**Pray for us** 17/3/24 dkm

Read: Colossians 3:12-4:6, 2Thessalonians 3

Text: 2Thessalonians 3:1-5

Psalms: 19:1-9, 147:11-15, 121, 117

Have you ever asked anyone to pray for you? Have you ever asked anyone to pray for you other than when you were sick? What about when you were tempted to sin in some way? It is humbling listening to someone praying for you to be delivered from temptation! People pray for me when I step into the pulpit- and I pray for myself. But when that prayer was for me to be kept from the fiery darts of the devil, I got a bit worried. But I realize I need such prayer, and I am thankful for such prayers. The apostle Paul asked the church to pray for him and his fellow missionaries in his first letter, and again here in his second letter (1Thess 5:25, 2Thess 3:1).

Our first year on the mission field was very hard. We were ready to return home but remembered the prayers of those sending us off at Sydney airport. We knew that these people were still praying for us, and God answered their prayers, as well as ours. Do keep praying for the leaders of your church, and for the spread of the gospel in this community.

Apostle of Jesus Christ that he was, Paul still opened his heart to fellow believers or ‘brethren’, and asked them to pray for him (3:1). He was in Corinth when he wrote this letter and was facing opposition from the Jews and false teachers in the church (2Cor 6:11, 7:2). Paul was not above temptation. No minister or missionary is above temptation. If Paul was humble enough to ask for prayer, every minister and missionary should be also. We must all be ready to ask for prayer when we face trouble or temptation, when we find the world, the flesh, or the devil standing in the way of our progress in the faith. ‘Christian fellowship is expressed in, and deepened by, our prayers for one another’. Are you opening your heart to the brethren or the fellowship and saying, ‘pray for me’? Are you serious about praying for those who open their hearts to you? The word ‘pray’ here in verse 1 is a continuous imperative, not just pray once and forget the matter.

Our subheadings for today, borrowed from Ligon Duncan, are: ‘Two-part prayer request’, ‘Two-part expression of confidence’, and, ‘Two-part blessing’.

**1. Two-part prayer request**

Paul is just over half-way through his second letter to the Thessalonians when he writes, ‘Finally, brethren’ (3:1). Some preachers start saying, ‘finally’ when half way through their sermon! Paul has already paused to pray for the folk in Thessalonica (1:11, 2:16). He ‘finally’ pauses to ask them to pray for him. As he does he is reminded of another serious matter in this church, and goes on to address this in the rest of this chapter. How often do you pause to pray? When you do so you will find the Lord bringing many people and many concerns to mind, such that your prayer will go on for some time.

If you have trouble thinking of things to pray for, begin with the Lord’s Prayer. You might also listen to what the apostle Paul says here in these verses. The first part of his prayer requests is that, ‘The word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified/honoured ‘(3:1). Paul wanted them to pray that the gospel of Jesus Christ be heard far and wide, and bring forth fruit to the glory of God. He was preaching the word of God, not the word of man (1Thess 2:13). He was preaching the word of God that is powerful to impact and change human hearts. Paul prayed that every time he preached people would hear, and that the Spirit of God would convict them of sin and assure them of forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

When Paul preached in Thessalonica many believed and gathered together for worship. It is amazing that in such a short time- just three Sabbaths- so many believed; we are not told the numbers but a church was formed. The gospel was certainly advancing or ‘running swiftly’ in this city! Paul was praying and was now asking this church to pray that the gospel, ‘run swiftly’ in Corinth and further- Paul had his eyes on Rome, the administrative capital of the Empire.

As the word of God is preached and, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, more and more people believe, God is glorified. In the OT we read that the Lord let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground (1Sam 3:19). And, ‘My word shall not return to me void but shall accomplish what I please’ (Isa 55:11). We pray that people will hear and believe, to the glory of God, but even if they do not believe, God is still glorified; he will be glorified for his grace or his justice. In the next verse we are told that ‘not all have faith’.

Paul was a prayer warrior, as every believer should be. Duncan writes, ‘One of the ways you know that the gospel has taken hold of your heart is that you care about the gospel taking hold of other people’s hearts’. If you don’t care about other people hearing the gospel and being saved you need to question the reality of your own salvation.

Paul’s second prayer request is that, ‘We may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men’ (3:2). The word translated ‘unreasonable’ literally means ‘that which is out of place’, something wicked or bad. Paul was facing opposition from Jews and false teachers who were demanding works as the way of salvation, or as an essential part of salvation. These were wicked and evil men, men ready to harm Paul. They were certainly not men of faith even if they claimed to be teachers of the truth.

Religion and rituals are one thing; faith is another. Paul did not preach man-made rituals or idols; he preached Christ crucified (1Thes 1:9). He knew the doctrine of divine election, so ‘not all have faith’, but he prayed and he preached to every person without distinction. We are facing increasing opposition to the gospel today. Are you praying that those preaching the gospel will not be silenced by the voices of evil in our day, voices sometimes heard within the church?

**2. Two-part expression of confidence**

At a recent meeting a speaker was explaining the rising opposition to the church in our nation. In some countries you cannot preach the gospel because the government promotes the religion of the majority. In our country the religion of the majority is sin-denying secular humanism; so preaching the gospel is being called ‘hate speech’. Yes, the good news we know is being called hate speech! One listener expressed pessimism, but another reminded us of the sovereignty of God in all things.

The apostle Paul faced many attacks upon the gospel he preached, and upon his person. He asked for prayer because he knew God is sovereign in all things. After asking the Thessalonians to pray for him, he reassures them, new believers as they were, that the Lord is faithful (3:3, 1Thess 5:24, 1Cor 1:9). Jews and false teachers slandered Paul, dragged him before the courts, and got him thrown into prison more than once. But the Lord who called him, the risen Jesus, was faithful, and delivered him as he promised.

The Lord who saves us, promises he will never leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5). He will establish or strengthen you as you stand fast in the truths and promises of the gospel. The struggle or battle we are in is a spiritual battle; our enemy is ultimately Satan. Paul has already spoken of the ‘workings of Satan’ being behind the ‘lawless one’ (2:9, 1Peter 5:8). Please remember this if you face ridicule or rage when you hold up the name of Jesus Christ. The Lord will always guard or protect you from the evil one (3:3). The Lord will give you words to say to enemies of the gospel as you pray for such men or women to be saved.

The second ‘confidence’ the apostle has is again a ‘confidence in the Lord’ (3:4). It is a confidence that they will be obedient to the demands or commands of the gospel. When the Lord saves us he brings us into a covenant relationship with himself, and God is always faithful to his covenant. The question is, are we faithful to his covenant? What does faithfulness to the covenant mean? It means obeying God’s covenant commands. Under the old covenant God gave the Ten Commandments and many ‘ceremonial’ laws. Under the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ, we are commanded to love the Lord and to love one another. In obeying these commands we will not engage in idolatry, intoxication, sexual immorality, or in slander- to name a few sins from the list in Mark 7:21-22, or Galatians 5:19-21. Paul refers to a command about laziness in the following verses, but these sins are sufficient for now.

Paul was confident the believers in Thessalonica were obeying, and would continue to obey, the commands of Christ he delivered to them (3:4). Would he be able to express such confidence in you? If not, then take a look at yourself from Paul’s perspective, or better still, from the perspective of Jesus Christ. The Lord knows your life inside out, and he is faithful and just to forgive your sin when you confess. Paul had confidence in the Lord, and your elders have confidence. Still, he has strong words of condemnation for those not obeying his command regarding living an orderly life, which includes working for your bread; and, we might add, includes faithful attendance in worship (Heb 10:45).

**3. Two-part blessing**

Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians ends with a benediction or blessing upon them. This is again in two parts. Firstly, ‘May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God’ (3:5). Love is at the heart of the gospel: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16). And we know what love is when we look to Jesus Christ who laid down his life for us on the cross (1John 3:16).

Love is the basis of the covenant God has made with us in Jesus Christ. Christ’s love for us is beyond our understanding (Eph 3:18), but we certainly know more of his love since believing in him, and should be growing in love for him who first loved us. It is natural, is it not, to respond to those who love us with love for that person? Jesus told Simon the Pharisee about two debtors who were forgiven by their master- one was forgiven 500 denarii or the one forgiven 50 denarii (Luke 7:36f). He then asked Simon which of the two would love the master most. Jesus had just forgiven a sinful woman who had sneaked into the self-righteous Simon’s house. She was forgiven much and she loved much. The more we realize how much Jesus has forgiven us, the more we will love him. May the Lord direct your heart and mine into the love of God (3:5)!

Secondly, may the Lord direct your heart into the patience or patient endurance of Christ (3:5)! My Greek dictionary says this word probably means ‘a basic frame of mind’, or perhaps ‘steadfast adherence to a course of action despite difficulties or opposition’. Think of your life as a walk in the park, or more of a walk in the jungle. The Lord has prepared the path before you by going ahead, as Jesus did by living and suffering in this world, and going to the cross in obedience to his Father’s plan. And even as we press ahead on this path, the Lord is with us, lifting us up when we stumble, and, with fatherly discipline, drawing us back when we go astray.

I sometimes picture Jesus as a trailblazer, as one who cut the path through the jungle that is this world, a path for you and me to follow. We are not trailblazers; we are followers. The path is not easy, but it is clearly laid out here in the Bible. What we have to do is follow Jesus, follow him closely all the way to the end. Whatever pain or shame you face as a believer, know that Jesus faced even greater pain and shame, and he did it for you. So let us run with endurance the race set before us (Heb 12:1). There is laid up for us at the end of this endurance race a crown, a ‘crown of righteousness’ (2Tim 4:8).