

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## Praying for the Church: 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Those who work with wood tell us that when possible, we should *cut with the grain*. The grain tells you which direction the wood is best cut. If you cut *against* the grain, you make more work for yourself, and it's more likely you'll spoil the cut. Go with the grain. That's the best advice.

When it comes to prayer, we recognise that there are prayers that go *against* the grain of Scripture, and there are prayers that go *with* the grain of Scripture. If I pray selfishly, then I'm praying *against* the grain of Scripture. If I pray not really caring about God's will, I'm praying *against* the grain of Scripture. What we need to do is pray *with* the grain of the Bible. And one of the ways we do this is to allow the Bible itself to direct our prayer life, to pray with the pray-ers in the Bible, even to pray the prayers of the Bible, and make them our own.

That's what we've been doing with Paul's prayers for the churches he wrote to. We've been looking at his prayers to see what it is he prays for, and why he prays for those things. In his prayer for the Philippians (1:9-11), he prays they will be abounding in love, and deepening in insight, and discerning the best, and pure in hope, and filled with fruit. In his prayer for the Colossians (1:11-14), he prays that they will be filled with knowledge, that they will walk worthy of the Lord, that they will be strengthened with power, and that they will give thanks to God. They were great things to pray for in Paul's day, and they're great things to pray today!

So, we turn to another of Paul's prayers, in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13. And as we do so, we face the same challenge we've faced already: when did we last pray like this for the church? But the *encouragement* is there too: let's pray these things for ourselves, and for each other!

In the wider passage, Paul explains why he is writing to the Thessalonians (see 2:17-3:10). He's desperate to see the people in the church

again face to face, but he's unable to do so at the moment. He writes about sending Timothy so he could find out how they were doing. And Timothy has just returned to Paul with the great news that the Thessalonians are doing well in the faith. It's at this point that Paul prays for them (3:11-13).

So, Paul's prayer for them arises out of his longing to be with them, out of his deep affection for them, and from delight at how well they were doing. *Paul's prayer is a product of his passion for people*. Paul doesn't now take them off his prayer list because they are doing so well! He *continued* to pray for them, night and day (3:10). *What* does Paul pray for?

### 1. Trusting in God (3:11)

The first thing he asks is that a way would be made clear for him to see them (3:11).

Before we reflect on that, notice *who* Paul addresses his prayer to: God our Father, and the Lord Jesus. Paul draws God the Father and Jesus together as one. Prayer is grounded in the character of God the Father, and as he has revealed himself in our Lord Jesus Christ. We might need to remember that. If God is *truly* God, and *truly* our Father, and if the Lord Jesus is *truly* the Lord, then we don't pray to this God our Father and this Lord Jesus somehow hoping that he might be able to pull a few spiritual strings here and there! We can pray with confidence to one who is in charge of the universe.

Paul had wanted to return to the church, but he tells them that Satan had somehow stopped him from doing so (2:18). We don't know the details about what barriers were put in place; but Paul asks God to remove them so he can go back. He wants the Lord to clear the way, to make the road straight for them to return. Paul says he wants to be with them, and he prays that God and Jesus would direct their way to them. This shows us that Paul knew he was

dependent on God's leading; there are certain things God is able to do, and he is the *only* one who is able to do them.

Paul tells God what he would like, tells him his personal desires; and there is nothing wrong with that. But he also submits to God's leading. He recognises that God can do this, but he doesn't *demand* that God clear the way. He knew that God *could* make it happen, but he also knew that God sees what we do not see, and knows what we do not know. Paul knows who is in charge. Was his prayer answered? Not immediately. It wasn't until his third missionary journey, five years later, that he was able to visit them again. In God's providence, that was how it worked out.

As we pray to God the Father and our Lord Jesus for ourselves and for our church, there are all sorts of things we might want; but we pray trusting that, like a wise parent, God knows what is in our best interest. And so, we come to him for guidance and direction with a humility that is willing to wait on his timing. The challenge for us – as individuals and as a church – is to be willing both to express our desires to God and to submit those desires to his plans for us. That's what Paul prays for.

## 2. Increasing in love (3:12)

The second request is in verse 12, and it's that they will be increasing in love. Paul prayed this for the Philippians too, that their love would abound more and more (Phil. 1:9).

Does Paul pray this because the congregation was *lacking* in love? No. As early as 1:3, Paul is praising them for their love (1:3). The point is he does not want them to be content with where they're at. He wants them to *increase* and *abound* in love. It's precisely because we do know and experience genuine Christian love among and between us that we need to make sure we carry on doing so: Paul prays for a loving church, that they would *increase* in love.

He says something similar in 4:1: just as you are doing, so you should *excel*, and do it more and more! And again in 4:10: we need to pursue this *even more*. And then in his next

letter, in 2 Thessalonians 1:3, he says it again: your love is increasing!

The words 'increase' and 'overflow' in the prayer are important: Paul wants not just a cup that's full, but a fountain that's overflowing! Loving is not a course we complete, some achievement we come to, a box we tick on a form; it's an ongoing, life-long learning experience. Where love increases and abounds, criticism, bitterness, and frustration decrease. Let's pray for increasing love among us.

Paul stretches this to others too (3:12b). The way we demonstrate we are children of God is by loving not just each other, but *all* people. Paul also gives them a model of this love – 'just as ours does for you'. Paul reminds them of his own example in 2:7-9, 11. Let's pray that our love would increase and overflow.

## 3. Strengthening in hearts (3:13)

Paul prays that they will be strengthened in their hearts (3:13). Paul isn't the power supply of the church; it's *God* who does that; it's God who makes their hearts strong. And that it's in our *hearts* is important: any growth in Christ comes from *within* and not from the external things that we do. It's not simply a matter of praying more, reading the Bible more, attending church more often. True Christlikeness is about attitudes, outlooks, values, and character; it's about the *heart*. And he wants God to strengthen their hearts for a particular reason: so they will be holy and blameless when Jesus comes.

Paul knows that one day Christ will return (see also 2:19), and he prays that the Lord will strengthen us in the light of his coming. So that when Jesus comes we will join with all the other believers who are declared holy. Paul prays in the light of the end.

We need to pray this way for ourselves and for our church: that we will trust in the Lord for his direction; that our love would increase and overflow; and that our hearts will be strengthened so that we will be blameless and holy, looking forward to the day when the Lord Jesus comes, and we will be with him forever.