

September 26, 2010

## *Living in the Light of Christ's Return*

### *Prayer and the Work of God*

#### **2 Thessalonians 1:1 – 12**

One of the strangest religious cults that has appeared in recent history sprang up in the aftermath of WWII. During the war in the Pacific, the U.S. Military used many of the South Sea Islands for temporary landing strips and supply depots in their push toward the ultimate goal of defeating Japan. Very often, the armed forces that used these islands were the first white people the natives had ever seen. And what they saw was pretty amazing in their eyes. Planes swooped down and unloaded tons of cargo – arms and ammunition of course, but also tons of clothing, food, refrigerators, radios, power tools and the like. Huge machines turned the jungle into airstrips and bases with roads and houses and telephone lines.

The natives learned that this bounty from the sky was known to the American servicemen as “**cargo**.” The locals were introduced to the magic of Zippo lighters and watches, and the refreshing taste of Coca-Cola, and medicine and canned food and candy. They saw for the first time Jeeps and tanks and automatic weapons, and all sorts of other modern technology. And the conclusion they came to was that the white men were Gods who brought magical stuff.

So when the war was over and these places were abandoned by the military, the people began building temples and shrines to the cargo gods. Their places of worship were perfect replicas of airplanes or control towers or hangers they made out of the discarded material, and they would come and pray to the cargo gods who brought you stuff out of the sky. They cleared their own kind of landing strips, and they carved wooden radio headsets with bamboo antennae, and even the occasional wooden air-traffic controller. Day after day, men from the village would sit in their towers wearing their replica headsets as others stood on the runways and waved the landing signals to attract cargo-bringing airplanes from the empty sky. Piers were also erected in an effort to attract ships laden with cargo, and the Red Cross emblem seen on wartime ambulances was taken as the symbol of the resurging religion.

Anthropologists discovered these people praying to the cargo god named Tom Navy and John Frum, and they prayed for holy cargo to once again drop out of the sky. They were worshipping holy relics like Zippo lighters, cameras, eye glasses, and ball-point pens. Missionaries who came to these places were initially given a warm welcome because they were seen to be the second coming of the cargo gods. However the islanders were looking for cargo, not the gospel, and those missionaries found that these people were so steeped in materialism that the gospel did not easily penetrate.

We laugh at stories like this, shaking our heads over the ignorance of these people, but in many ways, this is the way a lot of Christians approach prayer. It's a new brand of the cargo cults where God is this guy who dumps the goodies from the sky. There are preachers who openly teach that prayer is a means for self-gratification. Prayer is a tool through which you get what you want. And primarily what you want are things to make life more comfortable. More money, bigger houses, better cars. There is no difference between the cargo cults of the South Pacific and contemporary prosperity or name it and claim it preaching that reduces God to some kind of magical genie, who, if rubbed in the appropriate manner, must dump the cargo from the sky to gratify our wishes.

But this morning I want to look at what the Bible has to say about **prayer and the work of God** – specifically in the last two verses of chapter one in 2 Thessalonians. Having commended the Thessalonians and given glory to God for their endurance and love and growth in faith, and having assured them that persecutions and afflictions should not surprise them, but rather they should be encouraged to know that God is working His righteous will in their lives and in the lives of those who do not know God or obey His gospel – that God is still sovereign over all – **Paul shares with them how he is praying for them.** *To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of His calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by His power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.* 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Paul is not praying to any cargo God and we should notice that, aside from prayer that is not focused on self-gratifying pleasures and self-satisfying lusts, at least two things right away from this passage. Namely that Paul **prays often** and he **prays very specifically** for the saints. The phrase - *we always pray for you* - should remind us of the previous letter in which Paul called the saints to pray unceasingly. That is, he is praying with a **profound sense of personal insufficiency – he prays repeatedly and often and he prays faithfully**. That is what is bound up in that little phrase – *we always pray for you*. I believe that is how Paul prayed.

And when Paul prayed, he prayed specifically. Paul says - *To this end we always pray for you*. That is he has specific results in sight toward which he is bending all his energy in prayer. He prays that God would work in the saints to **make them worthy of His calling**. He prays that God would **fulfill every resolve for good**. And he prays that God would **fulfill every work of faith**, and he is praying that this would all be accomplished by God's power. And in all of this – all of His making us worthy of His calling, in every resolve for good, and in every work of faith with power, **Paul's end goal is that the name of the Lord Jesus would be glorified in us and we would be glorified in Him** – all according to, or by means of, the grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a short paraphrase of these two verses and this morning we want to flesh that out.

When Paul sees the growing faith and the increase of love among the Thessalonians; when he sees their steadfast endurance in the middle of persecution and affliction; when he looks at the soon return of Christ with vindication for the saints and eternal destruction for the unbelieving; his response is to encourage the Thessalonians that he is praying for them. Whatever he desired for the Thessalonians, he knew first of all that he needed to pray for it. Prayer is what lines our hearts up with heaven's will, and the will of God for the Thessalonians was not more cargo, but works of faith, and good resolves and a life that was worthy of the calling to which God had called them through the gospel.

The first thing we ought to take from this passage is that **our prayers need to be informed**, not by our circumstances but **by who God is**. The more we know God, the more we understand who God is, the more our prayers will reflect God's character, the more biblical our praying will be, the more God-honoring our prayers will be, and the more our prayers will be like the prayers God would have us pray. Paul could have prayed a lot of things for these Thessalonians. Relief from persecution, a break from the suffering, more money, better jobs – lots of other things he could have prayed for them. But Paul knew that God has ordained persecution and suffering for His people, so that He might make them fit for His holy kingdom. And he knew that through that process he was making them worthy of His calling. And so he let what he knew about God inform his prayers and he could pray then according to the revealed will of God. Real prayer is learning to think God's thoughts, to have God's desires as our own, loving what He loves and hating what He hates.

The second thing we need to understand from this is that **God is sovereign – and we need to pray**. More than anyone, Paul understood the sovereignty of God over all things. He understood that **all that God ordains happens, and all that He does not ordain, does not happen**. Or to put it another way, **nothing, no good thing or no evil thing, arises, exists or endures independently of God's will and plan**. He ordains days of prosperity as well as days of adversity, which He planned before they come – He reigns over our suffering and He reigns over our joy – according to His plans. All things in the universe are subject to His will and planning – nations rise and fall as He pleases according to His plans, rulers rule and are dethroned at His word according to His plans – He keeps the planets and stars and galaxies spinning and whirling through space by His power – and as Colossians 1:17 says, *'In Him all things hold together'* – and when He lets go they do not hold together – according to His plans.

Because God is sovereign, and has a plan and purpose in ordering all things for His glory, **prayer then is ordained as well**. **Prayer is the God-ordained means through which His will is carried out on earth**. He ordains not only the end of things but the very means themselves. Just as preaching the gospel is the means God has ordained through which people hear the word and come to Christ – [**Romans 10:13 – 15**] **prayer is the means God uses to change hearts and arrange circumstances and events to accomplish His will in the earth**. Just as God will see to it that His word is proclaimed as a means to saving the elect, so He will see to it that all those prayers that are prayed which are necessary for His will to be accomplished. When the time was right for the Messiah to come – God set an old man and a widow to praying for that to happen. When the time was at hand for God's people to be released from the Babylonian captivity, God stirred up Daniel's heart to pray for it to happen. And now Paul is praying for God to make the Thessalonians worthy of their calling, to fulfill every good resolve and every work of faith with power. In essence, asking God to do what He has already purposed to do.

And you might ask, 'Well isn't that unnecessary or at the very least redundant'? **Apparently not.** The same Lord who said, *'He who called you is faithful and He will do it'* [1 Thessalonians 5:24] is the same Lord who tells us to *'...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling – for it is God who is at work in you both the willing and the working for His good pleasure.'* [Philippians 2:12-13] As the called and elect of God, our salvation is sure and certain and irrevocable – **and** it requires working out with fear and trembling, precisely because it is God who is at work in us. The same Bible that tells us that *our Lord Jesus Christ...will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ* [1 Corinthians 1:8] also says that we *ought always to pray and not lose heart.* [Luke 18:1] That is, on the one hand, the Lord will see that we endure to the end – on the other, we need to pray that we do not lose heart and not endure to the end.

Let me illustrate that through the life of Peter. In Luke 22, Jesus told Peter on the night before the cross that he would betray the Lord. Of course Peter strenuously denied that he would but Jesus told him something strange: *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."* Luke 22:31-32 The sovereign plan of God included not only Peter's denial, but also Peter's rehabilitation. For whatever purpose of God, He allowed Satan to so work in Peter's life that he denied that he ever knew Christ, and he wept bitterly over that denial. But God had also ordained that Satan would not ultimately triumph in Peter's life and that he would be a powerful instrument in the hands of God for the cause of Christ in his day. But notice that Jesus didn't just simply say, 'Peter you are going to deny Me, but eventually you'll come around. Just hang in there!' He said, *'...but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.'*

In other words, just as Peter's denial and ultimate restoration was ordained by God, Christ's prayers for Peter were part of that sovereign plan. Christ knew that Peter would fail this initial test, He knew that he would be restored, and He knew that one day Peter would not fail the ultimate test, but he would die a martyr's death without renouncing his faith – namely because God had planned the whole thing. **And yet crucial to this plan was the prayer of Jesus for Peter.** If the Son of God finds it necessary to pray in accordance with the sovereign will of His Father, dare we do any less? In the Book of Revelation, at the end of all things we see the apostle John praying with all his heart. **'Amen, come Lord Jesus.'** And you almost want to say, 'Haven't you read what you've been writing here? You have been telling us for twenty two chapters that Jesus is coming back; in fact you end with Jesus telling us, *'Behold I come quickly.'* And yet you still pray: **'Amen, come Lord Jesus!'** So we see that **prayer is the God-ordained means through which His will is carried out on earth.**

**Paul is praying, as we need to pray, according to the revealed word of God.** He is telling the Thessalonians how he is praying, but you can almost hear him pray: *'Father, I know Your will is to have a people set apart for You, a holy sanctified church without spot and without wrinkle, so God would you do that for the Thessalonians? I know, Father that You want to count them worthy of their calling in the end; I know that You want to fulfill every good resolve and every work of faith with power. I know that You want this so that Your Son is glorified in them and they in Him. So i'm praying Lord, grant them this grace, do in them and with them whatever it takes for Your will to be accomplished in their lives, for Your glory and Your name's sake.'* This the prayer that touches God's heart because it concerns His will and His purpose in the earth. Very simply, **prayer is the means whereby I line up with the purpose of God and the means through which He works His purpose to fulfillment.** No wonder Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians to pray unceasingly.

And Paul is praying that way for very specific things: He prays that God would work in the saints to **make them worthy of His calling.** He prays that God would **fulfill every resolve for good.** And he prays that God would **fulfill every work of faith,** and in all of this, he is praying that this would be accomplished by God's power and according to His grace. When Paul prays that God would make the saints **worthy of His calling,** we should not suppose that he is praying that they would be declared righteous, in other words that God would somehow count the unworthy to be worthy – that has already happened. Romans 8 tells us that *'...those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.'* Romans 8:30 We have been justified by faith.

So on one hand the work of God over His saints is already finished; on the other hand we should pray for that to be realized in our lives. The worthiness Paul is talking about is the kind of worthiness that means that which is fitting, proper, appropriate. **That is Paul is praying that what we know line up with who we are.** He is praying that our life in the flesh reflect our life in the Spirit. What we need to understand is that our entrance into the kingdom is qualified by our worthiness to do so. In verse 5 Paul tells the Thessalonians that the persecution and affliction they are enduring has as their goal the working of worthiness for the kingdom. God is making us worthy of His kingdom – that is a life that is fitting and proper and appropriate for eternity.

So we might say that Paul's prayers had the effect of bringing persecution and suffering into the Thessalonians lives, so that the will of God might be accomplished in them, namely, fitting them for heaven. In other words, Paul is praying a prayer that says, 'Whatever is necessary to make these guys worthy of heaven, Lord – DO IT!' This is prayer that is according to the revealed word of God – prayer that is lined up with heaven's will.

He is also praying that God would **fulfill every resolve for good** in the Thessalonians hearts. That is a curious phrase, but again I believe that points to the sovereignty of God over all of this. The phrase translated as **every resolve for good** is also translated as **every desire for goodness**. And the word for resolve or desire is the Greek work **eudokia** whose basic meaning is will or choice with the implication that it is a good desire or good choice. And Paul is praying that God would rule over every desire for good that wells up in a believer's heart. And Paul is lining his prayers up with God's heart that not only gives those good resolves in the first place but rules over their fulfillment. Good resolves I believe are those Spirit-inspired longings after God, and deep desires for holiness that can only be explained by the work of God in the believer's life. The Bible tells us again and again that left to ourselves the desires of our hearts are only wicked and there is nothing in us that is good. So those resolves for good must come from God, and Paul is praying that just as God inspired those good resolves, He would carry them through to completion.

Jonathan Edwards, pastor, theologian and a man greatly used by God in the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century in America, wrote out a list of good resolves, inspired by his times with God, that he endeavored to read once a week, in order, as he said, 'to keep his mind on his duty before God'. So he wrote things like: **Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God; nor be, nor suffer it, if I can avoid it.** And: **Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.** And: **Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.** And: **Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.** And: **Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.** But over this all, he knew that all his good resolves that were inspired by God were also dependent on God for their fulfillment: **'Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat Him by His grace to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ's sake'.**

In asking God to fulfill every good resolve, Paul is not saying that the Thessalonians never engage their wills to make those resolves. The work of God never takes the place of the engagement of our will. The power of God to work in us never makes us passive. His grace is beneath or behind or within our will but not in place of it. **The evidence of the work of God in our lives is the strength of our willing to make good resolves.** If you say, 'Well, God is sovereign and He must do it so I'll just sit back until the Spirit moves me' then you don't really believe in a sovereign God. How can anyone believe that God controls everything and yet walk in disobedience? When you sit back and do nothing – you are actually engaging your will to disobey and if that is how you handle temptation and sin in your life, a case can be made that Christ is not in fact Lord of your life. The Bible is full of commands to make good resolves: resist the devil, strive for holiness, strive for unity, fight the good fight of faith and they work to inspire our wills to resolve to do what God has required of us.

Finally Paul prayed that God would **fulfill every work of faith**. I think that the difference between good resolves and works of faith is that **works of faith are simply good resolves in action**. James tells us *'What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works ? Can that faith save him?'* James 2:14 In other words, we can have all the good resolves in the world but if not put into action they have no saving effect whatsoever. If for example, you resolve to read the Bible through in a year by reading it daily and praying over it and meditating in it – that resolve becomes a work of faith when you press through the temptation not to read, not to pray, not to meditate by trusting in and believing the promises of God rather than your lazy self that doesn't want to work all that much.

You arm your good resolves with the promises of Psalm 1 that says: *How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers ! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither ; And in whatever he does, he prospers.* Psalm 1:1-3 And you lean on the promise of God that says: *"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.* Joshua 1:8 And then when the world, the flesh and the devil come against you to tempt you to not get into the word of God, you have the strength to say no to temptation and yes to God and your good resolve becomes a work of faith.

So what are we to conclude? First of all I think we need to conclude that **God is not a cargo god**. He is not interested in making life here the point for us. His goal for us is glory and life eternal and to display His glory in this universe, and He bends every ounce of His will behind that purpose. I don't believe He hears or pays attention to those prayers that terminate on us. But He is quick to answer those prayers that have His purpose in view.

I think too we should understand that **prayer is indispensable**. The goal of prayer is: *that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ*. 2 Thessalonians 1:12 This was the goal of Paul's prayer for God to make the Thessalonians worthy and to fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith. Ultimately, all our lives are about the glory of God, that the name of Jesus be lifted high in us; and that we would be brought to glory in Him. And the fact remains that although everyone of those that God has predestined, and called and justified **will be glorified and will bring** Him glory, our prayers for that very thing to happen are indispensable. **If God is sovereign, He can guarantee that we will both glorify Christ and be glorified in Him; and He can guarantee whatever prayers are necessary for that to happen.** So it is not inconsistent with His sovereignty to promote prayer as one of the means to bringing us to glory.

I think we also should conclude that **we ought to pray with the sense of serious resolve that matches what is at stake** – entrance into the kingdom. Christians are not those who pray a magical incantation and are then forever free to pursue their own interests and pleasures. Because God is sovereign, our prayers become His work to accomplish His will on earth even as it is in heaven.

*Our gracious God and heavenly Father,*

*Help us to see the place of prayer in Your sovereign purpose and plan. Grant that we would know You so well that our prayers become full reflections of what You desire. Line our wills and our hearts and our desires up with heaven's goal. Forbid Lord that our prayers should ever terminate on us, but rather help us to pray God-sized, scripture-saturated, eternal-purpose-filled prayers that move Your hand in accord with Your will. Father, fill and transform our thinking so that we think Your thoughts after You. Incline our hearts to Your word and not to getting stuff and have mercy on us in our foolish addiction to things that dull our hearts to the delights of knowing You. Grant it Lord that we would delight ourselves in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*