

1 Thessalonians 3: 11-13; "Paul's Benedictory Prayer", Sermon # 15 in the series - "A Persevering Faith", Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on July 20th, 2008 in the Afternoon Worship Service.

I would call these words which I have just read to you, Paul's benedictory prayer to the saints at Thessalonica. A benediction is an act of uttering a blessing, by either a minister or a private person. It is often, as it is here, a prayer which is spoken by the minister of God, a prayer of good-will to them, a prayer in which he hopes that God's definite and rich blessings will fall upon that congregation. It is often given at the end of a message which is delivered by that minister, but not always. Just because Paul was not in their presence, just because he could not utter His Apostolic wished blessing to them in person, does not mean that he could not do it by means of this letter. What a man is, and can say in person, he can often do just as well in a letter. And sometimes, Paul in his letters will break out into a benediction right in the middle of stating a truth, or expressing a strong desire of what he would like to see God do. Let me ask you this afternoon whether you have strong desires for the people of God; that they might grow in grace and in the knowledge of Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ? The essence of a true and godly zeal for Christ's kingdom and cause is often expressed in words which communicate the strong desires of a passion for the souls of fellow Christians; that they would know God's richest blessings upon them. If you have developed a prayer life with God in regard to other Christian people, it is very probable that you understand something of Paul's zeal and desire for the church at Thessalonica. You have the same desires as he does; the same ardent passion that he expresses here. If you do not, perhaps your heart will take fire this afternoon, and Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian church will become your prayer for this church, and for all the churches of God's saints. It is something which you will never regret if you start doing this very thing, because your growth in Christ is bound up in it. Your glorifying God with your life is bound up in it. The spiritual strength and health of your Christian life is bound up in prayer for other Christians and their growth in holiness. It is bound up in your strong desires to see others besides yourself grow in their faith, and love, and every grace. Paul's benediction consists of 3 benedictory prayer wishes concerning the church at Thessalonica. What are these blessings which Paul wishes for? Well the first is a prayer for God's direction. The second is a prayer for love to abound. And the third is a prayer for holiness; holiness both then, and at Christ's Second Coming. Let's think about these things for a few minutes.

1st - Paul's benedictory prayer for God's direction. (Verse 11)

"Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you." I wonder how many of us really understand how sovereign our awesome God is in directing not only the affairs of the motions of the planets and the stars, but sovereign also in the direction of men. Truly, we ought to take better

cognizance of it than we do, because if we did, we would be praying more about the plans that we make, in terms of where we want to go and what we want to accomplish. Paul has already told us before in this letter that it was his full intention to have come to them before this, but he had been hindered, and that more than once. Why was this? Paul's purpose was definite, his resolve was firm, but not only Satan hindered him, but it was evident that it was not God's purpose at that time to permit it. We need to remember that ultimately we are very much in God's mind and God's plans. Turn over with me to James Chapter 4 and you will see how James reproveth those Christians who scarcely think to include God in their plans of what they will do and where they will go. Verse 13 says, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow." "For what is your life?" "It is a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away." "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.'" "But now you boast in your arrogance." "All such boasting is evil." "Therefore to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." Now James is saying here that people make great plans, and may think only in a human sense of what their plans mean. They may not at all be thinking; "Perhaps God would not approve of my plans." And yet they plunge right into a business venture in a foreign country or a foreign city and think that somehow all will be well. This speaks to God of pride and self-sufficiency. It speaks volumes to the One who knows that our life and all the plans and decisions that we make, are in His hands, and in His hands alone, to be established. You say, "Well I knew that; yes I do know that." Well, blessed are you if you act upon it. For the verse after the verses that I read said this. "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." In other words, if you know that God is sovereign, and He alone can bless with success any plans that you make; why is it that you do not pray and fervently seek direction from him? Perhaps it will come to you in prayer that these plans of yours are only your boasting in your own abilities. God is not impressed with this. Rather you ought to humble yourself and think about all that you do in light of what God may want; of what He may be interested in.

Turn with me over to Proverbs 16 and you will see this truth again. There are 2 verses here in this chapter which pertain to our study of asking God to direct us. Verse 1 says, "The preparations of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord." The preparations of the heart are a man's plans. It is something that we should do. It is something which belongs to us to do. But this verse is telling us that we all need to acknowledge the fact that the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. It is just like a parent with his child. The child may make many plans, but if they have good and godly parents they know that they are not going to go anywhere or do anything without consulting with their parent's will. They will ask, and if they cannot get a definite answer, they may even beg or plead, but they know that they will not be able to go without the answer from the parent's tongue. It may be yes; it may be no; and it may be perhaps. But the answer will

come. Similarly with God, who is our Father, if we are walking in the Spirit, we should seek His counsel, both in His Word and by prayer; we should ask for wisdom and lay out all of our plans before Him. We will order our prayer before Him and then look up. And He will direct us.

Look at Proverbs 16: 9. Here it says, "A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps." This verse goes beyond the Christian's bare asking of permission of God for His approval of his plans. It goes beyond that, to the Lord's providential ordering of the events which will bring his plans to fruition. "The Lord directs his steps." "The steps of a good man are ordered (established) of the Lord, and He delights in His way," it says in Psalm 37: 23. These are almost the exact words of the Apostle Paul. "Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ direct our way to you." We need to take cognizance of the fact that our God is this way toward us, each and every day of our lives. Our plans are only accomplished in stages and by our taking definite steps. God delights in looking into our ways, and our plans, and our thoughts and motives for everything that we are doing. But will you not remember, O believer, that the Lord God has much more to accomplish with your life than simply your plans. He has His own plans and purposes which He desires you to see and to understand with your own eyes. He is going to interact with you in every stage and every step of the way. He has is going to most definitely weave His purposes and plans together with what you desire and what you plan, so that His will might be done in your life. Sometimes things will go very smoothly and sometimes there will be some difficulties, and at some times there will be great difficulties. But great or small, neither should be interpreted by us to mean that we are outside of his directive will unless there is sin in our heart or actions. Paul said that he was well-content with difficulties and yet he was in the center of God's directive will. God's will and His desire is to make you over into the image of His blessed Son and cause all things to work together for good to you in the process. That goes way beyond our plans. Remember that your prayer ought to be the same as your dear Savior's was as He submitted to the Father's will of going to the cross to bear our sins. "Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." (Matthew 26: 42) There was holy submission every step of the way in our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul as well, recognizes the will of the Father in his going back to his beloved Thessalonian believers. "May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you." What is beautiful here, is the way that he links the Father and the Son together in the direction that will be given to him. Jesus Christ is no lesser member of the Trinity in Paul's mind. He can pray to the Lord Jesus and to the Father and see each person as Divine, and yet but one God. These persons of our Divine Trinity are of one mind and Jesus speaks of it in John 16: 26 and 27. "In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you; because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God." We often think only, as Christians, of the love of Jesus Christ for us; that love that left the halls of heaven and came into

this fallen sinful world in His incarnation; that love that gave us the words of eternal life; that love that sealed those words with His blood; and that love which is revealed in the gospel. But will you not consider that in matters of God's purpose and His plans in electing love, and His predestinating purpose; as that purpose is being fulfilled in His providential ordering of all things, that the Father takes the lead Himself in directing us? That is what Paul is saying. And since the Son is at the right hand of the Father; He knows all those plans and purposes are only fulfilled by and because of His grace; and He will intercede for us according to the Father's will. This is why Paul prays this way.

Now the 2nd Benedictory Prayer Wish that Paul prays for, for the Thessalonian believers, is a prayer that they may increase and abound.

(Verse 12)

Increase and abound in what? Verse 12 says what it is; "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you,...." Now to understand what Paul intends here I think that it would be good for us to turn over to Romans Chapter 5 for a moment. Commentators are divided about which person of the Divine Trinity the words, "the Lord" refer to here. Some believe that since the word is Kurios in the Greek, that this means that it refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. And we must say, that in the answer to our prayers, that our Lord Jesus is the only mediator between God and man and the fountain of all life and grace in relation to the requests that we make. But here in Romans 5, verse 3 we find these words. "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope." "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." If the love of God has been poured out within our hearts by the Holy Spirit, then will not the increase of that love in relation to men, also come from Him; the Lord the Spirit? Yes, I believe that it is so. This is something that Paul prayed for in the lives of the believers at Thessalonica, and it is something that we should also pray for as well; an increase of love and an abounding of that love. But that this love is also coming to the Lord's people through and from our living Lord Jesus Christ cannot be denied. Turn over to Philippians 1: 9. Here Paul says, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense until the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." There it is; the fruits of righteousness, and specifically a sincere and discerning love, and carrying of oneself in an inoffensive manner towards others; this comes "by Jesus Christ to the glory of God." This is really what Paul is praying for in 1 Thessalonians 3: 12; only it is amplified more in this passage, in order to tell us what he meant.

It all comes together when we turn over to Romans 8: 26. "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses." (We may have a weakness in regard to showing forth our love for the brethren and our love for all men.) "For we do not know

what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." "Now He who searches the hearts (the "He" is our Lord Jesus Christ) knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God." Actually, we can see from this, that it is the whole Trinity of persons in the Godhead who will bring about this increase and abounding in love of one Christian person for the other, and indeed to all men. Are you a lover of men or an isolationist? An isolationist says, "I don't bother anybody and nobody bothers me." No, my brother; that is not what you are called to. You are called to increase and abound in love for the brethren and for all men. God by His super abounding grace is the only one who can make you, or cause you, to increase and abound in love, but that is exactly what His purpose is. Will you receive it? People ought to be saying things about you; at least to themselves if to no one else. Things like this. "That man really cares for my soul." "He is sincere in his love for Jesus, and he is sincere in his love for me." "He doesn't approve of all of my faults and sins. He even will show them to me at times. But I know that there is something wonderfully different about his kindness and love." "It must be the love of God." Now, you aren't really seeking for their recognition. You are seeking to show them God's love, the love of Christ. That is a wonderful thing to pray for, for others in this church as well as ourselves. This is what Paul prayed for the Thessalonian church.

Then 3rdly - We have Paul's benedictory prayer for Holiness; both now, and at Christ's Second Coming. (Verse 13)

Paul was praying for love to increase and abound in them, so that "the Lord Jesus might establish their hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints." The Lord Jesus shall do this personally for each of his saints, each of those who have cultivated holiness by the power and grace which He gave them through His Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of holiness. In Romans Chapter 1, verse 4, Paul speaks about the fact that "Jesus Christ our Lord was declared to be, 'the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead.'" This text sheds light on our verse 13 here. If it was according to the Spirit of holiness that our Lord Jesus was declared to be "the Son of God with power" on the day of His resurrection from the dead; then we also on the day of Christ's coming back for us, the day of our resurrection from the dead; we also will receive the ultimate great work of the Spirit's assurance and power, that on the basis of Christ's death, we will have "our hearts established blameless in holiness before the Father and the Son", at that very time. The fact that we are His Sons shall be plainly declared and seen by all. But let me apply this more personally to you now. If you have been walking in faith, sincerely trusting in our Lord Jesus Christ, and increasing and abounding in your love to all the brethren and to all men; this is because of Christ and the mighty work of His Spirit in you. You should be praying for the establishment of this work in your fellow-believers. This glorious work of having your heart established before God the Father happens in a gradual, progressive

fashion. Christ, because He is faithful, is leading you along by His Holy Spirit in such a way as to establish you in holiness. This work of grace and the assurance of its working to make you holy, will continue to the day of its complete fulfillment. This is what Paul was praying for, for the believers at Thessalonica; that they would experience this, even then, in proportion to their fervent desires for holiness, and to expect the full measure of it, on the day of Christ's return. We shall speak more about this blessed truth when we come to Chapter 4, verse 13. It is our hearts being established at Christ's coming that we speak of here today. Our love for Christ and the brethren and all men is not the ground of our receiving the blessing of this final great attestation to the reality of our salvation, but it is the present evidence of a real work of salvation begun by our God, and it is a work which will be established in our hearts first, and then vindicated, and publicly proclaimed on the day of Christ's coming with all His saints. He will say to those who have been faithful, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." "Enter in to the joy of your Lord."