

Prayer Week 2020

*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, 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.
(2 Thessalonians 1:11–12 ESV)*

To This End

January 5th, 2020

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning church! Happy New Year! I'd love for you to open your Bibles this morning to 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12; that's on page 989 in your pew Bibles. We have chosen this text in particular for the help we believe it will give us as we enter into Prayer Week. D.A. Carson says about this passage:

“Verses 3-10 provide us with a framework of thought that Paul keeps in mind as he prays, a framework that largely controls what Paul prays for, and why.”¹

Well of course that is exactly what we need to be looking at this morning. As we begin a New Year and as we enter into Prayer Week this is a perfect time for us to be thinking broadly and comprehensively about prayer. How are we approaching prayer? What is in our mind as we go to prayer? What should we be praying for and why? Those are good questions and so we thought that this would be a very useful passage for us to be looking at together this morning.

In terms of the people that Paul is writing to, probably all that we need to know is that they were baby Christians; they had been converted under Paul's preaching ministry however, Paul had been forced to leave the city prematurely because of a mob that had gathered before the city officials to protest his presence and influence among them. So he had to leave before these folks had been suitably disciplined and he wrote these two letters – 1 and 2 Thessalonians – just a few months after

¹ D.A. Carson, *Praying With Paul*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 22.

his departure from the city. So these are follow up letters written by Paul to his friends and children in the faith.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1.

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ 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 one another is increasing. ⁴ 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.

⁵ 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— ⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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. (2 Thessalonians 1:1–12 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well, as I've already mentioned, we have a particular interest in this passage. We are eager to learn from the Apostle Paul's approach to intercessory prayer – and that's why we read the larger section of text that we did. You can see for yourself that the actual content of his prayer is contained in verses 11-12 but prior to that he explains his entire APPROACH to prayer and we want to take careful note of that as well. Let me see if I can draw out these reflections for you in roughly the order that they appear in the text.

Reflections On Intercessory Prayer:

The first thing I think we would want to say is this:

1. **It would be wrong not to begin with thanksgiving**

Look at verse 3:

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 one another is increasing. (2 Thessalonians 1:3 ESV)

The Greek literally says: “We are obligated to give thanks to God for you”. Meaning, it is fitting, appropriate, required even. It would be **WRONG** not to begin our intercessory prayers with thanking God for the work that he has already done in your lives.

I think that is important for us to see.

We often begin our intercessory prayers with all the trouble spots don't we?

“O God! My kids are wandering away from the faith Lord! They are being seduced by the culture Lord! They are making bad choices and they are surrounded by unhelpful influences – O God! Rescue them!”

Now that's not a bad prayer – I imagine that every parent in the room has prayed some version of that prayer – maybe this morning. It's not a bad prayer – it's not just the right place to start. Paul says that we are obligated to begin – it would be wrong not to begin – with thanksgiving for the things that God has already been gracious enough to do.

So perhaps we would want to **EDIT** the prayer that I just referred to a moment ago. Perhaps it should sound more like this:

“O God, thank you for the firm foundation that you provided for my children. Thank you for all those goodnight prayers. Thank you for all those family devotion times around the table. Thank you for all the Sunday School teachers and Youth Group leaders who made such important investments in the life of my child. Thank you for giving them praying parents and praying grandparents God – these are signs of your grace and favour. You have been at work Lord and you will not fail to complete the good thing that you have started. Thank you Lord.”

It is important to begin your prayers that way.

For one thing it calms you down a little bit and it stirs up faith.

And it reminds you that God plays the long game – and therefore so we need to play the long game in our prayers. You need to notice and celebrate the ground work that has been laid and the progress that can be observed.

That’s what Paul is doing here.

He thanks God because their faith is growing and their love is evident. Now why those things in particular? Because Paul had prayed for those very things in his first letter. Flip back a few pages to 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13. Listen to what he prayed for them just a couple of months ago:

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. (1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 ESV)

So he prayed for God to establish them in the Christian way and for them to grow in Christian love – the very things that he gives thanks to God for now in the second letter.

He is celebrating progress and he is acknowledging the grace and work of God.

That stirs up faith, that settles hearts and that gives credit where credit is due.

It would be wrong not to begin our intercessory prayers with thanksgiving.

The second thing I think we can see here is that:

2. How you pray for people influences how you speak about people

That one might seem a bit surprising to you – it did to me – but look again at verse 4. In verse 3 Paul has been talking about how he is careful to GIVE THANKS for the progress and grace that he has observed already in the lives of these young believers. Now look at what he says next:

“Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God ...” (2 Thessalonians 1:4 ESV)

Do you see that?

We are very careful to give thanks for the signs of grace we have observed in your life – THEREFORE we boast about you in all the churches.

I think the point is very obvious once you slow down and pay attention to the words. It seems very clear that how we pray for people influences how we speak about people.

Of course we know that from our experience, don't we? Both in terms of the good and the bad.

We've all been to prayer meetings I'm sure, that descended into a group GRIPE SESSION. A person may begin to pray about her weak and rather disappointing husband - for example. “He doesn't support her in the home – Lord! He doesn't help out a great deal with the children – Lord! He isn't much a provider – Lord! O Jesus, help him! He's a disaster Lord!” And then of course after the prayer meeting we gather together with others who have similar concerns and we share our gripes and disappointments.

That's just human nature isn't?

The things in our hearts bubble up out of our mouths and fall into the ears of other people.

So do better work in your heart!

Begin with thanksgiving.

Begin with whatever small tokens of grace have already been given by God. Begin with gratitude for whatever signs of progress may be legitimately observed.

Try that.

Do that first.

It will change the way you pray – it will stir up faith and patience and endurance – and it will improve the influence that you have on other people.

Now, I'm not sure whether Paul MEANT to teach that here or not – but he IS TEACHING THAT! We're learning from his example – and I think that is the point. His determination to begin with gratitude DID IN FACT result in him discovering a lot to be thankful for – and to boast in even – and here we are being AFFECTED POSITIVELY by his example.

I think that is important for us to see.

The third thing we can see in this text is the longest thing we see in the text and also one of the most important things. We see quite clearly that what you believe about the future has a powerful effect on how you pray in the present.

3. What you believe about the future affects how you pray in the present

Look at your Bible.

In the big middle section of this passage – all the way from verse 5 to verse 11 – Paul is talking about how his eschatology – how the things he believes about the END – influence and shape how he prays for these folks in Thessalonica.

You can see it for yourself.

In verse 5 he says that the growing faith and the evident love in the Thessalonians that he has just thanked God for – is in fact evidence that they are on the right track with respect to the Final Judgment. Then he talks about the Final Judgment in verse 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. Then he says in verse 11:

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 (2 Thessalonians 1:11 ESV)

The NIV renders the start of verse 11 in a slightly different way. It has it:

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you ...” (2 Thessalonians 1:11 NIV11)

So – all that stuff that he believes about the FINAL JUDGMENT causes him to PRAY for these people in a particular way – are you seeing that?

Obviously – what we believe about the future affects how we pray for people in the present. So let’s look at what Paul believes about the future. Look again at verses 6-10. He says:

“since indeed² God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.” (2 Thessalonians 1:6–10 ESV)

So Paul believes that we are all hurtling towards a final encounter with a God who judges justly. He believes that at this Final Judgment God will AFFLICT those who have troubled and persecuted his people. He believes that Jesus will be REVEALED from heaven. He will COME

² Or “if it is so, and it certainly is, ...”

and every eye will see him! He will come with the ANGELS and in FLAMING FIRE. He will INFLICT VENGEANCE on those who have ignored God and who have not obeyed the Gospel. They will suffer ETERNAL DESTRUCTION whereas WE – who have known God and believed the Gospel – will be glorified and will worship the Lord – and MARVEL OVER HIM – because of our RESPONSE to the witness that we were given.

That's what Paul believes about the future.

And because he believes that he prays for two things.

First of all, you can see this in the first half of verse 11, he prays that God would make them worthy of the calling that they have received in Christ. Paul talked like this and prayed like this all the time. He said the same thing to the Ephesians in the letter that he sent to them. He spent three chapters GIVING THEM THE GOSPEL and then in chapter 4:1 he said:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1–3 ESV)

Do you see that?

That's obviously exactly the same idea that we are seeing here. Paul is praying that they would LOOK LIKE PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN SAVED! I want you to SHOW UP ON JUDGMENT DAY looking like people who have encountered Jesus!

That's exactly what he's saying – isn't it?

I want you to grow – by one degree of glory to the next into the same image as Jesus Christ!!!! O God, let this be the work of the Spirit in them!

That's what he's praying: O God! By your grace, make them look like Jesus come Judgment Day. Let there be NO DOUBT that they are citizens of the eternal kingdom. Let Judgment Day be a

celebration of your grace and not a display of their apathy and neglect. Let them not slip into heaven like a naked man escaping from a fire. Make it clear that you have been at work in them Lord, O God, I ask, in Jesus' name, amen!

That's a good prayer – given what Paul believes about the future.

The second thing he prays can be seen in the second half of verse 11. There he prays that God might empower every good and appropriate missional desire that they have as Christians. Help them do good works, God!

Of course, we aren't saved by good works – we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone – but the faith that saves us is never alone – it is ALWAYS accompanied by good works. Paul was very concerned about that – it was what he prayed for in his people – and James, the brother of the Lord was concerned about that too. He said:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:14–17 ESV)

So Paul prayed for his people to EXCEL in good works, without which their faith would be DEAD.

This is so hard for us as evangelicals to wrap our heads around.

We talk so much about DECISIONS – and decisions are important – but we talk so much about DECISIONS that we are totally unprepared for what the Bible says about Judgment Day. We think – because we are obsessed with DECISIONS – that when we get to heaven and we stand before God on Judgment Day he is going to say: "May I please see your DECISION CARD please?" And we will show him our decision card, which we have prudently sewn into our underwear, and God will examine the card, see that a decision has been made, and then welcome us into the glories of heaven.

We are sure that it will go exactly that way!

And yet – there are precisely ZERO Bible passages that suggest that it will go that way.

Rather the texts in the Bible that describe the Final Judgment ALL SEEM to indicate that there will be some sort of examination of our fruit.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats of course comes immediately to mind. So too does the Apostle John's vision of the Final Judgment in Revelation 20. He saw a great White Throne and people resurrected to stand before the throne and then he says:

“And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.” (Revelation 20:12 ESV)

Wow! We're not prepared for that are we? But clearly – according to the Bible our DEEDS WILL BE examined on Judgment Day – not to EARN our salvation but to give sufficient EVIDENCE of our salvation.

You see the Bible assumes that a truly saved person will change into the same image as Jesus and will even begin to do the works of Jesus and therefore the Bible says that God will examine your character and your works on Judgment Day to ensure that you are in fact A JESUS PERSON.

That's what the Bible says – and therefore Paul prays for his people the way he prays.

That makes perfect sense, if we think about. What we believe about the future will affect – should affect – does affect - the way that we pray for other people.

And then fourthly, and quickly because we are running out of time, I want you to see that:

4. What you desire above all things affects how you pray in every situation

We see that clearly in verse 12. Paul says that everything he has been working for and praying for this entire time has been:

“**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.” (2 Thessalonians 1:12 ESV)

Do you see that?

All of Paul’s PRAYER LIFE – his entire approach that he’s been talking about; who he prays for, what he prays for, how he prays – all of that – is geared towards one all consuming, driving ambition:

“that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him” (2 Thessalonians 1:12 ESV)

I want YOU TO MAKE JESUS LOOK GOOD ON JUDGMENT DAY and I want YOU TO ENJOY JESUS FOREVER AFTER JUDGMENT DAY!

Those are the things that matter most to the Apostle Paul and those are the things that AFFECTED and SHAPED his entire approach to intercessory prayer.

Now, I want to be sure you’re not hearing something I’m not saying and that Paul’s not saying.

Paul is not saying: “Hey guys, I want to make Jesus look good on Judgment Day – I’d hate for Jesus to be embarrassed by a parade of so-called Christians who look and act no different than their pagan neighbours – so let’s all pull up our socks and try a little harder.”

Paul is definitely not saying that.

Look at the last clause in verse 12:

“according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Thessalonians 1:12 ESV)

Ah! That’s very important!

What Paul is actually saying is this: “I am asking God to GIVE YOU GRACE – so that you can GROW into the image and likeness of Christ and so that you can OVERFLOW IN LOVE AND GOOD DEEDS so that Jesus will be glorified and you will be gratified on Judgment Day!”

That’s what mattered most to the Apostle Paul – and so that’s what he prayed for the most when it came time to pray for the folks in Thessalonica.

A Resolution And A Course Correction Moving Forward:

Now, let me just bring our time to a close by suggesting one single course correction in terms of how we pray as a people in this church. This is a suggested New Year’s Resolution you might say – for us all - as we kick off the year and also as we enter into prayer week.

Let me suggest – based on this text – that we pray MORE as a people about the things that matter MOST.

1. Let’s pray MORE about the things that matter MOST

Now when I say more – I am intentionally acknowledging that we are already a praying church. And I thank God for that!

However, I have observed that our commitment to prayer tends to ebb and flow. I’ve been here long enough now to become somewhat familiar with our general pattern. When there are a few catastrophic occurrences – a child that is diagnosed with cancer – a teenager killed in a car accident – a terrorist event somewhere in the world – immediately there is a spike in our commitment to prayer. Groups that normally average 8 persons all the sudden average 12. That may last for months at a time. But then, we feel better, perhaps the Lord responds, the crisis abates and our commitment wanes. The 12 becomes 8 again and perhaps as few as 6.

That is how we roll as a congregation.

So that’s what I mean by MORE.

I'd like us to be MORE COMMITTED and MORE FAITHFUL and MORE TRUSTING that prayer matters every day – not just during times of crisis.

So that's what I mean by more.

I want us to pray MORE – and FOR the MOST IMPORTANT THINGS.

You know, it is interesting to note that the Apostle Paul never once prayed for the physical health of any of his people – not that we have record of.

Not once.

And I'm not saying that isn't important – it is important and appropriate to pray for those things – but it is noteworthy that there is not a single record in the New Testament of the Apostle Paul ever doing so.

Now in all likelihood he did – but it is clear that it wasn't the MOST IMPORTANT THING for Paul – because of what he believed about the future.

See, cancer or no cancer you are going to stand before God on Judgment Day and go somewhere for all eternity. So since CANCER never sent anyone to hell and since MS never sent anyone to hell and since ALZSEIMERS never sent anyone to hell those things just are not going to get the best of the Apostle Paul's prayer time – and I want to suggest that they ought not to get the best of our prayer time either.

I'm saying – let's pray MORE for the things that matter MOST.

Let's pray for our children and our friends and our neighbours to KNOW THE LORD and to GROW IN THEIR FAITH and in their LOVE for one another. Let's pray and ask God to give grace so that when they stand before him on Judgment Day they will look so much like Jesus and they will be SO LADEN DOWN with Gospel fruit that there will be NO QUESTION WHATSOEVER that they are sons and daughters of the eternal kingdom.

Let's pray MORE about THAT!

Are you with me church?

That's what I'm asking. That's where I think this text is pointing us. So let's do that - and let's get started on that now. Let's pray together.