

TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹²May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³May 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.

Dear fellow followers and worshippers of our Advent King,

Over this Thanksgiving weekend, many people throughout our country have reflected upon all that they have to be thankful for. But as God's people we learn to appreciate those things that are more than just physical blessings. God truly blesses us vastly more than with merely things that are here today and gone tomorrow. Ultimately we know who earns our thanks and praise.

In this world, a person may say, "I am grateful for my upbringing and childhood". Such thanks is not afforded to or directed at nothingness. It is not offered to thin air. It should be directed to those parents that God saw fit to bless that person with.

In this world, a person may also say, "I am grateful for my job and the healthy compensation that I receive." Again, such thanks should rightly be directed to the employer who saw you fit for the job and was fair and generous with that a salary. Ultimately, we know that God provides the talent and the opportunity to faithfully use our talents for monetary gain.

In the church, we also may say, "I am thankful for membership in God's church and for all the spiritual blessings that come along with it." So too, God's Spirit leads us to realize that such thanks needs to be directed at the one who has so blessed us. The Triune God alone has granted us faith in his Son. He blesses us with the Word of Truth to nourish each faith. He further gives us the promise of his daily forgiveness, and the assurance of life everlasting.

Our text, today, opens with the expression of Saint Paul to the Christian church in Macedonia, saying, "How can we thank God enough for you" (verse 9). On this first Advent Sunday of a new church year we offer similar thanks and recognition to God for what we now have and are privileged to share with a hurting and dying world.

THE ADVENT OF OUR KING SUPPLIES WHAT IS LACKING

1. He alone makes our love increase.
2. He alone strengthens our hearts.

1.

Consider Saint Paul's amazement and overflowing joy over what he has heard and seen among these Christians in Thessalonica. This city was a prominent city in northern Greece. It was visited by Paul and Luke shortly after his vision from God that called him over to Macedonia from Asia Minor. Paul early visit and encounter with the residents of Thessalonica was hardly encouraging. We are told in Acts chapter 17 that he and his companions were driven out of Thessalonica by some zealous Jews, only three weeks after his arrival. That which Paul may have considered a lost cause, had now flowered into a growing and prospering example of spiritual growth. They were especially noted by Paul, in the first chapter of this letter to the Thessalonians, as a church that became a model for others. They remained strong and resolved in their faith amidst serious persecution.

"You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere" (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8).

Saint Paul now reminds them and each one of us to keep making that kind of difference in this world. There is no greater way for us to harm the cause of the church, than if we continue to act as hateful, jealous and violent as the unbelieving world does. People will simply conclude, "There is no difference between a Christian and an unbeliever, when they clearly act and behave the same way.

So the truth remains, in Christ we gain the strength and example of real love for people. This is what distinguishes us from the rest of the world. Paul clearly states that God will supply what would otherwise be lacking when he tells us, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as our does for you" (verse 12).

These words provide a vivid word picture for us. Under normal circumstances, mom will not want any child's glass of milk or pop to spill over anywhere. Perhaps, here in our text, Paul is stating that it is more like the person who fills their glass with water at the kitchen sink. He will let the water run cold with his glass filling up and overflowing until the temperature is just right. God desires much the same with our attitude of love for people, among those within the church and those within our community. Again, this is what distinguishes God's people from the people of this world. Paul also wrote similar words near the end of his letter to the Galatian church, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 5:10).

Through our clinging trust and faith in Jesus, our Advent King, we gain what we otherwise lack. Namely, LOVE. We forgive, because Jesus forgave us all our sins. Recall the parable of the unmerciful servant. Each of us can and will forgive another person for their sins against us, in view of the full forgiveness we already enjoy for our mountain of

sins against God. So too we love because we know and believe God loves us, in spite of our unworthiness. The apostle John addresses this love as not only a love for God, but also a love for our fellow man. “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. . . . We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:16-21).

Certainly, Jesus set the supreme standard by loving and saving those who by nature hated God. Paul also wrote to the Romans, “God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Jesus further clarifies that this love will be universal and all-inclusive when he instructs us in his Sermon on the Mount. “I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

2.

As important as it was for these Christians in Thessalonica to keep on loving people, it was imperative that they maintain a strong faith with great resolve. Perseverance and endurance was needed by these Christians. Yet, it is needed by us, no less. Attacks against our own faith will not be restricted to those visible and clear enemies of Christ. Our own sinful and sin-filled flesh will hammer us on every side. Therefore, we too need strengthened hearts. In the case of the Thessalonians, they were harassed and persecuted by the enemies of Christ. Their own endurance and “keeping-the-faith” could have easily weakened.

Praise God that in Christ this kind of strength in faith is offered and assured to us. You and I know that apart from the Gospel in Word and Sacraments there is no other food to nourish and embolden faith. Therefore, we thank God for this letter to the Thessalonians, and for the whole Bible so that we can further learn and grow in faith. We may recall that among new believers, as was the case with this congregation, it can happen that saving faith will be alive but soon wither and flounder upon a time of testing. Remember Jesus’ words in his parable of the Sower and the Seed. In that parable, the different types of ground represented the people who then received the seed of God’s Word. Jesus said that those plants that grew among the rocky soil were like those people “who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have not root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away” (Luke 8:13).

Saint Paul did not want to see that happen with this young congregation. Nor do we wish to see that happen with the people of our congregation. Keeping and living with a strengthened faith makes a difference to fellow believers in the church. They too are strengthened in their desire to keep their faith strong. Think of those godly and Christian examples in your life. Perhaps it was a spouse, a parent or a grandparent who remained steady in their faith in good times as well as bad times. Thessalonica was located along a major trade route. At that time it could have been considered a major highway. It was called the Via Egnatia. As a result many travelers passed through this growing trade city. One pastor notes in his commentary on this book, “Visitors who passed through the city often stopped to rest a day or two. This would give Christian travelers an opportunity to

make contact with the Christian congregation the city. What they learned in that short visit made a deep impression on them” (Kuske, Thessalonians, The People’s Bible, page 13). Indeed, a strong faith makes a difference to us as individuals and to those who see us and get to know us.

A strengthened faith makes a difference for us, today and tomorrow. As Paul concludes in our text today, he writes, “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” (1 Thessalonians 3:13). Ultimately, we will want to be found as Paul wanted those Christians back then to be found, holy and clean, when our Lord Jesus returns. God’s law truly reveals our unworthiness and lack of holiness. But God’s message of a Savior born tells us that we are truly saved

- from ourselves so tainted with sin
- from an unbelieving world, and
- from a deserving death and damnation.

This, now and forever, lifts us and presents us as God’s dearly loved children. We are blanketed with the righteousness and holiness of Jesus. Therefore he makes us ready for that inevitable and eventual day, Jesus’ Second Coming. Paul is reminding us to live each day as if it might be your last. When the unbelieving world hears that, they think, “Let’s live it up for my own enjoyment”. When God’s people hear that, they say, “What a joy it will be to see my Savior and to spend an eternity in his glorious presence, full of peace and safety. Now I want to do my very best to thank and praise him now and forever.”

Remember, we do not worship a weak king limited in power and domain. We worship the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He rules all powers and authorities for our good. Celebrate the coming of your Advent King

- + For his miraculous birth
- + For his coming to us in Word and Sacraments
- + For his second coming on Judgment Day.

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AMEN