

Chapter 2 - The Framework of Prayer (2 Thessalonians 1:3-12)

2 Thessalonians 1:3–12 (ESV)

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.

The Framework

The actual prayer in this passage is found in v.11-12, but the previous verses set the stage for what he prays in these verses. “In other words, 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.” (39)

Thankfulness for Signs of Grace**What do we commonly give thanks for?**

- Our food at meals
- Material blessings
- Safety and health

More often than not, our thanksgiving seems to be tied to our material well-being and comfort. In contrast, Paul’s thanksgiving is for signs of grace among the Christians he’s addressing. Let’s take a look at what’s he’s thankful for:

1. Paul gives thanks that his readers' faith is growing (v. 3).
 - He is speaking of increasing reliance on the Lord, not their conversion.
 - The Thessalonians are maturing in the Lord, not satisfied with previous attainments but pressing on, and for this Paul is thankful.
2. Paul gives thanks that their love is increasing (v. 3).
 - This speaks, not primarily of their love for God, or of their sentimental feelings to one another, but of their practical love they have for each other.
 - This love between believers is something Jesus said would be a distinguishing mark of his followers John 13:34-35.
 - Every group that comes together with a common set of ideals, background, and goals can easily foster a love for each other. This fraternity is very common in many groups.
 - What distinguishes the church is the variety of people, classes, interests, backgrounds, and so on that come together - the only thing they have in common is a shared allegiance to Jesus Christ and his love for them.
 - It is disheartening when a church that should be demonstrating this love for one another fall into divisions or break out into cliques. Any profession of love for Jesus Christ should be accompanied by a love for other who also profess love for Christ. When this happens it is a sign of grace and cause for thanksgiving.
3. Paul gives thanks that they are persevering under trial (v.4)
 - **What's the relationship between the faith and love, and the persevering in v. 4?**
 - Because of their increasing faith and love, they had the spiritual strength to endure through persecutions and trials.
 - Paul's thanksgiving is not merely a secret prayer, but a public boast - **What is he boasting in?** Not in his own work, but in the grace of God evident in their lives. "Look at how powerfully God's grace is working in the Thessalonians, that they are able to withstand these trials - what a testimony to the grace of God and an encouragement to us all."

This should lead us to consider what we give thanks for - does our Thanksgiving follow Colossians 3:1, where we're told to set our hearts on things above. We are most thankful for the things we cherish most, so if those things are heavenly things, our hearts will be giving thanks for those; if they're earthly, transitory things, then our thanksgiving will reflect that.

How does this relate to prayer?

- If we're to follow the example of Paul's mental framework, we should be on the lookout for signs of grace in the lives of fellow Christians and be giving thanks to God for them.

How does what Paul gives thanks for compare to what you give thanks for?

Confidence in the Prospect of Vindication

In verses 5-10, Paul describes how the faithfulness of the Thessalonians in the midst of persecution provides evidence that God's judgement is right and that they will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.

- This does not mean that their perseverance earns them the right to enter the kingdom, but rather that the perseverance is the fruit or demonstration of their that right. The right came when they believed the gospel.
- Two themes are introduces here:
 - **The kingdom of God** - this speaks of the ultimate kingdom, the final triumph of God in the new heaven and new earth.
 - **The perseverance of the Thessalonians** - that is, their steadfast endurance aimed at that future kingdom.
- Carson writes, "Christians are not masochists: they do not want to suffer out of some forlorn but stupid belief that suffering is intrinsically good. They are prepared to suffer and to endure because they keep their eye on the goal." (45)

1. For believers, there will be vindication. (v. 6,10)

- Perhaps as a result of weariness over debates about the end times and the various views, we have tended to be a lot more tolerant on such issues than in the past. This is a good thing, but at the same time we have lost something - a present and strong anticipation of the Lord's return. We don't deny this, but for many it seems that the power of this truth has been removed.
- Instead of "investing the the bank of heaven," we can be tempted to devote all of our time, energy, and money to the merely temporal and passing.
- Central to Paul's mindset, as seen in this passage and much of the NT, is the understanding that the Lord will return and when he does the righteous who suffer now will then be vindicated.

2. For others, there will be retribution. (v. 6-10)

- The idea of retribution is offensive to many and doesn't line up with the grace and forgiveness of the NT. Much like the some of the messages of the prophet in Nahum, this passage leaves many uneasy.
- However, all of us maintain a sense of justice and need for retribution - just watch the news and the outcry when someone who has committed a heinous act is given less than a just punishment.
- **This idea of retribution stands at the very heart of the Christian gospel.** **How is this so?** God's holiness demands retribution and his love sends Jesus, his Son, to absorb that retribution on behalf of others. Carson writes: "The cross simultaneously stands as the irrefutable evidence that God demands retribution, and cries out that it is the measure of God's love...that is why, in the Christian view of things, forgiveness is never detached from the cross, In other words, forgiveness is never the product of love alone, still less of mawkish sentimentality, Forgiveness is possible only because there has been a real offense, and a real sacrifice to offset that offense." (48)

- But what if people reject that sacrifice and refuse to acknowledge God?

- If they refuse the way of forgiveness, they must face the retribution themselves. In some cases, people can become so hardened that they scorn and despise those who have received God's forgiveness. They go so far as to persecute those who know God, which is the situation the Thessalonians face.
- The final picture is a sobering one - the common view of hell is that it is a place where sinners will be crying out for the opportunity to repent but God tell them "too late." Instead, their evil and self-centeredness will persist even then, as will their judgement.

These are the things at the front of Paul's mind as he begins his prayer in verses 11-12, which we will study next week. The world to come is front and center in his mind and is the grid through which he views the present and it colors his prayer as well. Carson concludes:

"His emphases mock so many of our own. In our pragmatic, materialistic society, where each of us seeks comfort and fulfillment and respect, it is hard to follow a despised, crucified Messiah - unless we fix our eyes on the end. If we do not aim for the new heaven and the new earth, many of our values and decisions in this world will be myopic, unworthy, tarnished, fundamentally wrong-headed. To put the matter bluntly: can biblical spirituality long survive where Christians are not oriented to the world to come? And, in this context, can we expect to pray aright unless we are oriented to the world to come?" (50)

What other New Testament teaching can you think of that encourages us to live (and pray!) with eternity's values in view?