

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

A Pastoral Prayer

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

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Let's open our Bibles to 1 Thessalonians chapter 3 and we're looking at the final paragraph in this chapter, and the final verses of Paul's lengthy introduction in this epistle. I guess the only person who has longer introductions than I do is the Apostle Paul. And the main message of his letter comes in chapters 4 and 5 and you get the feeling that by the time he gets into the main subject in 4 and 5 he is in such a hurry that he spits it out as rapidly as any text of Scripture, culminating it at the end of chapter 5 with a statement about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ being with you. So it may well have been from a human viewpoint, he had been laboring a bit through his introduction to get to what he wanted to say and when he finally said it, he said it in a staccato form as it came rolling out under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

But primarily in the first three chapters of this epistle, he is concerned to talk about his attitude and his ministry toward the Thessalonians. It is apparent in the background of the book that he is being criticized to them and he was not there to defend himself. And so as he writes these first three chapters, he really does speak regarding the integrity of his own ministry.

He is glad in chapter 1 for their true faith. He is glad in chapter 1 for the fact that they are moving ahead in their spiritual development. And then in chapters 2 and 3 he is more concerned to speak about the integrity of his own ministry in their midst.

He wraps up this section in the final three verses of chapter 3, and, in fact, he wraps it up with a prayer. This is not unlike the Apostle Paul who rather frequently in his epistles he will break in the midst of his argument or at the conclusion of a special point and launch into a prayer. And this is precisely what he does here.

This then we will call "A Pastoral Prayer." We've just had three chapters really of his pastor's heart and now there is a pastoral prayer. Spurgeon once wrote, "I take it that a minister is always praying. He is not always in the act of prayer, but he lives in the spirit of it." Certainly Paul was a model of that because even though the act of prayer itself does not occur until verses 11 to 13, it is obvious that he was in the spirit of it and this is sort of the spirit of prayer bursting out in a formal petition. "If you are a genuine minister of God," Spurgeon once wrote, "you will stand as a priest before the Lord, spiritually wearing the ephod and the breastplate where on you bear the names of your children, pleading for them within the veil."

The true pastor and the true elder and the true shepherd prays for his people. The question is, when the pastor prays, what is the nature of his prayer? For what does Paul pray? For what do I pray when I pray for you?

The answer comes in verses 11 to 13, let's look and see. "Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you. And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all men, just as we also do for you so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints."

Characteristically then, the Apostle Paul closing out this one section has a moment for a brief prayer and it tells us that his heart is in his epistles, that he's not a cold mechanic and he's not simply writing down what is dictated to him by the Spirit of God passing through his mind to his pen but not touching his heart. Quite the contrary. He cannot leave the theme without unburdening his pastor's heart and so the prayer, expressing his deepest desire for his people's welfare and his highest desire for God's will.

He submits these prayers in a very interesting way. Normally when you pray you pray in the second person...You, speaking to God. But here he speaks in the third person, in the fact that he does not directly address God but he directly addresses the Thessalonians. He uses what in the Greek is called an optative mood which expresses a wish. You'll notice the word "may" is used in each of the three verses and that is the usage of that optative mood which is meant to express a wish.

This particular approach to prayer is not uncommon, it's not the normal one but it's not uncommon. In fact, in chapter 5 look at verse 23. He uses that same form again, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is really a prayer also, but again it is the prayer in the form of a wish directed at the people. In 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 we find him doing it again in verse 5. "And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ." Then again in verse 16, "Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance, the Lord be with you all. Amen." Does the same thing in Romans 15, he does it again in 1 Timothy chapter 1. You find a similar kind of wish prayer in Hebrews 13:20. So it is not an uncommon expression of prayer.

You say, "Well why does he do this?" Well, in a sense it shoots the prayer two ways. It is directed at the Thessalonians so that they might know that this is his desire for them, it is directed at God so that God might know that it is his desire for them. It sort of splits the prayer in to two-pronged approach and reveals the passion and the burden of his heart. It is what he truly wishes for them, it is what he truly prays that God would do in their midst.

By the way, there have been some interesting studies done on this form of prayer and in the early church it appears to have been a rather common practice to close a public sermon with a prayer in this form. Very often at the conclusion of sermons in the early church, the preacher might say, "May God grant you such and such and such and such and such and such." Rather than saying, "God, will You please grant them this..." the wish prayer is directed in both directions. And so this again, I say, is not uncommon but would not be the ordinary means of prayer. It is not even uncommon today for you to say to someone, "May God bless you," right? And when you say that, you are intending that as a prayer that God would do that but you are saying it to them as an expression of your affection for them and your encouragement in their life. So it was with Paul.

Now in this particular prayer which we shall call it and it is, what is it that Paul is praying for? What is a pastor's prayer? If we are to give ourselves continually to prayer in the ministry of the Word as Acts 6:4 says, what are we praying for? When I prayed for you, either in the spirit of prayer or in the very act of prayer itself, for what do I pray? For what does any pastor pray for his people?

Well, I believe Paul gives us a definitive model as an answer. Let's look at these verses together and note that. He says, first of all, that "I want our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord to answer this prayer." Now let me speak to that for just a moment.

The Apostle Paul is concerned about their spiritual growth, that is apparent. He is concerned that they grow spiritually in three areas...faith, love and hope. That is the great triad of supreme Christian virtues. "And now abides faith, hope and love," 1 Corinthians 13:3 says. That is the triad of Christian virtues.

Back in chapter 1 verse 3 he said, "I remember your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." In chapter 5 verse 8 he says, "You need to put on the breastplate of faith and love and as a helmet the hope of salvation." So in the beginning of the epistle and the end of the epistle, in the middle of the epistle he focuses on these three great Christian virtues. And, beloved, these are the three dimensions in which the pastor wants to see his people go. We pray for your spiritual growth in faith, in love and in hope.

But would you please notice that he directs this prayer specifically to our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord. This is a marvelous statement. And I want you to understand it because it gives to us a very important and foundational truth in understanding the trinity.

First of all, he jointly addresses God and Jesus. This is a prayer and he jointly addresses God and Jesus. He calls God Father, he calls Jesus Lord. That is an interesting juxtaposition and let me tell you what I mean. Everybody knows God is sovereign, everybody assumes Jesus to be more personal and so he switches those and says, "God, our Father," using a more personal relational

term, "and Jesus our Lord," emphasizing sovereignty. And by the usage of those terminologies he puts God the Father and Jesus our Lord on an equal level. He uses the pronoun "our" in both cases to emphasize the personal element, the personal relationship that he enjoys and the Thessalonians enjoy with both of them. God is our Father, and Jesus is our Lord. God, coming down to be intimate with us as a Father, Jesus going up to be sovereign Lord balances beautifully the address here.

Furthermore, it is more than a curiosity that the pronoun *autos* (Gk.) or himself, is in the singular. It is equally important that that singular pronoun is in the emphatic position, that is it's listed first in the Greek order so that in the Greek the sentence reads this way, "Now may Himself..." that's how it is in the Greek, "May Himself," that's a singular. The verb you'll notice, at the end of verse 11, "direct" is also singular. The Greek language has the capability of dealing with verbs in a much broader way than the English language. The English language we can do very little with our verbs compared to Greek. They can make great distinctions and here you have a singular verb and a singular pronoun. So it would read if you take out the names of God and Jesus, it would read this way, "Now may Himself direct our way to you." Now may Himself-comma, our God and Father and Jesus our Lord-comma, direct our way to you. Who is Himself then? God the Father and Jesus the Lord.

Now if you tried to use a singular pronoun to refer to two people in your English class, the teacher would mark it wrong. In the English language you would have to say, "Now may themselves, our God and Father and Jesus our Lord, direct our way to you," right? How is it that the Apostle can use a singular pronoun and a singular verb and the answer is because these two are one...they are one. Marvelous insight into the reality of the trinity, marvelous to know that you can direct your prayer to God, you can direct your prayer to Jesus, you can direct your prayer to both for the Father and the Son are one. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one."

Even apart from those technical considerations, it is obvious that the Father and the Son are joined together and Paul very comfortably assumes without explanation the deity of Jesus Christ and petitions Jesus equally to the Father to what is his heart's desire. The fact that the Apostle Paul offers his prayer to Jesus as well as to God shows us they are not distinguishable in terms of deity, sovereignty. Further, the fact that Paul petitions both God and Jesus indicates that both God the Father and Jesus the Lord are the controllers sovereignly of the ways of men. And so you have a rather majestic insight into the trinity. Also this indicates to us that we can pray to Jesus as well as to God, or both.

Now, what does the pastor seek from God, from Jesus the Lord? Request number one, your outline says, "A perfecting faith...a perfecting faith." The first thing that any shepherd, pastor, elder wants is to see the faith of his people grow...to see it perfected. Notice back at verse 11. "My request is that Himself," that is God and Jesus, two distinct personalities yet one in essence, "may direct our way to you." The word "direct" means correct, make right, make straight. It has the idea of laying out a path that is straight and all the obstacles are removed, all the stones and the rocks and whatever else so

that the path is smooth. Remember back in chapter 2, look at it, in verse 18, Paul says, "We wanted to come to you, I, Paul, more than once yet Satan thwarted us." He was having difficulty getting back to Thessalonica. Circumstances were preventing it. Satan was in charge of the circumstances at that point. So the Apostle here says, "I'm praying that God will thwart Satan." He knows that the only power that can overpower, hindering Satan, is the power of the Lord.

Would you notice please, and I hate to have to even defer to say this, but he goes to God to deal with Satan and never addresses Satan directly. That is never done in the Scripture. Whenever I hear someone praying and I heard someone recently doing that in a public service, praying and talking to Satan, I get a terribly uncomfortable feeling because that is not indicated in Scripture. We have nothing to say to him. All we need to say we say to the Lord and the Lord deals with him. And so he wants the Lord to smooth the path so he can get to Thessalonica.

Why? Why? Back up to verse 10 and we'll see why. The middle of the verse, "That we might see your face," and here it comes, "and complete what is lacking in your...what?...faith." The word "complete" means perfect. I want to come and help you have a perfecting, growing faith. That's what's on his heart. He is praying for their growth in faith. That, beloved, is the most basic area of spiritual life.

And I'm not going to stand here and tell you everything about faith because I know you know about that. But I do want you to understand something of what's underneath what he is saying. Most of us, frankly, walk by sight more often than we walk by faith. We make our judgments on the basis of circumstances. We make our judgments on the basis of feelings, intuition rather than the Word of God. We walk by sight and sense more than by faith. So we need to learn then to have a growing faith.

Now what does that mean? Now you have to listen carefully to understand this, I don't want you to be confused. Faith is the ability to trust the truth, okay? It's the ability to trust the truth. Now if I'm going to trust the truth, I have to...what?...I have to know the truth. And to bring someone's faith to perfection, completeness, wholeness, is not a mystical call, it's not a mystical thing. It doesn't involve calling people to a higher trust. It isn't believe harder...I've heard people say that...you need to believe harder, you're not believing hard enough. You have to believe more. You need to...you need to believe with more strength. It does not compute in my mind. What in the world are you talking about? What do you mean believe harder? I either believe or I don't believe. I can't believe harder. Yet you hear that.

No. That's not the idea. If I'm going to perfect your faith and if faith is trusting in the truth, then I need to expand your comprehension of...what?...of the truth. And as I expand your comprehension of the truth, your faith is enlarged because now you can live your life in trust on a larger foundation of truth. So when Paul says I want to come back and perfect your faith, he doesn't mean I want to come back

and lead you into some ecstasy where you can believe harder the little bit you know. He says I want to come back and give you more truth so your faith is enlarged to encompass that truth. That's the issue. And herein is the mandate to teach the Word. If we are to live by faith and faith means believing God, the more I know about God the more I believe, right? The more I believe the more I have capacity to live on that belief.

And this, of course, is a glaring disastrous weakness in churches today. You have ecstatic experiential churches where they're trying to get people to believe harder. On the other hand, you have churches who don't teach the Word of God so people are believing but they're believing the very little that they know. And they can't enlarge their faith because your faith can't get any broader than your knowledge. I cannot trust what I don't know, right? How can I bank my life on what I don't know? Only an idiot would do that.

To call people to a greater and greater faith which is not sustained by a greater and greater knowledge is foolish because you're asking them to trust what they don't know. And so Paul is saying, "If I'm going to build your faith, I'm going to have to build the base of knowledge. And if I'm going to build you a base of knowledge, I've got to get back to you people because I've got to teach you some more."

That's, of course, the goal of the ministry that we have here and have had for all these years. People say, "Oh, all MacArthur does is teach." I preached recently in a large conference and I just taught the Word. In fact, I preached the sermon at that conference that I was prepared to preach here on the Sunday night, out of 2 Peter 1:3 and 4. When I got done, the man who was the moderator stood up before the whole congregation and said, "Do you give that kind of stuff to your people every week?" And I said, "Well, that's my...that was my Sunday sermon." To which he replied, "You must have cast-iron saints."

You see, most...that is foreign to most people to systematically delineate truth because that's just not what most preachers do. But that's the only way that I can enlarge your faith is to enlarge what you can believe in, not the degree to which you can believe. You either believe or you don't believe. And when the man said, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief," he wasn't saying, "Help me believe harder," he was saying, "Help me know what I don't know, help me know more so I can believe. I believe what I know but I can't believe what I don't know, so give me the rest." That's why the mandate of the church is to feed the Word of God to people so you enlarge the foundation of their faith. Greater and greater trust in the Lord is dependent on greater and greater understanding of who he is. His Word.

And then what happens is as you get this larger and larger base of truth, God begins to show you in your life that truth at work. And as you combine the biblical confidence with the personal experience of God working through that truth, then your faith really grows. For example, the Bible says, "God answers prayer." I believe it. Add to that the fact that I prayed and God answered it and I really

believe it, right? So my experience of God at work in my life, consistent with the revelation of God as a foundation is what makes my faith grow. Faith lays hold of the truth of God, of Christ and builds its life on it.

So Paul wanted to perfect their faith with the Word of God. That's why he wants to be there. Perfecting their faith was simply feeding them the Word so they could grow on it. First Peter 2, isn't that what it says? "As babes desire the pure milk of the Word that you may grow by it..." What do you mean grow? What grows? Does my new nature grow? No, it's perfect. What grows? My faith, first of all, my trust in truth and the more I trust truth the more I obey truth, right? And so obedience flows out of that.

The pastor's prayer then is that the faith of his people might be a growing, perfecting faith. I want your faith to grow. I want your faith to be complete, to be perfected. I want your faith getting larger and larger and larger and I know that is in direct proportion to what you know is true. And the only way that you can know something is true is to be taught the truth of it.

That's also, if I can do what Paul did and sort of speak to my own ministry for a moment, that is why when I teach you the Bible I'm not content to just pontificate and give you answers, but I want to take you through a process so that you can understand why this means this. Why? Because that increases your confidence in that. I could stand here without any Bible verses and say...All right, folks, here are five things that I want you to know...they're all true. And give them, all five to you and say, "Now go home and just know they're true." And you might say, "How do I know these are true?" You've got to be like the noble Bereans who searched the Scriptures to see if they're true. So what I try to do with you is take you on the search yourself with me so that when we're done, we know what's true. Now we can trust truth. And as we trust in truth, our faith encompasses that truth.

As you study the Old Testament, for example, what do you learn? You learn two basic lessons. Lesson number one, God punishes sin, right? And you can trust that's a truth you can trust. You sin, punishment.

The second truth you learn is God blesses righteousness. You can trust that. Then there's another truth you learn, that in spite of the fact that God is holy and punishes sin and blesses righteousness, He's also gracious and forgives the sinner. That's another truth you can trust. You see, when you go through the Old Testament, all the chronicle of redemptive history shows you that. God punishes sin, blesses righteousness and shows grace to sinners.

Another truth the Old Testament teaches is that there must be a sacrifice for sin to make that grace and forgiveness available. And you see the record of that through the whole Old Testament, culminating in Jesus Christ. And along the way God keeps revealing His character and there are more and more things about Him that are true, more and more principles of life and conduct. And as

you accumulate all of this, that becomes the foundation which you believe. And he wanted to enlarge the faith of his people.

My heart grieves for churches where all they ever hear is an evangelistic sermon, all they ever hear is a sermonette for Christianettes. Or all they ever hear is some psychological ditty, a self-help kind of thing because they never enlarge the foundation of truth to trust in. And so their faith doesn't grow.

The Christian life is a life of faith, but that isn't mystical. It's a result of who we know and what we know to be true. Not a life of ecstasy, not a life of mystery, fantasy, lived in the clouds in outer space, never touching reality, not at all. The doctrine, the precepts, the principles, the promises of Scripture are the windows through which we look out of our world house and see God and see Christ. And so that's the pastor's prayer...a growing faith, perfecting faith.

Now how do we know if our faith is growing? Huh? How do I know if my faith is growing? Let me give you a little list of things, just quickly. Number one, my knowledge of the Word of God is growing...my knowledge of the Word of God is growing and if it is, my faith is growing. Two, I find a greater confidence in God. Three, I have a higher trust in His sovereignty. Four, there is a definite increase in obedience. As I apprehend more truth and trust more truth, I live more truth...that's obedience. Here's another one, I find joy in my trials. What does that mean? That means I have a large faith. Why? See, I know that my trial produces perfection. Since I trust that truth, I have the faith to go through that trial joyously, right? See, as I know the truth and trust the truth, I find a growing faith. Those are the things that indicate your faith is growing. You know more of the Word. You have a greater confidence in God. You trust in His sovereignty. There's an increase in obedience. You have joy in your trials. That's proof that the foundation is being enlarged. You're trusting in that foundation. That's a growing faith.

You know the principle that says, "God will never leave me or forsake me." Right? I believe that principle. So in the midst of everything I have confidence in my God. You know the principle that God is sovereign, He works everything according to His holy purpose, all things work together for good to them that love God, are called according to His purpose. I trust in His sovereignty, no matter what happens, because I believe that, my faith encompasses that truth and I have a great faith at that point. I know full well that God has called me to obedience. I believe in His standards. I respond to His standards by believing in them and doing them. That's evidence of my enlarged faith.

And as I said, when I go through trials, I know the Scripture promises me joy in that, perfection through that, God's glory because of it and so I accept the trial and faith embraces that. That's the whole point.

So the pastoral prayer is for a perfected faith, a foundation of all Christian living. Now the next question that comes to my mind, obviously, is did God grant this prayer? Did He answer it? Did He

answer this? Well, look at the second epistle of Thessalonians. A few months later Paul wrote them again and look at verse 3 of chapter 1. "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as it is only fitting because your faith is...what?...greatly enlarged." And you can go back now to our text.

Hey, it happened. Somebody must have gotten to them and Paul didn't yet. Five years later God answered his prayer, approximately. He visited Macedonia and it's very likely that at the time he visited Thessalonica. That's indicated to us by the record of Acts 19 and 20 and also by some of his other comments, 1 Corinthians 16:5; 2 Corinthians 2:13; 1 Timothy 1:3. When he got back to Macedonia, surely he went through Thessalonica. But their faith was growing. His prayer was being answered. Not only through his instrumentation some years down the road, but even in a few months through the instrumentation of others.

What then is the second request of the pastor's prayer? Not only a perfecting faith but a prospering love, verse 12. Flowing out of true and growing faith is love and he says, "And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another and for all men, just as we also do for you." The word "and" here could be adversative, could be translated "but." In that sense it would mean whether we come to you or not, in either case, may the Lord cause you. Please remember, he's always depended on the Lord. He prays to the Lord. He knows that as spiritual birth is dependent on God, spiritual growth is dependent on God. As justification is a work of God, sanctification is the work of God. So his prayer is that the Lord, and that, of course, refers to Jesus who is called the Lord in verse 11 and also in verse 13, "May the Lord Jesus cause you to increase and abound in love." Now both of these verbs "increase and abound" mean essentially the same thing. If you want to stretch them out you could say he's saying, "May you have an increasing, overflowing kind of love." The word "love" is agape, a word that means the strongest, highest, purest, noblest love, the love that sacrifices to meet the needs of others.

Now back in chapter 1, remember verse 3, he said, "I already know you have demonstrated a work of faith and a labor of love." Love is there, faith is there, and what I want to see is the increase and the abounding of that faith. And I want to see now the increase and the abounding of that love.

Down in chapter 4 and verse 9 he says, "Nobody needs to teach you how to love because God teaches you that." So I know you have the faith, it needs to grow. I know you have the love that God has taught you, it needs to grow. Same kind of thing he said to the Philippian believers, Philippians 1:9, "I pray your love may abound still more and more." Paul always was praying for the growth of those he loved. Spiritual growth was really his burden and his passion.

In fact, if you go back in to Romans chapter 1 and verse 11. He's praying for their spiritual growth. And you go to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 9 and 10 and 11, he's praying for their spiritual growth. And you go to 2 Corinthians 1:15 and 16 he's praying for their spiritual growth. You come in to Ephesians chapter 4 and he's telling the Ephesians that he is given to the church along with the other

prophets and pastor teachers and evangelists for the perfecting of the saints that they grow up into the image of Christ. Epaphras was praying as Paul notes at the end of Colossians that Christians would become perfect and complete in all the will of God. This whole thing of spiritual growth was on his heart. And one major dimension was this growth in love.

Now let me see if I can give you the scenario, okay? Kind of follow my thought here. Where you have an increased foundation of truth, you have an increased and enlarged faith. My faith then apprehends God and Christ. The more I know about God, the more I know about Christ, the more I believe, the more I trust, the closer I am drawn to God through Christ, right? Why? Because they're the object of my knowledge and the object of my faith. What happens out of that is I begin to love God, I begin to love Christ. I begin to love them more and more and more. And as I love God more with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, the natural fruit of that is to begin to love my neighbor as myself. The flow here is just marvelous as the Spirit of God unfolds it.

Love then becomes the evidence of growing faith. The more I trust God, the more God is the object of my life, the more I walk by faith and not by sight, the more I am then demonstrating my love for God, the more I am demonstrating love for God, the more that love overflows to those around me. It all begins with truth. Faith embraces that truth. It moves the limits of that truth and it embraces that truth and then as I know more about God my Savior, more about Jesus my Lord, as I trust Him more and as I love Him more, the spill over of that extends to others. As I grow in my faith I learn to trust God more perfectly. I learn to love Him more perfectly. And my heart moves toward Him. And as my love for God grows, my love for everybody else grows too. I become rooted and grounded in love. I experience its breath and length and height and depth and the very love of Christ that passes knowledge fills me with the fullness of God by which I love others. That's the flow.

And notice again in verse 12. "I want that love to increase and abound for one another," first of all, that's in the fellowship, the one another would be the Christian, the believer. And then he says, "For all men." That's an evangelistic love where we love the lost, we love those who persecute us. Remember back in Matthew 5:43 Jesus said, "Well, you know, you've heard it said, you shall love your neighbor as yourself and hate your enemy. I say, love your enemy." Jesus taught us to do good to those who hate us and despitefully use us and persecute us and even take our lives.

You say, "How can I love Christians the way I ought to?" By the way, John 13:34 and 35 He says, "We'll be known by our love for each other." How can I love Christians the way I ought to love them? How can I love them with that fervent love that Peter loves to write about, that ektenes, stretched out love, to the very limit? How can I love so sacrificially I'd lay down my life for my friend? How can I love like that? How can I love the lost, the ungodly, the persecutors, the haters, those who treat me wrongly? How can I love like that?

There's only one way, the foundation of truth is broad, faith embraces that truth, that faith gets stronger and stronger as it experiences God's consistency with the truth revealed and I far more in love with God. And the more I love God, the more the love of God in me spills over to love others. I cannot...I cannot love Christians in a vacuum. Do you understand what I'm saying? I can't jump in at step three and I can't love the lost just out of the blue. I love them because God loves them and I love the God who loves them. And I love the church because God loves the church and I love the God who loves the church. Paul says, "We've even given you an example," at the end of verse 12, "just as we also do for you." He says you ought to know our experience. We loved you when you were in the "all men" category. We loved you when you were lost. And we came and put our lives on the line sacrificially under persecution to get you the gospel. Why? Because the foundation of truth is wide and because we believe God and believing God we will put our lives on the line. That's how much we love Him, that's how much we trust Him. Because we love God so much, we love you. Because we know the heart of God goes to the lost, our hearts go to the lost because we love God. And so we came to you when you were the "all men" and we loved you.

And then when you believed and became believers, we loved you like the "one anothers" so you've experienced both from us. We loved you evangelistically and we loved you in the fellowship. The sacrificial love of Paul and Silas and Timothy to them before they were Christians brought them into the saving gospel. And when they believed, they loved them as fellow Christians. So he's saying, "Look, I lived the principles I'm teaching."

So what does Paul pray? What does any pastor pray? For the spiritual growth of his people. What does that mean? Growth in faith, growth in love. How do you know if your love is growing? Can you do a little inventory? Here's some ways you know.

You have less concern with self-comfort and personal fulfillment...less preoccupation with your problems...more time spent on other people and their needs...an increase in your sacrificial giving...greater sensitivity to the lostness of people...and instead of having a bitter heart of condemnation toward unsaved people, you have a heart of compassion.

Well, did God answer his prayer? He prayed this for the Thessalonians. Go to chapter 1 of 2 Thessalonians again. Verse 3 again, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as it is only fitting because your faith is greatly enlarged...listen to this...and the love of each one of you toward one another grows even greater." God answered his prayer. Remember now, it is God who gives life, it is God who makes it grow. God answered his prayer. Their faith was growing, their love was growing even though he couldn't get there to be with them. By the time he writes the second letter, he is encouraged that God is answering his prayer.

What's the third request? A perfecting faith, a prospering love and a purifying hope. Wish we had more time to spend on it but we don't. But very briefly, let me suggest this to you, verse 13, "So that," now that is a very important transition statement, it is the purpose of the whole prayer. This is the

culmination. You start with truth, it moves to faith, it moves to love, it moves to hope. If your foundation of truth is broad and your faith is great and your love is increasing and abounding, the result is that, "He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints."

I'm telling you, this verse is loaded. But it is the climax of the prayer. Faith, love and now hope..."So that." Why does he want you to have a strong foundation of truth? Why does he want you to have a strong faith? Why does he want you to have a strong love? In order that the Lord may establish your hearts.

What does it mean? Make them firm, stable, unmovable. Against what? Take a wild guess...one word and it starts with "T", temptation. Of course. "That you might be strong, firm, stable, unmovable in time of temptation."

Now notice, he wants to establish your hearts because it's the heart that is the seat of motive, purpose, desire, thought. Everything comes out of the heart. It's not what goes in a man that defiles him, it's what comes out of him, out of his heart. And the reason the Lord wants you to have a strong foundation of faith and love is so you have a firm, strong, immovable, resolute heart that can stand against temptation.

What does that produce? Unblamable in holiness...that's the next thought. He wants to establish your hearts so that you're unblamable in holiness. Your heart, desire, motive, purpose, thought pattern are so strong, so firm, you're unblamable. What a thought. He's calling us to blameless living, holy living, purity of life.

You say, "Well how does that relate to love?" Listen to this. Selfless love is the opposite of selfish lust. Got that? Selfless love is the opposite of selfish lust. Humble love, and there is no other kind, is the opposite of pride. That's the whole issue. If you're loving the way you ought to love, you're unselfish and humble. And if you're unselfish and humble, you will not fall to sins of pride and you will not fall to sins of lust which simply gratify your own flesh.

So he's simply saying, the heart that loves God fully and loves others completely will not crave the world or the things of the world. It will not be driven by the lust of the flesh because that would be selfish. It will not be driven by the lust of the eyes, for that would be selfish. It will not be driven by the pride of life, for that would be selfish. And a heart in which love dominates is selfless. Pride finds no access. The lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh finds no access.

Dr. Thomas who teaches in our seminary has written in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians this, "An overflow of love is the only route to holy conduct in which no fault can be found. For when love does not prevail, selfish motives inhibit ethical development by turning us toward ourselves and away from

God and blameless living." Bottom line, if you don't love others and lose yourselves in loving God and others, you turn on yourself and you love yourself and that turns you away from holy living.

So he says...Look, the third thing is that I want you to live a holy life, blameless in holiness. "Be ye holy for I am holy," Leviticus 19:2 says and Peter repeated it, 1 Peter 1:16. It means being separate from sin, morally righteous, pure, free from iniquity--uncleanness.

You say, "How does it relate to hope?" Follow this, verse 13, "Before our God and Father." In other words, I want you to be pure not in the eyes of men, they can't see the truth, right? I want you to be pure before our God, in the presence of our God who is THE judge. I want Him to see you as pure.

When? End of the verse, "At the coming of our Lord Jesus." At the coming of our Lord Jesus. Here's the hope, right? "He that has his hope in Him does...what?...purifies himself," 1 John 3 says. If I really know some day I'm going to face God and the day I'm going to face God is going to be the day of the coming of Jesus when He comes to reward His people, that's the Bema Seat Judgment, it's called, for the word bema means a reward stand...if there's coming a time when Jesus returns for us to take us to himself, and at that time we will be called to the judgment seat of Christ, according to 2 Corinthians 5, and there at the judgment seat of Christ our works will be scrutinized by the judge, then if I know that's coming that ought to motivate me now, right? So that becomes a purifying hope. That's what he's saying.

I want love to so establish your hearts that you live an unblamable holy life, knowing that some day before God the judge at the coming of Jesus when He takes us to the Bema Seat, time of rewards, you might be without blame.

You say, "Well that's a fairly, fairly extensive goal, Paul. Can't you cut it back a little?" Well how could you expect him to cut it back? You say, "But I'm not going to arrive there unblamable in holiness." Right, but that's still the goal, right? The goal is not lowered because of our inability. Paul says, what I want from you is what he said to the Corinthians, I want to present you to Christ as pure virgin, chaste. And if you look ahead and realize that some day you're going to stand before God at the coming of the Lord Jesus, when He comes with His rewards, and this is a very general verse, it's not identifying any specific event because the Rapture of the church is followed by the time of rewards. He'll describe the Rapture in the next chapter. But all he is saying is you need this hope that you're going to stand before the Lord for a time of rewards at the coming of Christ and if you have that hope in your heart and you know there's an accountability there, it will purify your life.

What does the pastor want in his prayer? He wants to pray that God in His great grace would give His people a purifying hope. But it extends beyond his own congregation. Look at the end of verse 13, "With all His saints." It doesn't say, I don't think it's best, there's lots of ways to translate this, a very difficult word order here, but some would say he means, "At the coming of our Lord Jesus with

all His saints." But I would take it that what the verse is saying is, connecting all His saints not with the Lord Jesus but with the Thessalonians.

In other words, my prayer is that God will establish your hearts unblamable in holiness with all his saints. That seems to be the one that fits best, although it is possible here that it simply means at the coming of our Lord Jesus when He gathers all His saints. But either way, it is Paul's desire for believers to be pure at the coming of the Lord Jesus in the future glory, and that should motivate us now.

What does God's pastor want from his people? A perfecting faith, a prospering love, a purifying hope. That's really it. That's what we pray for. And I'll tell you, folks, it's an unending prayer, conscious and unconscious, waking and sleeping. You go to bed with it on your lips, as it were, you wake up with it on your heart. Faith, hope, love...my prayer for you.

Our dear Father, indeed we do pray for this church even as Paul prayed, that they may complete what is lacking in their faith, that they may increase and abound in love for one another, that they may have a purifying hope, anticipating that they shall stand before God at the coming of the Lord Jesus and along with all the saints may they long to be unblamable in holiness at that event. Father, this I pray knowing full well that the power resides with You, thanking You for the model of the Apostle Paul, a testimony of those to whom he ministered. And, Father, believing that even as You granted the answer to his prayer, even enlarging the faith of those believers, enlarging their love and purifying them through hope, that You would do the same for us. And we'll thank You in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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