May the presence of the Holy Spirit increase in your life

When we look at the story of Job, we see a man who was really doing alright with God. He was obedient and righteous and God was pleased with him. Satan challenged God to let him attack Job; to cause him loss, heartbreak, and sickness. God allowed it. Job went through a miserable time and never even knew why.

Then we look at the result. Firstly, God was glorified because although Job was troubled by all this, he never turned against God; satan was flat out shown to be wrong. Job suffered terribly, but when it was over, God blessed him doubly, and even more importantly, he had a closer relationship with his God. We see how important it is to trust God, even if we don’t understand. We also learn that satan can do nothing to us without God’s permission. When given permission, satan’s plans backfire to bring God glory and improve our relationship with Christ.

This is a very important lesson for us as we suffer in this world. Remember Job. God will allow terrible hardship in our lives; but if we keep trusting Him no matter what, the devil will be given a black eye and God will receive glory. We too will benefit by being drawn closer to our Saviour and we will receive reward; either in this life, in heaven, or both.

This is the life of a Christian. There is trial, but Jesus intercedes for us.

*“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”*

Luke 22:31-32

In Christ’s love

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1 Thessalonians 1 (2)

Last week we began a study of Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica. He referred to this church as being “*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*”. In this one phrase, Paul demonstrated the oneness of Jesus and God the Father; Jesus is both fully man and fully God. Also, by using the word “in” Paul showed the necessity of the church receiving all its strength and being from God in Jesus Christ. Just as the branch gets its nourishment from the vine, the church gets its nourishment from Jesus.

Now in verse 2, Paul says, “*We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers*”. One thing we see here is a good model for Christian prayer. It begins with being grateful to God and moves to interceding for others. Because we are human beings, our tendency is to focus on ourselves in prayer. Now, there is nothing wrong with praying for ourselves; the Bible tells us to bring our prayers and petitions before the Father.

But consider Jesus’ response to the question “What is the greatest commandment?” This is in Matthew 22:37-39.

*And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*

In this passage, we see how our normal prayers should progress. We begin with God. He is to be worshiped and praised simply because He is almighty God and far beyond us; in fact, He is our creator. We thank Him for His provision because all good things come from God. We show our gratitude for salvation through Jesus Christ. If God had not sacrificed His only begotten Son, we would all be lost for eternity.

Next is praying for others because we are to love them. We certainly pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ; for their blessings, for their sanctification, for them to be made more and more like Jesus and led by the Holy Spirit. We pray for those who are not believers that they would come to Jesus and avoid the penalty of hell. Scripture even specifically tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. So, praying for others is very important.

Although Paul doesn’t mention it here in Thessalonians, we do also pray for ourselves. “*Love your neighbor as yourself*”. We are to care for ourselves and pray for our own needs. The more we depend on God, the closer we are to His will. He wants us to depend on Him. Also, once we are a Christian, we are a temple of the Holy Spirit; God Himself dwells within us so we need to pray for the betterment of this temple.

This example Paul gives to the Thessalonians in prayer is a lesson and reminder for them. Many of the new Christians had been involved in pagan religions. In these religions, prayer often involved trying to talk the deity into giving blessing, usually by pointing out one’s own goodness or making some kind of deal with the deity. None of this has any place with the Christian. We know that we deserve nothing good from God and it is not a good idea to try to make deals with Him. Our requests are based entirely on His mercy and good will toward us in Jesus.

When Paul thanks God for the Christians of Thessalonica, it’s important to realize where the credit is going. The credit is going entirely to God, not the people. Paul is thanking God for the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit upon them to give them the necessary faith to accept the Gospel. He is thanking God for their growth in Christian maturity. He is thanking God for the spiritual fruit that is coming from that church. God gets all the glory because ultimately, God is the one who gives the ability to accomplish all these things. We see again that our entire prayer must be God centered, even if we are praying for others or ourselves.

We must understand that when Paul uses the words “always” and “constantly” in this context, he is not saying that they do nothing but pray about the Thessalonians. It means that they pray regularly for them, individually or during group prayer meetings. This is another good thing we can put into practice. We definitely pray for others during our regular prayer time; but if someone happens to cross our mind during the day, offer up a quick prayer for them. Although prayer should not be haphazard, strictly following a rigorous method of prayer can be deadening. The main thing is that God loves you and He loves to hear from you.

Verse 3 goes into the main things Paul is thanking God for regarding the Thessalonians. *[C]onstantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father*. Paul is thankful for the work God has done in the church to bring about the actions of work, labor, and steadfastness. It may be easier to think of steadfastness as perseverance. And these actions are coupled with the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul talks about how love is fundamental to Christianity. With Godly love, all we do is blessed and acceptable to God; without love, even our greatest sacrifices and gifts are worthless. In verse 13 he tells us: *But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love*. These are the three greatest attributes of a Christian during their earthly life. The greatest is love because love will last forever. Once Jesus establishes His kingdom, we will no longer need faith and hope. But for now, Christians desperately need all three.

The words work and labor are different words, they have different nuances. But there is certainly overlap, so we don’t want to make hard and fast distinctions. There are things we do because of faith and things we do because of love, but for the Christian, faith and love are intertwined. Bearing these things in mind we can look at what Paul is saying.

He refers to the Thessalonian’s “*work of faith*”. Keep in mind, that work does not bring us salvation; only faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour brings us to salvation. But once we have been saved, changes take place within us such that we want to do good works; we want to do things that please our Lord. So, doing good works is the evidence that we are saved, not the cause of it.

Because of the Thessalonian’s faith, they are performing good works. We can think of things like caring for the poor; providing for widows and orphans. Things like taking in strangers, visiting those who are sick just offering them comfort by your presence and prayers. Things very much like what Jesus tells us about in Matthew 25 when He describes the separation of the sheep and the goats. Christ’s sheep do these good things to others which is actually doing them for Jesus. The unbelieving goats withhold these things from others, and so, withhold them from Jesus. At the final judgement, Jesus will be able to point to our actions in order to prove our hearts.

These good works can be done by those who are not believers in Jesus. However, these works are not acceptable to God because they are done outside of Christ and therefore, with sinful intentions. Also, the faith mentioned here is faith in God. There are many who have faith in faith, or even in some other institution; these are on shaky ground and ultimately worthless. A Christian’s faith is in God through Jesus Christ; this is the only way.

Next Paul mentions their “*labor of love*”. The church is doing work because they have faith in God which causes them to love others and be willing to labor for them. The word translated “labor” has a more strenuous connotation. It refers to hard labor that tires a person. It is one thing to give money to a person in need; it is another thing to build them a house. This laboring is a difficult and time-consuming activity on behalf of another that doesn’t have any immediate reward.

We might think of mowing someone’s grass who isn’t able due to illness or shoveling snow for an elderly person. It could be those who are in church leadership (or congregation) who voluntarily teach, keep the church running, or repaired. These labors of love can be directed toward God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and the unbelieving. Of course, anytime we work for an unbeliever, we have the ulterior motive of bringing them into the kingdom of God.

True hope brings with it perseverance. If we don’t really hope for something, then there is no reason deal with hard times that come with waiting for it. The Christians of Thessalonica, and we who are Christians now, hope for the return of our Saviour Jesus. As I’ve said before, this is not a vague hope, something we would kind of like to see happen; like we hope it doesn’t rain on our Saturday. This is a hope that we strongly hold dear and believe is a fact due to faith.

As we are told in Hebrews 11:1, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*.” See how much faith and hope are intertwined. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit to receive the faith in Jesus Christ to be saved. By faith, we believe the things in the Bible. We look forward to and hope for the promises in God’s word. The faith and hope are solid, and so, we are willing to endure anything that comes our way, until the end of our life or Jesus returns.

The Christians in Thessalonica had to be steadfast, they had to persevere. They faced a great amount of hostility from the non-Christians in the city. For one thing, in order to work, most had to belong to a guild. Each guild had their own deity they had to worship; a special god that provided for members of that guild. If someone would not worship that deity, they could not be in that guild, and they could not work. Once someone became a Christian, they would often find themselves unable to ply their trade.

Additionally, the city of Thessalonica had favored status from Rome. The city government didn’t want to do anything to mess that up. Part of life in the Roman Empire was emperor worship. Once a person became a Christian, they could no longer refer to Caesar as lord. The last thing the city government and the people of the city wanted was a group of people who refused to worship Caesar. Rome would notice and they might lose their position. So, the Christians were also persecuted by the government, and they would not intervene if other citizens persecuted them.

The church in Thessalonica suffered severe persecution. Yet, by the grace of God, the church grew and thrived. Satan can cause the church problems, but he cannot overcome Christ’s church. Their hope was in Jesus Christ. They believed that He would see them through and that He would come back to establish His kingdom; and they wanted to be found faithfully working when He came.

These things have not changed; they are the same now for this and any Christian church as they were 2000 years ago. As individual Christians and collectively as the church, our faith in Christ is crucial. We must depend on Him entirely for salvation, and on the Holy Spirit for the ability to live in faith, hope, and love. We depend on Him also for the concrete demonstrations of work and perseverance. There is plenty of work out there for each of us individually and as a church. Our faith in Jesus will give us the ability to choose to love others, even when we don’t really want to love them.

The Holy Spirit gives us the strength to persevere supernaturally, and through the study of God’s word and prayer. We haven’t yet been called to martyrdom, but we have plenty against us. The culture we live in bombards us with temptation; it calls us to live unholy lives and accuses us of wrong doing if we do not follow: just as in Thessalonica. Christians must cling to the truth of Jesus Christ and His Lordship, regardless of COVID-19, civil instability, natural disaster, laws that are contrary to God’s order, or any threats to take our freedoms and possessions if we do not disown Him.

We must be willing to suffer for Christ. Just consider what He suffered for us. But this is no reason for despair. Our lifetime is very short when compared to eternity. And we are given great encouragement in Romans 8:18, “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us*.”

It will be worth it to us to nourish our faith in Jesus, so that we can love God and other people, and hold to that sure and certain hope that He is coming back.

Prayer

Lord God, we are so grateful for that faith in Jesus Christ that is a gift from You by the Holy Spirit. Feed that faith; may it grow strong in us so that we depend more and more on You for everything in our lives. Lead our hearts to do good works in Your name so that faith shows itself to be real and worthy.

Along with that faith build our hope. As we read Your word, build in us a stronger desire for the promises You have for us; that our hearts might ache to receive them. We ask for a hope so strong that it draws others, so that they too might be saved.

We ask for overflowing love; love that is Godly, not sentimental. Help us to love You Father, and to love Your only begotten Son as You do; give us that love You have for other people; let us see them through Your eyes. Let it be a love based on action, so that through us, Your love might shine.

We ask these things in Jesus’ name

Amen