

Text: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Theme: Prayer of the Early Church III

Sermon delivered by Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 21/05/2017 at 10.30am

We continue in our series on Prayer of the early church and today we are looking at the conclusion to the letter of Paul to the Thessalonians: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5. From the onset, we will be struck by the request of this spiritual giant asking other Christians who so well recognised their weakness to pray for him. Nowhere is Paul's humility clearer to see. And the fact that he, as it were, threw himself on their hearts must have done much to bind even his opponents to him, because it is very difficult to dislike a man who asks you to pray for him.

But in spite of his love for and trust in men Paul was a realist. The faith, he said, is not for everyone. We can be certain that he said it not cynically but sorrowfully. Once again, we see the tremendous responsibility of free-will. We can use it to open our hearts and we can use it to shut them. Faith's appeal is not selective, it goes out to every man; but the heart of man can refuse to respond.

In the last verse of this passage we see what we might call the inward and the outward characteristics of the Christian. The inward characteristic is the awareness of the love of God, the deep awareness that we cannot drift beyond his care, the sense that the everlasting arms are underneath us. One of the basic needs of life is security and we find that need met in the consciousness of the unchanging love of God.

The outward characteristic is the endurance which Christ can give. We live in a world where there are more nervous breakdowns than at any time in history. It is a sign that more and more people have the feeling that they cannot cope with life. The outward characteristic of the Christian is that when others break, he stands erect and when others collapse he shoulders his burden and goes on. With the love of God in his heart and the strength of Christ in his life a man can face anything.

This brief passage can be divided into three segments:

1. Prayer for the Gospel
2. Prayer for the ministers of the Gospel
3. Prayer for believers to live the Gospel

Let us look at the first verse and the first subdivision

1. Prayer for the Gospel.

- The Advancement of the Gospel.

Paul is praying that the word of the Lord may not be hindered. We are privileged to see a wonderful model as Paul demonstrates how his team's confidence lay not in human plans, promotion, programs, or human personalities, but in the Lord Himself. Their confidence for whatever they might need and face was an unending trust in the provision and faithfulness of the Lord and His powerful Word. The Lord Jesus said emphatically, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." While God uses frail human instruments in accomplishing His work on earth, the ultimate accomplishment of the work depends on the work and faithfulness of the Lord and His Word. That is why we must pray. Anytime you go to a church and the minister seems dead and the word of God seems dead or ineffective, it could be that the minister is not right with God, it could be that worldliness has taken over the hearts

of the people or that the people are not praying. Does it occur to us that the Word of the Lord could be hindered by virtue of our prayerlessness?

- The Acceptance of the Gospel.

The second need spelled out in this first request is that the message may continue to be honoured or glorified. The idea is that God's message, and thus God Himself, may be honoured among men as they recognize its authority and submit their lives to its glorious truth in faith and continued obedience and growth. For an example of this and as a further encouragement to the Thessalonians, he quickly added, "... just as it was with you." This recalls the amazing success of the message in Thessalonica as described in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 6, 8 and 2:13. This is the kind of response Paul and his team wanted to see wherever the gospel is proclaimed.

His request is that these Thessalonians Christians will share his burden that the **good news of Jesus Christ will spread rapidly and be accepted wherever it goes. Is that our passion? Is this the subject of our prayers? Is our over-riding concern for the gospel of Jesus Christ?**

What we think about; Read about; Pray about; Give our time and money to reflects our priorities and passions. Is it for self-advancement and self-comfort or is it for the cause of Jesus Christ?

Missionary activity and concern for missionary activity is not the responsibility of a select few. It should be the concern of every Christian – the advancement and acceptance of the Gospel. A Church that has lost its vision for mission has lost its heart for God. A Christian who has no concern for the salvation of others is not in tune with God's purposes.

Our modern 'go-go' tendency is to be quick to plan and act rather than pray, wait on the Lord, and then in God's timing and leading, work in His strength, leading, and provision. This is not only the position of wisdom but of humility as we put our trust not in ourselves, but in a sovereign God and Saviour. Again, the apostle provides us with a model, not just for ministry but for life.

2. Prayer for ministers of the Gospel.

– Protection from wicked and evil people.

Paul's second request for prayer is for protection. This is for himself and his fellow missionaries. However, we must be under no illusion that the advancement of the Gospel will take place unhindered. The forces opposed to God ensure that the task is not a simple Sunday afternoon stroll but a strenuous, all-consuming cross-country marathon with numerous obstacles. Paul wanted God to either deliver him from such men, or change them into reasonable and godly men. Paul must be thinking about the way God dealt with him when he was a great opposer of the Gospel.

– Protection by good faithful God, of His Word and of His people

But the Lord is faithful: Even if not all men have faith, the Lord is faithful. This was the basis of Paul's confidence in God's ability to establish and guard us from the evil one. There is a play of words here. Those who oppose may be faithless BUT God is faithful. The faithlessness of humans can never overturn or undermine the faithfulness of God to his people and to his word.

God has spoken and decreed that the gospel will succeed. God's message of salvation will be received by those who respond to God's word. God is faithful to His word. Satan seeks to

snatch us away from God, to destroy us with himself BUT God is faithful and will not allow that to happen to his people.

The church with all her weaknesses and shortcomings will succeed – The gospel message carried by weak and feeble messengers will triumph because God is faithful and does not fail. Matthew 16:18 ... I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (NIV)

Evil men may oppose you but God promised to keep Satan on a leash. He will not allow any temptation to become too great for us (1 Corinthians 10:13), and will not allow Satan to do whatever he wants with us (Luke 22:31-32). Remember Job. On all the occasions, he had to get approval from God and he had his limits. Nothing beyond which God's grace would not be sufficient for Job.

3. Paul prays for Believers to live the Gospel.

He says in verse 4 that our confidence in the Lord assumes that you will not fold your hands but that you will be at work with God doing and continue to be doing the things that are pleasing to him – the things we command.

There is Confidence in God's enabling. If our ability and willingness to obey God depended on us we would be very insecure in our faith. But Paul's confidence is in the Lord's ability to keep and strengthen and enable his people to obey his commands. God perfects what he has begun –

In closing it is Paul's prayer that the Lord direct your hearts into Christ's love and perseverance. That we will develop patience and perseverance and constancy, even in the face of opposition just like Christ. In short, that in all things we will grow up into Christ and be like him.

Conclusion.

This then is what Paul requested prayer for and what he prayed for in others. Does this reflect the way we pray? When we pray do we pray expectantly or is it just words? Sometimes we learn most not from learned adults but from the childlike trust of the young.

ILLUS.: The red umbrella – retold by Tania Gray.

“As the drought continued for what seemed an eternity, a small community of Midwest farmers were in a quandary as to what to do. The rain was important not only to keep the crops healthy, but to sustain the townspeople's very way of life. As the problem became more urgent, the local church felt it was time to get involved and planned a prayer meeting in order to ask for rain.

In what seemed a vague resemblance of an old Native American ritual, the people began to show up. The Pastor soon arrived and watched as the congregation continued to file in. He slowly circulated from group to group as he made his way to the front to officially begin the meeting. Everyone he encountered was chatting across the aisles, enjoying the chance to socialise with close friends. As the pastor finally secured his place in front of the congregation, his thoughts were on the importance of quietening the crowd and starting the meeting.

Just as he began asking for quiet, he noticed an 11-year-old girl sitting in the front row. She was angelically beaming with excitement and laying next to her was her bright red umbrella, poised for use. The beauty and innocence of this sight made the Pastor smile to himself as he realised the faith this young girl possessed that the rest of the people in the room seemed to have forgotten. For the rest had come to pray for rain she had come to see God answer.”

Do we pray with an understanding of what is on the heart of God? And do we pray with childlike faith expecting God to answer?

God calls us to pray but not selfish for what I want but rather “May YOUR will be on earth as it is in Heaven”.