

*The Pauline
Summer School Of Prayer
- A Holy Framework For Prayer -*

*Bible Reading:
2 Thessalonians 1: 1-12*

PREPARED BY
KEN GEHRELS
PASTOR
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH OF OTTAWA
ONTARIO, CANADA

What is the biggest need facing the Church in North America?

- S sexual purity?
- S financial integrity?
- S better evangelism?
- S biblical study?

D.A. Carson in *A Call To Spiritual Reformation* suggests that by far the biggest need is in the area of prayer.

We need spiritual, persistent, biblically minded prayer.

Says Carson, "*We have learned to organize, build institutions, publish books, insert ourselves into the media, develop ministry strategies, and administer various programs. But we have forgotten how to pray.*"

One of the biggest curses, a noose around the soul of Western society, is the body / soul split that the Enlightenment brought. Ideas of Descartes and Kant were layered on top of the ancient ideas of Aristotle, which the Church had long since baptized.

Aristotle taught that we apprehend truth through the two channels of *reason* and *experience*. He completely discounted a third channel, which Plato did acknowledge - the level of the inner light, the sub-conscious, the imagination, inspiration. The outer senses - they became the extent of reality, all that truly mattered, for Aristotle, and eventually for the Christian Church.

Descartes and Kant taught a dualism; saying that there are two levels of reality - the physical and the spiritual. Daily life was tied very closely to the physical. Inner meditation and reflection are the realm of the spiritual. What really matters is the material; what you can apprehend with your senses. The spiritual..... well, it is nice, **but**.

As that **but** became cemented into Western Society it led to the "*Sunday Christian*" phenomenon. It is what is behind the paranoia in Canada today over allowing faith to have any impact on public policy - witness the lack of any spiritual depth or significance to the 9/11 memorial service.

Can you see how, with this poison flowing through our hearts and souls, prayer becomes a nice exercise for when one has time, or how it can be a religious curiosity, or perhaps even just a psychological tool to talk ourselves into feeling spiritual?

Can you see how all the power and urgency is removed? After all - what matters is the material, the physical. What matters is the agenda - and getting that accomplished. What matters are the programs, and rolling them out. What matters is the building, and keeping it maintained.

Prayer?

Nothing to show for it.

Nothing you can directly measure.

No check marks on a "to-do" sheet.

Churches in Africa and Asia have not been infected by this philosophical poison. And they look at us cross-eyed as they observe our prayerlessness. They can simply not comprehend that it could be so.

In their cultures there has been no discounting of the non-physical dimension. That is **as much** a part of reality as what you can touch and see.

They understand how critical it is to keep oneself firmly in contact with the untouchable and unseeable but **very real** presence of the Living God.

They understand the critical nature of prayer.

Is it a coincidence that while the Church is shriveling in the West, in Africa and Asia it is growing by leaps and bounds; that we are fast becoming the biggest mission field in the world?

This is not meant as a put-down.

It is the inheritance that has come our way.

It is, quite simply, the way things are.

It is what we have to face and deal with.

And so it is this summer that we'll take time to open the Word of God and consider the prayer life of Paul, missionary, theologian..... child of God.

We do it with the prayer that the Holy Spirit will take whatever is biblically faithful and useful and so apply it to our lives that our praying will be permanently transformed.

And so we consider the Word of God.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:11 Paul writes, "*to this we always pray for you....*"

Or, as another translation presents the Greek, "*With this in mind we constantly pray for you....*"

The prayer that Paul prays - which, by the way, Pastor Daryl will focus on next week - assuming he makes it back from the wedding in Peterborough that he's doing this weekend!.....

.....the prayer is built on the basis of what happens in v.1-10.

The opening verses of 2 Thessalonians 1 form a holy framework for prayer.

Tonight let's look at that framework.

Perhaps we can find some timber to use as a framework for our own prayer lives.

Two things in particular stand out as you read these opening verses:

1. Thankfulness for signs of God's grace
2. Confidence in God's completion of His promises

1. Thankfulness For Signs Of God's Grace

3 We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing.

4 Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

Thanksgiving is one of the solid timbers on which Paul constructs his extensive ministry of intercession.

Tell me - for what do you tend to give thanks?

Someone suggested that if we look at our prayers, and list the things we for which we say "thank you" most frequently, we'll find the things we value the most.

These verses show us what Pastor Paul valued.

He gives thanks for their faith - which is growing abundantly.

The Greek word refers to the growth of a plant becoming larger, stronger, more mature, bearing fruit.

That was happening to their faith - beginning as a mustard seed, growing into a large plant with branches that spread and gave shade. Bearing fruit.

Not satisfied by yesterday's successes, but stretching further upward to the Lord.

Paul yearns for that - in his own life, and in the life of others.

For that he gives thanks.

Paul also gives thanks for their love - which is increasing.

The Greek word here refers to spreading, being dispersed over a wide area. In John 7 Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will fill believers, refreshing them with rivers of living water, and then gushing that water out of them into the world beyond.

That's what Paul witnesses in the Thessalonian believers - gushing, lavish torrents of love refreshing others around them;

dispersed over a wide area.

Not just in the small, select, safe confines of a few people that are alike and likeable.

No - dispersed over a wide area.

Which is God's vision for His people:

rich and poor, educated and uneducated, disciplined and flighty, intense and carefree, extrovert and introvert.

The love of Jesus dispersed widely over them all.
 What a wonderful sign of the grace of the Heavenly Father at work
 A sure indicator of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And Father Paul is deeply grateful for it.

That faith and love,
 growing and spreading,
 and for which Paul is thankful
 causes Him to carry the gratitude beyond the privacy of his personal prayers and into the community.
 What he speaks to God, he also shares with others.
 Prayerful testimony is what that is:
 Considering the amazing stuff that God is doing among the Thessalonians, and using that as
 incentive and encouragement to keep praying, living and working in their own lives.
 That, too, is a form of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Particularly, so, if you truly accept and believe in the Presence of God.
 Do you?
 That God is all-present - with us, active, in *real* ways?
 Even right now?

Words that speak of His accomplishments become,
 by that very nature,
 prayer words.

A framework for prayer -
 For others
 Giving thanks for what the Lord is doing in them.
 For signs of grace in their lives.
 Let us build the structure of our prayers on these timbers.

2. Confidence In God's Completion Of His Promises

And, secondly,
 consider the confidence that Paul places in God's completion of His promises.

There is a basic assumption in Paul's thinking -
 real Christians will ultimately persevere.

It's what in Reformed Circles we have plucked up and stuck in the middle of our famous TULIP as the
 "P" - *perseverance of the saints*.
 And for that perseverance he gives thanks.

The Thessalonian Christians lived in anticipation of the full revealing of the Kingdom of God - when all of
 the Cosmos will be restored to the full rule of God; when all evil and pain will be removed.

They looked forward to that coming; and lived in anticipation of that coming - working for it, toward it.

And Paul prays, thankful for that.
 It is another timber that holds up the rest of his prayer life.
 Praying with one eye to the return of Christ.

A return that will bring
 S vindication for believers
 S eternal retribution, punishment for unbelievers

6 For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

7 and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels
8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.
9 These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,
10 when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.
The return will bring relief for believers.
And hell for those who insist on being spiritual rebels.

We do well to focus on that.

Not to get all wrapped around the axle of timelines - the how's and when's of Christ's return in all sorts of obscure and speculative theologies.

I get very tired about that sort of thing.

Instead - living with a keen, acute awareness that we live on the cusp of eternity. In the great scheme of things Jesus is coming back soon.

Very soon.

Get ready!

I think we have become so comfortable here in the West that we have lost some of the urgency of that.

Believers in Islamic or Communist nations haven't. They maintain a correct sense of urgency.

Believers here in Canada tend to get that urgency only when they're backed into a corner - when the darkness of tragedy clouds their life.

V.7 speaks of relief for the afflicted - When you are in the middle of a storm, what you want more than anything is for the pounding to end.

It is at this point that the prayer, "*Maranatha, come QUICKLY Lord Jesus*" becomes terribly poignant.

I've heard people say that praying for Christ to come back and reward believers is a pretty cheap, other-worldly sort of thinking.

Well - actually it is very right thinking.

It is right for a wife who has been away on a long business trip to look forward with longing towards her return to her family.

It is right for the bride of Christ to look forward to the joyful reunion with the Bridegroom.

And - hard though it may be to comprehend -

It is very true that praying for vindication is also part of that longing.

Some write these words off as dark and morally lacking.

Actually - punishment is the other half of sin.

What a person sows, they will reap.

That is moral truth which no one can shake off.

Relief and Retribution -

they are the two poles of the final revelation of Jesus Christ.

and they are part of the framework on which our praying is built as we journey towards that great and awesome day.

"To this end we always pray for you...."

a. Thankful for signs of God's grace

b. Confident in God's completion of His promises.

That is the framework on which Paul prays.

A solid framework from which we, too, can build a life of vibrant prayer.