

PRAYING FOR THE AFFLICTED
2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Introduction

What do you do when you receive news that people you care about are undergoing something terrible but you are too far away to do anything about it, and even if you were there, the forces at work are greater than you can stop? Modern communication methods have now made that quite common for us to experience. We receive news in real time about what people are suffering in other parts of the world, which can cause enough anguish in itself, but even more so if you know people that are in the midst of that suffering. The inability to be able to do something in response to such news to bring relief can result in a wide range of reactions from falling into despair to becoming indifferent. Neither of those extremes is proper for a Christian for there is always something we can do. We can pray.

This morning we are going to examine 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 in which Paul and his missionary companions do exactly that. The Thessalonian believers were suffering from persecution and affliction and there was nothing Paul, Silas or Timothy could do to stop it from happening. But they could and they did remind them of God's promises and let them know how they were praying for them. Turn again 2 Thessalonians 1. I will read through the whole chapter to set the context for our study.

¹ Paul and 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 the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater; ⁴ therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. ⁵ This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. ⁶ For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸ dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰ when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed. ¹¹ To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, ¹² so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prompted to Pray - 2 Thessalonians 1:11

It was common in Paul's letters for him to include within his teaching a description of how he was praying. Paul often describes both the thanksgiving he gives to God because of what He is doing in their lives and the petitions he makes to God on their behalf. He had done that in his first letter to the Thessalonians, so it would be expected in this letter as well. In 1 Thessalonians 1 & 2 he gives thanks to God concerning their reception of the Gospel and its results in their lives of quickly maturing to become a model for other churches while also praying for them to continue in that path. In 1 Thessalonians 3:9 he gives thanks to God for the joy their genuine conversion had brought him in being able to rejoice before God on their account. He followed this with his prayer that he, Silas and Timothy would be able to return to continue ministry to them and that God would "*establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.*"

That is a good model for us to follow in our own lives as we consider other people. Give thanks to God for what He has already done or is currently doing in their lives while petitioning Him concerning continued growth in the knowledge of God and in walking with Him. That includes when praying for others concerning some hardship they are experiencing. That is what Paul does here in 2 Thessalonians. He began the chapter giving thanks to God for how He was answering their prayers so that the faith of the Thessalonians had increased exceedingly and their love for one toward another existed in abundance. Here in verse 11 he describes his continued prayers for them.

Verse 11 begins “*to this end,*” “*therefore,*” “*in view of this,*” or “*for which*” depending on the translation you are using. The Greek here (εἰς ὃ / eis ho) indicates purpose and means. The means is prayer, but what is the purpose? What has prompted this particular prayer? The first subject of the prayer that they would be considered worthy of the calling of God ties this back to verse 5 that their suffering related to the kingdom of God was the evidence that God in His righteous judgment had considered them worthy of His kingdom. As Jesus stated in Matthew 5:10-11, “¹⁰ *Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” ¹¹ “*Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.*” In other words, they were suffering for the kingdom of God because they were part of that kingdom.

It is interesting that what prompts Paul’s prayer here is not so much the persecution and affliction that they were suffering, but rather what that indicated about them. This is not to suggest in anyway that Paul was not compassionate toward them in their suffering, but only that he saw something of much greater importance than just seeking relief for them. That is a reminder that it is important not to get so focused on the human suffering that is being experienced that recognizing what God is doing is missed. At the same time, it is also important to deal with the human suffering and give hope. Paul is balanced here.

Notice that Paul followed verse 5 with encouragement that at Jesus’ coming the believers would be given relief from their suffering. He then continued on that God would uphold justice in the condemnation of those that were causing it. That included both the Gentiles that did not know God and the Jews that would not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus. Those are important truths, but they are subordinate points to their being worthy of God’s kingdom and not the reason for Paul’s prayer here in verse 11.

We see this same balance of both compassion for human suffering and pointing to something greater in Jesus’ ministry. In our seven year study of the life of Christ we saw over and over again how Jesus would have compassion upon the multitudes. He would heal every kind of disease and sickness and also cast out demons and even raise the dead. Yet Jesus never lost sight of the reason for His coming for He would always be teaching, preaching and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of heaven. Relief from suffering is important, but the truths related to eternity are more important. We need to keep these same truths in mind lest we become unbalanced in either direction.

In the early twentieth century there was a shift in many churches in which doing good deeds for people and especially efforts to relieve human suffering began to compromise and then replace the gospel. By the 1970’s it was not uncommon to find churches that were providing food for the poor, but you could not get a Bible from them. This became known as the social gospel. Things that are going on today in many churches are only a continuation of this same mindset. They might mean well, but in the end it is very cruel. Giving temporary physical, mental or emotional comfort for people on the road to hell without giving them warning and directions on how to get on the narrow road that goes to heaven is in the end an abomination.

Some gospel preaching churches over reacted to this and eliminated their efforts to help those in need, but that violates 1 John 3:17, “*But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?*” Or stated pragmatically in James 2:15-16, ¹⁵ *If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food,* ¹⁶ *and one of you*

says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?”

The balance is seen in Jesus and in Paul. Remember that more than once Paul was involved in taking up collections to bring relief to those in need. The great famine mentioned in Acts 11:28 is one and the references in 1 Corinthians and Romans to taking a gift for the poor in Jerusalem is another. Yet neither Jesus nor Paul ever compromised the gospel or the truth. Neither should we.

Paul and his companions were prompted to “*also pray for you always.*” The “also” is a statement that prayer for the Thessalonians was an activity that they did in addition to all the other things they did. It adds an emphasis to its importance to them backed up by the statement they prayed for them “*always*” or “*at all times.*” We saw this same word, (πάντοτε / pantote), several times in our study of 1 Thessalonians. This is not the idea that this is the only thing they do since it is something they “also” do. There is a time sense to this word in this context meaning “on every occasion.” They prayed on a regular basis and praying concerning the Thessalonians was a normal part of that.

The word for pray here, (προσευχόμῃ / proeuchomai), is the general word for speaking to, making requests of God. In this context this includes the idea of petition since the particular requests are given in the rest of the verse. Paul and his companions are praying for the Thessalonians with specific desires in mind - “*that our God may considered you worthy His calling and He may fulfill every desire for goodness and work of faith in power.*” We are going to look at each of these petitions in detail.

Worthy of Your Calling - 2 Thessalonians 1:11

The first petition, translated here a bit more woodenly, is “*that you, our God would regard worthy of the calling.*” The petition is specifically for the Thessalonian believers, but Paul is quick to point out that the God he is petitioning is “our God.” There is a personal relationship with God that both the missionaries and the Thessalonians share in common. It is not “my God,” or “your God,” it is “our God.” That has significance in itself in the common bond the believing Jews and believing Gentiles have with each other, but it would have even more significance to someone coming out of polytheistic paganism in which individuals would attach themselves to particular gods. They now only had one God - our God.

How did Paul and the formerly pagan Thessalonians come to share in a relationship with the same God? That was due to “the calling” which here is a reference the call of God to salvation and the holy life that results from that which culminates in entering into the kingdom of God for eternity. Paul uses this word (κλήσις / klāsis) many times in his letters and those usages give us a better understanding of Paul’s meaning in using it.

First, Paul uses this word in his flow of thought in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 in which he argues that the preaching of the cross is the power of God to those being saved because His “calling” was not to many of the wise, the mighty, or the noble, but instead to the foolish of this world, the weak, the base and the despised. No one comes to God because they are worthy, earn it, or figure it out. They come because God calls them so that by “*His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.*”

Second is the direct statement in 2 Timothy 1:9 that “[God] *has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.*” God calls people to be saved and fulfill the holy purposes He set forth in Jesus in eternity past.

Third is his usage in Ephesians 1:18-19 in which he prays for them that “*the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,*”¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” Paul then goes on to tie this to Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension and future subjection of all things to Him in eternity. This “hope of His calling” is a confident assurance for believers that heaven is their destiny.

The context of the “calling” here in 2 Thessalonians is directly tied to the hope of the Thessalonians and that all true Christians can have in looking forward to the revelation of Christ at His coming for His church. It will bring relief from whatever persecution and affliction we may suffer in this life while bringing about justice. That will not be the false ideas of justice being clamored for by “woke” society. It will be true justice in which God rewards those who have believed and followed Him and condemnation of those who have not. The very deeds they are doing now in pursuit of the world’s false definition of what is good will be the evidence that will render a judgment of guilty for their sin.

The calling of God upon the believer is a great source of comfort for it is an assurance that what God has promised to us He will also fulfill. My salvation is not dependent on my abilities but on His own working in me. The certainty of this is seen in Paul’s usage of the verb form of “called” in Romans 8:29-30, ²⁹ *“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;”* ³⁰ *and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”* The conclusion of each of these steps is so certain that future glorification is spoken of as something already done.

Paul prays that God will regard or count them worthy of this calling. While Paul has already stated in verse 5 that their suffering for the kingdom of God is already the evidence that God has judged them to be worthy of His kingdom, Paul will still pray for it. There is nothing unusual about praying concerning something God has already promised. God promises to meet the needs of believers as we seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness (Matthew 6:33), but we are still to pray to the Lord, *“give us this day our daily bread”* (Matthew 6:11). 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises that God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able and that He will provide a way of escape, and James 4:7 promises that if we submit to God and resist the devil, he will flee from us, yet we are to still pray that the Lord will deliver us from evil (Matthew 6:13). Philippians 1:6 tells us *“that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus,”* yet multiple scriptures direct us to pray for spiritual maturity (Philippians 1:9-10, etc.). That is the sense here. They had already given proof that God had judged them worthy of His kingdom, but he would still continue to pray for it. What God began in eternity past is evidenced in the present and will be completely fulfilled in the future. Our prayers bring us into conformity with God’s will and allow us the privilege of being included in it being carried out.

I like how Hendriksen explained this in his commentary. *“Paul knew from the evidences that as a result of constant prayer (their own prayer-life and the prayers of others for them) the Thessalonians would live and act as it becomes those who have received the call, so that on the day of judgement God would count them worthy of entering the kingdom. In the chain of salvation, which connects one eternity with another, constant prayer and daily sanctification are indispensable links.”*

Fulfilling Every Desire for Goodness - 2 Thessalonians 1:11

The second petition is *“and may He fulfill every desire for goodness”* or as the ESV translates it, *“may [He] fulfill every resolve for good.”* The word for fulfill here (πληρώω / plāroō) in this context refers to bringing to completion or to accomplish. What was to be brought to completion? The word used here, εὐδοκία / eudokia, can be translated in several ways, but it is an inner motivation, a resolve, that would be characterized by delight or good pleasure. The resolve here is for what is good, ἀγαθωσύνη / agathōsunā, is uprightness of heart and life. Galatians 5:22 includes goodness as one of the fruits of the Spirit, and it is also evidence of being a child of the light along with additional characteristics of righteousness and truth mentioned in Ephesians 5:8-9. That make sense since what is good is defined by God as a reflection of His character. This also explains the necessity of God’s involvement in bringing to completion the resolve of the Thessalonians for goodness.

Man is not good on his own. Romans 3:10-12 quoting from Psalm 14 is very direct on this point, ¹⁰ *as it is written, “There is none righteous, not even one;”* ¹¹ *There is none who understands, There is none*

who seeks for God; ¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, There is not even one.” It is the Holy Spirit that changes man from sinner to saint by bringing him to conviction about his sin, the savior and judgment (John 16:8), and then He quicken his soul to believe and be saved by God’s grace through faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:5, 8). As 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 explains, Jesus Christ who knew no sin took sin on our behalf when He was crucified so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him as new creations in Him. The desires change to match those of God.

What are God’s desires? Contrary to the ideas of sinners that do not know Him, God desires what is good for His creatures. That begins with Him supplying the needs of His creatures, but it is also given in the revelation of His will in His word so that we might have His direction for our lives. Sinners tend to think of God as the great cosmic killjoy that is out to ruin all their fun, but that is because they are oblivious to the fact that the pleasures of sin which they are pursuing is the road to misery in this life and hell in eternity. While there is enough suffering that goes on with just living in a sin cursed world and the consequences of our own sin, much worse is the suffering that comes because of the sin of others.

Six of the Ten Commandments are focused on behaviors and attitudes that have a direct effect on relationships with other people. The consequence of disobeying any of them are negative. Would not life in this world be much better if everyone showed proper respect for one another starting with honoring of parents? Murder has ramifications far beyond the individual criminal and the victim. The same is true with theft. The destruction of marriages and families by adultery reverberates throughout society - and that is without mentioning the medical consequences of venereal disease. The short term gain from a lie is far outweighed by the longer term destruction that comes from not being able to trust one another. Coveting is a sin of the heart, but the jealousy and envy that are part of it also destroys relationships. God’s laws are given for our good.

Fulfilling Every Work of Faith in Power - 2 Thessalonians 1:11

The third petition takes its verb from the previous phrase so that the request here is that God would fulfill every *“work of faith with power.”* Paul had commended and prayed for them concerning their work of faith in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. I dealt with this subject in detail in that sermon, so I am only going to summarize here. The first work of faith is to believe that Jesus is who He claims to be and did what He said He accomplished. He is God in human flesh, the Messiah from God who came to save sinners by His own sacrificial death.

The second work of faith simply is living according what it is claimed to be believed. In 1 Thessalonians this resulted in them getting rid of their idols (1:9) and living in a manner to please God (4:1) which included loving the brethren (4:9-10). They continued in these holy pursuits and were evangelistic spreading the gospel far and wide (1:8) even though they suffered persecution (2:14).

Ephesians 2:8-10 makes it clear that salvation is solely by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but it also makes it clear that such salvation will result in the Christian doing the *“good works which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”* Good works cannot earn you salvation, but salvation through faith in Christ will result in good works.

Paul adds here that this work of faith is *“with power.”* This is not their own power for man cannot by his own power produce the work of faith much less see it fully accomplished. This is a petition for God to bring this to completion in the Thessalonians by His own power. The life of faith began by the power of God working through the gospel in those He called (Romans 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 22). It continues in the present by God’s power working in and through believers (Eph. 3:20; Col. 1:11, 29; 2 Peter 1:3), and it will be brought to its completion by His power (Phil. 3:21; 1 Peter 1:5).

Glorification of the Name of Our Lord Jesus - 2 Thess. 1:12

Verse 12 gives the purpose for God to fulfill these petitions, and in doing so, he also gives a reason

we can be confident that He will do so. *“So that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him.”* That is the actual higher goal that is beyond the petitions for God to count them worthy of their calling and fulfill every resolve for goodness and work of faith with power while enduring the suffering that was upon them due to persecution and affliction.

To glorify the name of the Lord Jesus is to glorify Jesus, but the focus on “the name” is a reflection of Old Testament usage of “the name of the Lord” as a designation of Yahweh. The name of an individual represents that person including His revealed character and attributes. That is why taking the Lord’s name is vain - using it irreverently - is blasphemy. In Philippians 2:10 it is *“at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

Throughout the Scriptures the ultimate goal of everything is the glory of God, but this is to be particularly true of those who know and walk with God. Ephesians 1:4-14 explains that our salvation from its beginning in His choosing before the foundation of the world to its consummation in eternity future when the inheritance is received is to the *“praise of the glory of His grace.”* For Christians, even mundane things have this purpose as seen in 1 Corinthians 10:31, *“Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”* Certainly then Christ is glorified when we endure hardships in this life and mature as a result of them to become more like Him. That is Paul’s point here.

But notice as well that there is a reciprocal glory. He is glorified in us and we are glorified in Him. This idea comes from Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17:22-23, ²² *“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; ²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”* This shows the essential unity between the Lord and His people. His glory is enhanced by His work in them, and they receive glory by their nearness to Him. This will be brought to its fullness when Jesus comes.

Paul concludes this section by pointing out that all of this is *“according to the grace of God of us and [the] Lord Jesus.”* This is not man’s work, it is the work of God in man. It is according to His grace, His unmerited favor given to us in the Lord Jesus. Man’s work in this is in reality only yielding to God. It is to have faith in Him (John 6:29).

Conclusions

How do you pray for those who are suffering from persecution and affliction? This is the example. Certainly in compassion we pray for their comfort and relief from it, but we must also see beyond the present circumstances to God at work despite the evil being done to others by the wicked. For suffering non-Christians we pray that they will see their need for the Savior and cry out to Him for present mercies, but even more so, for eternal mercies of forgiveness of sin. For suffering Christians, we pray that God will glorify Himself in them through their response in the work of faith to endure with godliness reflecting the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray the Lord will empower them to desire and pursue what is good even while suffering evil. That is what Jesus and the apostles did.

Paul uses himself as an example in 1 Corinthians 4:11-16 writing,
¹¹ *“To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; ¹² and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we*

are persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. ¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶ Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.”

Let us be careful to pray for one another to follow that example by the power of God working in them.

Sermon Notes - April 25, 2021
PRAYING FOR THE AFFLICTED - 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Introduction

Prompted to Pray - 2 Thessalonians 1:11

Thanksgiving & Petitions

A model to follow

Compassion & seeing God's work beyond the current circumstances

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The balance of ministry in Paul

Praying at all times

Worthy of Your Calling - 2 Thessalonians 1:11

Our God

God's Calling

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

2 Timothy 1:9

Ephesians 1:18-19

God's calling & Hope in Christ's coming

Comfort in God's Calling - Romans 8:29-30

Prayers for what is already promised

Necessities of life: Matthew 6:33 cf 6:11

Temptation: 1 Cor. 10:13; James 4:7 cf. Matt. 6:13

Spiritual maturity: Phil. 1:6 cf. Phil. 1:9-10

Fulfilling Every Desire for Goodness - 2 Thessalonians 1:11

Resolve / delight

Goodness

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Fulfilling Every Work of Faith in Power - 2 Thessalonians 1:11

Work of Faith - salvation

Work of Faith - maturity

The place of good works

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Glorification of the Name of Our Lord Jesus - 2 Thess. 1:12

The name

The glory of God

God's grace

Conclusions

KIDS KORNER – Parents, you are responsible to apply God's Word to your children's lives. Here is some help. Young Children – draw a picture about something you hear during the sermon. Explain your picture(s) to your parents at lunch. Older Children – count how many times prayer is mentioned. Talk with your parents

about how to pray for people who are suffering - and then pray with them for someone.

THINK ABOUT IT – Questions to consider in understanding the sermon and its application. What do you do when you receive news that people you care about are suffering, but there is nothing tangible you can do about it? Paul often included prayers in his letters - look up some of those passages and note what he prayed for. What prompted Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians? What is the balance between compassion and pointing to what was more important in the ministry of Jesus? Of Paul? What was the origin of the social gospel? How did it compromise the gospel itself? How is the gospel being compromised in the present time in churches that emphasize social awareness? What is prayer? What is the importance of Paul of praying to "our God"? Why would that be more significant to a former pagan? What is the calling of God? Explain its different uses. How is the calling of God a comfort to the believer? Why should you pray for things that God has already promised? What is the resolve / desire for goodness? What is goodness? How can sinful man become good? List some of God's desires revealed in the Scriptures. How does keeping the Ten Commandments improve human relationships? What is the work of faith? What is the importance of God's power enabling it? What is the importance of "the name" of the Lord Jesus? Why is the glory of the Lord so important? Why are Christians to pursue that glory? How is that a motivation for proper Christian living? Why is God's grace necessary for it? How should you pray for those who are afflicted - keeping in mind the balance of compassion and seeking God's work in the person in the midst of it? Take time to pray for someone afflicted.