

## Supplying What's Lacking

### I Thessalonians 3:9-13 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> 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? <sup>10</sup> Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. <sup>11</sup> Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. <sup>12</sup> May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. <sup>13</sup> 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.

For our worship services, we generally follow a series of preselected Bible readings arranged for every Sunday throughout the year. We call this a lectionary for the church year. The church year starts with the first Sunday in Advent, which is today. Advent is a word that means “coming” or “arrival.” This is very appropriate because we are less than a month away from celebrating Christmas, Christ’s arrival into our world.

Hopefully you can’t help but notice a crossover from last Sunday to this Sunday. Because of how the church year is structured, we go from the Last Sunday of the church year, Christ the King Sunday, to the first Sunday in Advent with parallel readings from the Gospel accounts – last week from Mark, this week from Luke. Both recorded what Jesus said about the time leading up to his second arrival, his second Advent. Jesus warns us that it will not be a peaceful time as we wait for his return to judge. “On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” (Luke 21:25b-26) How will we make it through and be ready for Jesus’ second coming? Will we be ready for him to judge us?

The Apostle Paul was concerned about the Thessalonian Christians being ready for Jesus’ second coming all the way back in 51 AD, when he wrote this letter. On Paul’s initial visit to the city of Thessalonica, he and Silas were quickly opposed by some of the Jews who hated what they were preaching so much that they rounded up some bad characters, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city. Paul and Silas may only have been there for about 3 weeks before they were sent away to the next closest city of Berea.

However, they had much to be thankful for. “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?” (verse 9) What little time Paul and Silas had in Thessalonica was enough to see people come to faith through the preaching of Jesus as their perfect substitute of complete holiness as well as their complete sacrifice to remove all their sins. They planted that Gospel message and God had made it grow and kept it growing!

At the same time, though, with having spent such little time there, you can understand why Paul then wrote: “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.” (verse 10) I mean, I take usually 14 or more classes/weeks when teaching people what we believe as a congregation and know that it’s still a starting point and not an exhaustive curriculum of everything taught in the Bible. So, of course, there are things lacking in their faith, things that Paul wants to supply to them, teaching and preaching to them face to face.

What is lacking in our faith? How do you even take stock of that? Maybe you already know some of your particular shortcomings, topics that you have questions and know that you don’t fully understand, places where your faith feels weak, that trusting in God is hard, temptations that are particularly strong, that you hardly ever seem able to resist. While we could spend all day talking to everyone here just to get to know what you think is lacking in your faith, Paul directs us to three things.

The first thing that lacking in their faith are the things that are obstacles in the way of God coming to them. Are there things getting in the way of your relationship with God, of growing in your faith? While it could be a whole lot of things, maybe one of the obstacles is the anxieties of life, that as I look out into this topsy-turvy world filled with anguish and hate and abuse, I’m afraid to go out. It makes me question whether or not God is actually in control, whether or not I can believe that he is going to take care of me and get me through all of this. I start to feel concerned that if God is going to delay any longer in my life, well, then I might not make it. So, isolating, staying in my cocoon, cutting myself off from gathering with the body of Christ sounds a whole lot safer and appealing, and I keep God at an arm’s length away. And my faith suffers for it.

Closely tied to the anxieties in life putting obstacles in God’s way to come to us is also possibly a fear to love. Is there a single person here who has not been burned by someone that they opened up to, that they showed love to? Whenever we love, it comes with the risk of being hurt more deeply than we can be by other people that we are closed off to and keep at a distance. Maybe this has

made us stingy with our love, fearing that what has been done to us before can be and will be done to us again. Or maybe we are stingy with our love because we are spread so thin, trying to accomplish so many things, take care of so many responsibilities, that we are tapped out. We don't have the time or energy to increase our love for anyone else. Our love for others lacks.

Maybe this lack of love on our part makes us feel that if Jesus returned today, if his second Advent was right now, then I would not be found blameless and holy in his presence. In fact, as I examine myself even from this morning, let alone this past week, I can't confess that I've been perfect. Then past sins from long ago pop in and I feel even more worthless and unworthy to stand before God. This in turn ramps up my lack of love and my anxiety as I become apprehensive of standing before Christ as my Judge.

This is why Paul wrote out his prayer for the Thessalonian Christian who were feeling that their faith lacked in all these ways: "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you." (verse 11) All our anxiety over all the hate and anguish and abuse, clear it out from our lives, from us being with you, O Lord. You told your disciples that they would have trouble in this world, that they would be scattered by persecution, by people's hatred of them as followers of God. You said that they would have trouble, but you didn't say this so that they would be anxious about it and isolate. Instead, you assured them of your victory over the world!

This same truth clears a path for us to God in our lives. Christ our King has ascended to the right hand of God, this position of power over all things. This means that Jesus is actually in charge of this world in spite of all the anguish and hatred and abuse, all the things that make us apprehensive and anxious. Jesus reassures us that he's got this, that he has overcome them all. We go out and live every day with his power over us and over all the people and forces of this world. He protects us and keeps us safe. He clears the way so that our anxiety can be put to rest as we trust in his complete control as he is with us.

Paul's prayer for what is lacking in Thessalonian's faith and ours continues: "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you." (verse 12) It is a barrier for us to overflow with love to others when we have been burned by loving someone. The only way that can overcome this is to be filled overflowing with the love of Christ.

For us, love started not with our desire to love God, but him loving us. This wasn't just a feeling, a desire, or affections. The love of God is action; it's what he does. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10) As soon as sin entered into the world, God in love set his plan into motion to save you and me. The promise of the offspring of the woman who would crush Satan and all his accusations against us began with Adam, was passed down through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and eventually to King David, and finally culminated in Jesus' first Advent, his birth in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph. In love, Jesus took on flesh and blood and lived perfectly for us. He sacrificed his life in place of our ours to pay the debt of every single one of our sins. Not a single sin of ours is on our account anymore. It's completely wiped clean. We are holy and blameless because the Lord is our righteousness! This is where our love for each other and others comes from. We can increase and overflow with love for others when we are being filled with God's love for us over and over again, knowing that our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west.

Paul's prayer for what is lacking in our faith wraps up: "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." (verse 13) Because we are filled with Jesus' perfection and his blood which removed from us each and every sin, we are holy and blameless right now and we will be as we are judged on Jesus' second Advent. No matter how we feel, no matter how many accusations Satan hurls at us, God will judge us as he sees us: perfect, no sin whatsoever because he has paid for it all!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, keep filling up on this message what Jesus did for us in his first Advent and we will be ready for his second Advent. He fills what is lacking in our faith. He makes us complete before him. And so we will stand in the presence of our God and Father as blameless and holy because we are filled with what Christ has done for us. Amen.