

A Passion for People (1 Thessalonians 3:9-13)

More than many others, Paul's prayer in this passage show his deep concern for his readers. We see this not only in the prayer itself, but in the verses leading up to the prayer.

Paul's Prayer: A Product of Passion for People

1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:8 (ESV)

¹⁷ But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy. ¹ Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain. ⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

1. Paul's prayer arises out of his intense longing to be with the Thessalonians.

- **What is Paul's history with the Thessalonians?** (Acts 17:1-9)
- He is torn away from them after just a short time, but looks back longingly, desiring to be with them and help them along in their new faith. Carson writes: "Here is a Christian so committed to the well-being of other Christians, especially new Christians, that he is simply burning up inside to be with them, to help them, to nurture them, to feed them, to stabilize them, to establish an adequate foundation for them."
- He is not simply committed to ideas or books or distant ministry, but he is committed to people and to seeing them grow and develop as Christians.

2. Paul's prayer arises out of passionate affection that seeks the good of others - not their praise, gratitude, acceptance, and still less some sense of professional self-fulfillment.

- How much ministry exists for the purpose of self-fulfillment rather than the service of others? Carson writes: "In any Christian view of life, self-fulfillment must never be permitted to become the controlling issue. The issue is service, the service of real people. The question is, how can I be most useful?, Not, how can I feel most useful? The goal is, how can I best glorify God by serving his people?, Not, how can

I feel most comfortable and appreciated while engaging in some acceptable form of Christian ministry? The assumption is, how shall the Christian service to which God calls me be enhanced by my daily death, by my principled commitment to take up my cross daily and die?, Not, how shall the form of service I am considering enhance my career? This is not to deny that Christians may derive joy from work honestly offered to God, whether that work is vocational ministry or research into the properties of quarks. But it is one thing to find joy in the work to which we have been called, and another to make enjoying the goal of life, the fundamental criterion that controls our choices. It is one thing to weigh a Christian leader's evaluation of our gifts, and another so to focus on our perception of our gifts that self-worship has crept in through the back door. It is one thing to think of people as a live audience that will appreciate our displays of homiletical prowess, and another that passionately shapes each sermon to convey the truth to God's people for their good." (83)

- Paul's example to us is of one who has a deep affection for these people, and is not serving them to feed his ego - he is in agony out of concern to be with them for their good.
- **How does this mirror what Christ did for us?**

3. Paul's prayer springs from unaffected delight at reports of the Thessalonians' faith, love, perseverance, and strength.

- Paul's time of separation from the Thessalonians led to concerns about their spiritual well-being. The report from Timothy regarding their faith brought him great joy and is the well from which his prayer springs. Unlike some who seem to only find bad news interesting, Paul revels in the reports of good news, or growth in the ones he loves. This trait Paul shares with John, who wrote in 3 John 3-4: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.:"

To sum up: Paul's prayer is driven by a passion for people. "If we are to improve our praying, we must strengthen our loving...Superficially fervent prayers devoid of such love are finally phony, hollow, shallow."

Paul's Prayer: A Continuing Passion for People

1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 (ESV)

⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Keeping with the theme in the chapter, this prayer has been broken up around the question of how the people of God feature in this prayer.

1. Paul prays with rich thankfulness for the people of God.

We have already discussed the priority Paul gives to being thankful to God for the work he is doing in the lives of believers. In this prayer, there are two distinctive features worth pointing out:

a) **Although the thanksgiving is not addressed to the Thessalonians, but rather to God for the Thessalonians, nevertheless it is cast in such a way as to encourage them.**

- Carson contrasts Paul's approach with two alternatives:
 - First, the backslapping flatterer who compliments everyone. Whether they're hoping to win compliments in return or win a popularity contest, after while doubt arises as to their discernment. Regardless of the quality of work, everyone gets a gold star.
 - Second, the sober, theologically precise, who recognize that all praise ultimately belongs to God and rarely thank you for anything. They don't want the praise to go to your head and think you should be content with God's "Well done!" on the last day.
- Paul's approach differs from both of these. He gives encouragement to Christians by telling them that he thanks God for his grace in their lives. He writes: "there is simply no way that these believers can thoughtfully listen to what Paul says and then smugly pat themselves on the back: God, and God alone, is to be praised for the signs of grace in their lives. Yet nonetheless they cannot help but feel encouraged to learn that the apostle himself has observed God's work in their lives and rejoices because of it." (87)

- How do we avoid the danger of hypocrisy here?

- We need a prayer life that thanks God for the people of God, and then tells the people of God what we thank God for. **What would the impact of this be on our churches?**

- Example in corporate worship, applause vs. Amen

b) **Paul's thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians is in some measure Paul's thanks to God for his own greatest sources of joy.**

- Is Paul's expression of joy a narcissistic thankfulness that his own joy is fulfilled? Why not?

- His joy is "in the presence of our God," much like the angels in heaven who experience great joy when one sinner repents. In other words, this is a joy shared with God in the type of thing that makes him joyful.
- Indeed, it is Paul's passionate devotion to this people that leads him to be so joyful.

2. Paul prays that he might be able to strengthen these believers.

Paul offers himself up in prayer as a servant to the Thessalonians. Three details in this request are worth extra attention:

a) **Paul claims he utters this petition "day and night."**

- This is something Paul says regularly (1 Cor. 1:4; Phil 1:4; etc). **What does this mean?**

- Carson: "He means that, in his regular times for prayer, day and night, he remembers the Thessalonians before the Lord. There are two lessons to learn: the importance of frequent, regular prayer times, and the importance of remembering the right things when we set out to pray." (90)

b) The burden of Paul's constant prayer is that he might see them again so as to supply what is lacking in their faith.

What might be lacking in their faith and why?

- The short amount of time Paul was with them did not give him the chance to establish them in the Scriptures.
- He prays, not only that God would establish them, but that he would be the one who was able to do it. His prayer is simultaneously an intercessory prayer and a prayer for his own service.
- This ought to be our mindset as well. Whatever ministry we may or may not be engaged in, there is always an opportunity for us to do something. We shouldn't do these things without prayer, but praying like Paul should impel us to do them.

c) Paul is aware of factors that might prevent him from serving as he would like.

- There are hinderances to his coming to them, which Paul knows (however may be) it to be Satan.
- This doesn't discourage him but leads him to pray more fervently for God to intervene and make a way.

3. Paul prays that there might be an overflow of love among these believers.

We spoke to this previously, but it is a vital part of what makes the church the church. Paul recognizes this and makes it central to his prayer. Even more than his concern for their growth in any other area is his concern that their love abounds more and more.

4. Paul prays that these believers will be so strengthened in heart that they will be blameless and holy when the end comes.

- In biblical thought, the heart is not under the center of will and understanding, but also the place where hidden motives lie - if our hearts are strengthened in allegiance to Jesus Christ, then we won't need to fear what will be revealed when the Lord comes.
- **Carson: "When we pray for people, we must do so knowing that these people, and we ourselves, are inevitably moving towards the last day. When we pray with eternities values in view, we are driven to pray for people, because people like you and me are the ones must give account to God on the last day."**

What is Paul's source of joy according to this passage? What is yours? How is our source of joy likely to be related to what we pray for?

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prayer.

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1. Paul's prayer arises out of _____.

- **What is Paul's history with the Thessalonians?** (Acts 17:1-9)

2. Paul's prayer arises out _____.

- **How does this mirror what Christ did for us?**

3. Paul's prayer springs from _____.

Paul's Prayer: A Continuing Passion for People
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Keeping with the theme in the chapter, this prayer has been broken up around the question of how the people of God feature in this prayer.

1. Paul prays with _____.

In this prayer, there are two distinctive features worth pointing out:

- a) **Although the thanksgiving is not addressed to the Thessalonians, but rather to God for the Thessalonians, nevertheless it is** _____

_____.

- b) **Paul's thanks to God for the Thessalonian Christians is in some measure**

_____.

2. Paul prays that he might _____.

Three details in this request are worth extra attention:

a) Paul claims _____

- This is something Paul says regularly (1 Cor. 1:4; Phil 1:4; etc). **What does this mean?**

b) The burden of Paul's constant prayer _____
_____.

c) Paul is aware of _____.

3. Paul prays that there might be _____.

4. Paul prays that these believers will be so _____ that they will be _____.

What is Paul's source of joy according to this passage? What is yours? How is our source of joy likely to be related to what we pray for?