

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 13 January 2008

No. T0504

Speaker: Mr. David Anderson

With gratitude and concern for saints - 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Do you find prayer difficult? I do! Would you like some help in how to pray or what to pray about? I would! In this next series of four talks, we're going to look at four important prayers of the apostle Paul under the general heading: 'How to pray like Paul prayed'. This title is derived from an exhortation of one of my spiritual fathers. He used to preach: "pray the prayers that Paul prayed"! Our hope, and our prayers, is that one result will be that we might be helped to ask for believers' spiritual well-being, as well as their physical well-being. Today we're going to talk about Paul's prayer in 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12.

Praying with gratitude and concern for saints

First of all, let's read the introductory verses, verses 1-10, which lead up to the prayer in verses 11-12: "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed." (New King James Version).

Last autumn an unusual thing happened to the quince bush which grows in my son's garden - for the first time ever it set fruit! He and his wife were delighted, even though there were only four fruit. However, they donated these to the abundant crop I had picked from my garden and so increased my yield of quince jelly. That taught me a lesson which I see in this prayer of Paul and his fellow helpers: I should always appreciate what believers are and what they achieve for God, even if it seems so very little to me. Like mine, my son's quince is very ornamental, producing lovely flowers. The overall impression I have of this prayer is Paul's deep sense of the double worth of these Christians: their flower and their fruit as it were. He saw their contribution to that end result, when the Lord is glorified through and in His saints, even though, when he wrote to them, they were somewhat deficient in some areas of Christian living. This was due to some false teachers who had perverted the doctrines of Christianity.

The actual prayer is very short, occupying only verses 11 and 12. But it arises from their Christian reputation, their experiences of the Christian life and their dedication to the Christian faith. As the apostle Paul puts it in verse 11: "With this [impression of you] in mind, we constantly pray for you" (New International Version). So we'll divide our talk up into six sections:

1. The **background** knowledge Paul had of the Thessalonians.
2. The initial **benediction**, verses 1-2.
3. The **gratitude** Paul expressed to God about these believers, verses 3-4.
4. The answers to **difficulties** that they found themselves in, verses 5-10.
5. The prayer itself, verses 11-12.
6. Concluding practical lessons.

But before looking at these divisions, let's focus on a word which appears in the title of our talk. It's the word "saints". I remember years ago asking a young people's study group to say exactly who the saints are. One girl said they were the folk in her local church and in the circle of fellowship to which her church was attached. "This is how they talk about each other", she said. When I asked her whether other Christians, not connected with her fellowship, were also saints, she replied "No"! However, in the New Testament the word "saints" isn't used for a special branch or super brand of Christians. It's used to describe **all** believers and means that they're holy, that is, set apart from other people in the world, to be God's people. Paul rejoiced: "His holy people [are] ... all those who have believed [the Gospel]."

This includes you [Thessalonians]", verse 10 (New International Version). Paul's prayerful concern was that they (and us) would live up to their name!

The background knowledge Paul had of the Thessalonians

Paul encountered stiff opposition when he first preached the Gospel in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9), forcing him to flee at night to Berea after only about a fortnight. His travels soon brought him to Corinth, from whence he sent Timothy back to check out how the Thessalonians were getting on without apostolic support. Timothy returned with an encouraging report of endurance despite persecution. Not only that, but news of their steadfast faith was spreading throughout Macedonia (1 Thessalonians 1:8). Paul wrote his first letter to encourage this young church and to answer questions they'd asked about Christians who had died. Since that letter, further reports, indicating their continued faithfulness to the Gospel, had reached Paul. But false teachers had infiltrated the church teaching that the day of the Lord had already come. They **even** purported to be passing on what Paul had taught! And they said the mounting persecution the Thessalonians were experiencing proved this teaching to be true. So in 2 Thessalonians, Paul emphatically stated he had **never** taught that the day of the Lord had already come. To counter this false doctrine, Paul reminded them he **had** taught that the Rapture of the saints would precede the Day of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:5). He went on to explain about the emergence of the man of lawlessness and the prevalence of sin during those end times. Furthermore, he restated that they'd been called by God and saved through Christ's work. In view of these facts, he exhorted them to stand firm in Christ (2:15) and to work hard (3:12), always patiently waiting for the Lord's return for His people at the Rapture (2:1).

The initial benediction, verses 1-2

As with most of his letters to churches, Paul opens with words of blessing: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace, the unique Christian greeting, means that we have all the unlimited resources of heaven. It's coupled with peace, the traditional Jewish greeting - given an entirely new meaning by the Lord. He said that although believers would have tribulation in the world, they would also have His peace to enjoy. Notice the standing of this church - they're "in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ", a very special position of nearness, acceptance and favour. God is the Father who knows the needs of all His children and who'll provide for them in every way. The Lord Jesus Christ is the great High Priest, who ever lives at God's right hand to make intercession for His people and to provide help and sustenance.

Paul's gratitude to God for these Thessalonian believers, verses 3-4.

The steadfast faith of the Thessalonians was continuing to grow. It was like a river in flood spreading out over its flood plain. In fact, Paul boasted to other churches that this was testimony that the grace of God was effective in their lives. What had begun in the first days of their conversion to Christ, was now flourishing amidst trials and persecutions, brought upon them because they were Christians. Their outward success could be traced back to their inward strength. Inwardly, they were increasing in love for each other. Paul's thanksgiving to God was not only right, it was obligatory. Paul says that he owed it to them to always give thanks to God for their endurance.

Now I have to admit that often I find thanksgiving to be a missing element from my prayers. So, too, are the first two elements of the prayer acrostic 'ACTS': **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, **S**upplication. Far too much of my prayer life is just me asking (that is, making Supplication) without first vital Adoration, Confession and Thanksgiving. This is especially so when I pray for others or church fellowships. How often prayer focuses on current problems of doctrine or practice, the negatives, rather than positive, responsive appreciation of what God has accomplished in and through the lives of His saints!

The difficulties the Thessalonians had to endure, verses 5-10

Another preliminary to Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians was his appreciation and understanding of the difficulties and trials of their particular situation as suffering believers. He's anxious to assure them that God was right in allowing them to pass through tribulations for this demonstrated they belonged to His kingdom. Paul was a realist; he knew that it wasn't easy for them. Nor is it plain sailing for us. Each disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ in every age needs that strengthening of soul and that encouragement of spirit to continue in the faith. "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22, New King James Version). The Thessalonians had to be reassured that it was **God** who was allowing them to suffer, not just men opposing the Gospel. This reassurance included:

- That God was just in doing so. It was His way of saying that they were fit for His kingdom.
- That in the end analysis, His righteousness will come to light at the Judgement Seat of Christ, when they'll be recompensed with kingdom glory.

- That they, although troubled, could be content in anticipating that retribution will be meted out to all who oppose the Gospel, including their persecutors, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels.
- That when He comes, in that Day, He'll be glorified in His saints and admired among all those who believe, including them, because they'd believed the message of salvation preached among them by the apostles.
- That tribulation for saints will permanently cease when Christ appears in power and in great glory.
- That His Appearing brings about finality with respect to the Gospel - there'll be no second chance. With flaming fire He'll execute full justice on those who don't know God, and who haven't obeyed the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They'll be eternally banished from His presence to everlasting ruin in the Lake of Fire.

So how is it with you? Have you obeyed the Gospel message, repented of your sins and accepted Christ Jesus as your Saviour and Lord? The day's fast approaching when the opportunity will have passed. "For He says: 'In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you.' Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2, New King James Version).

The Prayer itself, verses 11-12

Knowing the history of these Thessalonians, and with an understanding of their present hardships, as well as their assured future in the glory, Paul prays the actual prayer itself: "Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

His lead-up to the prayer means that he doesn't need to use many words. He simply asks that their experiences would be character-building, fitting them for the coming Kingdom. In this respect we don't need to tell God what He already knows about people - we just need to intercede on their behalf. Twice over Paul expresses his desire that they'd be approved by God and counted worthy of their Christian calling. These weren't new ideas to them. They'd already been reminded by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12: "you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory". Like any spiritual father, Paul had an on-going concern for his spiritual children. He never forgot them. He never neglected them. He always hedged them about with prayer. He prayed positively for them.

Suffering of any kind has the tendency to produce resentment in men. To guard against this, Paul asks God to uphold them throughout their difficult and trying circumstances. He desires that the power of God would under-gird them as they worked at their faith and in their resolve to do good. But he **doesn't** pray for revenge upon their persecutors. He's content to leave that to the Lord, the judge.

He's anxious that Christ's Name is uplifted amongst them according to the precept: "if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that Name" (1 Peter 4:16, English Standard Version). I recently heard a lady, who is taking a stance for some local environmental issue, say on TV that it was having an extremely detrimental effect on both her mental and physical health but that she must 'see it through'. Here Paul prays not only that these Thessalonians would 'come out the other end', but that there would be positive benefits for them. Specifically, he prayed that throughout their trials the Lord Jesus Christ would be glorified by, and in, them. It was to be a present reality with them, as well as a future hope for them.

Finally, Paul gives us the secret principle by which he always prayed for saints, that his request would be granted "according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ." That is, it wouldn't depend in any way upon their faithfulness, but on the goodness of God. Here are two great resources for any believer:

1. God's grace can always be invoked. If **He** is for us, who can be effective against us?
2. There's also the all-sufficient grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the godly Man He experienced extremes of suffering in this world. But glory followed, and we now see Him at God's right hand! We can "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16, New King James Version).

Conclusion and Practical Lessons

In praying for saints suffering persecution and abuse, it's the spiritual dimension, that is, the spiritual strength of character to endure, that's most important. That's the main lesson of this prayer.

Whilst I was consulting a commentary on Thessalonians, I read the writer's view that nowadays problems in far-off churches are quickly solvable, at the end of a phone-line. It's also true to say that information about distant saints is

readily available to the worldwide Christian community by means of modern communications. Certainly, in respect to the suffering and persecuted church, we're bombarded with information and urged to uphold them in prayer. Alas, we tend to major on other issues - their protection, petitioning for, or the securing of, their release and the like. Like Paul, we should ask for their spiritual advancement and for the furtherance of the kingdom of God.

Other challenges from this prayer of gratitude and concern for the people of God include:

1. To seek spiritual understanding to recognise the work of God in the lives of His saints, and to make thanksgiving for them, first priorities when praying for others.
2. To appreciate more fully the vulnerability of those who are suffering for the Name of Christ and to seek to understand their trials.
3. To understand that persecution, adversity and suffering, in whatever form they come, are part of our Christian calling: "when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth'; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:20-23, New King James Version).
4. To be prepared to stand up for the Gospel with the same kind of faithfulness the Thessalonians manifested, knowing that we live in an increasingly ungodly age, when there's great opposition to the claims of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We'll finish with an appropriate hymn by Mary Bowly:

*Through the love of God our Saviour,
All will be well;
Free and changeless is His favour,
All, all is well.
Precious is the blood that healed us,
Perfect is the grace that sealed us,
Strong the hand stretched forth to shield us,
All must be well.*

*Though we pass through tribulation,
All will be well.
Ours is such a full salvation,
All, all is well.
Happy still in God confiding;
Fruitful if in Christ abiding;
Steadfast through the Spirit's guiding:
All must be well.*

*We expect a bright tomorrow;
All will be well.
Faith can sing through days of sorrow,
All, all is well.
On our Father's love relying,
Jesus every need supplying;
Or in living or in dying;
All must be well.*

Amen!

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.