
Praying for Sanctification

I Thessalonians 5:23-24

Introduction

We are approaching the end of this extended series on the prayers of the NT. In particular we have focused on the prayers of the apostle Paul found in his epistles. We have engaged this series with a number of ends in mind. One is that we desire 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.

And we desire that our attitude in praying is 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.

When we read a passage of Scripture, to fully grasp its meaning and significance we must answer several questions about the passage. These include 1) What does the text say? 2) What does the original author intend for his audience to read (or hear)? 3) How does this passage fit into the surrounding material the author has written? 4) How does this passage fit into the scheme of redemptive history to its historical point? 5) How does this text speak of Christ and the Gospel.

There are often other questions to ask and many ways to understand these questions more fully. One of the first steps though is to understand what the text actually says. Often this seems a bit simplistic, but many a false doctrine can arise because one simply does not look close enough at the text to see what it really says.

There are several authors who have written books to guide Bible students through this process. One author in her book for children maps out a strategy that requires the reader to ask the simple questions: who, what, when, where, how, and why. That is the strategy we are going to use to exam our text tonight. By understanding what the prayer says should provide us with ample opportunity to put this into practice.

Who?

Let us begin by asking the simple question, who? Who is the “subject” of this text? Who is carrying the action?

...of peace...

Now may the God of peace himself...

This prayer is addressing God. And God is the “who” who in turn performs the action. But Paul does not waste his words. What he says about God will give us insight into our understanding of this prayer.

The first thing we read is he is the God of peace. This is not uncommon for Paul to refer to God as “the God of peace.” He does so twice near the end of the epistle to the Romans in 15:33 and in 16:20. He also uses this in II Corinthians 13:11 and in Philippians 4:9. What does it mean when Paul call’s him the “God of peace?” First of all we have to keep in mind that the base meaning of the word involves more than a calm state of mind. It is the absence of war. And for Paul it frequently relates to a final and ultimate state of peace. Romans 2:10 and 5:1 are two usages of the word that indicate the type of peace that Paul is thinking of.

Why would Paul call him that here in this letter to the Thessalonians? They were engaged in conflict and persecution. They had been informed that this is an expected part of their new lives in Christ. It is important for them to be reassured that God is indeed the final victor and will indeed bring (even be) peace.

...faithful...

He who calls you is faithful.

But before we go on and look at what he is asking this God of peace to accomplish, lets look at some other remarks he makes about God in this prayer. He is very quick to point out that God is faithful. The verb here (it is actually a participle) is in the present tense implying that this is an ongoing idea. It could be translated “the one calling you is faithful.” In a manner very conservative of words, he assures them that what God has begun in their midst he will continue to work it out to its appointed end. He has called them, is calling them and will continue to “call them” until true peace has arrived.

...will surely do it...

he will surely do it.

But Paul is even more emphatic. He without doubt will continue. Without giving away where we are going, keep in mind this is concluding a larger section of text where Paul is exhorting the Thessalonian believers to continue steadfastly in the manner of life they have begun. So in this challenge, he reminds them that their efforts are not in vain because God continues to work as he has promised to do.

When?

Our prayer then invokes this faithful, working God of peace. Tonight we are going to next ask the question, “when?” This may not always be the next question to ask the text but that is what we will do tonight.

...at the coming...

at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ

We find this remark later in the language of the prayer where it says: “at the coming.” Let’s pause briefly here. Whatever our text is about, we haven’t exactly answered this question yet, it will happen at a set time. It will occur “at.” It is not a random event or an uncertain possibility. It is an assured concept that has a time associated with it. Indeed it is at “the coming.” We often miss the regal, victorious connotations of this word and indeed we could spend several hours tracing this idea throughout the Scriptures. But suffice it to say here that this is to be understood as the goal of history. When this coming occurs.

...of our Lord Jesus Christ...

at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ

But is not just any “coming” it is of our Lord Jesus Christ. The redeemer of mankind is the also the reason for our existence. The “appearance” made in the first century is not the end of his involvement with the world. Paul wants them to know there is more to come. His prayer (and challenge embedded in the prayer) is related to the goal of history, not just to the here and now. Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in California has written a good book entitled, “The Purpose Driven Life.” In it he points the reader to God’s purpose for creation and redemption. But popular expressions of this work; quickly make a “self-help” book for fulfillment and success. Paul is clear that “success” in this life is not the goal, the God of peace is acting for the future, the ultimate end when Christ again “appears.”

What?

Already now you say! God, the God of peace who is faithfully continuing his work in his people is going to “do” something at the coming of our Lord. What is it already! This question, the “what” will be asked more commonly earlier in one’s reading of a text. We put it off a bit to help us avoid some bias in our understanding of what is said. I wanted us to see the context that Paul has put together here. We actually have a compound verb phrase...

...sanctify you...

...may...God...sanctify you...

The first is that God may “sanctify” them. Now that we have some time reference we can examine the meaning of what Paul desires to occur without some of our habituated biases. First, the idea of sanctify involves being set apart or set aside for something special. We have these things around our lives. A special set of dishes or silverware, a special suit or tie, that special dress, or some other article of clothing. We all have things that we reserve for special use. That is the root meaning of the idea of “sanctify.” But most of the time it is used in the context of being special in a religious sense. An item needs to be special to be used in the worship of God (or even gods). Since God’s character is one of special holiness and uprightness, something (or someone) who is sanctified should reflect that character as well. Therefore when we hear the word sanctify or sanctification we think of ethical correctness. To correctly understand the Biblical use of the term we need to keep the broad use

of the word in front of us. In our context here, God is calling us, that is he is setting us apart for something. But in the greater context of the letter, it involves a certain ethical response. The ideas are distinguishable, but not separable. In fact that is why the two ideas are linked even in this sentence. We see ahead that we are to be kept blameless.

...be kept blameless...

And may you(r) be kept blameless...

That is the connection to the earlier section of the letter. They now have confidence that the God they have been brought into this new relationship is one of peace. His character can be trusted, indeed his working can be trusted because he “surely will do it.” But do not lose sight of the when as you hear these statements. When is this to occur? It will happen at the coming of our Lord. There is a forward-looking character to this confidence. There is a challenge for the now, no doubt, but the confidence will find its satisfaction in the end.

...completely...

In fact, he speaks of this as being so sure that he says their “sanctification” will be complete. If we fail to read the when into this sentence, we may come away with an idea that somehow in this life we will no longer need to be challenged for holiness, because we will be completely sanctified (some traditions teach this or some modification of it). But don’t miss the comprehensive nature that Paul is stressing. In fact he says their blamelessness will include “body, soul and spirit.” Again don’t get lost in this list. It is not likely listing the “component parts” of the standard human. Rather, it is the totality he wishes us to hear as we think of the future. We may have weakness, pain and suffering now, but in the end all will be “blameless” and pure!

Why?

So the last question we want to ask is why does Paul pray this here? First of all, Paul has a tendency to frame his ministry with prayer. His letters usually begin with the standard “thanksgiving/prayer” and they end with a benediction. Again don’t view this merely as some liturgical convention. Paul recognized that God was at work in the lives of people, even when he challenged them to change.

Second, he wished the Thessalonians to know that even in the midst of their strife and Paul’s challenge for purity and holiness that God was at work to accomplish this in their lives. In what we call II Thessalonians he had reassured them that God would make them worthy, and again here he encouraged them with the same thought.

It is in the work of the gospel, that is, the work that God is doing in Christ through the spirit that brings us into his presence and peace when God brings all things to their end when he reveals the great King of Kings and Lord of Lords at his coming.

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 acknowledge that we are engaging a God of peace.

We should recognize the peace of the gospel is found in the presence of God.

We should recognize the peace of the gospel is found when our Lord returns.

We should have trust in God who is faithfully working.

We should frame our ministry in prayer, trusting God for the outcome.

We should pray that our lives would match what God has already accomplished.

We should pray:

Father, the God of peace, may You Yourself, sanctify _____ completely, and may their whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at Your coming. I praise You that because You are faithful; You will surely do it.