

Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return: What We Pray for You

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

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*The Lord's Day Morning
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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 11 and 12. The apostle Paul often fills his letters with prayers that he prays for the congregation that he's writing, sometimes there are prayer requests that he asks them to pray for him and for the mission team that they're supporting and that may be writing them, other times he actually exhorts them to prayer, and then there are prayer reports where he tells that congregation what he has been praying for them. The passage that we're reading today is a prayer report. Paul is telling the Thessalonians what he has been praying for them. And that's very important for us because it's a guide for us as to how we can pray for one another. This is also a very rich passage which helps us to understand how we go about undertaking sanctification in the Christian life. What Paul has to say here is very, very significant for understanding just how you go about the pursuit of holiness and growth in grace.

And I want you to be on the lookout for several things as we read this passage together. In verse 11, for instance, I want you to note what Paul says about how he continually prays. Secondly, in verse 11, I want you to be on the lookout for that wonderful phrase, "that God may make you worthy of His calling." And I want you to be already asking, "What in the world does that mean? What does it mean to be made worthy of His calling?" And we've already met that phrase in this passage back in verse 5. Third, again in verse 11, I want you to note the phrase, "may fulfill every resolve for good." I want you to think for a second about what it means to resolve to do good. And also in verse 11, the phrase, "every work of faith" - what is a work of faith? And then in verse 12, I want you to notice what Paul says all of this is supposed to lead to — "that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you." And I don't want you to miss what he says — "glorified in Him, glorified in you" — may be glorified in you and you in Him. Don't miss that phrase. And ask yourself, "What does that mean?" And then finally, notice how he emphasizes that all of this is "according to the grace of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" at the end of chapter 12. Be on the lookout for each of those things as we read God's Word together. Before we do, let's pray and ask for His help and blessing.

Heavenly Father, as we attend to a passage that reports to us Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians, we ask that by Your Spirit we would not simply understand it or come to have greater views of Your power and grace by studying it or come to have higher thoughts of You because of Your work in these things, but that even more than that we would pray. We pray that this report of prayer would move us to pray and to live in accordance with the truths that it articulates. We ask that You would do this in us by Your Holy Spirit even as we read and hear the Word, in Jesus' name, amen.

This is the Word of God. Hear it:

“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.”

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

Paul, in this passage, is telling the Thessalonians what he prays for them and it is a prayer not only for their final glorification, it's a prayer for their present sanctification with a view to their final glorification. In fact, in this prayer, Paul prays that they would be sanctified by God Himself, that they would be sanctified by God, by God's power, and by God's grace for Jesus' glory so that at the end they would be counted worthy. It's a magnificent prayer and it's a prayer that puts perspective on so much in our lives. And I want to think with you about it for just a few moments today.

CONTINUALLY PRAYING

First of all, don't miss the phrase in verse 11 where the apostle Paul says, “To this end, we always pray for you.” Paul is saying, “We pray for you continually.” Now think about that a little bit. The apostle Paul was a man with missionary zeal, with evangelistic fervor. He was a man with a prodigious work ethic. He worked hard, he worked zealously, he worked passionately, but he depended upon prayer. Why? Because he understood that the mission that he was undertaking was fundamentally a spiritual mission and he did not have the power to accomplish that mission; only God, the Holy Spirit, can accomplish the goal that he has for his ministry amongst the Thessalonians. So as hard as he worked to share the Gospel, as hard as he worked to spread the Gospel, as hard as he worked to make disciples, as faithful as he was in his teaching, in his preaching, in his administration, he was dependent upon prayer. And I wonder if our prayerlessness in the church today, both individually and corporately, is not only due to the torrid pace of our lives — and our lives do have an incredible

busyness to them — but is due to the fact that we do not understand the profound spirituality of this mission; the work of God in the hearts of people is a supernatural work. No human being can accomplish it. Not the most powerful preacher in the world, not the most humble disciple living in a remarkable way can change the heart of another human being; only God can.

And so the apostle Paul says to the Thessalonians, “We always pray for you” because he is totally dependent on God. This is one of the ways in this passage, and by the way, it's only one of four ways in this passage, that Paul stresses that in all of his ministry he is totally dependent upon God. First, he stresses that because he says, “we always pray.” Second, look at the next phrase, “that our God may make you worthy of His calling.” Now whatever it means to be made worthy of the calling, notice that the apostle Paul says that it's God who does that. So he prays to God in dependence upon Him, he shows his dependence on God because whatever it is that he wants to happen he wants us to become worthy of His calling; it's God that's going to do that.

And notice again at the end of that sentence in verse 11 — how does it happen? “By His power.” That's the third way that he emphasizes if his ministry is going to be accomplished then God is going to have to do it. He prays to God, he acknowledges God is going to have to work, and then he acknowledges that this is going to happen only according to God's power. And then look at the end of verse 12. He says, “How's it going to happen?” “According to the grace of our God.” So he prays to God, he says God is going to accomplish it, he says it's going to be by God's power, and by God's grace. Paul, in this passage is teaching us something about sanctification. Sanctification is utterly dependent upon God's work and so we must pray showing that we know that only He can give the victory, we must acknowledge that He is the one at work so that we would be counted worthy of His calling, that it's by His power, and that it's by His grace. Paul is telling something very, very profound about sanctification in this passage. Let's look at some of those things with more detail.

WORTHY OF HIS CALLING

Look at verse 11 in the middle of the verse where Paul says, “That God may make you worthy of His calling.” Paul's saying, “I pray, one of the things that I pray is that God would make you worthy of His calling.” What in the world does that mean? Well we've already met that phrase in this passage. Look back at verse 5. In verse 5 Paul says, “This is the evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God.” Now in that passage Paul says that they are counted as worthy of the kingdom of God and here again he says, “I'm praying that God Himself, on that great day when you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, will count you worthy, will declare you worthy of His calling and of His kingdom. It's a picture of the final judgment and our being declared worthy.

Now my friends, if that worthiness ultimately boils down to our personal goodness we're in trouble, and that is why Paul says, "I am praying that God would count you worthy, that God would be the one at work, so that when you're standing before the throne you are counted worthy. I'm pray that He would do this by His power, that He would do it by His grace." He's asking you in every scene of life to be conscious of that final judgment. You remember how we said both 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians are about living life in light of Jesus' return and one aspect of Jesus' return is the final judgment. And the apostle Paul is saying, "I want you, in every situation and circumstance of life, to remember that your ultimate goal is to stand before God on that great day and to be counted righteous in Christ." And Paul is saying, "That's the finish line. There's nothing short of that that I'm working for, for you, Thessalonians. I don't want you just to be a little bit better than other people. I don't want you just to stay away from the most horrifying sins that you can imagine. I want you, on that great day, to be counted righteous in Christ. I want God to declare you to be worthy of His calling and His kingdom. And only God can do that and only God can do it by His power and only God can do it by His grace and so I'm praying that for you. I want you to know that," he says.

By the way, is that something that you pray for one another? You know sometimes friends ask you to pray for them and very often it has to do with a health circumstance or a circumstance in vocation or in family and we know how to pray for them, but do you wonder sometimes how you ought to pray for one another? This is a really good way to pray for one another, that you would pray that your brothers and sisters in Christ that when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ would be counted worthy in Christ of His calling and His kingdom, by God's grace and by God's power. And by the way, it would be a wonderful thing for you to pray that for a Christian from which you have experienced estrangement. Nothing knits the heart of estranged brothers and sisters together like praying deep and powerful spiritual petitions for one another. And so the apostle Paul says that he prays to the end that God will consider you worthy of His calling, will count your worthy of His calling in the great day of Jesus Christ.

PRAYING THAT BY GOD'S POWER, EVERY RESOLVE FOR GOOD WOULD BEAR FRUIT

But he doesn't stop there. Look again at the end of verse 11. He says, he prays that by God's power, every resolve of yours to do good would bear fruit. Look at the language — "that our God may fulfill every resolve for good." You know, half of growing in grace is wanting to. Half of growing in grace is wanting to. Half of doing the right thing is wanting to. If you've ever had the experience where you know what the right thing is but you don't want to do it — either you don't want to do it because you know what it will cost you or you don't want to do it because very frankly your heart is just not in it. And the apostle Paul is saying, "My prayer

for you is first of all that you will want to do the right thing. You will want to do what you ought to do. But then, that that desire, that will to do what is good, will come to fruition. You won't just resolve to do it; it will come to fruition."

Those of you who are in court have probably sometimes had a coach to tell you, "You've got to want it! You've got to want it more than they want it!" And what's that coach preaching? That coach is preaching resolve. And there's something really true about that. We've probably seen contests between teams in various sports where we could literally perceive with our eyes when we're watching the contest unfold that one team wants that victory more than the other team. Well the apostle Paul is saying, "You want to grow in grace? Good, but resolve isn't enough. Determination isn't enough. God must, by His power, bring fruit from your resolve." In other words, even when you are committing yourself and consecrating yourself and resolving to do what is good, you need God's strength, God's power, so that truth will be borne by that.

PRAYING THAT GOD WILL FULFILL EVERY WORK OF FAITH

And he doesn't stop. Look at the end of verse 11. He goes on to say, "I pray that God will fulfill every work of faith by His power." In other words, Paul is saying that by God's power he is praying that every work done from faith would bear fruit. What in the world does it mean, "every work of faith"? It means a work, a deed, an action, a word that is done that flows from our faith in Jesus Christ. It's not done to get chips with God. We're not doing it to try and merit His favor; we're not trying to do it to get God to love us or get God to bless us. This is not some sort of a bartering practice. We're not trying to build up our storehouse of merit. It's a work of faith; it flows from faith. We already know that God loves us; He's given us His Son; He's accepted us in Christ. But the reason we're doing this work flows from faith. And Paul says, "My prayer is that every work done from faith would bear fruit." And it will require the power of God for it to do so.

Imagine a woman married to a difficult man and for four thousand days she's gotten up and she's resolved before she's gotten out of bed, "Lord, today is going to be different. It's going to be different." She's resolved it's going to be different. In spite of the way that he infuriates her, in spite of the way that he disappoints her, in spite of the way he lets her down, it's going to be different today. And fifteen minutes after her feet have hit the floor it's already begun and the cycle continues. And the apostle Paul says, "Don't you understand that in the living of the Christian life it takes more than resolve; it takes more than determination?" First of all, it requires that you hold in front of your eyes that great judgment seat of Christ. What I'm aiming for in the Christian life is not necessarily that my circumstances will go away or even get better. My goal in the Christian life is when I stand before Jesus, He says, "Come, you blessed of My Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from before the foundation of the world." That's what I'm aiming for. And that means that it may be that what God does in my life

is not lift me out of my situation or change my situation, but change me in my situation so that in being changed in my situation I am prepared for the day when I stand before God and He says, "Well done, My good and faithful servant."

And my resolution, as important as it is, isn't enough. Unless God fulfills my resolution to do good, no fruit can come from it. And my deeds of faith are of no avail unless God is at work by His power to bring fruit from those deeds of faith. Do you see how Paul is emphasizing, "Yes, we must pray. Yes, we must want to grow. Yes, we must resolve to grow. Yes, we must do deeds of faith. But it's God who is at work in us. He is the one who brings the fruit." He is more concerned about your sanctification than you're concerned for your sanctification. And when He's not relieving you in situations that you're longing for relief and He's not giving you victory in situations for which you're longing for victory, you can still be sure that He is at work in you for your holiness, and even more than that, He's at work in you for your glory.

GLORIFIED IN HIM, GLORIFIED IN YOU

And that leads us to the next phrase because notice what Paul says all of this is supposed to lead to - that in the end, that God would count you worthy of His calling and that every resolve of yours to do good would bear fruit and that every work of faith would bear fruit by His power so that...what? Look at verse 12 — "so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you." There it is. All of that growth in grace in you in the here and now is to lead to what? So that the name of the Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified. I love what Calvin says about this passage. "Here he calls us back to the chief end of our whole life — that we might promote the Lord's glory." It sounds like the first question of *The Shorter Catechism*, doesn't it? Paul's saying, "I want you to be counted worthy in the great judgment day, I want every resolve that you make to do what's good to bear fruit, I want every work done of faith to bear fruit — why? Because I want Jesus to be glorified, because I want Jesus to get glory out of this."

Ah, now there's another thing that impacts our sanctification. Our work in the Christian life, our living in the Christian life, our resolve in the Christian life is not just to change our situation, it's so that Jesus gets glorified. And Jesus may be glorified in our situation changing or He may be glorified in our situation changing not one iota but our persevering in faith. So Paul says, "I'm consciously desirous that whatever happens in my life that the Lord Jesus gets glory."

It doesn't stop there. Notice what he says — "that the Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in Him." Now that sounds like something that comes right out of the Upper Room, doesn't it? It sounds like it comes right out of John 13 to 17. It sounds like John 15 — "I am the Vine; you are the branches." It sounds like the High Priestly prayer of John 17 where Jesus talks about us being in Him and He in us. The apostle Paul is saying, "It's my prayer that the Lord Jesus may be

glorified in you, that as God works in you for your sanctification, that Jesus is glorified because what He set out to do in you He is in fact doing.” And then he says, “and you in Him.” It’s mind-boggling! That you would be glorified in Him? Yes! Yes!

There has been a lot of controversy this last week if you've been following the news media or social media about a manuscript scrap from the fourth century that claims to state that Jesus had a wife and Jesus said, “My wife.” By the way, we just read about Jesus’ wife in Revelation 21:9, didn't we? He says to the Bride, “Come, My wife,” and who is it? It's the Church. Jesus did have a wife. She's called the Church. And the book of Revelation says that She is going to be spotless, perfect, without blemish. She is going to be glorified in Him. And that's what Paul is saying here.

BY GOD’S GRACE

And all of this, he says — look at the end of verse 12 — is “by God's grace.” Only God can accomplish the work of sanctification. He does it by His power and by His grace. Yes, we resolve. Yes, we work by faith. But He's at work by His power and by His grace. You know, the Christian life is not rocket science, but it is impossible, without God. The Christian life is not rocket science, but it is impossible without God. To live the Christian life, you need more than answers, you need more than resolve, you need more than determination; you need God. You need God's power and you need God's grace. You are utterly dependent upon God, His power, and His grace. But you have a God who loves you and a Christ who died for you and the Holy Spirit who is at work in you. And the love and the power of the Triune God that is at work in you for your glorification and for your sanctification, it is vast, unmeasured, boundless, and free. And if we understood that, it would dramatically change about how we go trying to live the Christian life.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this time in Your Word and I pray for us that You would count us in Christ, worthy of Your calling at that great day and that here and now, right now, in the present, You would make every resolve that we have to do good bear fruit, and every work of faith bear fruit, by Your power, and that the name of the Lord Jesus would be glorified in us and we in Him, all by Your matchless grace. We pray, O God, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Now let's sing of the love and power of our great Savior using number 535, “O, The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus.”

What does it take to be considered worthy of His calling and to have fulfilled in

you every desire for good and every work of faith? The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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