

Primary Prayers

Jason Abbott

When our family gathers around for meals, we have the tradition of praying. The blessings of food and fellowship are good reminders to come to God in thanks, as well as bring him what's broken for renewal. So, lately we've been thanking God for our food but, also, praying against the destruction being created by COVID-19. Usually, we pray for what's right before us—whether good or bad. Don't we?

But, you know, what we pray for can be revealing. It often tells us something about ourselves; doesn't it? If our prayers are largely repetitions of the same things, then our prayer life may be on autopilot. If our prayers are mostly personal requests for this or that, then maybe we should be concerned that we have become egotistical and self-centered in our thinking. If we only pray for those people we know and love, then chances are that our hearts have grown partisan. Indeed, the things that we pray for can reveal a lot about us.

And, in a similar fashion, what we don't pray for says something about us too. If you don't pray for healing, do you believe God can heal? If you never ask the Lord for forgiveness, do you really believe your sins are all that serious?

Friends, do you want to take your spiritual temperature? If so, then consider what you pray for and what you don't. It reveals a lot!

This morning we're going to look at how the apostle Paul tells the Christians in the Thessalonian church to pray for him as well as how he's continuously in prayer for them. Paul was a deeply prayerful pastor. Yet, more importantly, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit in recording these prayers. So, we want to study today's passage in order to learn how God would direct our prayers.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

3 ¹ As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. ² And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. ⁴ We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the

things we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

This short text has two prayers to consider. And the prayers are like two pieces of bread in a sandwich; they come at the beginning and the end. The meat, however, is what's in the middle of these prayers. So, let's look at these two prayers and, then, savor and celebrate what they are built around.

1. A prayer for Paul (vv. 1-2).

Throughout my time in ministry, I've always had those who prayed faithfully for me. I could make a long list of the ones I know about, but I'm sure there are those whom I don't know about—deeply faithful people who meekly pray for those called by God to lead his church. The prayers of these believers are of great encouragement to me as well as to others.

In fact—on behalf of the elders and the staff of First Free—I urge you to pray for us on a regular basis. Paul often asked the church to pray for him.

- **Romans 15:30**—*I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.*
- **Ephesians 6:19**—*Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel....*
- **Colossians 4:3**—*And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ....*

Praying for your leaders is a very biblical thing to do. The witness of Scripture is that you should do it and that your leaders need it. In fact—rather than the picture of fearless and invulnerable leaders—the Bible shows that those who lead the church are simply men and women who are just as prone to fear and failure as anyone else. Friends, we need your prayers. So, please pray for us.

Here Paul asks for protection; doesn't he? The apostle asks the church to pray against the schemes of "wicked and evil people" (v. 2). He asks them to pray to God for deliverance from people like these. Friends, those who would scheme and plot so as to embarrass or entangle Christian leaders were around two-thousand years ago

and are also around today. This wasn't simply a danger for ancient church leaders. It's a danger for church leaders in all times.

I once got an invite to hangout at a gathering of people with various beliefs. The invite was friendly. The evening would just be an opportunity for people to get to know one another. No agenda, just casual conversation. It all sounded really great, except that when I arrived it was not very friendly at all. Instead, it was an ambush. The real intention (as far as I could tell) was to discredit the gospel by defeating me in a debate in front of a bunch of nonbelievers.

Now, don't misunderstand me. This wasn't anything compared to the dangers which Paul often faced from those who opposed the gospel, nor was it anything like what many church leaders face today in various places around the world. Not at all! That's not my point. My point is simply to say that there are still, even in our context, those who would attack the gospel by attacking Christian leaders.

So, my friends, please pray for us. Your elders and pastors need your prayers. Don't neglect this vital ministry to us.

And, when you pray for your shepherds, recognize where the focus should be. This is another thing we learn from Paul's request. The focus isn't primarily on him. The focus or priority is mainly on the mission and glory of God. That's paramount. That's the most important thing. This is why Paul begins with it.

...pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you (v. 1).

The Greek word *τρέχει* is translated "spread rapidly" here. It's a fantastic word which is often used of runners in a race. But, we shouldn't think of just any old kind of race. We should think of an intense, competitive race—like an athlete competing in the Olympics. There's a deep and focused determination to reach the goal as fast as possible. That's the connotation *τρέχει* has. Paul desires, above all other things, that the gospel would advance and be triumphant in people's lives—"just as it was" in the lives of the Thessalonians (v. 1), just as it was in his own life.

Paul wants the gospel to run! He wants the Lord's mission to race forward! That's his priority—to set the good news loose.

After John Stott passed away in 2011, I recall reading a number of reflections upon his life in various publications. They all emphasized how passionate Stott was about sharing the gospel with the people he met. There were many examples of this. I've forgotten most of them now, but one story has really stuck with me.

Apparently, in the last year or so of Stott's life, there was a medical emergency and an ambulance had to be called. The author (of this particular tribute) was present for all of it and recalled how, even as the EMT was loading Stott into the ambulance, the old pastor was engaging his caregiver by name and gracefully sharing the gospel with him. Stott wanted the gospel to run. Above all things and in all circumstances, he hoped and prayed that the good news would race through him

This is something to pray for; isn't it? This should be a priority in our prayers. *Lord deliver our leaders from the schemes of Satan so that the good news might run! Jesus protect our congregation in order that your will can be done in Andersonville and throughout the city of Chicago with speed, power, and glory! Heavenly Father, let the gospel race! Amen.*

Friends, pray that prayer for me. Pray it for this church. Pray it for yourself. Pray that the gospel might run. Pray that that would be our our priority.

2. A prayer for the church (v. 5).

You know, Paul prays a lot. Have you ever noticed that? As he pens his letters, he's constantly and spontaneously in and out of prayer. So, he just asked for prayers from the Thessalonians; right? But now—only two verses later—he slips right back into praying for them. Just look at the last verse of today's passage.

May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance (v. 5).

So, here we have another prayer for the church. And, not only that, but another for them to be *unmovable* and *steadfast*. This has been a theme throughout this letter. True believers are believers who persevere. True faith is faith that endures hardships. The idea of enduring suffering is all conveyed in the phrase "Christ's perseverance." To see and appreciate this, we simply need to ponder the nature of Christ's endurance during his earthly life. We just need to ask—What does it mean to have our hearts directed into Christ's perseverance?

The answer to that question is obvious. Paul is praying that the Thessalonians (*and all believers!*) would replicate—“the steadfast endurance exemplified in the life of the Master.”¹ He prays that we’d reflect Christlike endurance in suffering.

Friends, we think too simplistically often times about what it means to suffer as a Christian, or what it means to exemplify Christlike endurance. Our experience of suffering isn’t one dimensional. There’s a diversity of ways believers can suffer in this world, and Scripture honestly grapples with them all.

One writer explains it this way.

*Suffering has many faces. The Bible doesn’t whitewash our experience of [it] by saying that it’s all of one stripe. Rather, it recognizes the multifaceted ways that suffering can come upon us.... Paul lists several types of suffering—mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Each of these are different ways that we can suffer, and when suffering comes, often several of these types... are involved.*²

You know, brothers and sisters, whenever we encounter suffering in our lives, it’s an opportunity to reflect on the prayer Paul prays for us here. How will we suffer? How will we deal with it? Will our hearts be directed into the Father’s love for us? Or, will we doubt his love for us? Will we reflect the endurance of Jesus as we suffer, or something else? Friends, every trial is an opportunity to see this prayer fulfilled in you—to experience God working in you.

So, how will you deal with suffering? What will you do with that opportunity? Will you invite God to refine you through it? Oswald Chambers states the challenge we all face in this way.

*We all know people who have been made much meaner and more irritable and more intolerable to live with by suffering: it is not right to say that all suffering perfects. It only perfects one type of person—the one who accepts the call of God in Christ Jesus.*³

¹ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 143.

² Joseph Scheumann, *Desiring God*: “Five Truths about Christian Suffering,” November 6, 2013. You can read the full article [here](#).

³ Oswald Chambers, *The Oswald Chambers Devotional Reader*, Oliver-Nelson Books.

Friends, my prayer for you is Paul’s prayer for you. It’s a simple, deep prayer. May the Lord direct your hearts—through a global pandemic or financial hardships or isolation, loneliness, and depression—(may he direct your hearts) into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance. I pray that we would be a people who accept the calling of God into Christlike endurance. Pray that for me as I pray that for you.

3. The faithfulness of God (vv. 3-4).

If the two prayers above and below this are the bread of our passage, then this is the meat. God’s faithfulness to his people is the real substance of these five verses as well as the whole of Scripture. Listen to them once more.

...the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command (vv. 3-4).

I once heard a famous-ish pastor give a devotional on Peter’s attempt to walk on water in Matthew 14. And he was engaging and funny and (on the whole) his talk was really entertaining; he had me won over until his conclusion about the meaning of the passage. As he concluded, he took Jesus’ words to Peter (as Peter starts sinking in the water)—“You of little faith, ...why did you doubt?” (v. 31)—and he argued that the Lord wasn’t scolding Peter for a lack of faith in Jesus but for a lack of faith in himself (for *a lack of faith in Peter!*)—for not having enough faith in his ability to be like his rabbi and walk on water.⁴

Friends, is that all we need? Enough faith in our own ability to be like Jesus? Is that where the power to change comes from? Faith in ourselves?

No...today’s passage and the whole of Scripture and the gospel say otherwise. Paul tells us from where the power of transformation comes. It’s from the Lord God. He is “faithful, and...will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one” (v. 3). And, where’s Paul’s confidence? Is it in us? No, the apostle’s confidence is set firmly in Christ’s ability to work thru us. Only in him does Paul trust that we will continue to walk in faithful obedience (v. 4).

My friends, here is the good news. The power of transformation and salvation doesn’t depend on you. It isn’t up to you. You could work your entire life to gain it,

⁴ Rob Bell, “NOOMA Dust 008,” Feb. 28, 2012. You can watch a link to his misguided devotional [here](#).

yet you would fail. You could trust in yourself with an unshakable, invincible kind of faith, but you'd remain feeble when it comes to living the beautiful and godly life because your faith would be in the wrong place.

Friends, here's the gospel. You can't do it on your own, but God in the person and work of Jesus has done it for you. Jesus is the gospel. Trust in him. Amen.