

Through Him who Strengthens Me

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[0 : 00] God's Word. Please do keep that passage open in front of you if you're able, but let us just pray before we consider it together. Let us pray. Father, we thank you once more for your words.

We thank you for the truth that speaks into our lives. We pray now that you might speak to us through your Word by your Spirit, and so shape us into the likeness of your Son for His glory, and it is in His name that we pray. Amen.

Amen. If you were to come and spend a week at our house, maybe even just a day, there is one phrase you would hear me say so often, but you'd probably think it was my sort of life motto or something.

Mary, that's my wife, I need help. Mary, I need help. Mary, I need help.

The phrase comes out ridiculously often in every imaginable circumstance. When I'm trying to get her son dressed, when I'm trying to cook something, when I'm writing a sermon, when I'm trying to remember what I was supposed to buy at Asda, when I'm trying to find something that Mary's sneakily hidden in plain sight.

[1 : 33] I need help. Now, you're probably sitting there thinking, it sounds like Mary might need some help, and you might not be wrong. I ask for help a lot, but I don't think I'm alone in that.

Maybe not in such desperate, pitiful circumstances as me, but we all ask for help all the time, don't we? Whether that's with chores around the house, with assignments at uni, with help at work, homework at school, if you're young, there's lots of things we need to ask older people for help with, and when you start getting old, there's lots of things you start asking young people for help with.

We all ask for help, don't we? And we do it, we do it when we know we can't manage something on our own, don't we? We ask for help when we know we cannot do something on our own.

Which parts of life, I wonder, do we think we can do on our own? Let me maybe just put that another way.

Which parts of life do we think we can do without God's help? If you want to know the answer to that question, I think we can just consider for a moment what we pray for.

[3 : 17] What do we ask God for? And we'll get a pretty good idea of where in our life we think we need God's help. We saw this morning, didn't we, that we should be asking God to provide our daily bread.

That's the reality of our level of dependence on him. Because whether we realize it or not, we are entirely dependent on him.

From the food that fills our cupboards, to the lungs, the air that fills our lungs, to the strength we have to get out of bed in the morning. In every single part of life, we are dependent on God.

Someone who realized that very well and let it shaped the way he lived and spoke was the Apostle Paul. We're just going to be looking at the short prayer at the end of 1 Thessalonians 3 this evening and see from it, I think, three things that Paul is committed to and that I think he wants his audience to be committed to as well.

And the first of those things, most obviously of all, is that Paul is committed to prayer, isn't he? Paul wrote a lot of letters in the early church.

[4 : 41] We've got them from Romans all the way to Philemon in your New Testament. And you will find they are full, absolutely packed with prayer.

One of the reasons he is committed to prayer is because Paul knows. Paul rightly recognizes that he can do nothing apart from God.

Now, if you remember last week, or you just cast your eyes back over the previous few verses, you'll notice that Paul was desperate, wasn't he? Desperate to return to the Thessalonian church.

He spoke repeatedly in the previous verses of his longing to be with these young believers. And his desire to see them again is so strong because he is so desperate to see them grow in their love for Christ.

Two things Paul is desperate for, to visit them and to see them go in love. And what does he do with them both? He takes them to God in prayer because he understands who God is and who he is.

[5 : 58] Just look at how he opens in verse 11. He doesn't just say, I pray that we might be able to come to you, does he? He wants the Thessalonians to know who he brings these petitions to.

May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, it might seem fairly obvious, but it's so important to remember and so easy to forget.

Who is Paul praying to? He is praying to God. God, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, who holds the universe in his hands.

Who knows every star in the sky by name. Who knows every hair on our head. God, who has ordained everything from the beginning of time into eternity, perfectly orchestrated to bring glory to his Son and raise his church in glory at the last day.

Paul is not praying, is he, to a God who might be able to do something. He is praying to a God who is all-powerful and all-wise.

[7 : 14] That is who we bring our prayers to. But he is not just God to us, is he? He is our God and Father. And because of that, we can know and be assured that when we do come with our prayers to him, as our Father, he will always, always do what he knows is best for us.

That doesn't mean he gives us everything we want, does it? It's not a father's job to say yes to every request of their child. It's a father's duty to do what is best for his children, even when they might not understand it.

So God might not respond to our prayers in the way we hope, but you can rest assured that if you knew everything God knew, you would answer every prayer the way he does.

Paul himself would get back to Thessalonica eventually, but it would take a lot longer than I imagine he was hoping for at the time.

But Paul trusted in God's plan, and he knew God's power, and so that's why he went to him in prayer.

[8 : 45] Not so that he would get his way, but so that God's will would be carried out through him. Paul knew he didn't know everything, and Paul knew he couldn't do anything on his own.

That's why Paul was committed to prayer. If we think we're smart enough to do it ourselves, or strong enough to make something happen by our own will, then we're not going to rush to God with it, are we?

But if we recognize that God is infinitely more able, more wise, and more loving than we are, when that's how we know God, then we will, as Paul does, go to him with everything.

Our right view of God, our creator, redeemer, and father in heaven, and our right view of ourselves, dependent on God, will drive us before his throne in humble prayer, time and time again.

So we see, first of all, that Paul is committed to prayer, isn't he? The second thing we see here, I think, is that Paul is committed to discipleship.

[10 : 12] Paul's first prayer request, that there in verse 11 in this prayer, is that the Lord would clear the way for the apostle and his companions to return to Thessalonica. But if we go just back a verse, back to verse 10, we'll see that this is more than a request just for traveling mercies, isn't it?

Verse 10, night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Paul is begging for the way to be cleared so that he can supply what is lacking in their faith.

He wants to help them follow Jesus. That's what we mean by the word disciple. It's nothing fancy. A disciple is someone who follows Jesus, who loves Jesus, and loves to live for Jesus.

Discipling is just helping other people do just that. And Paul is desperate to get back to Thessalonica to help them to disciple them. And that is really striking, I think.

When we think back to the account that Joe took us through in the first sermon in this series of Paul's visit to this city. Just put yourself in Paul's shoes as you live out what we read in Acts 17.

[11 : 39] That they arrive in the city of Thessalonica and as they normally did, they went to the synagogue for a few weeks and reasoned with the Jews and some of the God-fearers in the local synagogue, teaching them and showing them from the scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

But after only a few weeks in Thessalonica, they had to flee the city in the dead of night. Because there was a large crowd who really disliked what they were teaching and wanted rid of them. So they formed a mob and hounded them out the city. Just put yourself right in that position. You've had to flee the city in the dead of night because there is a mob roaming the streets hunting you down.

Paul escaped to a place called Berea. That's about 50 miles away. Now, 50 miles is a pretty decent distance now, isn't it? It was about two days' journey then.

He's escaped to a town two days away. And when some of the mob in Thessalonica hear that Paul's in Berea, they are so opposed to him that they make the two-day journey to Berea to go and start a mob there.

[13:03] And so Paul has to be escorted out the city and onto a ship and sent away. Now tell me, if that was you, I mean, how many of us are booking next year's summer holiday in Thessalonica?

Probably not many. That was Paul's experience in this place. And I think that's what makes his prayer in verse 11 all the more amazing.

That place where I had to flee for my life from, I am desperate to go back there. Not because it's any safer, but because there are young Christians who I can help.

That is Paul's level of commitment to discipling young Christians. That's amazing, isn't it? I think there's a lot we can take just from this little verse.

We see, don't we, that discipleship is necessary. Paul knows that this young church needs someone to help them on their way. You cannot do the Christian life in isolation from other believers.

[14:22] We see that discipleship is personal. Paul isn't content, is he, to just send them a letter and pray for them? He knows he needs to be there with them. Personal relationships are the normal means through which Christ grows his followers in their love for him.

We see that discipleship is costly. Paul was willing to go into danger for them. It will at the very least cost us time and energy and it will likely be emotionally draining.

both to be discipled and to be discipling. So discipleship is necessary. It is personal. It is costly. It is all these things. But above all else, what I think we should be doing off the back of this is praying for it to be happening in our midst.

What Paul does is pray that the Lord would open the necessary doors so that he can teach this young church. Pray that you would be given opportunities to speak the gospel into people's lives. Pray for relationships amongst God's people that are centered on Jesus. Pray that God would remove any obstacles to those relationships being built up and flourishing.

[15:50] If you have people in your life who are helping you follow Jesus, give thanks for them and hold on to those relationships dearly. If you don't feel that you have people like that in your life, pray for it and God will provide.

And pray for people you can help follow Jesus to. If we want to be committed to discipleship like Paul is, we need help. We need God's help.

But no, he will help because it's exactly what he wants to see amongst his people. So we learn that Paul is committed to prayer, he is committed to discipleship and then thirdly and finally, we learn that he is committed to love.

In this short prayer, there is one thing that Paul prays for the Thessalonian church. Just look down there at verse 12 with me. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else just as ours does for you.

Above all else, Paul wants their love to increase. love is central to the Christian life.

[17:20] You can turn to pretty much any book of the Bible and they're the same chorus we'll be ringing throughout. Some of Paul's most famous words are in 1 Corinthians 13.

If I speak in tongues of men or of angels but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and I have a faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to the hardship that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Jesus is asking the Gospels what's the greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

The Apostle John writes in his first epistle, we know we have passed from death to life because we love each other. That is the marker of a true follower of Jesus.

[18 : 36] There are lots of good habits we can build into our daily lives but if you want to see someone who's living all out for Jesus, look for someone who is living a life that loves others.

And so love is something that Paul prays and we should pray might be growing in us.

I think it's important to hear it. Paul is not rebuking the Thessalonians for not being loving. He's not doing that at all. He's not telling them to get their act together and I don't want you to hear that this evening either.

If you just look back at the very beginning of this letter, Paul says in verse 3 of chapter 1, we remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love. Verse 6 of chapter 3, Timothy has just now come to us and brought good news about your faith and love. These were loving people.

[19 : 45] This was a loving church. church. But Paul doesn't say, does he? That's fine, good job, move on to the next thing now. No, he prays that that love would continue to increase and abound and overflow.

flow. If you want to grow as a Christian, then you want to grow in love. And if we want to grow in love, the first thing we should be doing is praying for it.

Because who do we depend on for everything? I'm not going to become more loving by sheer willpower. willpower.

We're not going to become more loving by just trying harder. But we will become more loving when we ask the Lord to cause that love to grow in us.

I need help and you need help. And so we ask God, help us grow in our love for each other and for all.

[20 : 59] Paul will go on in this book to look at what the Thessalonians should be doing in order to live this life. But I think it is so key in this book that this prayer comes here before he instructs them how to live.

He knows those instructions will be in vain if God does not first cause that love to increase and overflow. and it increases and overflows towards everyone.

If you notice that there in verse 12, to one another and to everyone else. Our love should be for one another but it doesn't end there, does it?

What sets the love of Christ apart from the love of this world is that the love of Christ loves those who hate him. We learned in chapter 2 that the Thessalonians were suffering at the hands of their own people.

They faced very real opposition and persecution. Seems kind of implicit as we get to chapter 4 that some of them were dying for their faith. But Paul doesn't pray, does he, that their love would abound for all except for those who are persecuting you.

[22 : 28] It'd be easier if he did, wouldn't it? But he doesn't. The love of Christ does not stop at people who are easy to love.

It does not stop at the walls of this church. It does not stop at the people who come in here on a Sunday. It goes beyond these walls and into the world, even to those who would persecute us.

That's not easy, is it? Sometimes we have a hard time loving even lovable people. But people who oppose us, people who frustrate us, people who have let you down, people who have hurt you, they need the same love and the same gospel that we have received.

And while they might be undeserving of it, so are we. So was I. So let us pray that our love for them would grow just as it would for one another.

and in showing that love to others, we're only, aren't we, showing the same love that Christ has first shown to us. For it is He who loved us while we were still His enemies.

[23 : 58] He laid down His life for the very people who crucified Him. That is the love we are to be abounding in. That is the love which we pray will be overflowing in us.

And if we want to know what it looks like, just a little glimpse in practical terms, Paul helpfully says, doesn't he, just as we loved you, and he spent three chapters of this book, hasn't he, talking about what his love for the Thessalonian church looked like.

I recommend you go back and read those chapters, but let me just summarize for us. It is a love that prays for others. It is a love that cares for the church like a family.

It is a love that sacrificially bears many burdens for the sake of those around us. It is a love that willingly gives up comfort and peace and safety and popularity in order to share the gospel. That is the love Paul is talking about. It is a love that is grounded not in how much people deserve to be loved, but in how much God has loved us. Now, don't beat yourself up if that is not where you are this evening because I'm standing right there with you.

[25 : 32] But let us pray that that is the kind of love we will each and every one of us be growing in. Your will be done.

Those are the words we prayed this morning. Loving each other and everyone else is God's will. And if we pray for it, it will happen.

Ask and you will receive. Take a moment at the end of this service to sit and ask God to help you and the people around you and me grow in our love for each other and for everyone else.

And if that's what we're praying for, if that's what we're striving for, not only will the Lord himself do it, but through it, through that love we share, he will present us holy and blameless in his presence when the Lord Jesus comes again.

It's hard to tell in the English translation but verse 13 is not so much a final request of Paul's as it is the result he knows the Lord will bring about if our love is growing.

[26 : 53] And when I say if our love is growing, I'm not putting the pressure on us there. We've just seen, haven't we, we ask God to help our love grow.

Through that, through that love that he gives us, he will establish us holy and blameless before his throne. That is our hope and our joy.

It's a reminder, I think again, of what we were hearing this morning. There is no guarantee, the Thessalonians would have known this all too well, there is no guarantee that our love for others will win the praise of people.

But there is a guarantee that God will present us holy and blameless when the Lord Jesus returns. And that is something so much more worth living for.

So three things Paul is committed to, three things we can follow him in being committed to, prayer, discipleship and love. And just know when we come before him with these prayers, we come before a God and Father who knows what is best for his children.

[28 : 14] who loves us with a love we cannot fathom. And so whatever we may pass, so long as we are in Christ, we can rest assured that he will present us holy and blameless when Jesus returns.

The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Let us pray. Let us pray. our God and Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you that you are a God who hears our prayers.

We thank you that you are a God who cares for his people as a father for his children. we pray now that you would help us to grow in our love, that you might provide and strengthen us in that.

And we pray that you would open doors for us to help love one another and help each other to follow Jesus each and every day. In his name we pray.

Amen. Amen.