

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Praying for You 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Introduction

Romans 8—we don't always know what we should pray for. We need the Holy Spirit to lead and to interpret. Christ gave His disciples the Lord's Prayer. It gives a template for our prayers to God. But what about intercessory prayer for others? What should we pray for?

⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Praying for you:

1. Giving Thanks to God for the Joy You Bring (9)
2. Praying We Can See You and Serve You (10-11)

3. Praying You Will Increase and Abound in Love (12)

4. Praying God Will Establish Your Hearts Blameless (13)

1. Giving Thanks to God for the Joy You Bring (9)

For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God

When Paul heard from Timothy that the believers in Thessalonica were thriving despite the afflictions and temptations they faced, he could not contain his joy. His happy relief caused him to overflow with thanksgiving to God. Only the power of God could produce such steadfast faith in the face of such pressure. For that reason it only makes sense that Paul's prayer for these brothers and sisters in Christ would include praise and thanksgiving.

The way Paul states it here suggests the reasons for gratitude for what God is doing in their lives outstrips whatever expression of thanks he can render. It's a gratitude without limits because an infinite God is doing miraculous things.

When you and I pray for one another, we would do well to start with praising God and

thanking Him for what we see Him doing in the lives of those for whom we pray.

Doing so aligns our heart attitude toward our brother and sisters with their prime connection to God and to us. And it breaks through the boundaries of what is possible in their lives because of a miracle-working God.

Application

What handiwork of God do you see in the lives of your Christian brothers and sisters? How are they showing steadfast faith despite trials and sufferings?

In what ways are they growing in faith and love?

In what ways have they brought benefit or joy to you?

Take what you observe and bring it to God with thanksgiving.

2. Praying We Can See You and Serve You (10-11)

¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,

Paul's heart is to see these brothers and sisters face to face in order to contribute to their further growth in the Lord—to supply what is lacking—to restore, equip, repair. The word is used for setting bones, repairing

fishing nets, or making military plans. Same word used in Ephesians 4:12 for equipping the saints—making them functional for the work of ministering to one another. He gives instruction later in this letter regarding struggles they are facing in their walk with God. Like staying pure in the middle of a sexually immoral culture, or keeping their focus on practical service versus idle speculation about the Lord's return. Rejoicing always, praying constantly, giving thanks no matter what happens, not holding grudges.

His prayers for them are earnest—literally, overflowing all bounds, super abundantly

And his prayers for them are constant—night and day. Why? Because these kinds of needs crop up at any time in the lives of believers. Whatever time of day or night, it is always a good time to intercede for our brothers and sisters.

Illus: Zoellers

Paul's love for the Thessalonian believers and his desire to serve their needs makes him want to be with them in person. There had been significant obstacles to his doing so. Satan himself was hindering. So Paul prays that God will make a way according to His will for Paul to reconnect.

As you pray for others, pray about your role in their lives. In what ways could you further their growth in grace? Pray for God to open opportunities for you to serve them.

When you are praying for such open doors, you are far more likely to see the opportunities when they come and to use them well.

God may assign someone else to meet the needs you see. As best we know, Paul did not get to go back to Thessalonica. But you can be sure God did not forsake His people there. And even though Paul could not be with them to serve them at this time, his prayers could still impact their lives because he's talking to the God who is everywhere at once and who has every tool at his disposal to accomplish what needs to be done. God uses people whose eyes are open and hands are ready because their hearts are tuned to the needs of others through their prayers for them.

Notice that Paul prays for both God the Father and the Lord Jesus to direct his way to the Thessalonians. Both Persons of the Godhead, along with the Holy Spirit, have demonstrated their love for people and their power over all the circumstances of life. The Lord over the course of history is the Redeeming God, and He is at work for the good of His redeemed people.

3. Praying You Will Increase and Abound in Love (12)

and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

The primary area Paul prays for growth is in their love. He prays that it will increase and overflow. *Love is the hallmark of truly born again people. It expresses the heart of God. It is strongly attractive and therefore crucial to gospel witness as well as to building up other believers.*

Paul prays for their love to grow for one another—within the church family there is always room for love to grow further. Every new need creates a fresh opportunity for us to benefit others and to strengthen our love for them by exercising it.

Frequent prayer request of Paul for believers he knows:

Philippians 1:9-11

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Prays that God will so fill the Ephesian Christians that they experience the love of Christ in every dimension.

Paul prays not just for their love for one another but for their love for all—love for our neighbor doesn't stop with the church membership. We love people because God loves people. Human beings are made in His image, and as such deserve love and respect. *As we practice love toward those within the church family we learn how to show love to other people. If we get into the life pattern of living this way, it does not stop when we are engaging those who aren't believers yet.*

Fact is, we don't know who among our unbelieving friends will one day trust in Jesus and become members of our forever family. So it makes sense to be on mission always wherever we are and with whomever we meet. If you're not practicing showing love to those who are closest to you, how do you expect to show love to those who are not?

Application

As we move through our days, where do we see human need we can sacrifice ourselves to meet? How can we effectively express our interest in other people and show them we care for them just as Jesus does?

Paul is not just telling the Thessalonian believers to do this. He and his companions model this kind of living themselves—“as we do for you.”

In his letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians, Paul asks his fellow believers to pray for him to have open doors to share the gospel and when those doors open, for them to make the gospel clear. He was under house arrest in Rome at the time, but the Lord used even that to advance the gospel in the lives of those around him (Philippians 1:12).

4. Praying God Will Establish Your Hearts Blameless (13)

so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

The Christian battle is not just surface. It is at the level of heart desire. God alone knows our hearts, and God alone can fix what is wrong there.

Paul prays that God will make their hearts firmly committed to holiness. A holiness that is not for show, but that is as deep as God sees, hence blameless. This kind of holiness comes by the power of the Spirit of God who indwells us. Praying for it shows our

dependence on Him to bring it about in our lives. Our spiritual disciplines are important, but they work only through reliance on the power of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:16

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

He is our Father, so His holy character should be growing in our hearts because of who we are in Him. He cares that His children show His character for what is really is. How much shame and dishonor has been directed against God because the scandalous lives of those who claim to belong to Him.

The tragedy is not just that our secret sins becomes known, but that we would leave them unchallenged in our lives. Cleansing and deliverance is available to us if we would come with confession and repentance. *Paul is praying for holiness before the Lord, not just the appearance of it. Each one us who have been born again must continually engage in the spiritual battle of guarding our hearts before God.*

Romans 8:12-14

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds

of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

Colossians 1:9-11

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.

Further motivation is that the Lord Jesus will return soon— “at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” We do not know the day or hour, but we know we are accountable to Him.

1 John 3:2-3

² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Coming means “presence.” You recall that in ancient times this word often refers to the visit of a royal official. Jesus Christ is the King of kings. He is Head of His body the church.

He walks among them observing the good and the bad (Revelation 1-3). And it is to Him we answer for our earthly lives.

The Puritans called this Christ-aware living "practicing the presence of God." It is key to holy living because we cannot deliberately sin without shoving awareness of God's presence and watchcare out of our minds. This sensitivity to the presence and power of Christ in our lives is crucial to holy living.

Ephesians 1:16-21

16 I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, **17** that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, **18** having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, **19** and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might **20** that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, **21** far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Jesus is coming “with all His saints.” Their chief identity is that they belong to Him. They are the “cloud of witnesses” to which Hebrews 12 refers—those who have testified to the reliability of God in the way they lived by faith. They were convinced of His existence and they lived for His reward (Hebrews 11:6). His pleasure was their delight and reason for living.

Our sense of accountability to our Lord and of belonging to all the saints of His kingdom strengthens our resolve to live holy lives from the inside out.

Hebrews 12:1-2

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Application

What is the state of your heart before God, not just your outward reputation?

Are you yielding to the Holy Spirit’s work in you to empower you to fight the battle against the flesh?

In what ways does your conviction that the Lord Jesus is coming soon shape your sense of accountability to Him in your private and public living?

Conclusion

Consider your list of family and friends for whom you pray—especially those who are born-again brothers and sisters in Christ. When you pray for them, make sure you are—

1. Giving Thanks to God for the Joy They Bring (9)
2. Praying You Can See Them and Serve Them (10-11)
3. Praying They Will Increase and Abound in Love (12)
4. Praying God Will Establish Their Hearts Blameless (13)

Closing Song: Christian Hearts, in Love United

Summary of Applications

- What handiwork of God do you see in the lives of your Christian brothers and sisters?
- How are they showing steadfast faith despite trials and sufferings?
- In what ways are they growing in faith and love?
- In what ways have they brought benefit or joy to you?

- *As you pray for others, pray about your role in their lives. In what ways could you further their growth in grace? Pray for God to open opportunities for you to serve them.*
- As we move through our days, where do we see human need we can sacrifice ourselves to meet?
- How can we effectively express our interest in other people and show them we care for them just as Jesus does?
- What is the state of your heart before God, not just your outward reputation?
- Are you yielding to the Holy Spirit's work in you to empower you to fight the battle against the flesh?
- In what ways does your conviction that the Lord Jesus is coming soon shape your sense of accountability to Him in your private and public living?

Discussion Questions

1. What are some examples of work you see God doing in specific believers you know?
2. What are some ways you try to make connection with your brothers and sisters in Christ?
3. What are some specific ways you have found you can help other believers grow in the Lord?
4. Why do you think genuine love for others is so attractive to them?

5. What are some ways you've seen love expressed strengthen relationships with believers and with unbelievers?
6. Why is battling for a heart blameless before God in holiness impossible apart from the power of God at work in us?
7. How does the certain coming the Lord Jesus and our connection with all the saints who will be with Him help us purify our hearts and lives before God?