

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## A Pastoral Prayer

JOHN F. MACARTHUR, JR.

*Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:11–13)*

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The New Testament contains many rich and instructive examples of prayers that are pleasing to God (e.g., Matt. 26:36–42; John 11:41–42; 17:9–24; Acts 4:24–30; 7:60; Heb. 13:20–21; Jude 24–25). Arthur W. Pink (1886–1952), the English-born Christian writer, theologian, and Bible teacher, noted in the late 1940s how valuable those prayers are for current believers:

How blessed it is to hear some aged saint, who has long walked with God and enjoyed intimate communion with Him, pouring out his heart before Him in adoration and supplication. But how much more blessed should we esteem it could we have listened to the utterances of those who companied with Christ in person during the days when He tabernacled in this scene. And if one of the apostles were still here upon earth what a high privilege we should deem it to hear him engage in prayer! Such a high privilege that most of us would be willing to go to considerable inconvenience and to travel a long distance in order to be thus favored. And if our desire were granted, how closely we would listen to his words, how diligently we would seek to treasure them up in our memories. Well, no such inconvenience, no such journey, is required: it has pleased the Holy Spirit to record quite a number of the apostolic prayers for our instruction and satisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of prayers recorded in the New Testament are from the apostle Paul. It devotes more pages to his words and ministry than to those of any other individual except Jesus. Paul is the main character in Acts 14–28 (although Acts records no prayers of individual apostles, it does portray them as men of prayer in 1:24–25; 4:24–30; 6:4; 9:40; 10:9; 20:36; 21:5; 28:8) and the author of thirteen letters that record many of his prayers (e.g., Rom. 15:5–7, 13; 1 Cor. 1:4–7; 2 Cor. 1:3–5; Eph. 1:15–23; 3:14–21; Phil. 1:8–11; Col.

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<sup>1</sup> Pink, A.W. *Gleanings from Paul: Studies in the Prayers of the Apostle* [reprint; Chicago: Moody, 1967; 1981 paperback edition], 9.

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1:9–12; 2 Thess. 1:11–12; Philem. 4–6). Consistent with this picture of the apostle is Luke's description of the newly converted Paul: "he [was] praying" (Acts 9:11).

Certainly, the apostle Paul modeled prayer to the Thessalonians. He also exemplified the pastoral prayer life once described by Charles Spurgeon: "I take it that as a minister *he is always praying*. ... He is not always in the act of prayer, but he lives in the spirit of it. ... If you are a genuine minister of God you will stand as a priest before the Lord, spiritually wearing the ephod and the breast-plate whereon you bear the names of [your] children ... pleading for them within the veil."<sup>2</sup> It is obvious that Paul was in the spirit of prayer from 1:1 to 3:10, even though he did not offer a formal prayer until 3:11. Breaking into a prayer at a crucial juncture in one of his letters was typical of Paul (e.g., Rom. 1:8–12; Eph. 1:15–23; Col. 1:9–12; 2 Thess. 1:11–12). And certainly he could not conclude the expression of his pastor's heart here without praying for the accomplishment of God's will in his people's lives.

## THE FORM OF PAUL'S PRAYER

**Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord (3:11a)**

Paul's prayer took a distinctive form. Rather than addressing **God** by the usual second person pronoun, Paul, including the Thessalonians in his petition, addressed Him by name in the first person—**our God and Father**. Paul's petition utilized the Greek optative mood, indicated in English by **may**, which expresses a wish. That form of prayer was not Paul's normal approach, but he did use it at other times (5:23; 2 Thess. 3:5, 16). Use of the optative here allowed him to reiterate to the Thessalonians the sincere heart wishes he had concerning them. Paul also directed this prayer to **God the Father and Jesus the Lord**, expressing the desire that both the Father and Son might act to answer his longings. Such linkings of the Father and the Son are frequent in the epistles and emphasize equality in divine nature between God the Father and Jesus the Son (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:1, 3; 2 Thess. 1:1–2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem. 3; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:3; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 1:3; 2 John 3; Jude 1).

By calling God **our ... Father**, an address emphasizing personal relationship, and Jesus **our Lord**, an address emphasizing personal rulership, Paul switched the usual popular ideas about God being the ruler and Christ being the one with whom believers have a relationship. The use of **our** before both **God** and **Jesus** underscores the relationship Paul and the Thessalonians enjoyed with both Persons of the Trinity. God came down to be

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<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon, C.H. *Lectures to My Students* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Ministry Resources Library, 1985], 42, 47; emphasis in the original.

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intimate with them as their gracious, loving, and forgiving Father, and Jesus ascended to heaven's throne to be their sovereign Lord.

That **Himself** (*autos*) is singular and in the emphatic position in the Greek word order provides further insight into the nature of the Godhead. Literally, verse 11 reads, "Now may Himself, our God and Father and Jesus Christ our Lord, direct our way to you." The use of the singular pronoun (**Himself**) and the singular verb (**direct**) with the plural subject (**our God and Father ... and Jesus our Lord**) emphasizes again the unmistakable unity of the Father and the Son in the Godhead.

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That grammatical consideration helps explain why Paul's prayer could assume the deity of Jesus and address Him equally with the divine Father. The Father and Son are equally sovereign and perfectly agree in all matters. Assured of those truths, Christians, like Paul, can direct all their prayers to either or to both (cf. Job 8:5; Pss. 5:2; 143:1; John 16:23–24; Acts 7:59; 1 John 5:14). Romans 8:27 indicates that the Holy Spirit is also in perfect agreement: "He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

## THE PURPOSE OF PAUL'S PRAYER

**direct our way to you; and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (3:11b–13)**

Paul's prayer here is a definitive model of conscientious pastoral intercession. He had a threefold purpose in offering it: that God would grant the Thessalonians a perfecting faith, a prospering love, and a purifying hope. That is the familiar triad of Christian virtues (1 Cor. 13:13). Paul was genuinely concerned that his people grow in each of those spiritual realities, as is evident at the beginning of this letter: "constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" (1:3), and at the end: "let us ... put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation" (5:8).

### A PERFECTING FAITH

**direct our way to you; (3:11b)**

The foremost motive for Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians was that their faith would grow. The apostle did not explicitly say that within his prayer but identified it as the goal of his prayer: "as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith" (v. 10). "Complete" could also be

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translated “perfect” —Paul wanted to return to help perfect any weakness or defect in their faith (see the comments on 3:10, page 83), in the sense of Ephesians 4:11–12, “He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

For that spiritual work of edification, he asked God and Jesus to **direct** his way to them. **Direct** conveys the idea of laying out a straight, smooth path with all the obstacles removed. Up to this time, satanically instigated circumstances had prevented Paul from coming to the Thessalonians (cf. the discussion of 2:18 in chapter 5 of this volume). The apostle knew that only the power of the Lord could overcome Satan (cf. Gen. 3:15; Matt. 10:1; Luke 11:21–22; Rom. 16:20; Col. 2:15; 1 John 3:8; 4:4; Jude 6; Rev. 12:10; 20:10) and allow him to return. It was his desire to return, but only by the will of his Lord and God (cf. Ps. 37:1–5; Prov. 3:5–6).

Paul’s intention was not to return and lead the Thessalonians into some emotional experience that would merely attempt to get them believing more fervently in the things they already knew. Rather, he wanted to expand their knowledge of God through His revealed truth, which in turn would enlarge their trust in Him and enable them to walk in greater obedience to His will. Paul was ministering under a divine mandate to teach the truth (Acts 9:15–18; 13:1–4; 1 Cor. 9:16; Eph. 3:1–8), which meant feeding them Scripture so they could mature by it. That is the principle found in 1 Peter 2:2: “Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (cf. Acts 20:32).

The precepts, principles, and promises of Scripture are the windows through which believers look to see God and understand His glory and will for their lives (cf. Pss. 19:7–8, 11; 119:9, 93, 99, 105, 130; Prov. 6:23; Luke 11:28; John 17:17; 20:31; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:15–17; James 1:21–22, 25). Their response to the truths of God’s Word also allows them to know if their faith is growing. That growth is evident when (1) their knowledge of God’s Word is increasing (cf. Col. 3:16); (2) their confidence in God is greater than before (cf. Eph. 3:12); (3) their trust in His sovereignty is stronger than before (cf. Job 42:2); (4) their obedience to Him is consistent (cf. Deut. 17:19–20); and (5) they are finding joy in their trials (cf. James 1:2–3).

So Paul’s pastoral prayer began with a request that the Father and Son would use him to mature and strengthen the Thessalonians’ faith, which was the foundation they needed for obedient and powerful Christian living (cf. Acts 14:22; 2 Cor. 1:24; 5:7; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:4; Heb. 11:6; Jude 20). Even though he did not return to Thessalonica, Paul saw his desire realized, as evidenced by what he wrote to them a few months later in his second letter,

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“We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged” (2 Thess. 1:3).

A PROSPERING LOVE

**and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; (3:12)**

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The apostle Paul knew that genuine believers would always exhibit love (cf. John 13:34–35), therefore he prayed that the Thessalonians’ growing faith would be accompanied by a prospering love. That Paul asked **the Lord** to **cause** the Thessalonians’ **love** to grow indicates he depended on God for the development of spiritual virtues. Whether it was the beginning of the Christian life (justification—Rom. 3:30; 8:30, 33; cf. Isa. 50:8; Jonah 2:9; John 1:12–13) or the process of spiritual growth (sanctification—John 17:17; 1 Thess. 5:23; Jude 1; cf. Ezek. 37:28; Eph. 5:26), God revealed that He ultimately deserves the credit for believers’ maturity (1 Cor. 3:6–7; cf. 2 Cor. 3:5; 9:8; Gal. 2:20).

Paul’s statements in 1:3, “constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love,” and 3:6, “good news of your faith and love,” are clear evidence of the Thessalonians’ love. Here he prayed they would **increase and abound in love** (*agapē*), **in that love** which is the purest and noblest (Rom. 13:8–10; 1 Cor. 13:4, 13; 16:14; Gal. 5:13–14, 22; Eph. 1:15; 4:2; 5:2, 25, 28, 33; Phil. 1:9; Col. 3:19; 1 John 3:16–17). Paul asked first that their love would **increase and abound ... for one another**, that is, within the church (cf. Eph. 1:15; 4:16; Phil. 2:2; Col. 2:2; 3:14; 1 Thess. 4:9; 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:8). There are more than thirty positive and negative “one anothers” in the New Testament, and **love** appears by far the most often (1 Thess. 4:9; Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11; 2 John 5). Second, the apostle prayed that their love **for all people** would increase. He wanted them to have a greater love for the lost and for those who persecuted them, as Jesus commanded His disciples, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44; cf. Deut. 10:19; Rom. 12:14, 20; 1 Tim. 2:1–4). Other New Testament injunctions concerning **all people** include pursuing peace (Rom. 12:18), doing good (Gal. 6:10), being patient (Eph. 4:2), praying (1 Tim. 2:1), showing consideration (Titus 3:2), and honoring (1 Peter 2:17).

To provide them a practical example to understand that **love**, Paul told the Thessalonians they should love **just as he also** loved them. He loved them when they were strangers, in the greatest spiritual need by sacrificially bringing the gospel to them (1 Thess. 1:9; 2:1–2). Then, after they received justification, he loved them by the living sacrifice of his life for their sanctification (2:10–12).

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A PURIFYING HOPE

**so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (3:13)**

The final objective of Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians was **that** they might look to their glorification, which produces a purifying hope. All the good qualities of a strong faith and a vibrant love are incomplete unless they point one toward genuine hope. Paul reminded the Romans, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1–2; cf. 15:13; Titus 2:13; Heb. 6:11). The nature of that hope is best stated in 1 John 3:2, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (cf. Phil. 3:20–21).

The only way the Thessalonians would actually live in such hope was for God to **establish their hearts without blame in holiness before** (literally, "in the presence of") Him. Paul expresses a similar sentiment in 5:23, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." He knew the one person who cared most about the Thessalonians' purifying hope was God, and only He truly knows what is in people's hearts (2 Chron. 6:30; Ps. 44:21; Prov. 24:12; cf. 1 Sam. 16:7; Prov. 21:2). Paul wanted them to be pure at heart, so as to desire **the coming** (*parousia*, "presence") of the **Lord Jesus**, who is the Judge (cf. 2 Tim. 4:1). The apostle knew that the promise of Christ's return to Rapture and reward the church is the essence of believers' purifying hope. He explains the event in 4:13–18 as the hope that produces comfort (cf. Jude 24; the discussion in chapter 11 of this volume). Believers' knowing that when Christ comes to reward His people, they will have their works evaluated before the judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10), is motivation to holy living. (See also the discussion of 2:19–20 in chapter 5 of this volume.)

Paul focused on the heart because it is the seat of human emotion, thought, and purpose (cf. Prov. 4:23; 1 Chron. 28:9; Matt. 12:35; 15:16–20). If their **hearts** were pure, clean, and righteous, and they were able to stand against temptation (cf. Matt. 4:4–11; 26:41; 1 Cor. 10:13; Eph. 6:16; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:8–9), that would free them from shame and embarrassment before the Lord and cause them to eagerly look for His coming. The believer's appearance before God is truly the consummation of his sanctification (Rom. 8:17, 30).



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In contrast to obedient believers who look forward to Christ's appearing, sinning believers are not eager to have their sin interrupted and exposed to the presence of the Lord. Such disobedient Christians are like disobedient children who do not want their parents to catch them doing wrong, or like lawbreakers who least of all wish for the arrival of the police. What makes obedient believers long for the Lord's return is holiness that seeks pure fellowship with the Holy One. And such purity that initially inspires hope also produces greater hope, as John wrote: "And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3).

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Whereas Paul prayed that God would purify the Thessalonians' hope, Peter pled directly with his readers that they would live pure in hope:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. (1 Peter 1:13–19)

Again, the supernatural reality of sanctification is all the work of God and, at the same time, dependent on the obedience of the believer.

The apostle Paul's prayer that the Thessalonians would have a purifying hope actually extends beyond that congregation. His request was that God would **establish their hearts without blame in holiness ... with all His saints**. Paul wanted all the other elect to be pure and set apart from worldliness. Some commentators identify **all His saints** more specifically as the angels and believers who accompany Christ at His return to establish His millennial kingdom (cf. Matt. 16:27). Since that expression is *not* used in the New Testament to denote angels but *is* commonly used to denote believers, it is best to equate this **coming of the Lord Jesus** with the Rapture of the church (see 4:13–18) and her arrival in the place prepared for her (cf. John 14:1–6). Then comes the reward (Rev. 22:12) at the judgment seat of Christ where believers will be rewarded for their faithfulness and obedience. First Corinthians 3:11–14 describes this reward event as a judgment of works. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 4:5 it is clear that rewards will come on the basis of what motivated those works. The glory of this reward is the theme of Romans 8:17–18; Colossians 3:4; Philippians 3:20–21; 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; and 1 Peter 1:4; 5:4 (cf. 1 Cor. 9:25).

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This focus on hope concludes the apostle Paul's brief pastoral prayer for his beloved Thessalonians. His requests that God perfect their faith, prosper their love, and purify their hope model how all pastors and elders ought to pray for their people. His entreaty also establishes a general devotion to prayer that must accompany any sincere ministry of the Word (cf. Acts 6:4).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2002). *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (pp. 85–92). Moody Press.