

“Our Advent Prayer”

In just over a month from now, we'll be celebrating again. Many will stay up until at least midnight, perhaps even marking the time with fireworks or with a kiss. On the other side of midnight, we'll be changing out calendars from 2014 to 2015, and we'll be wishing each other Happy New Year.

Many people make a big deal out of New Year celebrations, and yet the reality is that very little changes from December 31 of one year to January 1 of the next. Certainly nothing other than the date changes automatically. What makes the start of a New Year special is our perception of it. It's a chance to recommit to things that we want to accomplish or to set new goals or to leave behind something that has us down from the previous year. The year ahead is full of possibilities for us.

Today is a New Year's Day without the fireworks and festivities. We don't really keep track of Church Years by a specific number, and it can even be somewhat confusing behind the scenes because the start of the Church Year and that of the calendar year are only a few weeks apart. But the First Sunday of Advent can be a useful time for us to recommit to things, maybe to set goals, or even to leave behind troubles from the past. The message won't be drastically different, God-willing, from one Sunday to the next or one Church Year to the next. But as we step out of the non-festival half of a Church Year now behind us and step into the festival portion of a new Church Year, it is an opportunity for us.

It's in that sort of New-Church-Year spirit that I invite you to join with me in praying our Advent prayer. We'll base our prayer on the prayer that the apostle Paul tells us about in our sermon text today, a prayer that he prayed for the Thessalonian Christians, a prayer that is very appropriate for us as we head into a new Church Year. We'll pray: “Deepen our faith, increase our love, and strengthen our hearts.”

Paul had spent only limited time in Thessalonica on his missionary journeys. In that city, which was one of the leading cities of the region, Paul had faced fierce opposition. Even when Paul had moved on from that town, enemies from Thessalonica followed him in order to hinder his work in the next town. If that was the sort of welcome Paul received, no doubt things would be a challenge for the young Christians who had believed his message.

Paul's co-worker Timothy went back to Thessalonica after Paul was forced to leave. He was able to encourage the believers there and to send back word to Paul about how things were going. Paul heard from him that the Christians were remaining strong in their faith and that they continued to reach out to others with the good news that they had received. In his joy Paul responded with the letter we call 1 Thessalonians. In his joy, he wrote, **“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”** Paul wasn't about to boast or brag. He was just the messenger. God had, through his Word, accomplished great things for these Thessalonians. It was God's work among them that brought his so much joy.

But there was more that Paul hoped to do. He wanted to return and to supply what was lacking in the faith of his friends. Now, that does not mean that the Thessalonians had an incomplete faith or that they had reason to be uncertain of their salvation. They had a true and living faith. But like all Christians, their faith had room to grow. They had not had the pleasure of digging even deeper into God's Word with the apostle. There would have been facets of the Christian life that they had not fully considered. And also like all Christians, the Thessalonians would continue to face new challenges and new threats.

And so our Advent prayer includes that same petition: Lord, deepen our faith. Just as in years past, in years to come our faith will be challenged and distracted. We will face new temptations and changing

temptations. By God's grace we will turn to his Word so that what is lacking may be supplied to us. Just as Paul longed to teach the Thessalonians further, so we as Christians long to dig deeper into God's Word. And what better time could there be than as we start to prepare for Christmas again! Indeed, as a whole new Church Year begins, we have set before us an abundance of opportunities for growth. We pray that the Lord would bless them for us, and bless us through the opportunities.

As Christians grow in faith, there are other results that flow from it. Paul goes on to pray for these things in the lives of the Thessalonians. While he wanted to come to them himself, whether or not that could happen, he prayed, **"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you."**

The report that Paul had heard about the Thessalonians spoke highly of their love. But just as our faith always has room to grow, so does our love. Paul asks that their love would "increase and overflow." As Christians are filled with the love of God in Christ, that love overflows to others, both to fellow believers, and to those who are not believers.

What a fitting prayer for all of us! It is often easy for us to love those who love us. It is easier still for us to love and serve ourselves. But God wants us to overflow with love for others. Think of the blessings that he brings as Christians show genuine love to each other: they work together, enjoy spending time with each other, support each other in difficult times, pray for each other, forgive each other.

And love is to overflow to "everyone else" as well. For the Thessalonians, this included showing love to those who persecuted Paul and those who followed his teachings. Our prayer is that God would make our love overflow to our unbelieving friends and neighbors, that our words and actions would demonstrate that love to them. And yes, that our love would overflow even and especially to our enemies and those who would persecute us. May God work in us to increase our love.

Paul goes on to pray: **"May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones."** This, too, is the result of what comes before. As God deepens our faith and increases our love, he strengthens our hearts. He is concerned not only with our actions to the outside but about our whole being. He expects proper motivation and attitudes. And he gives the proper motivation and attitudes. God makes us blameless and holy in connection with the final judgment. Obviously this does not mean that we will have become perfect or sinless by that time, but in bringing us to faith, God has washed our sins away. Jesus has made us his holy ones.

And the loving deeds that we do, motivated by God's love for us and our love for others, will give evidence of that faith in our lives. Recall how Jesus described the judgment elsewhere in Scripture. He said that as judge he would commend the believers as righteous for all of the good deeds that they had done (see Matthew 25:34-36). In today's Gospel we heard him warn against sin that would weigh us down so that the day of judgment would come unexpectedly like a trap for us. But he also assured us that the Last Day would be our redemption.

It is purely by God's grace that we will stand before the judge on the last day holy and blameless, because he has washed away all our sins and has instead strengthened our hearts to do his will. As we await that day, it is our prayer that he would continue to strengthen our hearts. The season of Advent is an annual reminder for us that just as Jesus once came as a baby in Bethlehem, so he will also come again as judge.

Today is indeed the start of a New Year. It is another New Year in the church. It is another year of God's grace to us, and another year closer to Jesus' return. May our Advent prayer rise to him, not only today, not only during this season, but throughout our lives and until our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. May he deepen our faith, increase our love, and strengthen our hearts.

The Text: 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 (NIV84)

⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.