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The Prayers of St. Paul

W. H. Griffith (William Henry Griffith) Thomas

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THE SHORT COURSE SERIES

THE PRAYERS OF ST. PAUL

[Pg ii]

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The title of the present series is a sufficient indication of its purpose. Few preachers, or congregations, will face the long courses of expository lectures which characterised the preaching of the past, but there is a growing conviction on the part of some that an occasional short course, of six or eight connected studies on one definite theme, is a necessity of their mental and ministerial life. It is at this point the projected series would strike in. It would suggest to those who are mapping out a scheme of work for the future a variety of subjects which might possibly be utilised in this way.

The appeal, however, will not be restricted to ministers or preachers. The [Pg iii] various volumes will meet the needs of laymen and Sabbath-school teachers who are interested in a scholarly but also practical exposition of Bible history and doctrine. In the hands of office-bearers and mission-workers the "Short Course Series" may easily become one of the most convenient and valuable of Bible helps.

It need scarcely be added that while an effort has been made to secure, as far as possible, a general uniformity in the scope and character of the series, the final responsibility for the special interpretations and opinions introduced into the separate volumes, rests entirely with the individual contributors.

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EDITED BY

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**THE
PRAYERS OF ST. PAUL**

BY THE

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**PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT LITERATURE AND
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WYCLIFFE COLLEGE, TORONTO**

**NEW YORK
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1914**

TO

W. G. J.

CONTENTS

- I. Grace and Holiness
 - 1 Thessalonians iii. 11-13
- II. Consecration and Preservation
 - 1 Thessalonians v. 23, 24
- III. Approbation and Blessing
 - 2 Thessalonians i. 11, 12
- IV. Love and Peace
 - 2 Thessalonians iii. 5, R.V.; 2 Thessalonians iii. 16
- V. Knowledge and Obedience
 - Colossians i. 9-12
- VI. Conflict and Comfort
 - Colossians ii. 1, 2
- VII. Wisdom and Revelation
 - Ephesians i. 15-19
- VIII. Strength and Indwelling
 - Ephesians iii. 14-19
- IX. Love and Discernment
 - Philippians i. 9-11
- Appendix
- Index

One of the most valuable elements in the Epistles of St. Paul is their revelation of the writer's spiritual life. While they are necessarily doctrinal and theological, dealing with the fundamental realities of the Christian religion, they are also intensely personal, and express very much of the Apostle's own experience. They depict in a marked degree the sources and characteristics of the spiritual life. This is especially seen when the various prayers, thanksgivings, doxologies, and personal testimonies are considered.

[Pg 1]

I.

GRACE AND HOLINESS.

[Pg 3]

I.

GRACE AND HOLINESS.

“Now God Himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.” —1 Thess. iii. 11-13.

There are few more precious subjects for meditation and imitation than the prayers and intercessions of the great Apostle. He was a man of action because he was first and foremost a man of prayer. To him both aspects of the well-known motto were true: “To pray is to labour,” and “To labour is to pray.”

There is no argument for or justification of prayer; nor even an explanation. It is [Pg 4] assumed to be the natural and inevitable expression of spiritual life. Most of the Apostle’s prayers of which we have a record are concerned with other people rather than with himself, and they thus reveal to us indirectly but very really what St. Paul felt to be the predominant needs of the spiritual life.

In this series of studies we propose to look at some of these prayers, and to consider their direct bearing upon our own lives. Taking the Epistles in what is generally regarded to be their chronological order, we naturally commence with the prayer found in 1 Thess. iii. 11-13. In this passage we have what is not often found, a prayer for himself associated with prayer for others.

1. His Prayer for Himself (ver. 11).

Let us notice *Who it is to Whom he prays*—“God Himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” The association of Christ with God as One to Whom prayer is addressed is of course very familiar to us, but it ought never to be forgotten that when the Apostle penned these words the association [Pg 5] was both striking and significant. For consider: these words were written within twenty-five years of our Lord’s earthly life and ascension, and yet here is this quiet but clear association of Him with the Father, thus testifying in a very remarkable and convincing way to His Godhead as the Hearer of prayer. And this fact is still more noticeable in the original, for St. Paul in this verse breaks one of the familiar rules of grammar, whether of Greek or English. It is well known that whenever there are two nouns to a verb the verb must be in the plural; and yet here the Greek word “direct” is in the singular, notwithstanding the fact that there are two subjects, the Father and Christ. The same feature is to be found in 2 Thess. ii. 17. It is evident from this what St. Paul thought of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it is in such simple, indirect testimonies that we find the strongest and most convincing proofs that the early Church believed in the Deity of our Lord.

Let us consider *what it is for which he prays*—“Direct our way.” He asks for guidance. There had been certain difficulties [Pg 6] in the way of his return to Thessalonica. He had been hindered, and now asks that God would open the way for him to go back to his beloved friends. Nothing was outside the Apostle’s relationship to God, and nothing was too small about which to pray to God. As it has been well said: “Nothing is so small that we do not honour God by asking His guidance of it, or insult Him by taking it out of His hands.” The need of guidance is a very real one in every Christian life, and the certainty of guidance is just as real. “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord” (Ps. xxxvii. 23); and this is as true now as ever. “I will guide thee with Mine eye” (Ps. xxxii. 8) is a promise for all time, and we may confidently seek guidance in prayer whenever it is needed. The answer to our prayer will come in a threefold way. God guides us by His Spirit, reigning supreme within our hearts.

He also guides us by the counsels and principles of His Word. These two agree in one, for the Holy Spirit never guides contrary to the Word. And then, in the third place, He [Pg 7] guides us by His Providence, so that when the Word, the Spirit, and Providence in daily circumstances agree we may be sure that the guidance has been given.

2. His Prayer for Others (vers. 12, 13).

Consider the *immediate request* he makes—“The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men.” He asks for *love* on their behalf, that God would grant them this greatest of all gifts—“the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before Him.” Love in the New Testament is no mere sentiment, for it involves self-sacrifice. It is not limited to emotion; it expresses itself in energy. It does not evaporate in feeling; it expresses itself in fact. “Love is of God,” for “God is love”; and the Apostle in praying this prayer asks for the supreme gift of their lives.

The measure of the gift is noticeable—“Increase and abound in love.” The “increase” has to do with their inner life, their [Pg 8] hearts being more and more enlarged in capacity to possess this love; the “abounding” has to do with their outward life, and points to the overflow of that love towards others.

Consider, too, the *objects* of this love—“Toward one another, and toward all men.” There was, first of all, the special love to be shown toward Christians, according to the “new commandment” (John xiii. 34). In the New Testament the emphasis is laid again and again upon brother-love, or love of the brethren, and the brotherhood. This was something entirely new in the world’s history—a new tie or bond, the union of hearts in Christ Jesus. To see how these Christians loved one another was a proof of this new affection based upon the new commandment. But, further, their love was to extend beyond their fellow-Christians—even to “all men,” just as we have in St. Peter’s Epistle, in that long chain of graces, first, love of the brethren, and then, love towards all (2 Pet. i. 7).

And yet it may perhaps be asked, How is it [Pg 9] possible for us to love everybody? What about those who are not lovely and lovable—how can we love these? It may help us to remember that there is a clear distinction between *loving* and *liking*. While it is impossible to *like* everybody, it is assuredly possible to love everybody. A mother loves her wayward son, but she cannot like him, for there is practically nothing “alike” between them. In the same way we may love with the love of compassion if we cannot love with the love of complacency, and thus fulfil our Lord’s command and realise the answer to the Apostle’s prayers. This, we may be perfectly certain, is the supreme thing, and our Christianity will count for nothing in the eyes of men if it is not permeated and energised through and through with active, whole-hearted, Christ-like love.

Consider the *ultimate purpose* he expresses—“To the end He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness.” The love for which he prays is to be expressed in holiness. The meaning of holiness throughout the Old [Pg 10] and New Testaments is “separateness.” The idea is that of a life separated unto God, dedicated, consecrated to His service. Wherever the words “holiness,” “sanctification,” and their associated and cognate expressions are found, the root idea is always that of separation rather than of purification. It involves the whole-hearted and entire dedication of the life to God. The cognate word “saint” does not strictly mean “one who is pure,” but “one who belongs to God.”

The sphere of this holiness is to be in “your hearts.” It is always to be noticed that in Scripture the “heart” includes the intellect, the emotions, and the will. In a word, it is the centre of our moral and spiritual being; and when this is understood we can see at once the point and importance of the heart being holy, for it is only another way of saying that our entire being is to be separated from all else in order to be possessed by, and consecrated to, God.

The standard of holiness is also brought before us in this prayer—“Stablish your [Pg 11] hearts unblameable in holiness.” The Apostle prays that they may be steadfast, not weak and vacillating. The great need was for solidity and steadfastness, as it is in the present day, for it is only when the heart is established by grace and in holiness that it can in any true sense serve God. This emphasis on a

fixed or established heart is brought before us several times in Holy Scripture (cf. Ps. lvii. 7, cviii. 1, cxii. 7; Heb. xiii. 9).

And steadfast hearts will be “unblameable” hearts, hearts that are not blameworthy. A clear distinction is to be drawn between unblameable hearts and unblemished hearts. A little child may perform a task which in the result is full of blemishes, though the child, having done his best, is entirely without blame. In like manner, though the believer is not free from blemish, it is nevertheless possible for him to live free from blame. This is the meaning of the Apostle, and the reason of his prayer.

In all this we can see the close connection between love and holiness. When our hearts [Pg 12] are filled to overflowing with the love of God to us, and of our love to Him, the inevitable result is holiness, a heart separated unto God, “strengthened with all might,” and “ready unto every good work.”

Consider the *great incentive* he urges—“Before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.” The Apostle puts before his readers the great future to which they were to look, and he urges upon them this love and this holiness in the light of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and all that it will mean to the people of God. St. Paul draws a wonderful picture of that day in a very few words. He speaks first of all of God’s presence there: “Before God, even our Father.” Then he reminds us of the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And last of all he tells us that “the saints” will be there also. Thus, surrounded by our fellow-Christians, and in the presence of our God and Saviour, we shall see as we are seen, and know as we are known, with hearts “unblameable in holiness.”

This, then, is what the Apostle prays for [Pg 13] his beloved friends in Thessalonica—abounding love and perfect holiness. This is Christianity and the normal Christian life. How simple it all is, summed up in the words Love and Holiness. And yet how searching it is! The simplest things are often the most difficult, and while it is possible for the believer to do great things and to shine in great crises, it is not always so easy to go on loving day by day, and to continue growing in grace and holiness, until the heart becomes so established in grace that our Christianity becomes the permanent character of our life. Yet this is God’s purpose for each one of us.

And the fact that the Apostle prayed for this is a clear proof that an answer was expected, and that the purpose can be realised.

[Pg 15]

II.

CONSECRATION AND PRESERVATION.

[Pg 17]

II.

CONSECRATION AND PRESERVATION.

“And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly: and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He that calleth you, Who also will do it.” —1 Thess. v. 23, 24.

As we consider these prayers of the Apostle, we become increasingly aware of what he felt to be the most important elements in the Christian life. The prayers all have reference to Christian living, and whether we think of the character of the life portrayed, or the standard held up in them, we can readily see their intense practical value for daily living. We may be pretty sure that those things for which he prayed on behalf of his converts were the things he regarded as [Pg 18] most essential in Christian character and conduct.

The prayer that now calls for consideration is that found in 1 Thess. v. 23, 24.

1. The Petition.

He prays for their *sanctification*—“Sanctify you wholly.” As already noted, the root idea of sanctification, and of its cognate expressions, “holiness,” “holy,” and the like, is *separation*. We see this very clearly in connection with buildings or things which are said to be “holy” or “sanctified.” It is obvious that no thought of purification is applicable to buildings and inanimate objects. We must,

therefore, understand sanctification in this case as equivalent to consecration. This is also the root-meaning of the word "sanctify" in relation to persons, and it may be questioned whether the word, as used in the original, ever really includes in it the idea of purification; the latter thought has another set of words altogether. The Apostle therefore prays that they may be consecrated, set apart from all else, for the possession and [Pg 19] service of God. This meaning may be aptly illustrated from our Lord's words about Himself: "For their sakes I *consecrate* Myself, that they also may be *consecrated* through the truth" (John xvii. 19).

The *extent* of this consecration is very noteworthy—"Sanctify you wholly." The word rendered "wholly" is used in connection with the Old Testament sacrifices in the Septuagint, and implies the entire and complete separation of the offering for the purpose intended. The Christian life must be wholly, entirely, and unreservedly consecrated to God, no part being reserved or held back, but everything handed over and regarded as permanently and completely belonging to Him.

He prays for their *preservation*—"Preserved blameless." The consecration is to be maintained in continual preservation, in and for God. The consecration as an act is to be deepened into an attitude, so that, day by day, and hour by hour, the separated life may be maintained, and preserved in [Pg 20] readiness for every call that God may make.

The *extent* of this preservation is also observable—"Your whole spirit and soul and body." The spirit is that inmost part of our life which is related to God. The soul is the inner life regarded in itself, as the seat and sphere of intellect, heart, and will. The body is the outward vehicle and expression of the soul and spirit through which we are enabled to serve God. The order of these three should be observed. It is not, as we often say, and sing in certain hymns, "body, soul, and spirit," but the very reverse—"spirit, soul, and body." The Apostle starts from within and works outward, thereby reminding us that if the spirit or deepest part of our nature is wholly surrendered to God, this fact will express itself in every part of our nature, and we shall be consecrated wholly. What a searching requirement this is, and what a solemnity and responsibility it gives

to life! Whether in relation to God, or in relation to man, whether for worship or work, character or conduct, prayer or practice, [Pg 21] we are to be wholly consecrated, and continually kept for the Master's use—

“That all my powers with all their might,
In Thy sole glory may unite.”

2. The Pre-Requisite.

“The God of Peace Himself.” The Divine title associated with this prayer as its definite presupposition and pre-requisite is very significant, as, indeed, is every title of God. There is always some special point of direct connection between the way in which God is addressed and the prayer that follows. In the present instance the prayer for consecration and preservation is addressed to “The God of Peace Himself.”

The Apostle lays special stress upon the fact that it is God “Himself” Who consecrates and keeps us. As with salvation, so with consecration—it is and must be Divine. The work is entirely beyond any mere human power, and while there is a truth in our frequent reference to consecration as something that we ourselves have to effect, it is far more scriptural, and, therefore, much more helpful, [Pg 22] to endeavour to limit the idea of consecration to the Divine side, and to think of it as an act of God, to which the corresponding human act and attitude is that of *dedication*. It is God Himself Who separates us, marks us off as His own, and designates us for His use and service. It is God Himself, and no one else, for we are here brought into personal and blessed association with the Divine power and grace.

Further, God is described as “The God of Peace,” and we naturally ask what it means, and why peace is thus associated with consecration and preservation. This title, “The God of Peace,” is found very frequently in the writings of St. Paul, and it deserves careful consideration in each passage. There is a twofold peace in Scripture, sometimes described as “peace with God” (Rom. v. 1), at others as

“the peace of God” (Phil. iv. 7); and they both have their source in the “God of Peace” (Phil. iv. 9). Peace is the result of reconciliation with God. Our Lord made peace by the Blood of His Cross (Col. i. 20), and the acceptance of His atoning sacrifice [Pg 23] through faith brings peace to the soul. This consciousness of reconciliation in turn causes a blessed sense of restfulness and peace to spring up in the heart, and thus we have the peace of God within us.

The connection between peace and holiness is close and essential. It is impossible for anyone to understand consecration until they have experienced reconciliation. Holiness must be based on righteousness, and righteousness is only possible to those who have accepted the Lord Jesus as God’s righteousness through faith. So long as there is any enmity in the heart, or even any uncertainty as to our acceptance in Christ Jesus, holiness is an impossibility. May not the forgetfulness of this fact be the cause of surprise and disappointment at Christian Conventions from time to time? May it not be that many go to such gatherings longing to be made holy who have not settled this question of their standing before God and their peace as the result of acceptance of Christ’s atonement? To understand and experience what holiness means before enjoying [Pg 24] peace with God is like trying to take a second step before attempting the first. Only through peace can holiness come, and only as we have blessed personal experience of God as the God of peace can a prayer like this be answered.

3. The Prospect.

“Unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Once again the Apostle prays with special reference to that glorious day to which he was always looking and pointing his readers. As he looks forward to that day he uses again a favourite word, “blameless,” and suggests to us the great and wonderful possibility of being so consecrated and preserved that we may lead a blameless life day by day until the coming of our Lord. Holiness is thus associated once again with the great future. The Apostle finds in the coming of the Lord one of the most potent reasons why Christians should be consecrated and preserved. This close and intimate connection between