

Praying...In Light Of His Coming

Series: The Second Coming Of Our Lord

by Ron. R. Ritchie

Recently someone handed me a copy of the publication Prisoner Bulletin, a quarterly put out by a group in Indiana for the Council of Evangelical Baptist Churches of the Soviet Union As I read it, my heart was filled with compassion for Christians in Russia who are paying a terrible price for their commitment to Christ.

I was struck by the fact that the main thrust of the magazine was prayer--prayer for people who were suffering persecution, some of whom are in prison for their faith The publisher of the magazine, Georgi Vins, is the ninth generation of gospel preachers in his family His father Peter Vins, was an American missionary who went to Russia in 1926 He died in a soviet prison camp years later for faithfully serving God Georgi's mother, Lydia, served a prison sentence for her work on the council of prisoners' relatives Georgi himself was imprisoned in Soviet camps a total of eight years for his ministry as General Secretary of the Council of Evangelical Baptist Churches he was stripped of his Soviet citizenship and exiled to the United States in April 1979 in a dramatic exchange of five prisoners for two Soviet spies.

In a recent letter to Georgi, the president of the Council of Evangelical Churches said to him "When Christians in the West ask what they can do to help us who are being persecuted for our faith, I answer this way We need your prayer support--but live your lives in such a way that your prayers for us will be heard by God!"

We find the same sentiments in the opening verses of chapter three of the apostle Paul's letter to the Thessalonians Paul is concerned that the Thessalonians--and we too in our own day--be known as a people of prayer In these verses the apostle, writing from Corinth, asks the Thessalonians to pray for two specific things; first, pray that God's word will spread; secondly, pray that God would deliver them from evil; and finally, he tells them that he is praying for their faithfulness We will see in these verses therefore that God very much wants his people to be faithful in prayer for the work of his Kingdom

In 52 A D, the time this letter was written, Paul, Silas and Timothy were ministering in Corinth There they received word that some prophet, message or letter had misinformed the Thessalonians as to the "day of the Lord" As a result, the believers assumed they had missed the rapture of the church and were living in the period of the great tribulation on earth So Paul wrote, this second letter to the church at Thessalonica to encourage, admonish and instruct them While their theology was not necessarily wrong, they had forgotten the order of events of the end times as he himself had taught them In chapter two of his letter, therefore the apostle helped them by setting out the order of events that must occur on earth before that terrible day of judgment occurs on earth, when ". . . the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory " (Matt 24 30)

Here in chapter three, Paul speaks on two final subjects First, he requests prayer for himself and his fellow as they minister in Corinth; and secondly, he addresses a household matter the need for the church to deal with undisciplined and lazy men who were taking advantage of the 'soon coming of the Lord'

The first thing Paul wants the Thessalonians to do, therefore, is to

1. Pray That God's Word Will Spread 3:1

Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; . . .

As we have seen, Paul is writing this letter from Corinth, a thriving port city of some half a million inhabitants on the southern tip of Greece. The city was known as the cradle of pleasure and the showplace of architectural beauty. It was the hub of the social and economic world. In fact, the very word "Corinthian" was synonymous with drunkenness and immorality. Corinthians were known for their loose morals and competitive spirit. Towering above the city was the hill of the Acropolis, upon which stood the great temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, with its 1,000 prostitute priestesses. Every evening these women would come down to walk the streets of the city, the hobnails of their sandals leaving imprints in the dust, the words, "Follow me." There was a Greek proverb that said, "It is not every man who can afford a journey to Corinth." But this did not deter the apostle Paul. On his journey to Corinth, he did. There he met the Jewish couple Aquila and Priscilla, and together they began making tents.

We pick up the account of what Paul did in the city in Acts 18:

And he was reasoning in the synagogues every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles." And he departed from there and went to the house of a certain man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

This then is the context in which Paul together with Silas and Timothy is requesting prayer by the Thessalonians.

What is prayer? Prayer is the means by which man, despite his finite and sinful nature, may communicate with the God who has reached out through Jesus Christ to redeem him. Prayer is the expression of complete fellowship between God and man in Christ. Prayer discloses our faith in the greatness of the God revealed in Jesus, a God who is SO great he is willing to hear the prayers of his children. Furthermore, his power is such that he is able to answer those prayers. Prayer is the expression of man's dependence upon God for everything in life. And prayer must always be the dependent prayer of a child to his Father. I have always been struck by that word in Romans 8 where Paul says Christians have "received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" At times we are so tearful and grief-stricken that is the only prayer we can utter, but the Spirit of God himself interprets that prayer in our behalf and brings our deepest needs before the Father.

Jesus himself should be our model in our prayer life. Men "ought to always pray and not lose heart," he said (Luke 18). In Mark 11 we read his words, "all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you." In Matthew we read, "keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation: the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." And also in Matthew, "ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you."

In the New Testament we find that our Lord modeled his life of prayer for his disciples. He did not go anywhere, do anything, or say anything without first checking in with his Father. His will, he said, was to "do the will of his Father who was in heaven." In his book on prayer, *Talking With My Father*, Ray Stedman writes, "The purpose of all faith is to bring us into direct, personal, vital touch with God. True prayer is an awareness of our helpless need and an acknowledgment of divine adequacy. For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing, the very breath of his life."

I find prayer to be absolutely essential in counseling situations. As some people expect pastors to have all the answers to their problems, knowing myself, that frightens me. When they ask what should they do about their dilemma, I find myself asking God what should I say to them, asking the Holy Spirit to speak through me and utter a word of encouragement or direction. At times I later find myself writing down what I have said during counseling, as the Holy Spirit has led me to say things I would never have come up with myself.

The apostle Paul believed very much in prayer. We have evidence of this in his letters to the Thessalonians, where there is frequent mention of his prayers. We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of *you* in our prayers:' says the apostle in the opening verses of his first letter to them. 'we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face.' he tells them in another place. Later he exhorts them. "Pray without ceasing," "Brethren, pray for us:' end, We pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling. Paul clearly understood the power of prayer. Confronted with spiritual warfare, he knew there was nothing he or his companions could do on a human level that would sweep away the resistance to the gospel of Jesus Christ in Corinth. That is why he reached out for the most powerful weapon on earth against all circumstances, intercessory prayer. As he wrote in Ephesians, though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses"

So Paul says in the opening words of the section we are looking at today, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly:' Here he is asking the Thessalonians to pray that the word of God might penetrate the lives of those he was ministering to in Corinth. He knew that the word of God was pure, that it was truth and life. Scripture says, The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit of both joint and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart"

Further, Paul knew that the word of the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith'" In another place he wrote, "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Paul knew that when he had presented evidence in Thessalonica that Jesus was the Christ; in spite of persecution the word spread rapidly; many were saved and the church grew strong. Now his desire was that those who had come to faith in Thessalonica would pray that he and his companions would see the same thing happen in Corinth, for there apparently was much opposition to the gospel in that city.

The apostle prayed that the word would not only spread rapidly, but that it be "glorified." This is what happened among the Gentiles in Antioch, as we read in Acts 13 following Paul's sermon there, which concluded with the words, "For thus the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth.' And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region"

When the word of the Lord is "glorified," it means that its hidden character is revealed as the word of life, righteousness and truth. As soon as the word is accepted by faith it begins to adorn the life of the believer. That is what the apostle wants prayer for. Last week my wife and I had firsthand experience of how the word of God can adorn a believer's life. A Dutch woman who was our guest for a couple of days told us she had come to know Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior following some very trying times in her life. We were overwhelmed at what the gospel had done in her life. All she wanted to talk about was Jesus and what he was doing with her. She said, 'When Jesus takes a step, I want to be right behind him. I want to spend the rest of my life following him.'" How this woman adorned the gospel, and how the gospel adorned her! When she left our house we missed her very much. She telephoned us later and my wife and I rushed to the phone to speak with her, just to hear her voice again. This then is what the apostle Paul prays for, "that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified."

Secondly, Paul asks the Thessalonians to

2. Pray That God Will Deliver Us from Evil 3:2

and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.

I have always loved Ray Stedman's comment about the apostle Paul to the effect that wherever Paul went there was either a revival or a riot. This was especially true during the apostle's second missionary journey, when his

gospel message was opposed by "perverse and evil men." The word perverse describes men who direct themselves and others away from that which is right and good, and persist in error Paul was thinking of some of the religious leaders of his day "Evil" means malignant, a word used to describe Satan "the evil one:"

The apostle had to face evil and perverse men wherever he went. He was confronted by evil men in Philippi when the masters of the demon-possessed girl did not rejoice in her healing but rather saw that their hope of profit was gone. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. had them beaten and thrown into prison. In Thessalonica when Paul began to preach the Jews stirred up the mob and forced him out of town. In Berea Jews from Thessalonica agitated the crowd and once more Paul had to leave town. In Athens he was sneered at. In Corinth the Jews resisted him. Paul knew that among the crowds to whom he preached evil and perverse men were very much present. Some of them even professed their faith in Jesus as the Christ but theirs was not a sincere profession. In time they turned on Paul and his companions to do them evil not good.

Don't think that this kind of thing happened only in the first century. When I first came to this church 16 years ago a family was attending here who as far as I could tell. loved the Lord. Just last week I heard they had converted to Judaism and moved to Israel taking with them the wife and children of a man I am currently working with. I also discovered that the man who converted to Judaism continues to visit this area and is attempting to influence others from this congregation to convert to Judaism. Thus we discover even in our own day that as the apostle says not all have faith."

Thirdly the apostle tells the Thessalonians

3. We Are Praying for Your Faithfulness 3:5

But the Lord is faithful and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

Paul had a healthy respect for the "evil one:" Satan. who had already "thwarted" the apostle when he tries to visit the Thessalonians (I Thess. 2:18). He knew that the adversary went about "like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour: that Satan was a liar a murderer and a deceiver. Paul was not about to engage in combat with him Rather he would turn to God who was faithful to him in all he did. seeking God's strength and protection on behalf of the Thessalonians. Paul had taught the Ephesians to ': . . take up the full armor of God that you may be able to resist in the evil day . . . taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one:' thus the apostle commits the Thessalonians to their faithful Lord who would deliver them from the adversary.

Next Paul says We have confidence in the Lord concerning you. that you are doing and will continue to do what we command:' In I Thessalonians we discover what these commands were that Paul is referring to. Here are some of them: . . . walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory" (2:12): '. . . abound in love for one another" (3:12): '. . . abstain from sexual immorality" (4:3); . . . make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands" (4:11): ". . . encourage one another. and build up one another" (5:11): '. . . appreciate those who diligently labor among you" (5:12): '. . . live in peace with one another"(5:13). Paul gives eight other commands to the Thessalonians in chapter 5 of his first letter all of them to be carried out in the strength that God provides. I am always saddened at those among us who well know the commands of Scripture and yet refuse to obey them. Last week a man who claimed to be a Christian told me that there was a certain sin in his life which he refused to give up. No matter what I said, he responded, "I want to do what I want to do when I want to do it." But here Paul says he has "confidence" that the Thessalonians will "continue to do what we command :'

Finally, Paul prays that "the Lord may direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ:' Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians is that, despite the persecution and at: diction they were undergoing, despite the fear they ten' because of their misunderstanding of the "day of the Lord:' the Lord would yet 'direct their hearts into the love of God:' The apostle is praying that they will have a straight and

smooth pathway, without potholes and obstacles, as their hearts are directed into the love of God. He wants them to reflect upon the wonderful love of God. who: . . . being rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our transgressions, made US alive together with Christ: by grace you have been saved." Speaking of this love, John said, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon US, that we should be called the children of~ God" (1 John 3:1): and again, "In this is love, not that we loved god, hut that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (4:10. 11). This is the kind of love which Paul is speaking about in this verse.

What does the apostle mean by the phrase "the steadfastness of Christ"? The Thessalonians were under political. social anti religious pressures because of their new--found faith in Jesus Christ. Paul prays that their faithful Lord would strengthen ant protect them from the evil one: that he would enable them to keep his commandments; that they would rejoice in the love of God towards them: anti also maintain the kind of faithfulness our Lord had during his days of' persecution and affliction. Peter had the same thought in mind when he wrote, ': . . since Christ also suffered for you. leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps. who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth: anti while being reviled, he did not revile in return: while suffering, he uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:21-23). The writer of Hebrews refers to the steadfastness of Christ" in these words from the 12th chapter.: . . let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against himself so that you may not grow weary and lose heart :'

Paul recognized his need for prayer in his own life and ministry and prayer for the churches he had planted. In the Prisoner Bulletin from which I read earlier there is quoted a letter from a Baptist pastor who was recently released from prison in the U.S.S.R. Here is what he wrote: "The word of Habakkuk come to mind: 'Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold; and there shall be no herd in tines talls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength.' If all these things are taken away, what will remain'? Nothing! Yet for a Christian, something even greater does remain. 'For me to live is Christ: He is everything in my life and he is my life So wherever I am, in bonds or tree, with him life is always good.'" The letter concludes. "Time rushes on, drawing us ever nearer to that joyous and much longed for day when we shall see Him face to face Then everything that has caused pain and suffering will be over, and that blessed eternal day will have begun!"

In light of the return of Christ let us be a people of prayer Let us pray, with Paul, that God's word will 'spread rapidly and be glorified," just as it did with the Thessalonians Do we think and pray along those lines'? As we talk to fathers and mothers do we pray that they will come into the kingdom of Christ, and that the gospel' will spread rapidly in their families so that their parents and children will also come to Christ'? A young Armenisn Christian (his name means "son of the resurrection") was in my home a couple of weeks ago to visit He picked up a guitar and sang a song about how his entire family came to know Christ First his sister came to faith, and she shared Christ with her brother He in turn shared it with another sister and so on down the line until the whole family had come to Christ Here arc the words of the song

See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us. that a whole family should be called
"childern of God" anti such we are!

First came Sue when she wondered Where on earth did grandma go when she died'?"

Then I followed right behind with a Bible looking for a Savior from the law

Then Paul came along when he heard a song and met a woman with your love

Then Sue took Julie's hand with the good news glove and they walked into the Kingdom of
love

But who would have thought that God could have brought us all together like He has'?

But who would have thought that God could have brought us all together like He has'?

Then Paul with the fire in his eye, told mom that she must believe or die!" and when the wrath had cooled and she read the Word, the Spirit came.

And when dad with his wisdom failed the final exam of the knowledge of the truth. he came too

The two became one. and then became six. and now we are all one in His love

Let us pray for one another that we will be guarded from the evil one. from perverse and evil men" who would lead us into destruction And let us not forget that "the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect [us] from the evil one:' Let us not rejoice over sin among us Rather let us pray that we will stand in the evil day Remember that the most powerful weapon we have is prayer We should have prayer lists of' people who we need to uphold pray for There will even be times when we will cry out. Abba! Father!" because we don't know what we should pray for. hut let us be a people who arc known as those who pray without ceasing.' nevertheless

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Ron R. Ritchie
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