

I.N.I.

17th Sunday after Pentecost
October 9, 2011
II Thess. 1:1-5,11,12

In Christ Jesus, our resurrected and glorified Savior, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

This morning we continue and we also begin anew. We continue our study of Paul's relationship with the Thessalonian Christians. We do so by beginning a new study--the study of his second letter to the church in Thessalonica.

It appears that Paul was still in Corinth when he penned this second letter. It is believed that Paul wrote this second letter only a few months after the first one while still working in Corinth. After Paul had sent that first letter, news came from Thessalonica about several matters which required a follow-up letter. How that news came to Paul in Corinth we do not know. But since Thessalonica and Corinth were both important cities of commerce and trade, it is not hard to believe that news traveled from one city to another and back again within a few week's time.

Paul writes about three distinct matters in this second letter, two of which he mentioned in his first letter. He begins by again thanking God for the Thessalonian's faithfulness and mentions the persecution by the unbelieving Jews. He again speaks of Christ's return. He urges, and in fact, admonishes them to work and not be idle and sponge off others. He also writes about the coming of the Antichrist.

In the verses that we have chosen to study this morning we see Paul's pastoral heart. He gives thanks to God for these beloved Christians who have remained faithful even in the face of persecutions. We have entitled our theme this morning:

A PASTOR'S PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

I: Paul thanks God for His people's faithful endurance

II: Paul thanks God for His people's growing faith

Read vs. 1-2 **PAUL, SILVANUS, AND TIMOTHY, TO THE CHURCH OF THE THESSALONIANS IN GOD OUR FATHER AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST; GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST.**

As we have said before, this address or salutation is very typical of most all of Paul's other letters. It is almost word for word the same as his opening comments in his first letter. Paul greets the Thessalonians with his usual two words: **GRACE** and **PEACE**. Though they are simple words, they are filled with tremendous meaning and application to our lives. God's **GRACE** or undeserved love is the only **CAUSE** of our salvation. We have done nothing to deserve anything from God. He has saved us alone through His undeserved love in Christ.

PEACE is the **RESULT** of our salvation. We are no longer enemies of God who must live in constant fear of Him. We are His dear children, sons and daughters in Christ. Grace and Peace--what more beautiful blessings could a pastor ask for his fellow believers?

Read vs. 3-5 **WE ARE BOUND TO THANK GOD ALWAYS FOR YOU, BRETHREN, AS IT IS FITTING, BECAUSE YOUR FAITH GROWS EXCEEDINGLY, AND THE LOVE OF EVERY ONE OF YOU ALL ABOUND TOWARD EACH OTHER, SO THAT WE OURSELVES BOAST OF YOU AMONG THE CHURCHES OF GOD FOR YOUR PATIENCE AND FAITH IN ALL YOUR PERSECUTIONS AND TRIBULATIONS THAT YOU ENDURE, WHICH IS MANIFEST EVIDENCE OF THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGEMENT**

OF GOD, THAT YOU MAY BE COUNTED WORTHY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD, FOR WHICH YOU ALSO SUFFER.

Paul felt compelled-"**BOUND**"-to be thankful. His joy in what God was doing in their midst placed him under willful obligation to thank God continually for these many blessings. And what were these blessings?

Their faithful endurance and growing faith.

The persecution these Thessalonians were experiencing was used by God to strengthen them. Persecution made them depend upon God for help in their time of need. Persecution drew them closer together and caused them to love each other more. They placed themselves confidently into their Heavenly Father's hands, knowing that He would either end the persecutions or help them bear it and in so doing increase their faithfulness. They were not going to deny Christ just to escape this trial. Rather, they were constantly seeking new ways to spread the message of their Savior.

What a marvelous congregation the Thessalonians had! Oh, yes, they were sinners, imperfect people just like you and me. But in Christ-like love they forgave one another their sins and weaknesses. Instead of causing them to turn on each other, mistrust one another, or exalt themselves over each other, their trials drew them closer together as a family of fellow Christians. No doubt, they offered loving help to any needy or distressed member of their spiritual family.

Notice that Paul gives the thanks to God. For it was God who accomplished all of this in these Christians. By their continued faithful use of His Word and Sacraments the Holy Spirit was able to continue to strengthen them in their faithfulness. That is why Paul also writes, **SO THAT WE OURSELVES BOAST OF YOU AMONG THE CHURCHES OF GOD.** God gave them the strength to persevere in their faith in the face of trials. What an inspiring example the Thessalonians were for all other Christians of that day and for today. Paul is not glorifying the Thessalonians nor his own achievements. He is glorifying God. It was to God and Him alone that Paul owed this continuing debt of thanks for what He had accomplished in these Thessalonian believers.

What could be Paul's purpose of glorifying God through this **BOAST** of these Thessalonians? One purpose seems to be to encourage other congregations in their trials and persecutions to follow the example of these Christians. Another purpose was to encourage the Thessalonians themselves, by way of letting them know that many other churches would be praying for them and thanking God for their faithfulness.

A very important lesson for us can be drawn from this text. God gives us the ability, like the Thessalonians, to grow in faithful endurance and love even in times of trouble. When trials and troubles come, God doesn't intend for us to despair and weaken in faith. Rather, He wants us to listen all the more closely to His Word, to cling all the more tenaciously to His promises. Then He will strengthen us through that Word to bear our trials, and He will increase our love for each other so that we will help one another in these trials. It is interesting to note that the faith of Christians very often shines brightest in controversy and persecution rather than in peace and prosperity. Sometimes continued prosperity can very often be detrimental and even harmful to faith. When things in our life are so good and everything we want and need is within our grasp, faith and trust, patient endurance and love very often weakens. Much like when we eat, drink and be merry without proper exercise our bodies and muscles get fat and lazy and it is harmful to us physically. So also our spiritual muscles, if not exercised with some trials and tests, will become lazy and lax.

We need to be thankful to God for our prosperity and also on constant guard for Satan and our own sinful flesh which will use prosperity to lead us away from a continued repentant faith in Jesus and away from a confident trust and reliance upon God for all things. Naturally, none of us likes or wants to experience persecutions. In fact, we often shy away from it. We hesitate to be labeled as

RELIGIOUS FANATICS, or to be ridiculed for our beliefs. But there are all kinds of pressures in this world, working to cause us to conform to the ways of the world rather than to be transformed, changed by the powerful Word of God.

Persecutions and trials because of our faith may seem to be grievous, but actually they are an indication or evidence of God's powerful love for us. As believers we should expect to be opposed by the world and experience persecution and ridicule from the unbelievers around us. John said in his first epistle, **DO NOT MARVEL [BE SURPRISED], MY BRETHREN IF THE WORLD HATES YOU**. Jesus said in Luke 21:17 **AND YOU WILL BE HATED BY ALL FOR MY NAME'S SAKE**. Peter writes in his first epistle 4:13ff **DEAR FRIENDS, DO NOT BE SURPRISED AT THE PAINFUL TRIAL YOU ARE SUFFERING, AS THOUGH SOMETHING STRANGE WERE HAPPENING TO YOU. BUT REJOICE THAT YOU PARTICIPATE IN THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST, SO THAT YOU MAY BE OVERJOYED WHEN HIS GLORY IS REVEALED. IF YOU ARE INSULTED BECAUSE OF THE NAME OF CHRIST, YOU ARE BLESSED, FOR THE SPIRIT OF GLORY AND OF GOD RESTS ON YOU...IF YOU SUFFER AS A CHRISTIAN, DO NOT BE ASHAMED, BUT PRAISE GOD THAT YOU BEAR THAT NAME**. Paul said to the churches of Asia Minor and it applies to us today, **WE MUST THROUGH MANY TRIBULATIONS ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD**.

Let's read vs. 5, 11, 12 **WHICH IS MANIFEST EVIDENCE OF THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT OF GOD, THAT YOU MAY BE COUNTED WORTHY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD, FOR WHICH YOU ALSO SUFFER;...THEREFORE WE ALSO PRAY ALWAYS FOR YOU THAT OUR GOD WOULD COUNT YOU WORTHY OF THIS CALLING, AND FULFILL ALL THE GOOD PLEASURE OF HIS GOODNESS AND THE WORK OF FAITH WITH POWER, THAT THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST MAY BE GLORIFIED IN YOU, AND YOU IN HIM, ACCORDING TO THE GRACE OF OUR GOD AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST**.

III: Paul also thanks God that He has made His people worthy.

Didn't we earlier say "we have done nothing to deserve anything from God?" How can Paul thank God and say that we **MAY BE COUNTED WORTHY OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD?**

Paul does not want to leave the impression that Christians remain faithful as a result of their own intentions and abilities. God alone does all this. That is why he wrote **THIS IS MANIFEST EVIDENCE OF THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT OF GOD**. God's righteous judgment is this: **THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH...THE SOUL THAT SINS IT SHALL DIE...FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD**. But His righteous judgment also consists of this: **THE GIFT OF GOD IS ETERNAL LIFE IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD...BEING JUSTIFIED FREELY BY HIS GRACE THROUGH THE REDEMPTION THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS...FOR HE MADE HIM [CHRIST] WHO KNEW NO SIN TO BE SIN FOR US, THAT WE MIGHT BECOME THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN HIM**.

What makes us worthy of the kingdom of God? Nothing but the blood of Jesus with which He has paid for our sins. Nothing but faith in that sacrifice which has paid for our sins. We could turn that question around and ask, "what does it mean to be worthy of the kingdom of God?" It doesn't mean we deserve to be saved, but that because of Jesus' perfect life and death for us we sinners are given the kingdom of heaven as a gift. We inherit it, as repentant children of God, by faith in Christ Jesus. In that way, through Jesus we are **COUNTED WORTHY OF OUR CALLING and of HIS KINGDOM**.

Paul's prayer is that God would keep these Thessalonians faithful to their Savior until death, using His Word to fulfill every good purpose and every act prompted by faith in Jesus.

What a wonderful pastor's prayer for God's people! Paul says **WE PRAY ALWAYS FOR YOU**. We can't help but admire Paul's active prayer life for the believers. May we be immersed in actively praying for each other both here at Peace Thru Christ and for believers around the world.

Paul's purpose for these prayers is that Christ's name would be glorified through the believers and that they in turn would be glorified in Jesus with the crown of life on Judgment Day. Only God's grace can accomplish that. We Christians confess Christ here on earth to others. When Jesus comes at the end of the world He promises He will in turn confess us and every believer before His Father in heaven. May that also be our prayer for each other.

Amen.