

January 12, 2020

“The Fundamentals of Prayer”
2 Thessalonians 1:3-12

FCF: The need to rethink our approach to prayer

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The fundamentals of prayer are not what we think.
(anchor) We need to let the Lord retrain us.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

There are things we absorb we just assume to be true. It may be the culture and priorities with which we were raised. Or it may be our daily habits and ordinary patterns. We absorb them and assume they are true. In which case, such things often need to be revisited and rethought.

The same applies to prayer. If we grew up in a Christian home, we were trained in how to pray. If we gave our life to Christ in college, we may have been taught by a campus minister. It all may have been good. Or not. In any case, such things need to be revisited and rethought.

After all, no matter the state of our prayer life, prayer is just too important to let it slide.

SCRIPTURE READING: 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Let me cast your mind to “The Karate Kid” (1984). Here’s a plot recap. Daniel moves to California with his mother, but soon becomes the target of a group of bullies who study karate at the Cobra Kai dojo. Fortunately, Daniel befriends Mr. Miyagi, an unassuming repairman who happens to be a martial arts master himself. Mr. Miyagi takes Daniel under his wing, training him in a compassionate form of karate, preparing him to compete against the cruel Cobra Kai.

Mr. Miyagi has a unique training regimen. Daniel begins with waxing cars, sanding floors, and painting a fence. Understandably, he becomes exasperated. “What does this have to do with karate?” What Daniel doesn’t understand is that he is learning defensive blocks through muscle memory established by those chores. He is learning the fundamentals. Actually, he is re-learning - his assumptions and ways of responding re-shaped and re-formed. He is re-learning.

Which brings us to the topic of prayer and our text. The Apostle Paul is writing to the church in Thessalonica, a church he had planted just a few months before. He is concerned for them because of the pressures and persecutions they faced. So he writes to counsel them. And he prays for them. And we can learn much from what he says about the way he prayed for them.

What we learn forces us to this conclusion. The fundamentals of prayer are not what we think. The fundamentals of prayer are not what we think. And we need to let the Lord retrain us.

Those fundamentals begin to make themselves clear as we look at two things. First, what Paul knew to be true. And, second, how Paul then prayed for others. “What” and then “how.”

I. WHAT PAUL KNEW TO BE TRUE

So, first, what was it that Paul knew to be true that served as his framework for prayer?

A) Thankfulness for Their Flourishing

He begins with thankfulness for their flourishing (**READ 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4**).

1. Growing faith

Paul is thankful for their growing faith. The faith they had at their conversion was maturing. They were not smugly satisfied and settling for past success but were truly striving to grow.

2. Increasing love

Paul is thankful for their increasing love. Not just love for those who were like them but love for all within the church. Their chief loyalty was to Jesus. And that changed all other loyalties.

3. Perseverance under trial

Paul is thankful for their perseverance under trial. For this growing faith and increasing love was all taking place in the larger context of resistance and antagonism from those around them.

This is why Paul is thankful. And this is important for us to consider. For the focus of our gratitude reveals our deep priorities. Paul longed for these things. So now his heart was full.

B) Confidence in the Final Outcome

His mention of their perseverance under trial leads to mention of their persecutors and his confidence in the final outcome of things ([READ 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10](#)). Let's dig into this. There are two basic headings - retribution to God's enemies and the vindication of the saints.

1. Retribution

Retribution - the sure judgment of God. When will this be? At Jesus' return, His full unveiling. Who will this involve? All who live in unbelief and have rejected the gospel. How will it come about? Through an eternal destruction and exclusion, everlasting separation and disintegration.

2. Vindication

Paul encourages his readers that retribution is coming. As is vindication ([READ 2 Thessalonians 1:10](#)). Chiefly, this is the glorification of Christ. His glory will be seen in full and His unfettered praise finally given. But Paul also speaks of the glorification of the saints. The prepositions are important to note. Jesus will be glorified not just among, by, or through us. It will be in us.

Illustration:

John Stott points this out in his commentary ([READ quote](#)):

So how will the coming Lord Jesus be glorified in relation to his people? Not 'among' them, as if they will be the theatre or stadium in which he appears; nor 'by' them, as if they will be the spectators, the audience who watch and worship; nor 'through' or 'by means of' them, as if they will be mirrors which reflect his image and glory; but rather 'in' them, as if they will be a filament, which itself glows with light and heat when the electric current passes through it.

The distinction between these models is important. A theatre is not changed by the play which is performed in it. An audience is not necessarily moved by the drama enacted before it. A mirror is certainly not affected by the images it reflects. But a filament is changed. For when the current is switched on, it becomes incandescent. So when Jesus is revealed in his glory, he will be glorified in his people. We will not only see, but share, his glory. We will be more than a filament which glows temporarily, only to become dark and cold again when the current is switched off. We will be radically and permanently changed, being transformed into his likeness. And in our transformation his glory will be seen in us, for we will glow for ever with the glory of Christ, as indeed he glowed with the glory of his Father.

Let's pull this together. This is what Paul knew to be true. The Lord brought forth this flourishing. There was hope in the final outcome. And that formed Paul's framework for prayer.

Application:

There was a sense of anticipation to how Paul prayed. Based on the Lord's promises, he anticipated this working in their lives. He expected it. He looked for and longed for it. So there was an anticipation of what would happen in the present. But there was also an anticipation as to what was coming in the future. And both of these - present and future - shaped his prayers.

Let's think about our own looking towards the future, our sense of anticipation of Jesus' return. In years past, there was far more attention on eschatology, the study of "the end times." Sadly, a lot of that led to some untethered theories and unneeded division. So the pendulum has swung from much attention on the topic to very little. And we may have gone too far there.

There is a thin barrier between the temporal and the eternal, a short distance between this life and the next. The same may well be true when we think of this day and that Day. And so Paul is pressing upon us this simple thing: "That should shape how you pray for one another."

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II. HOW PAUL PRAYED FOR OTHERS

Which takes us to the second point, moving from "what Paul knew" to "how he prayed." (READ 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12) "To this end" - "With that in mind, here's how we are to pray."

A) *The Petitions Themselves*

Let's look at the petitions themselves. There are basically two here.

1. To be made worthy

First, that they would be made worthy. Now, back in v.5, Paul had said they were worthy. That is, their endurance under trial was evidence of the Lord's work. What was happening was a true demonstration that His hand was already upon them. So, in that sense, they were already worthy. But here in v.11 Paul means something different. He is praying that those already worthy will be made worthy. Meaning that the gap would be narrowed, that they would become who they were.

2. For God's working

That's the first petition. Paul prays they would be made worthy and then also for God's working. That is, for the fruitfulness of every good purpose and endeavor. The Lord was changing their hearts, their desires and goals. But good intentions and efforts are nothing without God's power.

Illustration:

I recently bought a light rod to go over our kitchen sink. It's one of these high efficiency long-lasting types. I told Sarah that I think it will outlast the two of us. So it's a fine light. But if you just leave it on the countertop, there's no light. Why? No power. No power, no light. It's the same with what Paul is saying here and why he was praying for God's working, His power.

B) *The Ultimate Goals*

But these great petitions served even greater goals - glorification. This is similar to what was said earlier but now the focus shifts from the climactic final Day to the ordinary everyday.

1. The glorification of Jesus

The burden of Paul's heart was that Jesus would be glorified, made larger in their eyes, even now. That is, as Jesus' power was working, they would trust, obey, and praise Him all the more.

2. The glorification of His disciples

So the present glorification of Jesus. And His disciples. That is, as these worthy ones were made worthy, they would experience deep renewal, becoming more and more like Jesus Himself.

So we have the two petitions and the two goals. And this is how Paul prayed for them.

Application:

This was his perspective. It is the path of prayer. And it points us to a whole different set of priorities. Think with me. As parents, we pray for our children's happiness, health, satisfaction, and success. In our community groups, we pray for our problems at work, pressing decisions, and Aunt Petunia's ingrown toenail. For ourselves, we often pray simply, "Get me out of this." Which is all fine in a way, given that Jesus is the King over all and Shepherd in it all.

There is nothing wrong with such prayers. But they have to be set in the right order, seen through a 2 Thessalonians 1 grid. Which means that over and above everything else, the longing of our hearts needs to be Jesus' honor before our comfort, His purposes to unfold and our delight in them, change in our hearts over change in our circumstances. And we need to pray that way.

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CONCLUSION:

Think with me about "the heroic journey." Much has been written on this in recent decades, beginning with Joseph Campbell back in the 1940's. All the great stories and myths, ancient and modern, are shaped by this. The heroic journey is a template with particular recurring features. There is a hero, a great quest, daunting obstacles along the way, a process of self-discovery, and then the final accomplishment. All the great stories have these. And one more thing. In each of them, there is a mentor, an experienced guide. Think about it. Arthur had Merlin. Frodo had Gandalf. Luke had Obi-Wan and Yoda. Harry had Dumbledore. What is the common thread? An older wiser figure without whom the hero has no chance to succeed. And from whom they have much to learn and unlearn, much training and retraining to undergo.

Don't dismiss this out of hand. There is a reason these stories endure as they do. They are echoes of the greatest story, the one true story, the one the Lord has been writing since the very beginning. And, in fact, Jesus is two things at the same time here. He is the ultimate hero. And He is also the guide, the mentor, we need. We need a guide. We need a mentor, not just for life in general but especially in the spiritual life. And, in essence, He is saying to us, "Let me be your guide. I am showing you what is real and true. And how to engage it, how to live out of it, how to pray. I want to show you how to pray." That's Jesus' posture to us. Which is good news.

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