

Praying With the Correct Desires

I would like to ask you a series of questions about prayer. To begin I will ask, “What is the most important thing that you ask for in your prayers?” Do you ask for good health, money, and happiness, or that God would help you to grow spiritually? If you say that you pray for your spiritual growth, “What are the specific spiritual things that you ask for and why?”

Our study is not about how often we should pray. Our study is not when to pray, where to pray, or in what position we can pray. The Bible has already taught us that believers are to constantly pray, because Ephesians 6:18 urges believers to pray at all times, and 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says we should “pray without ceasing.” The Bible teaches that we can pray in any position and place we desire. Peter prayed while sinking into the Sea of Galilee one evening while trying to walk on the water.

Now we know he did not get on his knees and spend twenty minutes of praise to God and thanking Him for something before he cried out, “Lord, save me!” (Matthew 14:30). If he had, he might have drowned in the water. The prophet Jonah prayed in the stomach of a

great fish just before he died (Jonah 2:1-9). Now we do not know in what position he was praying in that stomach, but I doubt that he read a passage of Scripture with his two hands clasped together before he started asking for help. Frankly, I suspect that many saints were not always very formal in their prayers! I will admit that I often pray while I travel in my

truck, when I am alone. My eyes are not closed while I pray. Just imagine the accidents that I could have.

So, the important question is what do you ask for when you pray? “What do you desire for yourself?” Notice that I used the word “desire.” What is the most important thing you want for yourself when you pray about yourself? When you pray for others, what is the most important thing you ask for them? The answer to the question is what our study is all about — praying with the correct desires.

PAUL’S PRAYER FOR THE THESSALONIAN BELIEVERS. Our study is in 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12. These two verses record the first of the apostle Paul’s four prayers of that are recorded in this epistle for the believers in Thessalonica. We have already discovered that Paul had established the church in Thessalonica in about A.D. 50. While he was there, persecution

broke out and the believers sent Paul out of the city. But getting rid of Paul did not stop the persecution. Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians reveal that persecution continued until about A.D. 52, for a total of about two years.

We have already learned in 2 Thessalo-

nians 1:3-10, that Paul attempted to comfort these persecuted believers with the promise that God would punish their persecutors. That is, their persecutors would not escape the punishment they had earned for themselves. In addition, Paul promised that they would find relief or peace at the second coming of Christ. It was actually a reminder that peace is



God's ultimate goal for every believer, but it was not a promise they would experience while living on this planet. That is, Paul tried to comfort these believers who had been persecuted for about two years.

TO THIS END ALSO WE PRAY. Verse 11 is the first verse of today's study. But before I read it, I have a second question. "How do you think Paul prayed for these persecuted believers? For what did he ask?" The answer is found in verse 11. It says,

To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:11 (NASB)

Frankly, I think many believers are surprised by what the apostle Paul asked God to do for these believers. Did you notice that Paul did not pray for healing of body wounds, safety from their persecutors, or repair of their personal property, if any of their properties had been damaged? Instead, Paul prayed for three spiritual things. His prayer was about spiritual growth! Now here is my third question, "Do you pray for your own spiritual growth?" My fourth question is, "Do you pray for the spiritual growth of others?" Therefore, as we study his prayer, please notice the three things that Paul considered to be more important than their physical wounds, safety, or repair of their personal property.

Worthy of His Calling. The New American Standard Bible says that the first thing Paul prayed for was that "God will count you worthy of your calling." But that is not the best translation. The NIV and the ESV are more accurate. Rather than saying, "your calling," our Bibles should read "His calling." The "His" refers to God. Therefore, the opening part of this verse should read, "God will count you worthy of His calling." That is, salvation is the work of God. Listen to Romans 8:30,

. . . and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. Romans 8:30 (NASB)

God Calls Us To Be Saved. "Called" reveals that God determines who is saved. That is, salvation is the work of God.

Another passage which teaches that the term "called" refers to God sovereignly choosing a person to be saved is Romans 9:23-24. It says,

And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. Romans 9:23-24 (NASB)

Almost forty times we are told in the New Testament that God called those who believe. In theology this is referred to as the effectual or irresistible call of God that results in a person believing in Christ.

I want to share three verses that will make this very clear. The first one is John 6:65. It teaches that a person can only become a believer by God's permission. It says,

And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." John 6:65. (NASB)

Then John 6:44 teaches that no one can come to Jesus unless God the Father permits them to be saved. It teaches that the Father draws us to Christ.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. John 6:44 (NASB)

Finally, John 6:37 teaches that every person whom God the Father permits to believe in Jesus will come to Christ and be saved. This is the result of the call of the Father.

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. John. 6:37 (NASB)

This helps us to understand that we are believers because the Father has called us.

God is Sovereign in Salvation. I find it strange that some argue that Ephesians 2:8-9 says a person is not saved by works, but then they claim that God is a spectator waiting for someone to decide to believe in Jesus. That is, God did not choose

them to be saved. Then they add that a person must decide to believe in Jesus in order to be saved. Notice the emphasis on deciding to believe. That implies the person did a work by choosing or deciding to believe. That creates a theological problem, frankly! The root problem is that Christ's teaching in John 6:37, 44, and 65 which states salvation is of the Lord, is unacceptable to them.

A careful study of Scripture teaches that God is sovereign in everything, and that includes salvation. He caused us to be born and He decides when we die. He selected your parents and the nation in which you would be born. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and everything else. He raises up and removes rulers of nations. He will not answer our prayers if our request is not consistent with His will. He can change the hearts of kings. So, why would He not be sovereign in our salvation? That means it is impossible for anyone to do anything to earn salvation. We cannot make ourselves worthy of God's calling in salvation. Yet, when a person accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord, the experience is real. We grieve our sins, repent of our sins, believe in Christ, plead to be forgiven, and then give our lives to Him.

So, God the Father calls a sinner. The Holy Spirit draws the sinner to Christ, gives the sinner faith, and the sinner believes. Romans 5:1 teaches that as a result, we are justified or legally declared to be righteous (Romans 8:30). That is, God makes a legal decision to consider the believer righteous, even though he or she is not. This means that God takes unworthy sinners and legally declares them to be righteous. What is even better is that a believer's righteousness is not a second class righteousness, because 2 Corinthians 5:21 says believers have the righteousness of God, because of Christ. The verse says,

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB)

God Will Count You Worthy. Now let's look at 2 Thessalonians 1:11 again. The first part of verse 11 says, "God will count you worthy of His calling." The Greek word for "count" comes from the Greek verb *axioo*, which can also be translated as "to make." That is, Paul is praying that "God will make believers

worthy of His calling." The message is that by ourselves, we can never be worthy of what the Father has done for us! But He can make us worthy or demonstrate that we are worthy to be saved!

How can God make us worthy of His calling? The answer is by transforming us into the image of Christ. I think Philippians 2:12-13 helps us understand how this happens! The passage explains the principle. Here is the passage.

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Philippians 2:12-13 (NASB)

The passage says God is working in us. Notice this passage also teaches believers are to work because of their salvation. Now notice the passage does not say we are to work in order to be saved. Instead, the passage says we are to work out the salvation that we have already received, while God is also working in us! The principle is that God works, and believers are to work also. Ephesians 4:1 ties everything together! As we work or walk our lives become increasingly worthy of the Father's call. We bring honor to the Father.

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called . . . Ephesians 4:1 (NASB)

So, what have we learned? We discovered in a previous study in verse 5, that as believers persevere in the faith, they prove they are worthy of salvation. It proves they are real believers, that is, the Father called them to be saved. Second, we have learned that when our behavior is increasingly more righteous, we are moving toward the goal of being worthy of God's call to salvation.

Fulfill Every Desire for Goodness. Now let's look at the next phrase in 2 Thessalonians 1:11. Paul wrote,

. . . and fulfill every desire for goodness . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:11 (NASB)

The Greek word for “fulfill” is *pleroo*. It can be translated as “complete,” “finish,” or “accomplished.” That is, Paul asks God to complete our every desire for goodness. The root Greek word that Paul used for “goodness” is *agathos*. The word does not refer to what people of the world consider to be good. Instead, it has the meaning of “ethical behavior.” Since only God is good, this means Paul prayed that God would complete the believers’ desire for true goodness, as opposed to a desire for wickedness.

Paul has just prayed that the Father would make us worthy of His call. We learned how that works and that we are to work out our salvation. Now, Paul tells how to do this, how believers are to pursue every desire for goodness.

John MacArthur compiled this list of ways in which Christians are urged to walk worthy. But it also applies to the concept of “every desire for goodness.” Here is his list,

The Bible lists several components of the worthy walk. A worthy walk is a walk in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:16, 25), humility (Eph. 4:2), purity (Rom. 13:13; Eph. 5:3), contentment (1 Cor. 7:17), faith (2 Cor. 5:7), righteousness (Eph. 2:10), unity (Eph. 4:3; Phil. 1:27), gentleness (Eph. 4:2), patience (Col. 1:11), love (Eph. 5:2), joy (Col. 1:11), thankfulness (Col. 1:12), light (Eph. 5:8-9), knowledge (Col. 1:10), wisdom (Eph. 5:15), truth (3 John 3, 4), and fruitfulness (Col. 1:10). In short, “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6), because that pleases God (1 Thess. 4:1).¹

A good illustration of someone who had a desire for godly goodness was King David. 1 Samuel 13:14 says that God had appointed a man after His heart to be ruler over Israel. Later we learn his name was David. He was a man who had a heart that desired true goodness. Paul prayed that the Thessalonian believers would realize those desires that were characterized by goodness. The emphasis was on godly goodness.

Work of Faith With Power. Then Paul prayed that God would complete their . . .

... work of faith with power . . . 2 Thessalonians 1:11 (NASB)

This is another way in which believers work out their salvation. The emphasis here is not on desire but what a believer accomplishes for Christ. James 2:26 says that faith without works is dead. That is, works does not save a person, but it reveals if you are a true believer. I was speaking with a pastor some years ago. He told me that he hated the idea of “true Christians” and “false Christians.” I was surprised because Scripture refers to this concept! There are those who claim to be Christians, but they are not real Christians. Even in 1 Corinthians 15:2 Paul refers to believers who have vain faith. That is, they believe something about Jesus, but their life reveals their faith is not true faith.

It is important to remember that Philippians 1:6 says that God is at work in us. That means, a true believer will increasingly minister for God and to others. We will share the gospel and serve other believers in various ways. That is the result of the work of the Spirit. I believe that also explains “with power.” The work that Paul is talking about is the result of the Holy Spirit empowering believers for ministry. In Ephesians 3:16 Paul prayed,

... that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. Ephesians 3:16 (NASB)

It is the Holy Spirit who helps us do the work when He fills us. So, how about another question. Are you ministering for Jesus in some way? What are you doing?

THE GOAL IS THE LORD JESUS AND BELIEVERS ARE GLORIFIED. Then in verse 12, Paul prayed,

... so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 1:12 (NASB)

The goal of these requests was that the Lord Jesus would be glorified. Then, so would we! Notice Paul said, “You in Him.” Why did he say that? The answer is that as we bring glory to Jesus, He blesses us with glory. Listen to 1 Samuel 2:30,

1. John MacArthur. 1 & 2 Thessalonians. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Moody Press. 2002. p. 257.

... for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed. 1 Samuel 2:30 (NASB)

In John 12:26, Jesus said,

... if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. John 12:26 (NASB)

So, Paul prayed that Jesus would be glorified, and these persecuted believers would be glorified, and that all of this would be done according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION. Now I want to close this message by asking, “What are the most important things that you ask of God?” Do your requests include your personal comfort, long life, health, sex, children, a great husband or a beautiful wife? Paul’s prayers were mainly about spiritual growth. He prayed that God would transform believers into a godly man or woman. So, we should pray that God will help us seek what is truly good and not just what our flesh desires. We should pray that God helps us do those works that will advance the faith. I call them ministry. And why are these so important? Because they give glory to Jesus and in return, He glorifies us.

Harry Ironside wrote in his commentary on 2 Thessalonians,

The Christian walks a path of rejection as he goes through the world, but ahead of him is the glorious prospect of joy with Christ at His return.²

2. Harry Ironside. 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Ironside Commentaries. Loizeaux. 1997. P. 67.

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