

**First Sunday in Advent – November 29, 2015**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

*Pastor Charles Heup*

**1 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? 10) Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. 11) Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12) May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13) 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.**

Dear waiting ones;

If I were to have greeted you today by saying, “Happy New Year,” I’m guessing you would have looked at my somewhat strangely. The season of Advent signifies the start of a new Church year. It comes upon us rather quietly like a winter snowfall. No Advent parades are scheduled, nor will Advent fireworks light up the nighttime skies. And yet, this season exists to remind us that we will soon observe the greatest celebration of all times—the triumphant return of Christ.

Perhaps you noticed our blue altar clothes and banners – an evidence of the new church year. Many of us may remember that the liturgical color for Advent used to be purple, the color of royalty, which turned our thoughts to the coming King. To set this season apart from Lent, the color has become a beautiful blue. Blue is the color of hope, as well as the color of the sky. Combining those two thoughts makes a lot of Advent sense – it is from the sky that Jesus will come again the second time to take us to be with Him forever; and that fills us with a sure and confident hope.

We’re awaiting the Savior’s arrival. However, as he himself reminds us today, our wait may not be all that pleasant. We’re going to see and experience some rather strange and unsettling events - the kind that will cause some people to faint from sheer terror. In fact, after using words like anguish, perplexity, and anxiety, Jesus says to us in our Gospel reading, ***“Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen”*** (Luke 21:36)

Have you been doing that? Have you been saying your prayers, asking God to see you safely through this world’s last days? Or do you wonder how to even word such a prayer? Today the Apostle Paul shows us. With his inspired words, the Apostle Paul in our text suggests some prayer thoughts for

**Theme:** Our Prayer for Another Year of Grace

1. Lord, deepen our faith
2. Lord increase our love
3. Lord improve our live

The Lord’s grace to the Thessalonians prompted Paul to pray as he does in our text. Paul had spent less than a month preaching in the synagogue in Thessalonica before the Jewish opposition instigated a riot that forced Paul and his preaching companions (Timothy & Silas) to leave the city. The persecution there was especially fierce and Paul was extremely worried about this fledgling group of Christians. As soon as he could he sent Timothy back to check up on them. Were they remaining steadfast in the faith? The belief that Jesus Christ is humankind’s Savior from sin and the only way to eternal salvation; brought bitter persecution upon Paul, and which had now spread to Paul’s followers. Were they holding up in the midst of their faith being

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under attack? And what did they think of Paul? Were they upset with him because their newfound Christianity now put them in harm's way?

Timothy came back with the report that all was well. The Thessalonians were standing firm in the faith. They also longed to see Paul again as much as he longed to see them. The Lord had been gracious to them and that grace was evident in their lives. So Paul begins our text by telling them how thankful and joyful he was because of them.

**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? 10) Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.**

Paul began with thanksgiving and our prayer for grace also can begin with thanksgiving that the Lord has blessed and prospered us by preserving us in the faith and allowing us to reflect his grace in our lives.

God's undeserved love sought us out and, then, taught us to believe that Jesus Christ has done away with our eternal misery by suffering in his own body the punishment for sin that should have been ours. How can we thank God enough for the joy that grace has brought to our lives, and keeps bringing to our lives as we witness its power at work in one another?

We will never thank God enough for giving us love that we don't deserve, but that doesn't mean we should stop trying. So how can we thank him? As odd as it may seem, God says that we thank him best when we ask for more grace. So we pray, "Lord, deepen our faith." This is a prayer for grace. God's gracious gift of faith is what has brought us into a saving relationship with our Risen LORD. God-given faith is the only thing that connects us to the perfect life Christ lived as our substitute. Faith is the only pipeline that keeps the blood of Christ flowing into our lives and covering our many sins. Without faith we are without forgiveness and without heaven.

But why pray for a deeper faith? Is there something wrong with the faith we have now? Was there something wrong with the faith of those Christians living in Thessalonica? Is that why Paul told them, "**Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith**" (v. 10)? Paul's concern was not that the Christians' faith was something less than saving faith. That need not be our concern either. Jesus has promised, "**I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you**" (Matthew 17:20). Faith, no matter how small, makes all the riches of heaven our very own. But the faith that fuels our spiritual life is constantly being spent. If it is not replenished it grows shallow and finally runs out. The more trials our faith encounters the faster that happens.

Years ago I had the chance to spend some time in the mountains of Colorado. It seemed that I was always filling up my gas tank with gas even though I had a rather fuel efficient vehicle at that time (29 miles to the gallon back in the 70's was pretty good.) So why did I need so much gas – it's because you use more fuel to climb up the steep mountain grades – just as you use more fuel in cold weather or to buck the wind.

Paul was afraid that the same sort of thing might happen in the faith-life of the Thessalonian Christians. He knew that their faith was constantly being drained by the ridicule and persecution they faced every day.

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In our Gospel reading Jesus gives us reasons to have the same concern for our own faith-life. In these last days our faith will fight many up-hill battles. The winds of adversity may blow. We will see and experience tragedies on this earth and in our lives that may cause us to doubt the very love of God. At the same time we must battle our own sinful nature. Again Jesus says in our Gospel reading: **"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap" (Luke 21:34)**. Our own perverted love for sin will constantly challenge our faith's belief that it's better to have God's forgiveness than sin's pleasure. Our faith is being and will continue to be taxed at an alarming rate. It is growing more shallow more quickly than ever before. That is why we want to pray: Lord, please deepen our faith so that when you return we don't end up trapped in the very hell from which you have saved us.

This is our prayer. Do you believe the Lord wants to answer it by giving us more faith? Without a doubt! So how will he do it? Think of Paul's prayer. Paul wanted to be able to come to the Thessalonians and supply what they were lacking. He wanted to bring them more of the truth of God's love for them in Christ. He wanted to grow them in their knowledge of Scripture. Why? Because as Paul points out in Romans 10:17 **"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."**

As you and I pray for a deeper faith, in the same breath we are asking God to make us daily students of his Word and frequent partakers of his sacrament, because God has chosen to deepen faith by these and no other means. Not even time spent in prayer deepens faith. In prayer we speak to God. Faith grows only when God is speaking to us. Only time spent in worship, in Bible classes and in our own private study of Scripture puts us in touch with the Gospel's power by which alone the Holy Spirit builds faith. To deny ourselves any of these opportunities is to starve our faith at a time when it is threatened most. We pray, "Don't let that happen, Lord. Move us to study your gospel and through it deepen our faith."

"And Lord, increase our love." That's the second part of our prayer for another year of grace, based again on these words of Paul to the Thessalonians, **"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you" (v.12)**. Notice that Paul doesn't simply demand that the Christians be more loving. That's because the kind of love that pleases God is always and only a product of the faith God gives us. Faith is born of and clings to God's Word. It is eternally grateful for his saving promises and wants nothing more than to express its thanks through acts of love. Deeper faith produces increased love. And what is love's favorite thing to do? It lives to give itself away to others.

A hymn writer expresses it this way:

Love in Christ is strong and living,  
Binding faithful hearts in one;  
Love in Christ is true and giving --  
May his will in us be done!

Love is patient and forbearing,  
Clothed in Christ's humility,  
Gentle, selfless, kind, and caring,  
Reaching out in charity.

Love in Christ abides forever,  
Fainting not when ills attend;  
Love, forgiving and forgiven,

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Shall endure until life's end. (CW 490)

That was the kind of love that had been evident in the lives of the Thessalonians. In spite of persecution they spread the message of forgiveness in Christ. They labored so hard in love that their faith was evident to all. Paul commended them: 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8 **And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8) The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia-- your faith in God has become known everywhere.** And yet Paul prays that their love would increase. **May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.**

And our prayer is also for an increase in love. **May the Lord make our love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.** Lord, help us be bells which ring out the message of our Savior's love in our neighborhood, our country, and our world. Help us to be models after whom others without your love would like to pattern their lives. Lord let us see the needs of others, let us respond to those needs with thank filled hearts. May our love for you and for each other grow and increase in the coming year as we wait for your return.

As we pray for an increase in faith and love we are acknowledging our need for the Lord's forgiveness of past failures. And so Our Prayer for Another Year of Grace includes the prayer, Lord, improve our lives. That prayer reflects the thoughts of the closing verse of our text: **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.**

In some ways it seems as though we carry the weight of the world upon our shoulders. We know what needs to be done. We need to be in the Word for ourselves so that it may bring blessing to us and many others. But even as we see this great need we don't appear to be up to the task. Like Paul says in Romans 8, **we have the desire to do what is good, but we cannot carry it out.**

Paul wasn't making excuses for himself or us. He's reminding us that God alone is the source of our strength and encouragement. Any change needed in our life must be worked by God or we cannot and will not change. So before Paul sends us on our way today, he offers one more prayer, the words of which provide the very strength they seek. **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.** Paul's prayer reminds us of the truth that when we stand before Jesus when he comes with his holy angels at the end of time our Judge will be none other than our Savior. And our Savior's verdict in our case will be based not our accomplishments but on his own. Our sins will be hidden from his sight, covered by his own blood, and even the poor attempts we made to thank him during our days on earth will be regarded as holy because the Judge will see our love as something perfect, made so by his own righteousness. Dear Christians, may God's Spirit use this powerful truth to 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. Amen.