

A PRAYER OF THANKS

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

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We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:2-3).

In most of the apostle Paul's letters, the greeting is followed by an expression of thanks to God. Since First Thessalonians is an entire letter of thanks for the readers' faith, Paul expresses his gratitude throughout the first three chapters. This thanksgiving begins with a long sentence from chapter 1 verses 2-5, the heart of which is Paul's rejoicing over the proofs of their salvation: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you" (1 Thess. 1:4). Paul had been concerned about the reality of the Thessalonians' faith when he was forced hastily to leave them in the midst of trials, and he thanks God for proof of God's grace in their lives.

Assurance of salvation is based on biblical evidences, and in verses 2-3 Paul identifies the proofs that mark the Thessalonians as God's elect: "your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 2:3). In doing this, Paul identifies the qualities of a healthy church and a thriving Christian life, while also noting the graces for which believers should pray to God.

PAUL'S CONTINUAL PRAYERS

Before commending the proofs of their salvation, Paul informs his readers of his fervent prayers on their behalf: "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers" (1 Thess. 1:2). This statement is one of many references in his letters that present Paul's commitment to prayer. It says much that the first thing we learn about Paul after his conversion is the statement made to Ananias that, as the King James Version eloquently puts it, "Behold, he prayeth" (Acts 9:11). That is not a bad beginning to anyone's spiritual biography. "It is as though," says

Arthur Pink, “that struck the keynote of his subsequent life, that he would, to a special degree, be marked as a man of prayer.”¹

One of the keys to Paul’s prayer is the word “constantly” (1 Thess. 1:2). Paul seems to have maintained a constant prayer vigil for his persecuted friends in Thessalonica. In his former days as a Pharisee, Paul would have kept the practice of formal prayers at least three times a day: in the morning, at mid-day, and in the evening. It is hard to imagine that as an apostle he would have prayed less than this. We, too, would benefit from regular periods for prayer in our daily schedule. Like Paul, we should pray for a wide range of family, friends, and servants of Christ. Some faithful Christians keep a list of who they will pray for on each day of the week. Others pray through the church directory one letter at a time so as to be constantly praying for fellow believers. We can easily imagine Paul, Silas, and Timothy meeting regularly – perhaps at every meal – to pray together for new converts and persecuted churches. G. K. Beale writes: “Paul is a spiritual parent to the Thessalonians (2:7-8, 11), and just as little children are never far from the thoughts of their parents, so Paul is continually mindful of his children, the Thessalonians.”²

The English Standard Version continues Paul’s description by saying his prayer consisted of “remembering before our God and Father” (1 Thess. 1:3). It is likely that the reference to God the Father belongs later in verse 3, asserting that the Christian virtues for which Paul prays are lived out in the sight of God. Nevertheless it certainly is true that the fervor of Paul’s prayer life arose from his awareness of God the Father’s presence. We have a tendency to think most about what we or others are doing in our families, our businesses, and our churches. This is why so little attention is often given to prayer and so much attention is paid to influencing men and women. Paul, however, realized that the blessings he sought in the Thessalonian church come only from God. This is why Paul sought not the favor of men but of God, and therefore why he prayed constantly. To the

1 Arthur W. Pink, *The Ability of God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000), 13.

2 G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 45.

extent that we realize that the spiritual blessings that we desire cannot be procured by man but are freely given by the God of grace, we like Paul will devote ourselves more constantly and earnestly to prayer.

Moreover, our prayers, like Paul's, should be richly adorned with thanks, realizing that, as James put it, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father" (Ja. 1:17). Thanksgiving is a distinctive mark of Christian prayer. Geoffrey Wilson points out that pagan writers like Homer included a great many prayers in their works, yet virtually no prayers of thanksgiving. The reason for this pagan thanklessness, just like its current form in our thankless, cynical secular society, is an ignorance of God's grace. Wilson notes, in contrast, that "a constant spirit of thankfulness marks out those who have been made sensible of God's multiplied mercies. Hence Paul, Silas, and Timothy are daily filled with fervent thanksgiving to God as they think of what his grace has wrought in the lives of these Thessalonians."³ We, too, through our faith in Christ, have ample reasons to pray continually with thanks because of the saving grace that has flowed to us from the cross of Christ and from the throne in heaven where he reigns for us. As Paul writes toward the end of this letter: "pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:17-18).

EVIDENCES OF SALVATION

Paul's opening prayer identifies the marks of grace that bear testimony to the believers' salvation. He writes to express his joy over the report that Timothy brought back from Thessalonica, noting their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" (1 Thess. 1:3). Readers familiar with Paul will recognize the threefold virtues about which he often spoke: faith, love, and hope (see Rom. 5:2-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5f; Col. 1:4f). Writing to the Corinthians, Paul changed the order, saying: "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). To the divided Corinthians, Paul stressed love, whereas here, writing to believers harassed by persecution, Paul places the stress on hope. In every case, Paul notes faith as the initial grace,

³ Geoffrey B. Wilson, *New Testament Commentaries*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, X), 2:134.

from which spring both love and hope from the believer's heart. John Lillie explains: "wherever true faith is, there also you are sure to find the other two. If faith is the indispensable root, the unfailing fruit is love and hope."⁴

The first evidence of salvation is faith as it is observed through good works: "your work of faith" (1 Thess. 1:3). Some Christians become alarmed whenever works and faith appear together in the Bible. Paul makes clear in his writings that sinners are justified by faith alone, apart from any good works: "we know that person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16). As sinners we could never cover our guilt before God with any number of good works, since good works cannot erase the record of our sin and being imperfect they cannot merit salvation. Instead, God justifies us through the finished work of his Son, Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty of our sin on the cross and achieved righteousness for us by his perfect life of obedience. Having been justified through faith, however, a Christian is called to the "work of faith." Paul makes this connection explicit in Ephesians 2:8-10: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

What exactly does Paul have in mind in speaking of the "work of faith"? We might think of a wide range of godly results of trusting in Christ. One result is turning from sin in practical areas of your life. Paul will emphasize this later in the letter: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess. 4:3). The work of faith might also include evangelism and other vital ministries in the church, another topic that Paul writes about extensively in this epistle.

Benjamin Morgan Palmer points out, however, that Paul speaks of "work" in the singular rather than "works" in the plural. This suggests that faith produces work as "an undivided whole, a continuous career of activity."⁵ This is a life of increasing fruitfulness in obedience to

⁴ John Lillie, *Lectures on Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Tentmaker Classic Commentaries (Tentmaker Publications, Stoke-on-Trent, UK: 1860, reprint 2007), 38-9.

⁵ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *Sermons*, 2 vols. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 2002), 1:585.

God's instruction and commands in the Bible. Leon Morris notes that sincere faith in Christ "cannot but transform the whole of life, and issue in 'work' of many kinds."⁶ This is what the writer of Hebrews celebrated when he remembered Bible heroes "who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Heb. 11:34).

Second, Paul rejoices in the Thessalonians' "labor of love." The Greek word *kopou* emphasizes sacrificial exertions that go beyond ordinary works. Whereas "work" focuses on the deeds, "labor" considers the arduous effort required. Paul rejoices that the Thessalonians were willing to serve in costly ways because of the love that had risen from their faith in Christ. Paul envisions love laboring among fellowship Christians (1 Thess. 3:12), in esteem for spiritual leaders (1 Thess. 5:13), in concern for Christians in other places (1 Thess. 4:9), and "for all" (1 Thess. 3:12), which includes non-Christians. This kind of "labor of love" was discovered by a visitor to a Bulgarian peasant's house. During the long stay the peasant's daughter busily stitched at a dress the whole time. He asked her, "Don't you ever get tired of that eternal sewing?" "Oh no!" she said, "you see this is my wedding dress."⁷ It was for her a labor of love, and the weariness and difficulty seemed as nothing to her heart. So is the labor of love that Christians offer to one another and to the world.

The most common New Testament word for love is *agape*, a word seldom used in earlier Greek writings. The more common word among the Greeks was *eros*, which not only meant romantic love but more generally spoke of love for something desirable. A young man has romantic love towards a woman who catches his eye as being lovely. Leon Morris warns us, however, of the contrast between the

⁶ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 51.

⁷ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Louisville: Westminster, 1975), 186.

love of desire and the love that God gives: “The Hollywood brand of love will never do if we wish to understand the New Testament.”⁸ In contrast to the *eros* love common to man, God’s love gives moves his people to costly labor apart from any desire for gain. Morris explains:

God loves us, not because we are worthy, nor even, as some think, because He sees in us possibilities as yet unrealized. God loves us although He knows full well our complete unworthiness.... He loves, moreover, without thought of advantage, for there is nothing that we can bring to Him who made all things. He loves because it is His nature to love. He loves because He *is* love. Continually He gives Himself in a love which is for the blessing of others, not for the enrichment of Himself.⁹

The fullness of God’s love became known to believers only through the sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for our sins. John wrote, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10). That gracious love of God works in the hearts of those who receive it, so that we begin to see others as God sees them and to love them without thought of gain or of cost to ourselves. Hearing of the “labor of love” among the Thessalonians, Paul rejoices at this evidence of God’s saving power at work within them.

Third, Paul notes their “steadfastness of hope” (1 Thess. 1:3). The hope of which he refers is not mere wishful thinking, as when we say, “I hope it snows on Christmas morning!” Rather, biblical hope is the certainty of receiving what God has promised, including forgiveness and an inheritance in eternal glory. Like love, hope springs from a living faith in Christ and his Word. Paul wrote to Titus: “he saved us... so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Tit. 3:5-7). The result of this hope is the ability to remain steadfast in the face of present trials, knowing that by persevering in faith we will be saved.

The steadfastness of Christian hope is not a grim, stoic resignation to hardship but a believing fortitude that faces trials in the certain hope

⁸ Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*

of victory through Jesus Christ. Alexander the Great showed this attitude when he divided up all his property before setting off to war. A friend exclaimed, “But you are keeping nothing for yourself.” “O yes, I am,” Alexander answered. “I have kept my hopes.” William Barclay comments: “A man can endure anything so long as he has hope, for then he is walking not into the night but to the dawn.”¹⁰ Christians have a far greater hope than even the fondest desires of a conqueror like Alexander: we have, Paul wrote, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

GROUNDED IN GRACE

Credible evidences are important to Christian assurance, which is why those who do not live out their faith in practical godliness and love will often be tormented with doubts about their salvation. Yet the evidences are not the source or cause of salvation. Instead, Paul says, these are signs of God’s saving work, and even of a believer’s sovereign and eternal election (v. 4). With this in mind, Paul concludes verse 3 by directing his readers to look to Jesus Christ and to God the Father for the security of their salvation.

First, the Thessalonians’ faith, love and hope are located “in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3). This reference to Christ is especially linked to the concluding matter of hope. Since Paul is writing to new believers who are struggling with persecution and other hardships, his particular concern is that they would press on in hope. This letter goes on to emphasize that our hope is grounded in the promised return of Jesus Christ to complete the salvation of his people: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God... and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 5:16-17).

Remembering Christ’s return, they are to “encourage one another” amidst the brief struggles of this life (1 Thess. 5:18).

Of course, the whole of a Christian’s salvation is in Christ. We look back in faith to Christ’s saving work, we love Christ in the present and share that love in the labor of ministry, and we look forward to his future return and the final victory of his people. To hope in the Lord,

¹⁰ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, etc.*, 186-7.

then, is “to wait for [God’s] Son from heaven,... who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10).

In the Greek text, the final words of verse 3 refer to God the Father: “before our God and Father.” Some English translations insert this statement earlier, with Paul describing his prayers as “remembering before our God and Father” (1 Thess. 1:3, ESV), since the idea of being in God’s presence fits the topic of prayer. The problem is that by putting these words at the end of the sentence, it is more likely that Paul relates the presence of God with the practice of Christian virtues. The King James Version is probably right to translate verse 3: “Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.” In this case, Paul is wrapping up his expression of thanksgiving by, first, relating the believers’ hope to Jesus Christ and then reminding the believers that God sees and is glorified by their evidences of his saving grace.

In this respect, Paul emphasizes the Fatherhood of God for believers, who are his children in Jesus Christ. As children, we are reminded of our responsibilities by the presence of our father. But, even more so, we are encouraged by the love, support, and provision of our Father. Just as children want their father to be present for baseball or soccer games, drawing strength and encouragement from his supportive strength, so Christians are emboldened in the work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope by their awareness of God’s love, acceptance, and provision. The Father’s presence motivates us to glorify him through a life transformed by the grace he gives.

THE CHRISTIAN’S POTENTIAL AND CALLING

In applying Paul’s prayer of thanks, we should first be reminded not only of the high calling but also of the high potential that every believer possesses through faith in Christ. Paul told the Corinthians: “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). As sinners, we are saved by grace alone, apart from anything of our own to commend us to God. But while God receives sinners he does not leave us in our sin! We are to be and we can be transformed by the mighty grace of God!

Christians who do not realize their potential as born again children of God may live in defeated resignation towards their sin. It is sometimes even taught that since we are such sinners, we simply have to accept the bondage of our corruption while hoping for justification through faith alone. This teaching is completely contrary to the New Testament. Paul exhorted the Ephesians to remember Christ's resurrection and "the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe" (Eph. 1:19), which enables us to "put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 5:21-23). Some false teachers will describe an emphasis on good works and a changed life as a legalistic denial of Paul's principle of salvation by grace. But Paul himself rejoiced in "the work of faith." He explained to Titus: "the grace of God has appeared,... training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Tit. 2:11-12).

The record of the Thessalonians, who had only recently become believers, shows that everyone who is born again in Christ has God's power to be radically changed. Trusting Christ therefore calls us to strive in God's Word and in prayer to realize this potential and grow in God's grace. In raising Christian children, we likewise should aspire to far more than keeping them out of trouble and from abandoning the faith. Instead, we should minister God's Word in confident expectation of divine blessing, setting an inspiring example through our own transformed lives and praying fervently that God will inspire our children in "the work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope" in Jesus Christ.

Second, we have here an apostolic definition of a good church. Notice how little attention Paul pays to the size of the Thessalonian congregation, must less to the impressiveness of their building, their church budget, or the personality traits of their leaders. What really matters in a church is faith, love, and hope: faith arising from the faithful ministry and practice of God's Word, love flowing from Christ through the interactions of the church members, and a hope that brings joy and zeal for witness in the midst of a hostile world. This is the

kind of church we should desire to be, and which we can be as we consciously live before God the Father through faith in Jesus Christ.

Third, Paul's example should inform our own prayers. We should frequently think of other Christians and also of the well-being and ministry of the church, constantly bearing their needs in prayer before God. We should pray, however, in keeping with the priorities of Christ's kingdom, in which the things that really matter are faith, love, and hope. And we should often thank God for the evidences that his saving power is at work among us.

A LIFE WORTH REMEMBERING

Everything we have noted about a good church is also true of a fruitful Christian life. A successful Christian is not one who has attained to high positions in society but who has advanced in evidences of God's grace. A rich Christian is not one who boasts of a great deal of money but one who abounds in faith, love, and hope through Jesus Christ. As Paul remembers the evidences of salvation among the Thessalonians, we realize that a life worth remembering is one sketched out on the canvas of Paul's prayer of thanks.

One man who lived such a life was Joseph A. Maybin, an elder at First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, who died on May 14, 1876. Maybin was a man blessed with a great intellect, a high position in society, and an eminently successful career. Yet after his conversion to faith in Christ as an adult, he increasingly devoted his attention to ministry to fellow Christians and service to Christ's church. At his memorial service, Maybin's pastor, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, preached from 1 Thessalonians 1:3. He stated: "Should it occur to this church to set a monumental slab upon the wall of this sanctuary, as a fitting memorial of one whose ministerial service dates back almost to her origin – beneath the honored name and the dates of his official career, I would have traced simply these words: 'Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.'"¹¹

Maybin's example, with the eulogy given to his life, invites us to ask what words would sum up our lives as believers in Christ. There are

¹¹ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *Sermons*, 1:584.

many good verses that might adorn a memorial to our names. But if those who knew us best should choose to note our “work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope” (1 Thess. 1:3), then surely Christ will receive us, saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt. 25:20), and the people of God will remember our lives with both thanks to God and assurance of his saving work in us.