

**From the Pen of
Pastor Paul**

1-2 Thessalonians

Daniel R. Hyde



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Danny Hyde unpacks the teaching of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians with a keen eye on the text, a sure grip on the witness of the scriptures as a whole, an awareness of the history of interpretation in the church, and above all with a pastoral heart for people. I warmly commend this stimulating exposition.

—**Dr. Lee Gatiss, Director of the Church Society, Cambridge, U.K.**

The Reverend Danny Hyde has given us what should be expected from him: attention to the text of Scripture with attention to the church and world to which the gospel is addressed. This volume offers a welcome addition to books on 1 & 2 Thessalonians for its care to be true to Scripture, its regard to lean on exegetical masters, and its devotion to apply the Word of God to a needy and hurting pew. It also stirs up many useful ideas for teaching and preaching these materials. Pastors will especially want this volume on their shelf to assist them in preaching and teaching these two letters of Paul.

—**Dr. J. Mark Beach, Professor of Ministerial and Doctrinal Studies, Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, IN**

Danny Hyde's new book on Paul's letters to the Thessalonians strikes a unique balance. It has depth so as to assist the pastor as he prepares to preach but is also accessible to any Christian seeking to understand and apply God's Word to their daily lives. *From the Pen of Pastor Paul* will be a great blessing to all who read it!

—**Dr. Tim Witmer, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA**

The best commentaries on New Testament Epistles are often those that were born the same way as the Epistles themselves: out of the womb of real pastoral concern and ministry. That is what you find in this highly readable book on 1 and 2 Thessalonians. It has an aroma of authenticity about it. Read it and you will sense the heart of the apostle Paul for the 1st century church brought with fresh power into the 21st century.

—**Dr. Conrad Mbewe, Pastor of Kabwata Baptist Church and Chancellor of the African Christian University, Lusaka, Zambia**

To Karajeon

Ubi duo, ibi et ipse; ubi et ipse, ibi et malus non est

“Where the two, there also He;

Where also He, there also the evil one is not.”

Tertullian, *To My Wife*, 2.8.8

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Abbreviations

Aquinas, *Thessalonians*—Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians and the Letter to the Philippians*, trans. F. R. Larcher and Michael Duffy, Aquinas Scripture Series 3 (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1969).

Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*—F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary 45 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982).

Calvin, *Thessalonians*—John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, Calvin's Commentaries, Volume 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961).

CD—Canons of Dort (1618–1619)

Fergusson, *Thessalonians*—James Fergusson and David Dickson, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians & Hebrews*, Geneva Series Commentary (1841, reprinted; Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1978).

HC—Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

Morris, *1–2 Thessalonians*—Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (1959; reprinted, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984).

Stott, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*—John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

WCF—Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

WLC—Westminster Larger Catechism (1647)

WSC—Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)

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I am so thankful for my brothers and sisters at the Oceanside United Reformed Church, who listened to the original sermons from which this book was developed. You have always encouraged me to be a pastor whose duty and delight is to “preach the Word” (2 Timothy 4:2).

I thank my wife, Karajeon, who continues to be my most honest and helpful sermon critic, telling me what I need to hear not what I want to hear. I also thank my boys—Cyprian, Caiden, and Daxton—and my little girl—Sadie—who, without their knowing it, have made me a better preacher.

Preface

The substance of this book came from a preaching series through 1 and then 2 Thessalonians in the Lord's Day morning service of the Oceanside United Reformed Church (OURC) from September 26, 2010 through July 31, 2011. The context in which I preached those sermons is important to understanding the exposition in this book. I add this by way of preface because preaching is a dynamic enterprise. After all the requisite training to prepare for the ministry and after all the reading, writing, and meditating throughout a week, preaching has to be practiced. And it's not practiced in the vacuum of the preacher's mind; it is practiced among real living and breathing people. As a preacher, then, the people before whom I stand, all the ups and downs we experienced together in the ministry, and my own emotions play a vital part in what I do. So if I were to preach through 1–2 Thessalonians again, either in another congregation in another context or even at OURC, I would not and could not just re-preach the same notes and what developed into a book here.

Before September 2010 I had previously preached through Genesis and Exodus and was making my way through Leviticus. Then I received

a call to serve another congregation after a decade of serving OURC. When I declined that call because I was convinced God's call was that I continue serving the OURC, I wrapped up that Leviticus series as soon as I could. I had originally intended to finish the entire Pentateuch, moving into Numbers and then Deuteronomy. But I believe God had other plans for me and for us as a congregation. After much prayer, Bible reading, and meditation, I decided upon 1 Thessalonians. Why? I believe in 1 Thessalonians Paul opens his pastoral heart more than to any other congregation to which he wrote. As the Anglican preacher and commentator, John Stott (1921–2011), said, Paul's Thessalonian correspondence "reveal the authentic Paul. . . . We hear his heart-beat and see his tears."¹ And since I had just declined a call and recommitted myself to my current call, I believed it was important to express my pastoral heart to my people like never before.

Those sermons were, therefore, more personal than any other sermons I had ever preached. Those sermons were, therefore, more earnest than any other sermons I had ever preached. Those sermons were, therefore, more applicatory than any other sermons I had ever preached. If that was a fault of those sermons, at least I have John Calvin (1509–1564) on my side: "The greater part of this Epistle consists of exhortations."²

Let me also say a word about commentaries. I do not presume my method of using commentaries is normal nor do I insist my pastoral interns should follow it. With all my expository preaching, I have an eclectic approach to commentaries. I have not read every modern exegetical commentary. What I do, though, is follow a reading plan in which I read something from the ancient fathers, something from the medieval period [if possible], something from the Reformation, something from the Puritans, and then something from the modern exegetical commentaries. With Thessalonians, my main reading

conversation partners were the ancient preacher St. John Chrysostom (349–407), the medieval theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), the reformer John Calvin, the Scottish Presbyterian James Fergusson (1621–1667), and the modern commentators F. F. Bruce (1910–1990) and John Stott.

I pray the substance and the spirit of this exposition moves you to receive the inspired apostles' words afresh, “not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Daniel R. Hyde

Oceanside, California

August 2015

I

From the Pen of Pastor Paul

1 Thessalonians 1:1



First and Second Thessalonians are two of the least known of the New Testament letters of the apostle Paul. Yet it is quite possible that 1 Thessalonians was his first letter, written after his labors in Thessalonica in AD 49–50.¹ This lesser known letter to a church planted by Paul has many parallels to what those involved in the ministry of church planting and missions have known and experienced.

The church in Thessalonica was planted by Paul, along with his ministry partners Silas (given his Latin name here, Silvanus) and Timothy (1:1).² This occurred during what we call Paul’s second missionary journey, as we read in Acts 17:1–15. As was Paul’s custom, he found the local synagogue and “on three Sabbath days he reasoned

with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ" (Acts 17:2-3). The core group of this church plant (to use our modern terminology) began with "some" of those from the synagogue, some "devout Greeks," and many "leading women" from Thessalonica (Acts 17:4). This caused the Jews to form a mob and storm the house of Jameson (Acts 17:5). When Paul and Silas were not found, they hauled Jameson and some believers before the *politarchas*, the five to six magistrates of the city.³ When they did so they uttered some of the most famous words to describe the church: "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6). Christianity was an unwelcome intrusion to the *status quo* of Thessalonica. The Thessalonian Jews' description echoed that of the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54), who in the year AD 41 described the spread of the gospel as "a general plague which infests the whole world."⁴

Like those new believers in first century Thessalonica, what we know today is this: Jesus has utterly revolutionized our lives. To the world, we turn everything upside down. To the believer, God is making everything right side up. The world has fallen and it is God who is picking it up. The world is like a shattered vase and it is God who is restoring it. The world is like a filthy mirror and it is God who is renovating its luster.

This charge of "turn[ing] the world upside down" caused the ears of the city rulers to perk up: "They are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7). The church, then, sent Paul and Silas "away by night to Berea" (Acts 17:10). The Jews, though, followed them there, causing Paul to flee even further into Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed behind (Acts 17:14-15).

As a persecuted pastor himself, Paul's great pastoral desire in his

first letter back to the persecuted Thessalonian Christians was that they would persevere in their faith, hope, and love. He said in his second letter to them, “do not grow weary in doing good” (2 Thessalonians 3:13), but he wanted them to rekindle their zeal (cf. Hebrews 12:1). 1 Thessalonians is a book that challenges us today. As with Paul, a pastor’s desire for his people is that they would continually rekindle their passion for the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because the Thessalonian congregation began and continued to exist under such duress, Paul wrote to spur them on to continue persevering. You notice this in what is really the occasion for his writing as well as the theme for his exhortation: “Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3).

1 Thessalonians is also a book that challenges us as pastors. Paul writes about his ministry in such personal and passionate ways that the Holy Spirit should break us down as we meditate upon it. I’ve always been told that to be a successful pastor I need to have the thick skin of a rhino to encase my heart within. I do not see this in Paul. We should be changed men after reading Paul’s message. And members of local congregations should pray for their pastor to be transformed into a “shepherd [...] after [God’s] own heart” (Jeremiah 3:15). In the words of Robert Murray M’Cheyne, “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness.”⁵ The apostle Paul wrote elsewhere to young pastor Timothy, that he was to “keep a close watch on [himself] and on the teaching ... for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16).⁶ Pray that you would not only hear more of Jesus through your pastor but that you would see more of Jesus in him.

1 Thessalonians exhorts a new congregation to be steadfast in faith,

hope, and love in a very pastoral and personal way and it exhorts pastors concerning the duties of the pastoral ministry.

Ministering for Progress

It is not only the duty of a minister, like Paul, to labor in the planting of a church but to continue to labor in the cultivating of that church over time. Whereas in Corinth, Paul planted but it was Apollos who watered (1 Corinthians 3:6), here Paul says the same minister may be called to do both in a local church. After initially planting the church (Acts 17:1–9), he was forced to leave because, as he goes on to say, he, Silvanus, and Timothy “were torn away from you” (2:17). This is why he also writes, “we sent Timothy . . . to establish and exhort you in your faith” (3:1). Through this inspired letter Paul is now checking in on his spiritual children’s progress.

What kind of progress should we be seeking to cultivate? In 1 Thessalonians Paul has the particular theme of his people’s steadfastness in the faith. He praises them for their “steadfastness of hope” (1:3) and that they were “standing fast in the Lord” (3:8). What does Paul mean by “steadfastness?” One great illustration is at the very end of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Just before Christiana and her companions were about to cross the river and enter through the beautiful gate we read these great lines: “Then there came forth a summons for Mr. Standfast. This Mr. Standfast was he whom the rest of the pilgrims found upon his knees in the Enchanted Ground.”⁷ This character stood up to all the temptations of the Christian’s three enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil (HC, Q&A 127). And having stood up to them, he resisted them. At the end of his life he entered into the celestial city. The minister is to labor that his people would stand fast against everything all the enemies of Christ throw at them for the sake of the Lord. As John Calvin said, as a minister, Paul’s purpose

here was “not so much to commend them as to encourage them to perseverance.”⁸

Paul consistently exhorts the Thessalonians to progress in their Christian walk by being steadfast. He remembers that they received the preached Word of God in much affliction (1:6). Paul says he and his cohorts suffered for what he preached (2:2). He says he, Silvanus, and Timothy suffered as examples to the people (2:14). Paul and Silvanus sent Timothy to exhort them to stand fast in the midst of their many afflictions (3:2–4). Finally, Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to persevere in godliness even as they were already doing (4:1, 10). But why does Paul spend so much time exhorting the Thessalonians to progress in their life of sanctification? Because, as one ancient writer said, “God is pleased if we are growing in Christ.”⁹ The new believer is one in whom the Lord himself has planted the imperishable seed of the gospel (1 Peter 1:23, 25). That seed is now growing upward and outward to the point where we have the fruits of good works sprouting from us.

This perpetual progress is not only hard work for the believer, but it is even harder work for the minister as he seeks through prayer, preaching, and pastoral care of every soul entrusted to him that they progress in their walk with the Lord. Although it is hard, it is the minister’s calling. Although it is hard, the Lord blesses this labor. The Lord gives the minister his Spirit and all the means necessary to bring progress to his people: prayer, the Word, the sacraments, visitation, and hospitality, just to name a few. This is one of the reasons why I have always favored a long pastorate and have not understood the typical method in so many evangelical, Bible-believing churches for a minister to take a call elsewhere every five years. When I was in seminary, one thing that struck me about this was a comment to me after I commented on how many pastors a local church had, as

evidenced by the ministers' pictures in the Council room. The comment was: "After five years we've heard everything he has to say." How can a pastor actually see any fruit in just five years?

Why should we minister with the expectation that our people will progress in the steadfastness of their faith? Our people must become practically what they are theologically. What do I mean? Look at the opening greeting Paul writes: To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace (1:1). The Thessalonian church was in this particular locality, but it was also in the Father and the Son. Paul typically speaks of being "in Christ" but here as in Colossians 3:3 he speaks of being in God. While being in Thessalonica meant being in a local place, for example, Judea (2:14), being in God and his Son speaks of having a vital relationship with them.¹⁰ As Jesus said, we are branches that are in him as the vine (John 15). As Paul said, we are members that are united to the body (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). And this relationship with the vine as its branches, and with the body as its members is vital and life giving. So we are, as Christians, livingly, organically, spiritually, and vitally connected to the Triune God; that's our theological identity. Practically, then, we need to reflect that truth as we progress in faith, hope, and love in the context God places us.

Ministering in Person

This ministry to see progress in our people must be done in person, personally. No doubt you have heard the pastoral adage that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. For many who enter the ministry at a young age, they are clearly captivated and taken up with studying the Word, reading lots of theology, and even learning church history. But oftentimes their words—even as true as they are—go in one ear and out the other of

their people. What people clearly need to feel is a pastor's heart before they will listen to his words.

Why mention this? Notice again the opening word of this epistle. It is very simple: Paul (1:1). What is so striking about the way he addresses the Thessalonians? He humbly calls himself merely Paul here without any other titles.¹¹ To see the significance of this, survey with me the opening greetings in Paul's other New Testament letters.

- In Romans he is “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle” (Romans 1:1).
- In 1 Corinthians he is “Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:1).
- In 2 Corinthians—when Paul's apostleship was being questioned—he was “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (2 Corinthians 1:1).
- In Galatians he is “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Galatians 1:1).
- In Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy he is “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1).
- In Philippians he and Timothy are “Paul and Timothy servants of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:1).
- In 1 Timothy he is “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Timothy 1:1).

- In Titus he is “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ” (Titus 1:1).
- In Philemon he is “Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus” (Philemon 1).

So why did Paul merely use his first name here? We can infer one reason being that there was no controversy about his apostolic authority in Thessalonica.¹² They respected him and received the message he brought. Therefore Paul had no need of asserting his titles. It is not titles that matter, it is the man.¹³ John Owen (1616–1683) once spoke of common ecclesiastical titles such as “reverend” and “doctor” by saying, “I have very little valued it.” He went on to quote Martin Luther (1483–1546), who said, “Religion is never put in danger except amongst the most reverend.”¹⁴ We should not be so fast to assert our titles and authority. It’s the person people want to know.

We learn, then, that Paul ministered as an apostle very personally among the Thessalonians. As the Scottish divine, James Fergusson said, “The Spirit of the Lord in Christ’s Ministers makes them of such an humble condescending temper ... as they will not stand to stoop somewhat below what they are, and to make use of all lawful means and helps, which may serve to procure respect unto their message among the people.”¹⁵ While it does show respect for the office of the pastor when a believer calls him “reverend” or “pastor,” and while this is extremely beneficial to teach children within the church a healthy lesson in respect, it is not the title, but the man behind the title that matters.

We see this personalness of Paul later in this letter, as he could very easily have asserted his office with them to demand their attention. As he says, “we could have made demands as apostles of Christ” (2:6). Instead, he speaks throughout 1 Thessalonians of the ordinariness of

his ministry among them, which is an example to those of us who minister. What kind of an example do ministers give to the world when they do hospital visitations and use the front row, “clergy parking?” As the minister walks into the front door, there is a man in a wheelchair waiting for his ride. What does it communicate to people when “you” are only in front of them on a screen or if you just pop in the assembly right before the sermon, as if the people whom you are speaking with are so privileged to have you? We need to be personal and ordinary, not a privileged class.¹⁶

We see Paul modeling a different kind of life before the world. He says, “you know what kind of men we proved to be” (1:5). What kind of men were he and his helpers? They were not seekers of glory from men nor greedy for money (2:5–6). Instead, they were “gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (2:7). They were “affectionately desirous” and willing to “share ... our own selves” (2:8). They were “like a father with his children” (2:11).

What a picture Paul is of a personal pastoral ministry. He was available, he was open, and he lived his life as an open book before his people. That’s what the church in our time needs today. It does not need the superstar, who is distant and has nothing to do with the average believer. It does not need the pastor shielded behind layers and layers of associates and ministry helpers so that he can do the “real” work of the ministry. The church does not need icons, but persons. It does not need its ministers living behind a fortress but living in the fishbowl of public life.

Ministering by Pouring Out

To accomplish this it is the duty of a minister to pour himself out for his people that they might receive the grace and peace of the Triune God.

As Paul writes to the Thessalonians of his brief past ministry among them and of his present concern for them from a distance, he exemplifies to us that the minister is to pour himself out for his people's good from beginning to end. Fergusson, again, said, that ministers "would endeavour to have their own hearts readily affected with enlarged desires after the people's good."¹⁷ The pastor's heart towards his people leads to the pastor's labors for his people.

Listen to how Paul expressed his heart, which led to pouring out his life for the Thessalonians: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (2:8). This word "share" (*metadounai*) is used of something that belongs to a person that they take of their own initiative and give to others, whether their money for the needy (Ephesians 4:28) or God's gifts to his people (Romans 12:8). As God has shared his word with Paul, Paul wanted to share it with the Thessalonians. Even more, as God had shared himself with Paul, in giving his Son for him, so Paul wanted to share himself with the Thessalonians. This is what he told the Corinthians, when he said, "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (2 Corinthians 12:15).

What a call this is to all of us as believers as well. As ministers are to follow the example of Paul, God's people are then to follow their pastors. "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7). What a shuddering thought! Ministers are to share their lives with their people. Then the people are to share their lives with each other. By such love, broken hearts will be mended, sorrowing hearts will be cheered, and weak hearts will be strengthened. We need this; the world needs this.

What a high calling this is to pastors. As John Owen once wrote:

“he will have little benefit by his own ministry who endeavours not in the first place an experience in his own heart of the power of the truths which he doth teach unto others.”¹⁸ How can a pastor call upon his people to strive for holiness if he is not striving himself? How can a pastor call upon his people to serve if he is not serving himself? May God lead all God’s people to pour themselves out for the good of the church and salvation of the world.

Conclusion

What kind of bar does Paul set for the life and duty of the minister in his pastoral letter to the Thessalonians? He calls upon the pastor to minister for the godly progress of his people’s souls. He calls upon the pastor to minister in a very personal way, so that his people would truly know that he cares for them. He calls upon the pastor to minister by pouring himself out for his people’s spiritual good. What a high bar this is. This should cause pastors to cry out, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:16) This should also cause us to rejoice:

Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.
(2 Corinthians 3:5–6)

This is why the ministry is ultimately Christ’s heavenly ministry through the means of sinful, earthly men (2 Corinthians 4:7). Why must pastors strive for their people’s progress? Because Jesus is holy and has given his Spirit to lead us. Why must pastors know their people personally? Because Jesus knows our names and cares for us individually. Why must pastors pour themselves out for their people? Because Jesus did. He “loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2). When you pray for your pastor, pray particularly that he would grow in love, holiness, service,

and concern for you, not for his own personal benefit, but that you might experience Jesus more until he comes again.

2

Pastor Paul's Prayer

1 Thessalonians 1:2–3



One of the means by which we rekindle our zeal for the Lord and press on in our race as Christians is prayer. We need to be challenged as people and churches to become more a people of prayer than we already are. Church history shows that the “success” of the church is directly linked to the prayer of the church. When God’s people pray, especially as they gather for prayer, God pours out his Spirit and blessing.

And what is true of God’s people as a whole is especially true of the church’s pastors. The passage before us details Paul’s prayer for the church in Thessalonica. In fact, all of chapters 1–3 are one long prayer. Notice that as Paul opens in prayer here, saying, We give thanks to God (1:2), he continues his prayer in the next chapter, saying, “We

also thank God” (2:13), and then he concludes this lengthy prayer, saying, “As we pray most earnestly night and day” (3:10). His prayer climaxes in 3:11–13 with a beautiful benediction for the Thessalonians. All this shows us that Paul was a praying pastor. The opening of this long prayer teaches us about the relationship of a pastor to his people in prayer.

Men of Prayer

Paul’s example—which is also the example of Silvanus and Timothy—sets before us that the pastor is to be a man of prayer. As we hear him praying, especially as we saw above (1:2, 2:13, 3:9–10), behind these words is the realization that Paul was devoted to prayer: We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work (1:2–3). Paul uses present tense verbs here when he says, give thanks ... constantly mentioning ... remembering. The translators of the English Standard Version recognize Paul’s language here speaks of a pattern, a habit of prayer when it translates Paul’s literal construction, “making mention,” as constantly mentioning, since this is a present tense verb that speaks not of Paul’s present prayer for them only when he wrote it, but of his pattern of prayer for them in an ongoing way.

Paul fleshes out what he means by giving thanks to God always and mentioning the Thessalonians to God constantly a little later, when he says he, Silvanus, and Timothy prayed for them “night and day” (3:10). While it is true that this is a literary way of saying what Paul says elsewhere, “pray without ceasing” (5:17), it is also true that Paul reflects here an Old Testament pattern of prayer from the daily morning and evening burning of incense in the tabernacle (Exodus 30:7–8). One of the practical and outward ways he expressed his praying “always” and “constantly” was to pray every morning and every evening for them. This is a beautiful pattern for pastors—and

all of God's people for that matter—to pray, opening and closing their days in devotion to God.

It goes without saying, then, that Paul prayed a lot. The ever-present temptation for pastors and those preparing for the ministry is to think, “Well, I’m off the hook. After all, Paul was an apostle.” But let me remind you that when a man is called to the office of minister of the Word he is also called to a ministry of prayer:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will *devote ourselves to prayer* and to the ministry of the word.” And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase. (Acts 6:1–7; emphasis added)

The apostles' devotion as ministers was just as much to prayer as it was to preaching. A minister of the Gospel in the New Covenant, then, fulfills his calling in two ways. First, he is a spokesman of God to his people in preaching God's Word to them. Second, he is a spokesman of the people to God in his prayers on their behalf. This is why one of the fathers of English Puritanism, William Perkins (1558–1602), described the pastoral ministry as “the art of prophesying.”¹

He said this because just as prophets in the Old Covenant both preached and prayed, so in the New Covenant the ministers have this prophetic anointing to preach and to pray. In fact, in the Dutch Reformed tradition this was codified in the various church government documents of its particular reformation in the synods of Middelburg (1581), The Hague (1586), and finally culminating in the Church Order of the Synod of Dort (1618–19). The Church Order that I operate under continues this tradition, saying, “The office of ministers is to continue in prayers and the ministry of the Word.”² What we go on to read in the book of Acts is that when the ministers of God’s Word devote themselves—and when their people allow them sufficient time to do this—the ministry of the Word spreads and increases (Acts 6:7) in the conversion of lost sinners and the edification of the church.

Perpetual in Prayer

Pastor Paul’s prayer is also illustrative of the Christian life. All Christians, like their pastors, are called to be perpetual in prayer. Yes, *we* all, as God’s people, are to be devoted to prayer. While it is Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy who are praying for the Thessalonians here always and constantly mentioning them in their prayers (1:2), Paul goes on to remind them that “you became imitators of us” (1:6). Therefore Paul goes on to exhort them later in this same letter to “pray without ceasing” (5:17). Why? Because this was “the will of God in Christ Jesus” (5:18). God’s will for your life is that you pray perpetually. Why does God call the church’s members to be devoted to perpetual prayer? Let me give you two basic reasons.

First, there is so much to be thankful for. Thank God for his goodness to you in the beauty of his creation, which is the theater of his glory. For some of us who struggle with depression, feeling depressed, and having a melancholic personality, it is so important to remember this and to enjoy God’s good creation. Thank God for

his mercy to you in his providence. Those of you who have much, rejoice, and be a blessing to those who have little. Those who have little, rejoice that God is still providing for you in amazing ways—even through the hands of those who have much. Thank God for his grace to you in his beloved Son. Where your sins abound, his grace superabounds (Romans 5:20). When your sins make you feel dried up, his grace is poured upon you. When you feel spiritually empty in your sins, his grace is lavished upon you in his Son. All of this is so wonderfully expressed in the *Book of Common Prayer's* “General Thanksgiving,” which begins like this:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all men; We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.³

This idea that at its root prayer is grateful thanksgiving is so important to remember. Prayer is not an attempt to earn anything from God. Prayer is not an attempt to repay God for anything he has given to us. Prayer is our response of gratitude for the blessings of God. The Heidelberg Catechism captures this so beautifully, when it says,

Q. 116. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

A. Because it is *the chief part of thankfulness* which God requires of us, and because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who earnestly and without ceasing ask them of Him, and render thanks unto Him for them. (emphasis added)

Prayer is the chief, or most important part, of our thankful response

to God. The Westminster Larger Catechism also has a wonderful question and answer on the topic of prayer, which gets to the heart of why we are grateful in the first place:

Q. 180. What is it to pray in the name of Christ?

A. To pray in the name of Christ is, in obedience to his command, and in confidence on his promises, to ask mercy for his sake; not by bare mentioning of his name, but by *drawing our encouragement to pray, and our boldness, strength, and hope of acceptance in prayer, from Christ and his mediation.* (emphasis added)

Do you see that? As the Lord perpetually prays for you (Hebrews 7:25), you are to be encouraged, emboldened, strengthened, and assured to respond in prayer perpetually to him.

The second reason we are called to perpetual prayer is because there is so much to be on guard for. As Paul goes on to say later in this letter, “keep awake and be sober” (5:6). Why? Our own sinful nature rises within us perpetually. Pray perpetually for strength to resist perpetually. The world in which we live is relentless. Pray perpetually for protection perpetually. The devil is ever-prowling (1 Peter 5:8). Pray perpetually for confidence to stand with the armor of God perpetually (Ephesians 6:10–17). We have to fight our entire life against our sins. There is a spiritual battle at hand. Engage it. But isn’t it interesting how after Paul exhorts us to stand and fight against the devil, he says this, “praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication?” (Ephesians 6:18) We pray because we need to fight in the strength that God alone can supply.

Persevering by Prayer

We also learn in Pastor Paul’s prayer that we are called to persevere by prayer. In prayer, Paul and his companions brought before the Lord

the remembrance of the Thessalonians' work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1:3). His prayer was not a sentimental remembrance of a bygone time with them. His prayer was that they would continue in these spiritual gifts and graces. Paul wanted to enliven them to persevere. We are to persevere in prayer that we might persevere by prayer. One practical thing we learn here is that in prayer we meditate upon God's grace to us in Christ as well as in us by the Holy Spirit. And as we remember his work in us we are aided to persevere.

We need to persevere in three areas, according to Paul's prayer: faith, hope, and love. These three "cardinal virtues" are frequently mentioned in the New Testament by Paul (1 Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5-6; Colossians 1:4-5) and by Peter (1 Peter 1:3-8), and even later in this very letter (5:8). They are so important that John Calvin called them "a brief definition of true Christianity."⁴

First, we need to persevere in the work of faith by means of prayer. The Thessalonians' faith in Christ in the midst of great opposition was hard. But that's what made it faith. In the same way pray that your faith will persevere and that it will be focused outside yourself and rest in Christ's past work and become productive.⁵

Second, we need to persevere in the labor of love by means of prayer. The Thessalonians' love for each other was in the midst of great opposition from their very neighbors, whom they were called to love. As well, their love for building the body of Christ was laborious, but it was a building that had lasting value. Paul's term here labor is not the same as that for work above. The word for labor speaks of the exertion associated with work.⁶ Paul is saying that these believers needed to pray so that their love, which was exhausting, would not grow cold. They needed to persevere in love that was focused outward towards others.

Third, we need to persevere in the steadfastness of hope by means of prayer. The Thessalonians had a resolve that all they were doing was of lasting value, because it would be brought to its culmination at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. They didn't see this before their eyes in the present, but they persevered in its hope for the future. As Paul says to the Romans, "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:24–25). In the same way pray that your hope of heaven will persevere and that it will be focused outward and cling to the promise of Christ's future coming.⁷

In saying that we need to pray for our faith, hope, and love, no doubt you noticed that they are described in arduous terms: work, labor, and steadfastness? As St. Chrysostom said, "Merely to love is no labor at all. But to love genuinely is great labor."⁸ Why is it that things of lasting value take so much effort? One reason is because life itself is hard. As the Scottish preacher, James Fergusson said, "The life of a Christian is not a life of idleness, not a life of ease, nor yet a life mutually prosperous and free from the cross. His faith must have work, his love must have labour, and his hope must be attended with patience under the cross."⁹ Prayer is a necessary means of bringing our faith, hope, and love to a stronger place. This is why we can call prayer a means of grace (WLC, Q&A 154). It is not a sacrament, as that requires an outward sign, but it is a means of growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. The means of grace are chiefly and primarily the means that God uses to communicate his grace to us: preaching and sacraments. In response to this, prayer is a means by which we cleave to and continue in that grace, by which we persevere, by which we long for more.

Conclusion

Therefore God calls us to be praying individuals, but especially to be a praying people, a praying church. Prayer is not flashy, showy, or a matter of our ingenuity. As E. M. Bounds, a nineteenth-century Methodist minister, once wrote in his little book, *Power Through Prayer*,

We are constantly straining to devise new methods, new plans, new organizations to advance the Church and secure enlargement and efficiency for the gospel. This trend of the day has a tendency to lose sight of the man or sink the man in the plan or organization. God's plan is to make much of the man, far more of him than of anything else. Men are God's method. The Church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men.¹⁰

Will you be one of those men, women, young adults, and children? Will you devote yourself to pray unceasingly for yourself, your brothers and sisters, and for the ministry of the church and its gospel message to the world? Let us be grateful for Christ's prayers for us by being a praying church to him.