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Prayer In Preparation For The Kingdom

If you would open your Bible to 2 Thessalonians. The Thessalonians were facing persecution. There are several forms of persecution: first there's intellectual intimidation, which can range anywhere from mockery on one end of the spectrum all the way to your fellowship drying up at the university, second there's social intimidation which can range from ostracism from certain groups all the way to verbal threats for non-compliance and third there's physical intimidation which can range from imprisonment all the way to execution. The Thessalonians were facing this third form of persecution. Satan wanted to get physical with them because their testimony was such a threat. They turned to God from idols and this was being heard throughout the ancient world. Therefore Satan was pulling out all the stops to eliminate the threat.

We are in the first chapter and each chapter we have assigned an E to facilitate our memory. The first E stands for Encouragement. Encouragement under Persecution. And Paul encourages them in three ways. First in vv 3-5 he encourages them by recognizing their faith was greatly enlarged. Our faith grows when we're under persecution. Someone asked me this week, do you know of anyone who prays for persecution in order to stimulate a greater faith. I don't know of anyone personally. I do know that in the recent *Voice of the Martyrs* issue a pastor in southern Algeria who was facing tremendous persecution was praying that the Christians in northern Algeria would be persecuted because they had grown lax. And I do know that Christians around the world pray for American Christians because their perception is that we have it too easy, we have a comfortable Christian existence and therefore a weak faith. So it's generally recognized that persecution does enlarge our faith. Then Paul recognizes their love for one another growing ever greater and this too is common in persecuted churches. They don't have

to create programs to get people involved with one another at the local church because number one, there aren't any competing activities. They don't have play practice, baseball practice, choir lessons and all the other extracurricular activities filling their schedules. They have persecution and so they can't wait to come to church, that's the highlight of the week. They'll walk for miles to get there, usually in communities, and they'll meet three, four, five, six hours, there's no time limit put on church. Like one African pastor said, you in the West have watches, we have time. And when one Western pastor went to preach he actually taught for 45 minutes, which is pushing the limits here in America, most pastors preach about 15 min and 14 minutes and 60 seconds of that he says nothing. So this guy was really long winded, 45 minutes and when he finished the local pastor got up and said, well, since so and so has finished early I'll continue and they went for another hour. And people here in America would just go to pieces, why, we've got the ball game and you can bet that pastor wouldn't have a job the next week. Bible teaching just is not tolerated. But in persecuted churches they actually need the word of God and so you can teach all day and they'll actually stay awake, that's what sustains their soul. And when it's all over nobody wants to go home. That's just the way it is among the persecuted church. So the very situation of persecution causes increased love and dependence upon one another. It's vital to their survival. Then in verse 4 he goes on to encourage them by telling them how their testimony is being shared among other churches, namely, how they were enduring the afflictions. These people have tremendous strength to bear up under pressure, many of them have lost one or more family members, they've suffered destruction of property, they have faced so much persecution that they can take it, and they've become hard-skinned Christians. And then in verse 5 Paul encourages them because their suffering makes it evident that they were justified in the high court of heaven and that Satan knew that and it was because of that he was persecuting them but that Satan's persecutions were a means through which the Thessalonians would be counted worthy of the kingdom when they entered. They would not simply enter the kingdom, they would enter well, they would enter to serve in positions of honor, having been trained in the pressure cooker of persecution, a topic which Paul will return to in his prayer for them in v 11-12.

Then in vv 6-10 we come to more Encouragement by way of a complex of prophetic events beginning with the Rapture, extending through the day of

the Lord's wrath and ending with the Second Coming. Since they lived before the unfolding of this complex of events Paul encourages them to keep on enduring persecution and not to worry about it because those who persecute them will one day soon be the persecuted. God is just, He has character, and because He has character He will repay with affliction those who afflicted them, and in turn will give them rest, rest and relaxation. This will unfold at the moment of the Rapture and simultaneous initiation of the Day of the Lord's wrath. Since this reversal can occur at any moment it is a stimulant to keep on enduring and not give up. These people have a thing or two to teach those of us who want a quick fix to our problems today so we can go back to comfort living. In any case, Paul teaches that whoever is not a believer will be repaid proportionately to the measure of his affliction of believers, whether Jew or Gentile, in the day of the Lord when the Lord Jesus judges through His mighty angels. These will pay the price of everlasting destruction in duration, being separated eternally from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power in Hell. Paul preached Hell, Jesus preached Hell, Peter preached Hell and I'm going to preach Hell, so get used to it, it's part of the gospel.

So we've had a number of Encouraging things and now Paul turns to another means of Encouraging them - Prayer. How nice it would be to know that while you are in persecution Paul is praying for you. Paul tells them the goal of his prayer, what he was interested in his prayers achieving for them. Notice verse 11, **To this end we pray for you always**, to what end? To the end which follows. Now you would think the end that follows would be that the persecution would lift, that Paul would pray, Oh Lord, let their affliction be taken away. That's how we pray, that's not how Paul prayed. Paul prayed that through the affliction they would be counted worthy of their calling. Their calling was to be persecuted and so through that God was forming them, molding them, making them into the people He wanted them to be, people who could serve in positions of honor in the kingdom. And through that the name of the Lord Jesus would be glorified.

So it's not the kind of prayer request the typical Western Christian might offer when persecution came, like the pastor from southern Algeria who prayed for increased persecution for his brothers up north, probably a prayer we would never think of offering. Might even think it was wrong to pray that way. But Paul's prayer is probably of the same order. Why not just pray for

the persecution to stop or to decrease, something, but Paul says no, I'm interested in the believers ultimate destiny and I recognize that there are things we have to go through in this life, things we have been called to that God is orchestrating. It's those things that prepare us for our destiny and so I pray to that end, that distant goal; I don't think about the need for immediate release from pressure. I think of the end goal of the pressure, what it's doing in a believer's life and how it's an honor to suffer for Christ. You do know that the men of the early church, the first two or three centuries considered it an honor to be martyred for Christ. That was the highest honor a Christian could receive. That's the correct attitude toward suffering. And so Paul prays that they would be refined in the refiner's fire.

Now since the big idea here is prayer let's talk about prayer. We'll make three or four points. First of all prayer is what? Prayer is talking to God. Talking to God the Father through God the Son in the power of God the Spirit. That's why we say Dear heavenly Father and not Dear Jesus, and that's why we pray in the name of Jesus and not in the name of the Father. There's an order to prayer and there's a reason to that order that the historic church has recognized and respected that relates to the roles of the three members of the Trinity. Now the modern church says you can pray anyway you feel and that is contrary to the order set out by the Trinity and it's just sickening to hear these prayers that disregard God's self-disclosure of Himself in Trinitarian roles. So the first thing is simply what prayer is- talking to God the Father through God the Son in the power of God the Spirit.

Second, how should prayers be offered? Answer, without ceasing. This is the fourth time Paul has mentioned prayer without ceasing in his letters to the Thessalonians. We could go back to 1 Thess 1:2 where Paul said "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers," or to 1 Thess 3:10 where Paul said, "we night and day keep praying most earnestly..." how's that for prayer without ceasing. Or we could go to 1 Thess 5:17 where we are given the prayer in command central, "pray without ceasing," and now we come to it again, **To this end also we pray for you always.** See that word always? That means always. Now we wish that we could all say this is how we prayed but most of us know that we only pray when? When something goes wrong. As long as everything's okay, or we perceive them as okay, we don't pray. Prayer without ceasing takes

discipline. It doesn't just happen. Jesus' own disciples struggled with it. They said, Lord, teach us to pray, meaning Lord, teach us how to really attend to this ministry because we all know that when you start to pray what happens? 99 things flood into your head and those 99 things knock you out of prayer. So this doesn't come easy, it takes discipline. So the second thing is pray without ceasing.

Third, why pray? Why should people pray? Obviously because God has commanded us to pray. But some people take this to mean that our prayers are writing history, that through our prayers history becomes a joint product of God and men. Let me be emphatic that that is not the case. Prayer doesn't change the plan of God. How could prayer change the plan of God when the plan of God came before the prayer? The plan of God is from all eternity past. It was written beforehand. He declared the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done saying, My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure; Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it." God is not planning history as it unfolds. He already planned it before it ever began. And that means that if prayer occurs in history then prayer is a part of God's plan for history. He planned prayer. So our prayer isn't going to change God's plan it can only fulfill God's plan. Now if that's the case then God very clearly does condition some of His actions in history upon prayer. And that brings us to the role of prayer in God's plan. Prayer is the means by which God's plan for history is fulfilled. So one extreme error is that prayer changes the plan of God.

The other extreme is to go the other way and say that prayer is useless because the plan of God is going to happen anyway. What refutes this so clearly is the many prayers throughout Scripture as well as commands to do it! So why, if God's plan is going to happen anyway, should we pray? Same answer as before, because prayer is the means by which God's plan comes about. Prayer is part of the plan.

Now, with that said, we might speculate, it's not a far reach, but it's somewhat of a speculation, and that is, if we ask, why does God bring prayer into the plan? He doesn't need us to accomplish his plan. Why bring us in? I think as a benefit to us, it brings Him enjoyment to bring us into the

enjoyment of seeing His plan unfold. It's like the Kingdom, does God need us to serve in His kingdom? No, He can easily do it Himself. He doesn't need us. Well why does He give us positions of service then? Because it brings Him pleasure to see His creatures get joy out of service. He shares the joy with us. And that's a function of His grace. So I think the same thing holds with prayer. God gives us prayer to involve us in the joy. He enjoys that.¹

So Paul prays and he says, **To this end also we pray for you always,** what end? Three things. First, **that our God will count you worthy of your calling.** What does this remind you of? Check verse 5, "so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God." And here in verse 11, that our God will count you worthy of your calling. There it's considered worthy, here it's count you worthy, there it's the kingdom in view, here it's your calling in view. Paul is still on the same topic that relates to the kingdom, to what we've been called to, our destiny.

Paul is very interested in kingdom issues which he mentioned in verse 5. So let's review God's kingdom program so we understand our relationship to the kingdom program in the present age. First, we have to reach back to the OT because the kingdom program begins in the OT when God calls out Abraham. God called out Abraham to form a distinct counter-nation to the rapid paganization that occurred after the days of Noah. So immediately with the Call of Abraham the kingdom concerns a new nation. It therefore involves national issues, political issues, law issues and the law of the kingdom was given by God at Mt Sinai, so God was the King. It was a theocratic, earthly, political, national kingdom where God ruled over the nation Israel. We call this the period of the Theocratic Kingdom because God ruled His kingdom directly. However, in Samuel's day the nation rejected God as their King because they wanted a King like all the other nations. So God gave them a King like all the other nations. God chose Saul and now the human monarchy comes into existence and the Mediatorial Kingdom is initiated which means God is going to rule indirectly through a human king. Saul fumbled the ball so he was rejected and God chose David. David was a man after God's own heart and God promised David an eternal dynasty ruling from an eternal throne. This kingdom came to the brink of extinction many times, but particularly with the curse on Jeconiah in Jeremiah, the Coniah Curse where God said that no man from Coniah's line would sit on the throne of David. But God protected another line that came from David and it's this line that is

traced in Matt 1. Matthew's interest is tracing the legitimacy of Jesus' Kingship. That He is in the line of David but not through Coniah, He came by another route. So when the kingdom of God/kingdom of heaven is offered to Israel by John the Baptist and Jesus on the condition that they repent, what kind of kingdom are they offering? The earthly, national, political kingdom. No change in the nature of the kingdom is ever mentioned. So we have to assume that the nature of the kingdom offered is the same as the kingdom they knew from the OT. Did it have spirituality to it? Yeah, absolutely, it required repentance to enter. So spirituality is involved to. But the nation refused to repent and instead they crucified their King. He came to His own and His own received Him not. The King is raised, He ascends to heaven and sits in session at the right hand of the Father. And so what happened to the Kingdom? The King departed. How can you have a kingdom without a King? And so the kingdom is re-offered in the Book of Acts by the apostles. It's rejected again and the subset of believing Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles are being consolidated into a new organism called the Church. So as the kingdom offer to Israel is phasing out in the period of Acts the Church is gradually being recognized as a new organism that God is building during this interadvent age, during which the kingdom offer to Israel is put on hold and Satan's kingdom building continues. During this time God is calling out Jew and Gentile from Satan's kingdom and preparing them for positions of service in the future kingdom. And that's what this age is all about; this age is a period of preparation for service in the kingdom. When will the kingdom come? When the nation Israel repents and calls upon the name of the Lord to be saved. Jesus said you will not see Me Israel, until you say, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. So the nation has to call upon Jesus to be saved. Then He will come from heaven to earth in the kingdom. Who will serve in these positions of honor in the kingdom? Believers who are counted worthy of the kingdom, that is, believers who have prepared for kingdom service by learning loyalty to God through His word in this life. We are in training now for reigning later.

And that's what Paul is talking about in verse 5 and in vv 11-12. He's talking about preparing for the kingdom. How do we get fit to serve? How do we get trained? And we've seen three parts of our training. One part is spiritual gifts, learning to use our spiritual gifts faithfully. God has given every believer at least one spiritual gift and these spiritual gifts are for the whole body, they are not for private use, they are for the building up of the body.

They're ministries really, they're how you minister to other people and if you are a believer, believe it or not, God has equipped you to minister to other people. There's no such thing as *the* minister and then everybody else. All minister. You minister, I minister, we all minister. So where do you minister? Well, what are your spiritual gifts? Second, faithful service now. How do we serve? Are we even serving? Or is it the same old game where 20% do all the service and 80% don't have time to serve? The difference isn't time, the difference is how you spend your time. We're all busy in America because we've filled our schedules to the brim. TV, choir practice, those are just not luxuries they have, by the way, those are luxuries. But we've turned them into necessities and we're not being good parents if we don't have our kid in every activity. Baloney, that's the world talking. God says faithful service now in the body of Christ will result in positions of honor in the future kingdom. What do you want? To live for today or to live for the kingdom? Go ahead, make your choice. Third, faithfulness during suffering, trials, tribulations, that kind of thing, that's where the Thessalonians were. Do you count it all joy when you suffer, do you give thanks in everything and persevere or do you go to pieces and have a fit? Why me God, poor little me. All three of these things are involved in our preparing for the kingdom.

Today we come to a fourth thing that is necessary to prepare us for the kingdom and that's prayer. Prayer is a means by which God prepares believers to fulfill their calling and enter into kingdom service. To this end he prays and so the calling here is referring to our destiny. That's the first thing he prays for.

Second, that God would **fulfill every desire for goodness**, or better, **fulfill every desire of goodness**, not *for* goodness. That's very different, to fulfill every desire of goodness means it refers to the Thessalonians desire to do goodness. What Paul is talking about is the idea he talks about in Rom 7 where he says the good that I want to do, I do not do, but I do the very evil that I do not want. In that chapter Paul was a believer but he was a believer who hadn't learned to live the Christian life yet. Paul understood that he was justified by faith but then he thought he could be sanctified by works. But this Paul could not do and so he struggled as he tried to learn how to be sanctified and finally he learned that he could have victory only by means of the Holy Spirit. We need his enablement. And so the good he desired to do, that was great, but the means to do it, that's what Paul is praying here for

the Thessalonians. They had desires to do goodness, but if they were ever going to do the good God would have to fulfill those desires, He would have to go to work to live through them. So this is the second thing Paul prays for them.

The third thing is at the end of verse 11, **and the work of faith with power**, or better “work of faith by power.” That’s miraculous power. It’s not our power, it’s His power. And what Paul is praying is that we exercise faith, this is faith in some promise of the word of God, we’re using the faith-rest drill. When we function by faith there is work that is accomplished, supernatural work, work that we could never have done. Just like Joshua and the Battle of Jericho, Joshua was a great military leader, he sent all his recon guys in, they gathered the intel, they reported back, Joshua formed the strategy and then one day some strange guy was walking through the camp and Joshua said, are you for us or for our enemies, and the man said, no, I’m the captain of the Lord’s armies, and Joshua bowed down. He knew who it was, and right then and there he got a new strategy. Some kind of strategy! You can read it in Joshua 6 - walk around the city once a day for six days, walk around it seven times on the seventh day, blow the trumpets, yell, and the city is yours. What kind of military strategy is that? What do you think the people of Jericho must have thought; these people are on some kind of exercise program? And then boom, the walls came down. That’s the work accomplished through faith, it’s supernatural work and if you’ll just try this you’ll see amazing things, if you’ll walk by faith you’ll see God do things you never even dreamed were possible. And that’s what Paul prays for them, that God would accomplish great things through their faith, things they never dreamed of, mighty works of power.

Now we come to verse 12 and it begins with *hopos* which is a final purpose. You say he already prayed “to this end,” yes, but this is the underlying purpose of it all, the ultimate purpose and its doxological, always the ultimate purpose is the glory of God, don’t kid yourself. , God’s ultimate purpose is not to save you; God has bigger things in mind. His own glory. And finally He is going to be glorified. When sinners go to hell that glorifies God, when saints go to heaven that glorifies God. So don’t ever forget that you can never beat God, you can reject His Son and He’s not going to be hurt by you, He’s going to be glorified by you, or you can receive His Son and He’ll still be glorified by you. So heads He wins, tails He wins. So in view here is

this doxological purpose, the glorification of Jesus Christ and the reciprocal glorification of us. Paul puts it this way, **so that the name of the Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him**, but once again we're going to change the preposition *en* to *by*, **that the name of the Lord Jesus will be glorified by you, and you by Him**. All the *en* prepositions in this section should be translated "by" which is perfectly legitimate and very common. So Paul says that ultimately the aim is **that the name of the Lord Jesus will be glorified by you**, it's that name, the name referring always to the character, to the reputation of someone, and that's why the names of Scripture are so important, they have meaning and they communicate character. And that's why if someone's character changes God changes their name. That's why believers whose characters change because of God's work in their lives will get a new name as a reward. It's because a new character merits a new name. And so his prayer is that the character of the Lord Jesus will be glorified by you. How is this accomplished? Answer, as verse 11 is fulfilled, as God counts them worthy of their calling, as God fulfills every desire of goodness and as God accomplishes works of power through faith. The bottom line is as we walk by faith the Lord Jesus is glorified by us.

But then there is also the reciprocal glorification of us, **and you by Him**, that is, the resurrection body. Jesus Christ will glorify you at the day of the Rapture, when the Lord descends with a shout, when the voice of the archangel shouts, and when the trumpet sounds, then the dead in Christ shall rise first, then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. That's the day of our glorification, when we are glorified by Him and taken to the judgment seat and then ushered into the presence of the Father.

Finally Paul gives the standard by which these things will be accomplished, namely, **according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ**. It looks at first glance in the Greek that this could be a case of the Granville Sharp rule, where you have the definite article, followed by two singular nouns separated by *kai*, which if that was the case the nouns God and Lord would both be referring to Jesus Christ, and then it would be like Tit 2:13 which is a major deity of Christ passage, but it's ambiguous here because Lord can be used as a proper noun and if it is a proper noun then that disqualifies it from following the Granville Sharp rule. So probably it's

referring to two people, God is the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son. But verse 2 God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ should give us pause to wonder if Paul is not referring to Jesus Christ as God in this verse. I'm not so sure we should throw this verse out as a reference to the deity of Christ, it may well be. But in any case, **according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ** points to the source of the grace that is necessary for this prayer to be fulfilled toward the Thessalonians.

In conclusion, the big idea is prayer. They're praying for them in persecution and the striking thing is they do not pray that their persecution will be lifted. Paul already knows that at any moment God's justice might kick in and the persecutors will become persecuted, so Paul rather prays that through the persecution these believers might be counted worthy by God of their calling. That is, of their destiny in the kingdom, and that God might fulfill their every desire of goodness (what good things they want to accomplish) and that God might do mighty works of power through the faithful response of the Thessalonians to His promises, and finally, to the ultimate end that they glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and that they might be glorified by Him on the day of the Rapture when we are caught up to the Lord in the air. Finally all this can only occur by God's grace, apart from which they can do nothing. We are weak vessels.

By application we can be challenged by the kind of prayer Paul offered, we can learn a lot about how we ought to pray, what kinds of things are really important to pray for and what kind of things are shallow. What really matters is that we live for Him, for His glory and not for ourselves. That's why He called us, not to have a good time, not to have happy lives, but to live for Him. He is what matters. He created us and sustained us and redeemed us. He has a plan for our lives and it may involve intense persecution and that's His prerogative. It's our duty to live for His glory and not our own.

Alright, next time we'll move into chapter 2 and the second E, Error Corrected regarding the Claim that they were in the Day of the Lord. They were not and there are good reasons why they were not in the Day of the Lord, nor can any Christian be in the Day of the Lord. We'll see more Bible prophecy in chapter 2 and how false teaching can creep into congregations and destroy us spiritually.

ⁱ Now Paul was a prayer warrior. He had tremendous discipline. He recognized the power of prayer, not that the prayer itself is powerful, but that the God who answers prayer is powerful. It's Him who answers prayer and accomplishes things we never could. That's one of the things that prayer presupposes. I can't do it, I'm insufficient. I know some people will never pray for themselves because they say that's selfish, I pray for others not myself. Get over it, it's not selfish to pray for yourself, it's humbling, it's an admission that I can't but God can. And isn't that what God is wanting us to do daily? Come humbly before Him admitting that we can't do it in our own strength, we need His? Prayer is one of the main reasons I will never be an Arminian. The Arminian says I can, the Calvinist says I can't. And as many Calvinists have noted, every time an Arminian prays he's suddenly a Calvinist. Otherwise he wouldn't be praying. Think of what an Arminian prayer might sound like if he really prayed what he believed. God, I have no need to thank you because I can do it myself, I have the ability, such enormous powers, isn't it great God that you have given me commands that I can follow, etc..." and yet I never met an Arminian that prays like that. Reason; at heart we're all Calvinists in that sense. And one of the things that Paul recognized, to add a fourth thing to our list, is that faithful prayer is necessary means God uses to fulfill His will in our lives and count us worthy of our calling. That's the main idea of verse 11-12. Prayer is a means by which God accomplishes His plan for history.

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