
Praying for Perseverance

2 Thessalonians 1:3-12

Introduction

Another sermon on prayer! I am certain that many are tired of this repetitive series on praying. Of course the Bible is full of prayers of all sorts, and I suppose there is some benefit in reading each one of them, but why all the hub-bub. We have been doing this now almost fourteen weeks. Surely there must be something more important to here about than this...

This might represent some thought that you have tonight. I very well might reflect some of the thinking of those who aren't here. I would assert that one of the reasons that thinking Biblically about prayer is so hard, so boring, so dry is that we don't believe in it. "But of course we believe in prayer, it is all through the Bible and we believe the Bible, especially here at Clearcreek Chapel." I can here that rebuttal almost audibly come from your minds, and at face value I don't doubt that each of us "believes" in praying. But do we really? Why do we pray? What are we trying to accomplish in praying? What do we pray about and for?

These are the questions that we should have clear answers in our minds that will enable to pray like we really believe in it. I am sure that many only pray at meals and when asked to in public settings, does that show a confidence in prayer?

This series is a beginning in developing a Biblical theology of prayer. As we work through each of these texts we should be expanding our understanding of what the apostles thought about prayer in how they prayed. Russ is planning an Old Testament series as well and I would then be surprised if there is not a concluding series that brings the Biblical data to a cohesive whole for us to think about.

Thus far in this series we have been exposed to praying for hope, and for peace. We have examined prayers for the growth of the effects of the gospel and for unity in our differences in carrying out the effects and mandates of the gospel. We have been challenged to give thanks for each other, to consider each other's growth in their faith and for each of us to be enabled by grace to persevere.

Why have we spent this time so far? One reason is to have the content of our praying shaped by the Bible. Our praying should not be so radically different from that which we read in the text, especially in the New Testament. If the petitions of our praying do not resembling what the New Testament prayers include in their petitions then perhaps we do not understand what prayer is about...

Another reason, and one which follows the first, is that our attitude in praying needs to be sharpened by the Bible. When we truly understand what we are to be praying about and for then our intensity and consistency will be increased as well. Let's get on and read this evening's choice, II Thessalonians 1:3-12.

Paul's Commendation of the Thessalonians (vs. 3, 4)

This portion of Scripture is an interesting one to examine and can be used to demonstrate many of the skills that we use to understand correctly the message the text has before us. One of the first steps to understanding a text is to recognize how it fits into the surrounding landscape. In order to accomplish this one needs to read the entire document and related documents to gain a familiarity with these texts. Informally we do this each time we read or study the Bible and our familiarity will increase the more we read and the more we attend. That is one of the reasons I find it interesting that Christians take such a lackadaisical approach to knowing their Bibles. The ministry leadership here at the Chapel works hard to outline and organize Bible teaching to develop skills and answer problems. It still surprises me that people often just come when it is convenient. If we take the notion of community serious and we recognize the covenant we make in participating, it should be the default operation that we are here to be challenged from the Word. Yes, there will be times when illness, and schedules conflict, but it should be natural for us to be here at 9:15, 10:30, and 6:00 and in flocks. It should not be "should I go...?" but rather, "why is this in my way...?"

Anyway, this text is part of a letter. When we recognize a letter, several bells and whistles should go off in our minds to help us organize and read a first century letter. What our text involves is a common component of a letter's opening where a thanksgiving or prayer of stated on behalf of the readers. In other teaching settings I have shown how the common letters of the day include this format and you can see other examples in other New Testament letters as well (...)

Paul especially then uses this natural letter-writing convention and puts it to work to open and present his argument. According to the style of argumentation or the rhetoric of the day this section is referred to as the exordium. It is used to gain the reader or hearers attention. It often included "nice things" about the readers so as to ensure that they will listen (read) the entire presentation. It also then introduced the main theme of the document or presentation and set the tone for what was to follow.

In our text Paul does this in two sentences, the first extending in our Bibles from verse 3 down to verse 10. The second is verses 11 and 12. In the opening of this first sentence we see the classic thanksgiving. We read:

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for each other is increasing.

Our English translations break down complex Greek sentences into smaller English sentences that help us see the main thoughts but sometimes prevent us from following the connections. But here Paul cannot help but give thanks to God when he thinks of his Thessalonian friends especially when he sees their growing faith and increasing love. This is what makes Paul get excited. He is not excited about their doctrinal precision or their moral perfection. Yes he cares about those things as well but he is more excited about their faith and love. He "ought" to thank God for what he is doing among them, in fact in the next phrase he goes on and says:

Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

He not only gives God credit but also then uses them as an example as what God can do in the lives of those whom he calls. In fact their steadfastness is especially noteworthy in the face of the degree of persecution they are facing. That brings us to the next section of this sentence where we move from Paul's commendation to his concern.

Paul's Concern for the Thessalonians (vs. 5-10)

Paul then elaborates on the nature of this affliction. If we go back to Luke's report of the founding of the Thessalonian congregation in Acts 17 we read that the Jews of the city and then the Gentiles as well were in the main quite antagonistic to the claims of Paul's gospel and were aggressive in their challenge to it. This led to physical harm as well as certain social ostracizing. Paul went on his way but he left a fledgling group of Christians hardly new-born in our terminology. Let's read some sections from this to put this in perspective (vs. 1-9, 13-15).

This next section carries two tricky points of interpretation. What exactly is evidence of God's righteous judgment and how does that, whatever "that" is, consider us worthy of His kingdom? We read the text:

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering — since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you.

Without belaboring the point this evening, it is likely that the affliction of the Thessalonians carries the evidence that God's judgment is coming and that in our participation in suffering we give evidence to our being in the kingdom. Our participation in the sufferings of Christ is comparable to our participation in his death and resurrection.

But for our focus tonight, it is the concern in the living out the results of our "calling," in this case the experience of suffering requires the daily growth of faith and the constant increase in our love for one another. Paul elaborates on the eschatological ultimacy that should build hope in the Thessalonian believers. (We already have faith, and love reported but alludes to hope by looking ahead to the ultimate victory that God will bring to fulfill the calling that they have experienced.

But they are struggling, and Paul prays in this regard. He has encouraged them in his commendation and focuses their gaze forward in his presentation of his concern. He now reports to them the content of his prayer for them.

Paul's Content in Praying for the Thessalonians (vs. 11, 12)

The text continues with the beginning of a new sentence. Here Paul reports what he prays about regarding the Thessalonians with respect to this concern, that is their persecution and it's potential to derail their faith and love. He puts it this way:

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power...

His prayer involves a double petition, the first is that God would "make" them worthy and the second that He would fulfill their service in his power. The first of these petitions speaks of this idea of being "worthy" of a "calling." Calling has slightly different nuances in Paul's writings depending upon the context. It always refers to God's action in identify-

ing a people and in the text of the Thessalonian correspondence implies a connection to the future program of God. We can look ahead to I Thess. 2:12 and read:

...we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Here we see being called involves being brought into his kingdom that also involves “glory.” Earlier in our reading tonight we also reference to being worthy of his kingdom and saw the eschatological and end-time relationship to the “glory” revealed in a final retributive justice. That these thoughts are connected should not be lost on us as we read. Paul is concerned that God would continue to bring them into their fulfilled “salvation” that will be clear on the day of God’s final judgment.

It is God who both considers and makes us worthy. There is some debate as to the best way to render this verb but either way it is God’s activity on our account that enables this calling to occur and is the motivation for Paul’s prayer. He knows that in the working out of life that God’s inner working in our hearts becomes visible, so he is concerned that in their strife that God will keep them faithful in the faith and love that they so obviously manifest. It may not be direct in this passage but their worthiness is seen as a result of the working of the gospel that Paul details in other letters. His connection to Christ in the opening of the letter and his clear proclamation that Christ will be the final judge of the universe secures this allusion. He declares this judgment falls upon those who fail to obey the “gospel of Jesus Christ” (vs 8) and his readers; both immediate and we today should not fail to recognize this connection. The gospel of the coming of the Son to fulfill what Adam and his posterity could not do and then offer the one and only sacrifice to appease (atone, propitiate) the penalty for those whom he calls is the ground for any worthiness to be included in the kingdom. It is our “in Christ” position that makes this possible.

Paul in his second petition also prays that their “resolve for good” and “work of faith” would meet with fulfillment in the power of God. This should remind us that God continues to work in and among us allowing us to work out the effects of the gospel in our lives. The change in our lives, the growth of our faith and love for each other comes to reality only in God’s continued work in us and does not result from our own merit. The work began with the gospel continues with the gospel that requires us to yield all to the only Son of merit.

Paul’s prayer for this continued growth reminds us (and them) that in the face of persecution and affliction in general it is God who continues to work in us. This then demonstrates the validity of our claim to a call; that is that we grow and change in the power of the gospel for our righteousness in our weakness. We then can speak of worthiness, not because we are something in ourselves, but because the gospel propels us and guides us in our doing.

But before Paul leaves his prayer report he goes on and concludes his exordium by providing the goal of this divine activity. This insight into the divine perspective should keep our faith, love and hope growing because it is...

...so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This entire divine enterprise is to bring glory to the name of Jesus. As Paul goes on to give them confidence that God’s program is not complete so that their confidence is not shaken

(the reason for the argument of the letter) is so that they (we) may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2:14). All that is happening to us, in us and through us is to bring glory to Christ. It is then only right for us to work also to that end that all we do be directed to his glory and not for our sake.

Conclusion

So then, how should this effect our praying? Paul was very much concerned that God continue to work in the hearts and lives of this young group of believers so that they would remain faithful in the face of persecution and affliction, indeed in the face of false teaching regarding the program of God's redemption.

We should be concerned for each other that we remain faithful in our circumstances.

We should pray for the faithfulness to the power of the gospel for each of us daily.

We should pray that each of us is praying for our own and each other's faithfulness.

We should pray for fruit to be demonstrated in each of our ministries because we know it is the result of God's grace and power.

We should pray that the glory of the name of Christ be foremost in our thinking and working.

We should pray that God would continue to glorify the Son in us daily.

We should pray:

Father, May You make _____ worthy of Your calling and fulfill their every resolve for good and their every work of faith by Your power so that through the favor and enablement of Your grace, You alone may be glorified.