

## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: Justice*

We are grateful, Lord God, for the privilege of knowing Your justice and love. You have been gracious to us and pursued us, and You have taught us right from wrong and brought us to a place of repentance. May we never turn away from Your justice, which has brought us healing, empowerment, and encouragement, especially when the enemy is defeated. Bring us safely through all the trials of our lives, we pray, to our home in glory; **AMEN**

### For myself

*Give thanks to God for your personal security, for His protection in the past and for all He will do to keep you safe in His will in the future.*

### For others

*Pray about the influence of sports personalities on many young people. Pray that those who are privileged to earn vast wealth to entertain us would understand their responsibilities to society.*

## Meditation

Great Lord of all, You are more than I can ever be:

You are a library where I am a book;  
You are a landscape compared to my snapshot;  
You are a wise man who shows up my folly;  
You are a forest though I am a tree;  
You are the master who determines my service;  
You are a storm that makes me stagger for breath;  
You are all the world's history to my short life;  
You are a computer that powers my peripheral;  
You are an encyclopaedia to which I add my articles;  
You are perfection that covers over my blemish;

Praise You Lord! And make me complete, I pray.

# Bible Passage

## 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

<sup>11</sup> Now may He who is our God and Father and our Lord Jesus, guide our pathway back to you; <sup>12</sup> and may the Lord make you grow and overflow with love for one another and for all, just as we do for you, <sup>13</sup> so that your hearts may be established as blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

## Review

As a whole, this all sounds as if Paul is closing his letter! He asks that God will allow him to return to Thessalonica (3:11), and he then urges the church there to submit to their Lord so that they might grow and 'overflow with love' (3:12). His last prayer is for the Thessalonians to walk 'blameless in holiness', and so be fulfilled at the 'coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints' (3:13).

If Thessalonians were to finish here, it would make a good short New Testament letter shedding light on one part of the story of Acts. It would also offer us straightforward and valuable advice about the Christian life. The theology would not be as deep as Paul's later letters, but what else would we expect from a letter written in the middle of Paul's intense missionary activity!

Our passage today comes roughly halfway through the letter, and in common with letters such as Philippians (see the change from ch. 2 to ch. 3), Paul is winding up the first part of the letter because he is about to deliver a message of great importance both to the Thessalonians and the wider church. Moreover, the very last sentence of our passage contains a strong hint of what is coming, when he comments about the 'coming of the Lord Jesus ...' (3:13). It is highly likely that Timothy's report (3:6) contained information that suggested to Paul that the Thessalonians were in urgent need of some teaching about this, because as we will soon discover, it is not straightforward!

## Going Deeper

So our passage today offers specific blessings for the Thessalonian church, and contains words that sound like a 'benediction'. '*Now He who is our God and Father and our Lord Jesus, guide our pathway*' (3:11), could be said to conclude a service of worship, as could '*may your hearts be established as blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all the saints*' (3:13). However, if we look beyond the attraction of using these words in this way, these verses contain some interesting teaching that is arguably not found elsewhere in Paul's writing. We must look carefully to spot this.

### ***He who is our God and Father and our Lord Jesus (3:11)***

The first unusual feature is what the passage says about God and about Jesus. We are used to speaking about 'God the Father' and 'our Lord Jesus' (3:11) as one and the same, largely because this is basic to our faith. So we must think about how people came to make this connection and proclaim it as an 'article of faith'.

In the Gospels, Jesus constantly worked to help people recognise that He was both Lord and God, and it was difficult to do because it was hard for Jews to believe that Almighty God could be with them in human form. Peter came dramatically close to this when he was the first to say to Jesus, '*You are the Messiah the Son of the Living God*' (Matt 16:16). When the disciples received the Holy Spirit and were emboldened to speak, Peter then delivered a sermon in which he sought to persuade people that Jesus was the Messiah, and said, '*God has made Him (Jesus) both Lord and Messiah*' (Acts 2:36). For us, this was tantamount to saying that Jesus was God, but it was his call to people to believe that Jesus was the Messiah that gained the famous response on the first day of Pentecost, at which the church was born.

It is not surprising that it took time for Christians to use words as we might today, saying that Jesus was both man and God, for example. The Gospel of John, especially John 1 and the various conversations between Jesus and the disciples (e.g. John 13:31), puts more flesh on this truth than any other Gospel. But this was written towards the end of the first century, decades after Paul wrote to the Thessalonians! We can only conclude that Paul was himself at the forefront of speaking out what has become a fundamental truth of the church, that the man Jesus, crucified and raised, is indeed, '*our God and Father and our Lord ...*' (3:11). The declaration 'Jesus is God' remains fundamental to Christian faith to this day, and we should not forget its significance.

### ***Love - the evidence of faith (3:12)***

In the central verse of this passage, Paul writes about love as the evidence of faith at the heart of the Christian community; '*may the Lord make you grow and overflow with love for one another ...*' (3:12). Paul frequently wrote about love in his letters and emphasised its importance; for example, the subject of love forms the dramatic climax of his first letter to the Corinthians (see chapter 13). The Gospel writers also report Jesus' famous command to his disciples to, '*love one another*' (John 13:34) and to '*love your neighbour*' (Matt 19:19). Jesus Himself focussed much of His teaching on love, saying for example '*love your enemy*' (Matt 5:43), and described forgiveness as the natural consequence of practical love; '*if you forgive others ... your heavenly Father will forgive you*' (Matt 6:14, 18:21f.).

Paul, however, emphasised Jesus' teaching that love was not merely a personal attitude or a property of God; it must '*come from the heart*' (see Romans 6:17). He was the first apostle to use the special word, '*agape*', to specify the quality of love shown by God in saving souls, a love that is both unmerited and free. He taught the privilege and duty of every Christian to demonstrate this same love in every area of life, and God's supreme call on all who claimed His name.

### ***The pathway of Christian holiness (3:13)***

The message here is that by doing everything possible to put love into practice, we '*establish*' our hearts as '*blameless in holiness*' (3:13). This sounds rather deep, but in reality it is straightforward. By doing loving deeds amply described in Scripture such as caring, forgiving, going the extra mile etc, we '*prove*' to ourselves, to others and to God that the faith and love in our hearts is real.

Moreover, this exercise of faith is truly holy. God's nature is love, so by doing deeds of love, we both demonstrate our faith in Him and also make Him known in the world. Practical love is either fellowship and evangelism, depending on its context! This is what the last verse of our passage says, no more, no less, and it adds that this proof of our faith stands at the End, when Jesus our Lord, who has revealed these truths to us by His Spirit, comes again in glory with all His saints (3:13)!

# Discipleship

## ***Application***

### ***The importance of love***

This small and unpretentious passage is an important reminder to us of the love that lies at the heart of our faith in Jesus as the Son of God. It also calls to mind the importance of demonstrating our faith and our discipleship through loving deeds. Too often, we are content to say that we have faith in Jesus who is our Saviour, but our words and deeds do not display the sheer generous and open-hearted love that proves our faith.

It would be unwise for anyone who reads 1 Thessalonians to read past these verses as if they mean little. Their value can be missed because people think of them merely as a connecting device between what we have already read and the serious theological teaching to come.

### ***The pathway of holiness***

I have found that a large percentage of Christians of my own country are uncomfortable with the idea of Christian holiness. I know this because of the serious furrows that cross their brows when the word 'holiness' is mentioned in anything more than a passing manner. Some feel that due Christian modesty precludes them from measuring up to anything like 'holiness'.

But such a thought goes against Scripture. In truth, when Paul speaks of holiness as he does in verse 13, he is rejoicing in the holiness God's people have been granted through their salvation, which is the gift of entry into God's holy presence by the sacrifice of Christ! He is not saying that the Thessalonians have somehow merited God's special status of being 'holy' or 'saints', words which unfortunately mean roughly the same thing via the strange pathways of the Latin and Hellenistic Greek languages!

So instead of wondering whether we are 'holy' or not, we accept that Jesus alone makes us 'holy' because He loves us, then we will perhaps get the right perspective on this idea within Scripture which can appear so strange to so many.

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- Ask yourself what aspect of the life of the church causes you great difficulty and makes it hard for you to be forgiving and generous. These are precisely the challenges of love that the Lord is bringing you.
- Pray for the church today, because there is much division and stress amongst people who find it very hard to love each other. Pray for any such people who you know.

## ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Share testimony in your group about how you have been guided by God in the course of your everyday life.
2. Do people readily believe that Jesus is God, today? Do people readily believe that we can see God in Jesus? If not, what might be the barriers to people believing this?
3. How can we put the love of God into action today in a way that demonstrates our faith and does not compromise it?

## Final Prayer

Give me, Lord a heart that is open to Your guidance and Your will. May I be prepared to go wherever you may call, with the courage to stand against any evil, using the gifts You have given me. Help me to serve others under all circumstances, so that God may be glorified in all I do. Thanks be to the Lord and God of all. **AMEN**