

Praying with Paul
1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Introduction

Growing up, I recall a comedian telling his audience that he nicknamed his bed, “prayer.” He said he did this so that whenever people would call him, and he did not answer, he could always call them back and tell them that he was “spending some extra in prayer this morning.” While this is clever, it also reveals something about the difficulty that surrounds prayer. Prayer would be a whole lot easier if it was simply a matter of lying in bed. But of course, you can rename your bed “prayer” and still not do much praying.

I believe that part of the reason that we struggle is due to our sense of self-sufficiency. We typically pray when we feel we are in need. If we do not feel our need, then we are less likely to pray. Prayer demands self-reflection upon our own fragileness. We are in greater need than we often realize. It is not just our physical health concerns and other temporal issues that need to be prayed about. It is also, and most importantly, our spiritual health that requires greater attention in prayer. We need to be more conscientious of our needs before God.

To help us in this endeavor to pray more often and with greater attention on our spiritual health, we will consider Paul’s brief prayer for the church in Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13...

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

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.

Exposition

In this morning’s passage, we see two distinct prayers by Paul. The first is related to himself. The second is related to the Thessalonians. Yet, both prayers give us insight into the frequency and focus of our prayers...

I. Prayer for Daily Direction (Vs. 11)

In this first prayer, Paul prays that God the Father and God the Son would direct his way to the Thessalonians. If you remember from previous verses, Paul was separated from the church in Thessalonica. His ministry in the city has resulted in persecution that drove him away for a season, but he was hoping to be able to return to church that he had planted.

What does this prayer have to teach us about praying? Well, for starters, if the apostle Paul prayed about fairly routine travel to an area that he was already familiar with, then we also should not take such seemingly common praying for granted. When you rise for work in the morning to go fulfill your calling to the vocation that God has placed you in, it is right and good to ask the Lord for his watch-care of you. If you make it to work, it is because God has shown you mercy.

Every day that we live is an opportunity to live in obedience to God. Yet, as Paul shows us in verse 11, that obedience depends upon the Lord's presence with us. If we make it through the day, it is because God has willed it for us. Thus, we begin our days asking for his mercy upon us and end our days thanking Him for his faithfulness to us.

Of course, you and I will only pray like this if we realize that we are dependent upon God for everything. As the book of Acts records the apostle Paul's message in Acts 17:28, "For in God, we live and move and have our being." We are not self-sufficient creators. We are God-dependent creatures. We need Him, even when we do not realize it. Do you realize that you needed God to make the drive from your house to this building today? Before you got out of bed this morning, did you think, "Lord, if you do not go before me, keep watch over me, protect me, and sustain me, I will never make it through this day."

I believe we have a lot to learn from children in this respect. As I left the house this morning, the girls were telling me goodbye and just as the door was closing, Eden said, "I hope you have a safe day." I live hardly any distance from this church building and the speed limit does not get over 35 MPH. What could possibly happen between my house and my office? And then, it hit me, I'm too confident in my own abilities to even think that I should pray about moving a few miles down the road in order that I might be here to serve God's people this morning.

Do you realize how desperately you need God? If you do, then you will pray. If you do not, you will walk through life being overly confident yet easily deceived by the type of pride and arrogance that leads us away from prayer.

Such self-confidence and self-reliance is ultimately destructive. It makes me think of the famous poem by William Ernest Henley, entitled, "Invictus," which ends with the famous words, "I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul." Henley, a committed atheist and self-professed "master of his fate," died of tuberculosis at age 53. Henley was sadly delusional. No matter how much he willed to live, he could not conquer his illness. He had no say in his own death. While we might not write poems like Henley about our own self-sufficiency, we practically write them with our lives when we do not acknowledge our daily need for God in prayer. With every day that passes, we, like Paul, need to pray for God to direct us and watch over us in every endeavor. The frequency of our praying should be daily, for every day that we live is day when we are in need of God's provision.

T.S. - Yet, it is not simply the everyday matters of this life that Paul is concerned with in his prayers. If you continue to read with me, in verses 12-13, we move from the everyday frequency of our prayers to the spiritual focus of our prayers...

II. Prayer for Holy Progress (Vss. 12-13)

In verses 12-13, Paul's focus turns from his daily needs before God to the holy progress needed among the Thessalonians. In the weeks to come, we will see just exactly what Paul means when he speaks of the church being "blameless in holiness before God," but for this morning, I want us to see our dependence upon God for holy progress.

If we would accomplish anything significant for God, if we would make progress in holiness as a people, if we would be “established in holiness before God,” then God must be active in our lives and in our church. Just as we are a God-dependent people for our daily needs, we are a God-dependent people for our spiritual needs. If we would grow in spiritual maturity, it will be because God has moved among us. It will be because God has produced the fruit in us. It will be because God is at work. Apart from the move of God, all of our ambitions and efforts as a church will come to nothing. Therefore, acknowledging the church’s need for God, Paul prays that “God our Father and the Lord Jesus” might “establish their hearts in holiness,” which brings me to a point a significance for us this morning.

When we pray, while we ought to be sure to pray for our daily needs, we must never let those temporary needs supplant eternal realities. In other words, praying for holiness, praying for spiritual matters is of more eternal value than praying for daily, temporary matters. Now, please do not hear me saying that we ought to pray less about daily matters. We must pray for these matters. Jesus gave us a model for such praying when he said, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Yet, before we ever pray for our daily bread, we must be praying, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

My fear is not that we pray too much for daily matters, but that we never move from the temporary to the eternal. And, honestly, I believe this tends to be because we are more enamored with temporary things than eternal truths. We are more concerned about healing in the now than holiness in the future. Yet, when the apostle Paul prays for the church in Thessalonica, he prays above all else that God might establish their hearts as blameless in holiness so that they might be ready for the day when Jesus returns!

Do you pray like this? Do you pray as much for your holiness as you do your health? Do you pray that you will be found blameless in holiness at Christ’s return as much as you pray that you will be found healthy at your next doctor’s appointment? Again, please do not hear me saying that your health is not important! Your physical health is important, to a degree, but it is not as important as your spiritual health. The reason that Christ healed so many people of their physical ailments in his ministry was so that people would know that He was able to heal of them of their spiritual disease, their sin-sickness. Physical healings were never an end in themselves. They were always pointing to the greatest healing. The healing that Christ brings to all who trust in Him.

So again, I ask, do you pray to make progress in holiness? Do you pray that if God chooses not to physically heal you, protect you, or strengthen you that He will use the trial to make you more holy? God’s end game is not our physical wholeness on this side of the resurrection. God’s end game is our spiritual wholeness in Christ. One day the perishable will put on imperishability. One day the mortal will put on immortality. But until that day, we pray chiefly that we will endure to the day when Christ returns, and we are transformed, when we see Him as He is! So, pray for the healing of the loved one! Pray for your daily needs. Pray about your job. Pray about your marriage. Pray for your children! Pray that God will heal you when you are sick! But above all else, pray that God would make you more holy so that you might be ready for the day of Christ’s return! Pray with your eyes on eternity!

Conclusion

What, then can we conclude with and learn from Paul's prayers?

First, we should pray as often as we need God.

Finally, we should pray with a focus on growing in holiness.

Apart from God, we can do nothing. We cannot make it through the day and we cannot progress in holiness in preparation for Christ's return without God. We desperately need Him. And because we need Him, we pray.