

Dear friends in our Savior,

As God's people, we like to begin things with prayer. We know that nothing succeeds without God's blessings. So we begin with prayer to ask for God's blessings on whatever it is that we are going to do. Before we eat, we offer a prayer of thanks to God for the food he provided and ask him to bless us physically through it. We pray at the start of Bible Class and ask God to open our hearts and minds to understand his word and for His Holy Spirit to help us hold tightly to the truths professed there. We start meetings with prayer to ask God to guide our discussions and decisions that they might be for the benefit and advancement of his kingdom. We begin things with prayer to recognize God's hand in any blessings that occur and to guide and direct us in our endeavors.

Today we begin a new year. No, it's not January 1. But it is the beginning of a new church year. As we set out into this new church year before us, we begin with the season of Advent, which reminds us that we are waiting patiently, quietly, and expectantly for the coming and return of our Lord Jesus. As we ponder that coming of Jesus, Scripture reminds us of the challenges and difficulties that we will face before our Savior returns. The devil is working hard, bringing bitter attacks against the people of God and throwing whatever obstacle he can to sway us from our faith in Jesus. It is fitting that we begin this church year with a prayer. Paul offers that Advent prayer for us in our text, asking for God's blessings, guidance and strength as we continue to wait for the coming of our Lord. Let's study that prayer and be encouraged as God works to strengthen us as we wait for his return. Today, we offer **An Advent Prayer**.

I Thessalonians 3:9-13 *How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

The first thing that Paul prays for is that God would deepen our faith. This was especially important for the Thessalonians. Paul had left these Christians because of some very intense persecution after being there only three weeks. These were very new Christians who were very young in the faith. Paul was concerned for them. It was like throwing the lamb to the wolves. He was concerned that in the face of such tough persecution that they would give up their new faith in Jesus. Because Paul was too big of a figure and would bring even more intense persecution, he sent Timothy to encourage and strengthen them as Paul continued on to minister in other cities. But Paul was anxiously waiting to hear a report of how this young, small band of Christians had fared verses the persecution.

Paul's joy that he speaks of at the beginning of our text came from Timothy's report after he had visited Thessalonica that these Christians were standing firm in their faith. They didn't retreat an inch in the face of Satan's onslaught by the Jews. They didn't choose the easier path of giving up their faith and going back to their former lives. Paul's joy was so great that he confessed in our text that words failed him when he tried to express his thanks to God for keeping these Christians in the faith.

But Paul was not content to rest secure on past successes. He knew that the devil would not stop his attacks on these Christians just because they had stood firm against him. In fact, he knew that the devil would only intensify his attacks to strip these Christians of their faith. Paul also knew that there were places in their faith that were lacking. Three weeks is not enough time to teach the entire counsel of God. They needed more instruction. They needed to be strengthened in their faith and devotion to Christ. They needed to be strengthened to hold tightly by the Holy Spirit to the eternal life that they had been given in Jesus. Paul states the goal of their faith in our text—that they might be found blameless and holy at the coming of the Lord Jesus. The way to strengthen them and supply what was lacking in their faith so they could meet this goal was by sharing God's word with them. The tools that the Holy Spirit uses to create and strengthen faith are the Means of Grace—the Gospel or good news about Jesus shared through the word and the sacraments. Paul prayed that God would open the path so that he could come to them and by sharing this word with them deepen their faith to continue to hold firm in the face of temptations. The Thessalonians could never stand up to this persecution on their own. The strength that they needed could come only from God. And it is through his Gospel alone that God offers what his people need to deepen their faith.

Our prayer also is that God deepen our faith as we wait patiently for his coming. We ask this not because the study of God's Word will make us better able to answer Bible trivia questions, but we ask this so that God can work through that Word to strengthen our hold on heaven. Our goal in faith and life is the same as these Christians in Thessalonica. Whether you are new in the faith or have known Jesus your entire life and are long in the faith, our goal is the same: to be found blameless and holy in the presence of Jesus when he returns. Satan uses the same high intensity attacks on us to try to make sure this doesn't happen. If the Thessalonian Christians wanted to continue in their faith, they would need God to strengthen and deepen their faith. We are no different.

We like to pretend that we are exempt from the bitter attacks of the devil. But the reality is, the battle that we fight is against Satan and his evil angels. We are kidding ourselves if we think he isn't working against us at all times toward this purpose. He can get people to do his dirty work without even knowing it. He uses whatever roadblocks he can throw in our way by whatever people he can use for his purposes. We think of him using the Apostle Peter to try to dissuade Jesus from his path of suffering in Jerusalem. Jesus actually had to say to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter was well intentioned. He thought he was speaking to help Jesus. But Satan used this to try to lead Jesus away from the path of suffering to which he was destined for our eternal salvation. If he did that to Jesus, we can be sure that he does the same thing to us.

The way to combat this work of the devil is with the armor of God and the sword of the Spirit. Our power to stand firm and fight this battle comes only from the Holy Spirit. We note that awesome power of the Spirit to keep these very young Christians in their faith despite everything Satan was throwing their way. That same power is ours, but to have it, we have to be in the Spirit. This is something you have heard from me over and over again and you will continue to hear from me—it is essential that we are in the Word. This is the importance of continued Bible Study, both those offered at church with fellow Christians and our own individual study of God's Word at home. We can get into that syndrome that says, "I know all that I need. I've got the basics. I'm OK. I'm not new to the faith. I've done fine this long. I'll be fine." We fail to heed the Apostle Peter's plead to continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. If we think of God's word as spiritual food for our soul, how strong we would be if we only had one meal per week?

We need the strength that God offers through his word. So our prayer is this: deepen our faith so that we stand firm and are found blameless and holy in the presence of Jesus when he comes to this earth. Then we let God answer this prayer as we dig into his word.

The second part of the Advent prayer that Paul offers for us is: Increase our love for one another. The Thessalonians had a unique opportunity to experience the bond that held them together—they were united by faith in Jesus. The persecution that they endured on his behalf drew them closer together. God had brought these believers into a new spiritual family by faith. They worked together for the good of the whole family. They realized that they were all they had. They were a family in which strengthening, comforting and encouraging each other from God's Word was a daily experience. Paul's prayer wasn't that they love each other. They already were doing that. His prayer was that their love for each other increase and overflow!

A Christian is not just someone who knows the Bible well, but is someone who puts that knowledge and faith into action by loving others as Christ loved the world. Especially is that love to show itself within the family of believers. By definition, you can't be part of a church and remain detached from everyone else. We don't have the luxury of being individual and uncaring. Through baptism, we have been brought into the family of God. We are united together by a common bond of faith in Jesus. We are co-heirs of salvation with Christ, shares in His eternal inheritance. We have the same goal to be found blameless and holy in Jesus and we are all waiting patiently for the same thing.

Yet how easy it can be to forget this. It is easy within a gathering of believers to see the flaws in each other rather than the blessings. Hard and difficult times can make us selfish, self-centered people. When hard times come, we can be very harsh in our speech and lacking in love. We critique others rather than love them. We judge rather than encourage. We find flaws rather than celebrate each other as fellow believers. We complain about what others do or don't do rather than rejoice in what God has done in them and through them.

How thankful we are for Christ's love for us, which covers these unloving actions as well as all our sins. What a wonderful thing Jesus has done in each one of us. He has turned our hearts from those of stone unbelief to those of faith. His love willingly took our faults and flaws upon himself, even when we were his enemies. We think of the Christmas season that is upon us as the gift giving season. We are reminded of the greatest gift that we were given when Christ exchanged our sins and gave to us his perfection.

Mindful of this love shown to each of us by Jesus, why not say a prayer of thanks that God has given us so many faithful Christians and in spite of our sinful natures, God has brought us all here together to worship him today? It's a miracle that God could change us from being selfish to caring about each other's pain and loss. All of us are here by a miracle of the Holy Spirit. Why not thank God that even one fellow Christian calls on us in our trouble? Instead of being angry with people for not recognizing your works of faith, why not thank God that you can perform them at all? Instead of accusing and attacking others when you see a fault or a flaw, why not step in to help them and support them in their weaknesses? Love doesn't mean that we will always agree or see eye to eye on things. But love means that when we have difficulties and differences, we work together calmly and respectfully to come to an agreeable solution. It means that we trust each other. It means that we look out for each other, care for each other and go out of our way to help each other. Our prayer is not just that we love each other, but that our love for each other increases and overflows.

As you wait patiently and quietly for the return of Jesus on the last day and as you prepare your hearts to meet him again at the manger on Christmas and to be blameless and holy on the last day, let this be your Advent prayer: Lord, deepen my faith and increase my love. Amen.