

## Second Advent Checklist

### 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.

It's December now. The Christmas decorations are up here at church. How is your Christmas checklist coming? Thanks to Black Friday and Cyber Monday, do you have all your Christmas shopping done? Are the lights and tree up around the house? Are the Christmas Eve and Christmas Day plans settled – who's coming, where you're going, when you're going, etc.? Do you have the kids' Christmas concerts on the calendar along with the office party? There is a lot that needs to get done before we can celebrate Christmas, before we can welcome Christ once again.

The Apostle Paul was preparing the Thessalonian Christians to welcome Christ again, to welcome him when he returns, his second coming on what will be the last day or Second Advent - Judgment Day, the end of the world. The Thessalonian Christians weren't quite sure what to expect because Paul only got 4 weeks with them before he had to leave town because of persecution. However, when Timothy returned with a report on them, Paul was thrilled! He wrote, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering 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 1:6-8a) Paul can't even express his joy over them: "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)

I echo Paul's sentiments. How can I thank God enough for you in return for all the joy I have in the presence of God because of you? Every Sunday morning I am thrilled with every single one of you who come to worship, Bible Study, Sunday School. I could focus on the people that I think should be coming, on the people not here, but then I remember that each of you made a conscious decision this morning to get out of bed, get ready, and take time on your Sunday morning (or Monday evening) to gather around God's Word. You could have come up with a million excuses not to come, but you didn't. That brings me great joy. I relish the fellowship that we share, these opportunities to gather around God's Word and to be built up by what he says. And I know that the Holy Spirit is always building you up here because he promised to work through his Word, that whenever his Word is preached it will not return empty. And I get to see that happen in your lives as you go through struggles and challenges and you still grow in your understanding and your faith in God. This is something that I pray continues in your lives. I pray like Paul, "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith." (verse 10)

As much as Paul thanked God for the Thessalonian Christians, he also knew that they weren't done growing in their faith and understanding of God. In fact, there were things that they were lacking, and he wasn't content with them having the minimum knowledge. He was praying for the opportunity to supply what was lacking in their faith. He wanted them to be absolutely ready for Christ's coming. He had a Second Advent checklist for them – one that included teachings about the Last Day, Jesus' Second Coming, the resurrection of the dead, and how to live knowing that they are in the end times.

Thinking about these Thessalonian Christians lacking in their faith, it gives us pause to ask ourselves, "What is lacking in my faith?" Forget your Christmas checklist for a minute. What should be on my Second Advent checklist? What do I need to do to be ready to welcome Christ again? This may be something very hard for us to see. It's often easier to point out what other people are lacking. We hear someone worry, and we jump to saying that they are not trusting fully in God to take care of them. We hear them struggle with the relationship of faith and works, hearing something that sounds like we are saved by what we do, and we wonder why they don't know the basics. We gawk at someone who doesn't know one of the Bible stories we grew up hearing. It's tempting then to think that we have a superior faith to our brothers and sisters in Christ because we don't lack what they lack. We might even look down on them, despise them, thinking that they are just not as good of a Christian as I am. If they were, they would understand this.

On the other side, maybe you are very well aware of what you lack in your faith, and so you don't talk much about your faith or your God. You don't raise your hand in Sunday School or Bible study because you would rather be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt. You don't want to be exposed as being ignorant about your God that you believe in.

Shame on us if we use what we know about God to condescend to others, that we use our knowledge to lord it over others like a, “I bet you didn’t that, did ya?” This is not love for our brother or sister in Christ. This does not build them up. Remember what you have struggled with, what you have lacked in your faith at different time and how your faith has been built up over the years. Then ask, “What did I need to hear that supplied what my faith lacked?”

On the other side, maybe what I lack in my faith, which I keep to myself, means that I have doubts in my mind, that I wonder whether or not I will be found blameless on that day “when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones,” on his Second Advent. (verse 13) I look at what I lack in my faith, and I know I’m not good enough – but I keep this to myself. And then I don’t receive any help. No one comes and supplies for me what I lack in my faith.

Let’s acknowledge that just as much as we are all different people with different strengths and weaknesses, we are also all at different stages and places and knowledge and maturity of our faith in God. It doesn’t matter if you have been a Christian all your life or only for a short time. All of us have something about God and his Word that we don’t know, something that is lacking in our faith. We are not to tout an air of superiority over what we do know and we are not to hide and cover up what we don’t know. Instead, let’s have supplied what is lacking to our faith, what is lacking in our Second Advent checklist. Where do we start for that? The same place as the Apostle Paul with the Thessalonians: we pray.

In filling out our Second Advent checklist to get ready for Christ’s second coming, we pray that God will supply what is lacking to my faith, just as your pastor is already praying that for you and himself. We pray: “May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.” (verse 11) We pray that God remove all the obstacles that try to keep us from being in his Word gathered around our brothers and sisters in Christ. If those are temptations to stay home, temptations to hold a grudge, feelings of being judged, or obstacles of sickness and exhaustion – God, remove all that. Bring me fellow Christians that encourage me, who build me up, who help me want to be here. Help me to be that person who goes out of their way to encourage the people here and the people not here to continue to come and be built up in God’s Word. Help the pastor manage his time and to reach out to those who are hurting. Give me the courage to fulfill my responsibility to reach out to pastor when I need spiritual guidance and help, when I am struggling with having supplied what is lacking to my faith.

The next item on the Second Advent checklist is to pray for fruits of faith. “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.” (verse 12) Pray that God would make your life abound with good works, not just for people here at church, but for everyone – for our neighbors, for people in our community, and for people wherever we can influence them. And I rejoice as I see so many of these fruits of faith already among you from everyone who has helped with church projects to those who did Christmas decorating to those who are taking angels from the angel tree to supply what others lack to those who clean up after a potluck and empty out coffee pots and vacuum the floor to those who fold bulletins to those who greet new people and give encouragement to our members. God, increase all these fruits of love for each other and everyone else that they overflow.

The final item on the Second Advent checklist is to pray that God remove all doubt from your heart and strengthen you in anticipation of Jesus’ Second Coming. “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) God strengthens you for that day by remembering where your blamelessness and holiness come from. As Jeremiah said the righteous Branch from David’s line – Jesus - he is my righteous Savior. He is, in fact, my righteousness. He is my holiness, my blamelessness. He has made me a saint, one of his holy ones by covering my sin with his blood. Because my righteousness is based on Christ and what he has done, I will be blameless and holy in the presence of God when he returns because he has already made me that way. God strengthens us in our holiness in our identity in Christ by repeating in his Word that he is my righteousness, by recalling that in my baptism he has clothed me with Christ’s righteousness, that he gives me his body and blood in, with, and under the bread and the wine in his Supper for the forgiveness and removal of my sins. We pray that God continue to keep us in these truths that he continually builds us up in them.

Our Second Advent checklist is all prayers today. We pray them knowing that the Lord Almighty, God himself, hears and answers them. With prayer, I put all this in the Lord’s hands instead of all on me to be ready for his Second Advent. He will answer me for Jesus’ sake and keep me ready for that day. God, supply what we lack in our Second Advent checklist. Strengthen us in the holiness that comes from you and covers us. Make us and keep us ready for your coming. Amen.