

# Paul's Priorities in His Prayers

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[ 0 : 00 ] Hello St. Mark's and hello to everyone listening at home. My name is Dylan and I'm the Assistant Pastor at St. Mark's. And we've been covering the book of Genesis in our morning sermon series, but we take a break once a month to focus on the important topic of prayer.

And we want to align ourselves with God's priorities in prayer. We're going to see some of that today. Just to mention how important prayer is in the Bible. You know, in the Old Testament, you've got an entire book devoted to prayer, the book of Psalms, and David and Solomon and other people in Israel wrote down their prayers.

And that's what we've got in the book of Psalms. And it's prayers in every circumstance, good and bad, life-threatening and joyful exuberance for God's goodness.

In the New Testament, we've got Jesus who continues to have prayers of priority in his ministry. He breaks away from his disciples often to go and pray by himself.

And his last night on earth, before his death, he pulls his disciples aside and says, guys, we need to go and pray. When we come to the Apostle Paul, we see that likewise he has a priority for prayer as well.

[ 1 : 15 ] Did you know that Paul includes prayers in all of his letters? And we've got 13 of Paul's letters in the New Testament. And every single one of them has prayers in them. There's not one of his letters that doesn't include a prayer of sorts.

Paul could rightly be called the Apostle of Prayer. If you go through them, which I've done, you'll see, for example, there's six prayers in Romans, seven prayers in Corinthians, a prayer in Galatians, four prayers in Ephesians, four prayers in Philippians, prayers in Colossians, ten prayers together in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, five prayers in the books of Timothy, in the letters to Timothy, and a prayer in Titus, and two prayers in Philemon, a very short little letter.

Thirteen letters, 42 times Paul is praying. So clearly then, prayer is a priority for Paul, which means it's a priority for God, which means it must be a priority for us.

Now then, let's take a look in more detail at Paul and ask, what are Paul's priorities when he prays? If prayer is a priority for him, what are Paul's priorities in his prayers?

We'll look at one of his earliest letters, the letters to the Thessalonians. And then just to give you some background there quickly, Paul got to Thessalonica, which is in Greece, on his second missionary journey, and that is from the year 50 to about 53 AD.

[ 2 : 44 ] Paul starts off in Damascus, and he heads off to Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. And God doesn't, you know, he goes through certain parts, and he's not allowed to preach here or there until he gets what's known as the Macedonian Call.

It's a well-known story, and in a vision he sees a man standing in Macedonia, which is Greece, saying, come over and preach to us. Paul gets on a ship, and he lands in Philippi. Not Philippi in Cape Town, maybe it's Philippi, but in Cape Town we call it Philippi.

And there's a famous story in Philippi where Paul has success, but then it all goes wrong. The Jews get jealous, the local town people get jealous, and they throw him in jail.

And there's a famous story of Paul converting the Philippian jailer. But Paul has to escape, and he runs down the road, and he gets to Thessalonica. And he spends some weeks there with good success.

But again, the local Jewish population gets jealous that there are a bunch of pagans listening to Paul and being converted, and they cause trouble, and Paul has to escape at night and run away again.

[ 3 : 51 ] He goes down the road to Berea, and from there he ends up in Athens and in Corinth. And it's in Corinth that he spends about two years.

And in Corinth, he's writing the letters back to the church that he planted in Thessalonica just a few months prior. And so that helps us understand some of Paul's worries and concerns that come out in those letters.

Primarily, he's worried that they're going to be standing firm in the persecutions that they're going through. And he's glad to hear that they are. And that's going to come out in some of our points a bit later. So the first thing, we'll look at a few things then.

We're going to look at the priorities of what Paul gives thanks for in prayer. We'll see that at the start. And then we'll look at the priorities of what he asks for in prayer.

And then finally, we'll look at the goals of prayer. What are the goals that Paul wants? Is there something that wraps it all together? In our reading today, Paul gives thanks for three very important things.

[ 4 : 55 ] When he writes to Christians, he's looking for certain things. He wants to see that things are happening in their life. And he spells out for us in the first few verses. Let's read verse 3 and 4 again.

So the first thing Paul is looking for is growing faith.

We thank you. We thank the Lord for you because your faith is growing more and more. What we pray for tells us what our priorities are. And it's interesting when we pray for our children.

We pray for good health and happy childhood, for friends at school, for school, etc. For a good school. And we pray for our friends. We often pray for them to get well if they're sick, support in hard economic times.

But do we pray that their faith will grow more and more? That they will trust God more and more? That they'll have a deeper understanding of His word? That they'll have a deeper hunger for God and the things of God?

[ 6 : 12 ] That our understanding, their understanding of theology would be deepened and grow? Now we often talk about that their relationship with God would grow and that's fine. Paul here talks about faith, that their trust in God would increase.

Now Paul is here giving thanks to God that he can see that their faith is growing. So clearly he's looking for it and wanting to be sure that it's there. And that's a challenge for us. If we are praying for growing and deepening faith for others, when we see it, do we tell them?

Paul has been obviously praying about it and he thanks God that it's there and he tells them about it. And that's very encouraging to do. Maybe we need to do the same thing. Hey, send a message to someone.

Hey, I've been praying for you, for your faith to be strengthened and deepened. And I can see that it's really happening. And it's been growing a lot. That would be a lovely letter or message to get from someone.

If you're praying for this in others, let them know so they can be encouraged, just like Paul is doing here in the letter. Then Paul says that he thanks God because their faith is growing more and their love for one another is increasing more and more as well.

[ 7 : 32 ] So Paul sees increasing acts of love in the people that he's praying for. Note, he doesn't just say that they have love. They've got love and that's fine. I thank God that you've got love for each other.

That's not what Paul is saying thank you for. He's saying thank you that their acts of love are growing more and more. Not that they've got love, but that their love is increasing. Notice I'm saying acts of love because love needs to show itself in actions and words.

Paul isn't talking about feelings here. Oh yes, I've got deep feelings of love towards people in the church, as good as that is. Now he wants it to be acting out and doing things, to be active.

Notice that it's love, that it's the love everyone has for everyone. The love of all of you, the love all of you have for one another is increasing more and more.

The whole church is loving the whole church. Every church member is loving every church member and they're doing it more and more all the time. That's noteworthy.

[ 8 : 37 ] Of course it's a challenge to us at St. Mark's. Are we doing that? Are we ensuring that we're all having each other more and more? Not some of us loving some of us and leaving it there.

Now Paul's saying thank you to God because he knows it's happening. He's receiving reports back from his fellow workers as to what's going on there. If he's saying thank you to God that he can see it, then he's been asking God for it.

So here's a challenge for us again. If Paul wrote a letter, would he be able to say, I thank God that everyone is loving everyone else more and more? When we pray for ourselves, are we praying that God would help me to love everyone in the church more and more?

When I pray for others, am I asking God to help them love everyone in the church more and more? Are my prayers aligned with God's priorities?

Am I praying for myself to grow in faith? Am I praying for others to grow in faith as a priority? Yes, we can pray for other things, but these things must also be prayed for. Are we praying that our love or that the whole church's love is growing together?

[ 9 : 46 ] And then Paul goes on to mark out that they're standing strong, that they've got this strong perseverance or ongoing perseverance. Paul boasts about their perseverance in the face of persecution and trial.

Just to read that again. Therefore, among God's churches, we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

The word persecution here is the same word that is used for hunting animals. Paul is saying that the church in Thessalonica is being chased and hunted down like animals with the intent of being killed.

The word for trial is being squeezed or being put under pressure, not having anywhere to escape, to be cornered. The church there is being severely tested.

And Paul is thankful that they are persevering, that they're standing up under it, that they're taking it. They're there, they're solid. They're not wavering. They're not, not that they're not worried, but that they're taking it.

[ 10 : 51 ] They're remaining strong through it. And the word for persevere means to remain standing under, to be able to go through something and not be overcome by it. And note what Paul is not asking for, he's not asking for the pressure to be removed, or for them to have victory and to claim or declare the pressure to be from the devil and to be rejected, or hedges to be strewn around, prayed for.

In fact, persecution is necessarily part of their experience. Paul knew that was going to happen when he went there.

In the first book of Thessalonians, in chapter 2, he says, You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.

For you know quite well that we are destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted, and it turned out that way, as you well know. That was in Paul's first letter when he first got to Corinth.

And we're in the second letter now. And it could be up to two years later that Paul is writing this. It could be a few months, but it could well be up to two years later. And he says, Well done, you are still bearing up under all those persecutions and trials.

[ 12 : 13 ] You know, they weren't under lockdown for 21 days. They were in it for the long haul, and they knew where they were going to get into it. And Paul thanks them that they're standing up under it. Rather, they thank God that they're standing up under it.

Now, that doesn't mean we mustn't pray for these things to pass. Take, for example, the coronavirus. We will definitely be praying for this to be removed. But if we are to align ourselves with Paul's priorities in prayer, we must be praying for ourselves and others that we'll be able to remain standing strong during the trials and during hardship and during persecution to remain faithful and true to God through difficult times.

Paul goes on to say that far from being evidence that something is going wrong in their Christian life because they're experiencing trials and persecution and hardship, they're evidence that things are going right in their life.

That's very unexpected. But that's what he says in the next few verses. All this, from verse 5, All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result, you'll be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering.

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result, you'll be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering. Persecutions and trials are horrible, but there's an end goal that makes it all worthwhile.

[ 13 : 40 ] Another reason that we don't have to fret or worry about trials or hardship is that these things are all under God's control.

Paul goes on to say, in verse 6, We don't need to take revenge ourselves because God is going to do it for us.

Yes, it'll take a while, but it will happen. And boy, will it come as a big shock to those who have been giving us hard times.

There's some very straight talk for those who harm or hurt Christians in this passage in any way. Friends, we can be assured, God has got our backs. And that leads Paul to pray for a number of things for the church in Thessalonica.

So those are the things that Paul gives thanks for. Those are the things that Paul is looking for in their lives. He's looking for growth in faith, for loving everyone more and more, and for standing strong in persecution and hard times and trials.

[15:01] Next, Paul asks God to give the Thessalonians some certain things, and these are the priorities that we need to make part of our own life as well. The first is that they will be made worthy.

We've just read that. But the passage continues on in verse 11. With this in mind, we constantly pray for you that our God may count you worthy of His calling and that by His power, He may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by faith.

We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in Him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul prays that God would count the church worthy of its calling.

God wants people worthy of His kingdom, worthy of His love and worthy of His blessings. He doesn't just want anybody. Now, this is a challenge to us because we are told we are not worthy to receive God's kingdom, and in fact, we've seen that in our stories in Genesis.

While this is true of us when God calls us into His kingdom, we are indeed unworthy, nonetheless, He doesn't want us to stay unworthy. As a topsy-turvy way that God has ordered His kingdom is He calls unworthy people into His kingdom, kind of takes spiritual paupers, if you were, and in a sense declares them to be princes.

[16:20] He adopts us as sons and as Paul says in Romans, as co-heirs with Christ. That makes us a prince or princess. And then He constantly tells us to live up to that calling, to who we are.

Now, this is counterintuitive to every other religion that says you can only get in if you make yourself worthy. God says, No, you're not worthy. You can't make yourself worthy.

But I'll include you in my kingdom. Now live up to your calling. A good way of thinking about it is like in the movies, when a down-and-out boozier inherits a huge amount of money from an uncle, or gets told that he's the long-lost son of a deceased king.

He has to learn all new kinds of ways of talking and behaving and acting and thinking. It's a bit like that with God, except God doesn't expect us to become worthy by ourselves and in our own power. Paul prays that God would make them worthy. So, in prayer, we have access to help from the God who wants us to be worthy. So God wants us to be worthy.

[17:30] He says, I'll make you worthy if you just ask for it. It will happen. Now, I don't want to imply that this is an easy road to be made worthy.

It's not. It's a hard road. It's a long road. It's a difficult road. It's a road that will take us our whole lives. That's why Paul says he constantly prays for the Thessalonians.

Might have missed that in that verse in 11. With this in mind, we constantly pray for you that our God may count you worthy of his calling. We need to be in constant prayer with God, asking him to help us to make our biological family worthy and to make our church family worthy of his calling to be fit for the kingdom.

We're not just praying for ourselves. We're praying for others as well in this. And then, secondly, Paul prays that their kingdom plans would come to fruition.

The next important thing that Paul's asked for is that every good purpose of theirs would come to fulfillment. He says in verse 12, to bring every good purpose and every act prompted by faith to fulfillment.

[18:47] In other words, Paul wants things to happen. He wants the Christians to make them happen. And we're again in that strange place where God expects his people to have plans and to do good, but he is the one who will make them happen.

So that ultimately, if we want to be effective as Christians, we need to again be in constant prayer to God to ask him to give us power to enable us to get things done for his kingdom. Now, what is surprising is that Paul is praying that the Thessalonian church would have plans and purposes that

God will fulfill in the middle of their trials and persecution.

Now, this needs prayer because we know what our tendency is like when trials come our way. One of the dangers of facing outside pressure, like, for example, the coronavirus we're going through, is that we turn inward and only think of our own situation, our own welfare.

Make sure that we're stocked up, that my family is fine. We forget that part of the Christian life is to be in prayer for others and doing good for them. God doesn't want us to let hardship or trials turn us away from being men and women of prayer and action.

Of asking God to help for ourselves, but also of continually looking out for the needs of others, even when we ourselves are going through trials. Now, I don't know about you, but this takes a real extra special grace from God.

[ 20 : 11 ] We all know we don't have the power within ourselves to go through trials and come out winning and smiling and being like roses. We might come through it, but we don't look anything like the poster or the adverts tell us to.

It makes us acutely aware of our shortcomings and weak points and that God wants us to take them to Him. That's why He sends us trials, so that we will turn to Him and ask Him for help when it's hard.

And then lastly, Paul mentions the goals of his prayers, or the one goal, really. Paul ends his section on prayer reminding the Thessalonians of why all these prayers are important, of what the ultimate goal is, what it's all about.

Verse 12. We pray, we pray these things, we pray this, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in Him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is all so that Christ may be glorified in us. As you know, we can spend our whole lives running around trying to achieve things for ourselves. We can spend our lives running away from difficult things and from disappointments and fears and trials and hard times.

[ 21 : 21 ] We can give up trying. We can just let life take its course, throw it all away on alcohol and gambling, maybe just sitting in front of the TV watching sport and that's not really living though.

That's just existing. And anyway, all of these self-medications, all these methods don't really work. The pain doesn't go away. The problems don't stop.

The world doesn't get any better. The funny thing is when we live out our prayers, when we take time to pray about the things Paul is talking about, it helps us to live them out. And when that happens, Jesus gets the glory because he's the one that makes it possible in the first place.

So as we go about our daily lives, struggling to have more faith, struggling to pray for others, struggling that they will have more faith, as we struggle to love others and ask others to be more loving, as we struggle and fall and fail and get back up, as we fight to be made more worthy of our calling, we constantly turn to Jesus to ask forgiveness and help.

That's why Jesus gets the honour for everything that happens in our lives, because we know we can't do these things by ourselves. It's only possible through his help and power. But there's one more strange thing that happens that should help us or motivate us to spend more time in prayer and praying for these things.

[ 22 : 48 ] Not only is Christ glorified, but he is glorified in us. And not only that, we are glorified in him. So just have a look at that verse again.

We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of God, of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. And what this means is that somehow we get to share in the recognition that belongs to Jesus.

Now, it's his glory. We're not stealing from it. But somehow it shines a little bit back on us. What that looks and sounds like is when people say, wow, it's amazing that you're going through such a hard time.

How on earth do you handle it so graciously? Or when someone says, thank you so much for the sandwich that you made me. I was really hungry. Thank you for that water that you gave me. I was really thirsty.

Because when we're doing it for Jesus, we get a little bit of that glory reflected back onto us. A motivating factor to pray for these is knowing that God is actually pleased with us.

[ 23 : 57 ] He's pleased with us when we remain steadfast, when we grow in faith, when we love others and when we pray about these things. It makes him happy that we're doing it. He looks down, he says, yes, excellent, well done.

I'm glad about that. And we get the reflected glory back from Christ. Now, if Paul wrote a letter to the Plumsteadian church, for example, and we're going through the coronavirus, would he be able to write second Plumsteadian?

Would it reflect that we've been constantly praying for our growth, for growing in faith? That we've been praying that others would grow in faith?

Would Paul be pleased with our increasing acts of love for each other? Would he write about how steadfast we've been in the crisis, so much so that he can boast about it? And in years to come, can we claim that we have grown in worthiness to our calling together as a church?

Have we created and made plans that brought about kingdom growth and good works in spite of the difficulties? Did we live for the glory of Christ? The only way that this will happen is if we actually do these things.

[ 25 : 08 ] we have to spend, we have to make prayer priority. And when we make prayer priority, there are priorities in prayer that Paul lays out for us here that are important for the strengthening of the church.

That's why, for example, on Wednesday, we can have our communal prayer meetings so we can carry on this vital kingdom work of praying for ourselves and praying for others and asking God to help make these truths reality in our lives.

well, I hope you can see that prayer is vital for the life of the church and the health of the church and so make an effort to tune in on Wednesday for our communal prayer meeting.

We'll still go ahead and make it happen as best as we can. Well, let's pray for God to help us in all these things. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we know that you've called us to be your people and that you want us to be a people of prayer, to be in constant communication with you, relying on you to make your spiritual truths a reality in our lives.

Lord, we know that you want us to be growing in faith and faithfulness to you. We know that you want us to be loving each other more and more and more in our church. We ask, Lord, for you to help us to do that.

[ 26 : 28 ] Lord, we know that you want us to remain steadfast under pressure and trials. Father, please help us to do that. It's really difficult. But we know that if we ask you, you will answer these prayers for us and help us to remain steadfast and true.

Lord, we want to be more and more worthy of the calling that you've given us to be your sons and daughters, to be inheritors of the kingdom. Lord, we know that you want us to have plans and actions in spite of the trials and tribulations that we're going through.

And Jesus, we want to give you all the glory and the honour and thanks for all the things that you're going to do for us. Amen. Amen.