

Text: 1 Thess 3.9-13
St Stephen's

Nov 29, 2009
Advent 1/Sun

'Night and Day Prayer'

Thanksgiving: a wonderful time for our family. Our children their families made it home. So there were 12 of us packed into our home. And 4 dogs and a cat! Whew! We went to Ohio to be with my parents and my brothers and their families. It was a wonderful break for us.

We begin the season of **Advent** today with a look at the prophecies of the end of the world and the coming of Christ. We find that for thousands of years the scriptures spoke of **someone who was to come**, and that they go on to say that the one who came **will come back**, and come back **soon** – and that the meaning and the destiny of the whole cosmos is tied up in his return.

I am interested that one of the great responses of people to the comings of Christ has always been **prayer**. We are **not such good pray-ers** these days. We're great shoppers, but not such great pray-ers. And it might be good to think about **giving prayer its due place** in our lives as we look to the return of Christ. So I want to start into the season of Advent today with a look at Paul's prayers from our Advent epistle.

Night and day we pray earnestly for you,

1 Thess 3.10

Pay attention to the little phrase, '**night and day**'. I assume that Paul is not just spinning it here, but honestly means that he was praying for them off and on through the day, through the night. I pray like that sometimes, especially when **someone in my family** is having a very difficult time, a very dangerous time. I will think about them throughout the day and pray for them. I will wake up in the night sometimes, but find myself immediately in prayer, or maybe even having been in prayer while I sleep. I am worried for them and so I pray for them. Paul was worried for them, and praying for them. They were family, and they were in danger, and Paul was worried and he was praying, night and day.

He also said that he **labored night and day** while he was among them, leading you to the idea that he probably had them on his heart while he worked... and prayed for them under his breath, in his mind, while he was attentive to other things. So, I get the sense that by this little phrase he meant that he had **focused times** of prayer for them every day – maybe every morning and evening, and that he had constant **background prayer** for them during the day, even while he was doing other things, and even at night during hours of off and on sleep. They mattered to him, and they were in trouble, so the Apostle prayed 'night and day'.

We are not such good pray-ers these days...

There was a moment in my **sabbatical retreat** 4 years ago with Dallas Willard that landed on this. All of us at the retreat were pastors in ministry a decade or more, most of whom had responsibility for major ministries. We finally came to the time when we talked about prayer. Here's what **Dallas told us**: 'You pastors don't pray. I know that. I'm going to tell you why. Because you are **activists**, and you believe in getting things done. And **you don't think prayer does anything**. That is not true, and you need to think about it again. Prayer is one of **the great powers of the kingdom** that has been given to us.'

Paul prayed. What did he pray for? Lift up three of the focal points of his prayer.

1. He 'Always' Starts With Thanksgiving

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers

1 Thess 1.2

His prayers for people are filled with thanksgivings. You might call it '**all thanks**' – because he says he does it '*always*', '*constantly*' and for '*all of you*', and again, I don't think that Paul is spinning things here. **Every letter**, no matter how difficult the circumstances, is filled with prayers of thanksgiving. Actually, in almost every letter Paul specifically includes

people who have been **causing him trouble**. He thanks God for them. When was the last time you did that? And isn't that an interesting thing to remember this Thanksgiving weekend?

Near the end of this letter he wrote,

"In all things give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." 1 Thess 5.18

And Paul did. He was imprisoned in a dark, cold Roman dungeon when he wrote this letter and gave thanks. **How would this be possible?** If we are to be thankful people in the midst of life's challenges and difficulties, if we are to be this with integrity and authenticity (and not just putting on our Sunday best for show), it must be because **something larger than our difficulties**, something able to triumph over them all **has come to our aid**.

That is exactly what the Bible tells us has happened in the resurrection of Christ. So **Paul gives thanks. All the time.**

2. He Prays for 'Grow and Overflow' Love

And may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow, just as our love for you overflows.

1 Thess 3.12

The Thessalonians had encountered **sharp hatred** as they came to faith in Christ, and it rocked their young church. There had been riots and arrests and anger. The gospel, Jesus warned, would draw out that kind of reaction sometimes. But even if it did, that was **not to be our response**, nor to be our life. Because the gospel at heart is a gift of love. Life changing, community changing love.

In his first paragraph Paul addresses his letter to the Thessalonians to the *'brothers loved by God'* - what a great name for a group of people. At the heart of the Gospel is this ringing certainty that **Christ has loved us**, does love us, will love us, **no matter** what we have to face... and can

make us **partners in his love** - a love too good to be true, too great to be missed.

He **didn't want them to settle in** for the love they had before they met Christ. '*Growing and overflowing*' is his prayer. For '*one another and all people.*' That's a love **without limits**, a love **without boundaries**, a love that spills over the normal channels of life, that reaches to people you have never been comfortable with, never been friends with, to people high and low, like you and unlike you. That would include some people inside this church who were walking away, who were going back to their old lifestyle, and even some to their old religions. No boundaries. No limits. It's a big prayer!

Paul is a realist, and it drives him to prayer. He sees **the lovelessness** of people. And he sees **the high call of overflowing love** that comes with faith. You might call the difference between the two '**the gap**'. We all know 'the gap'. One of the great questions of life is, '**how do you close it?**' One of the primary answers comes with a 'power' that you and I don't use too much. It is **the power of prayer**. And the power of prayer **comes from** something else that Paul never loses sight of, the **risen Lord Jesus**, who stands ready to answer, and ready to return.

So Paul prays, '*may the Lord make your love grow and overflow...*' Paul knows that love like that is beyond ourselves, so he **goes to the source**, knowing that Christ gives more of his love to us.

3. He Prays for Holiness of Life at Christ's Return

There is a great deal of confusion about holiness of life. We don't hear enough talk about it these days. Many modern Christians treat salvation as though it is:

Salvation

- Christ's Forgiveness for our Past,
- Christ's Eternity for our Future

Just look carefully at that for a moment. Do you notice **what it leaves out? Today**. Every today God gives you. And it is not the gospel of the

NT, at least not all of it. It is what one writer called (and it is a crass phrase, so take a breath) '**vampire Christianity**'. The kind of Christianity that **says to Jesus**, 'I want a little of your blood to take care of my past and secure my future – but I don't have much interest in you for my today's. I'd like to manage those myself...'

The gospel of the NT is something far larger; it would be better charted like this:

Salvation

- Christ's Forgiveness for our Past
- Christ's Life for Today
- Christ's Eternity for our Future

it includes your past, your future, AND your today's, all swept up by the mercy of Jesus, all transformed by his grace. Nothing is left out. No hope or dream, no relationship, no possession, no job or career, no thought or action, no sin or failure, no matter of character or attitude of life – all swept up under his mercy, all infected by His Spirit, all lived for his glory - your yesterdays, your today's, and all your tomorrows – for a long, long, long time!

All of that starts when you come to faith in Christ. Theologically the Bible teaches that salvation starts with justification, moves right into sanctification, and is destined for glorification.

Paul's prayers naturally move in this direction. Look at vs 13:

May he, as a result, make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before God our Father when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people. Amen.

1 Thess 3.13

What **a great prayer** - and look at it carefully; strong and blameless hearts - not something we can do! Standing blameless and holy before Christ when he returns with all his angels, all his saints - beyond our capacity! Who can stand there blameless? But nothing less than that is your destiny in Jesus. So again, **you see the gap** between our failure

and our future. And once again, **to close the gap, Paul prays, 'may he make your hearts strong, blameless, holy...'**

This same prayer is penned by Paul in the last paragraph of this letter:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

1 Thess 5.23,24

Again you see the same large gospel, one that covers yesterday, tomorrow and today! One that touches and transforms all you are and all you do. It is something beyond our reach, but not beyond the reach of the risen Christ. The ringing confidence of the Apostle is this: *He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*

These are **great prayers** – to pray for family and friends, to pray for children and parents, to pray for pastors and ministry leaders and all of us who bear witness to our Lord Jesus!. Large prayers. Of praise and thanksgiving in season and out of season, for overflowing love towards all people, for Christlikeness of life and holiness of character -

To a great savior, the risen Lord Jesus, the one we call faithful and true, the one who gave himself for you and who is coming back.

Prayer like this to a Lord like that brings answers from above.