

D.A. Carson, in his book *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (39–62), makes an interesting observation that should be mentioned at the outset. In verse 11 Paul says, “To this end also we pray,” or, as the NIV translates it, “with this in mind we pray.” The question that Carson asks is, “with what in mind?” What was the framework of thought that Paul had when he prayed? The answer is that Paul was thinking of the content of verses 3–10—“with verses 3–10 in mind he prays.” There are two dominant features in these verses: Paul (1) is “thankful for signs of grace” in verses 3 and 4, and (2) has “confidence in the prospect of vindication” in verses 5–10. In other words, when Paul prayed, he was thinking both about the outward signs of grace that he saw at work in the lives of the believers in Thessalonica and about the confidence he had that Christians suffering persecution would be vindicated.

Salutation

1:1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

1:2 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

See notes on 1 Thessalonians 1:1.

One difference between Paul’s salutation in 1 Thessalonians and this one is that here he refers to God as “our” Father. God had come to the Thessalonians as a father and the fatherhood of God is what unites Paul to other believers in Christ.

Thankfulness for Signs of Grace

1:3 We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater;

1:4 therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.

Thanksgiving is clearly a component that controlled Paul’s thoughts (1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13; 3:9; 5:18; 2 Thess. 1:3; 2:13). Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians’ faith was growing, that their love was increasing, and (cast in slightly different terms) that they were persevering under trial. Their behavior is a sign of God’s grace working in their lives. In other words, as Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, he was contemplating God’s work in their lives and was grateful for it.

“Growing faith” cannot be a reference to the initial faith that the Thessalonians exercised when they came to Christ; rather, the faith he is speaking of is the relationship of trust they had with God. Trust is a living, dynamic, growing thing in all relationships, and our relationship to God is no exception (Stott, 144). In 1 Thessalonians 1:4 Paul saw their initial faith as evidence of God’s love and election. Here he sees their growth in faith as the work of God; this is why He thanks God for their behavior.

Paul also thanks God for the great growth in the Thessalonians’ love for one another. Many groups of people who have shared ideals, goals, or interests often find it relatively easy to foster love, tolerance, and cohesion for others in their group. But the church is different in that it is made up of people who are

rich and poor, learned and unlearned, practical and impractical, sophisticated and unsophisticated, extrovert and introvert—and everything in between. The only thing that holds people together in the church is their shared allegiance in Jesus Christ. When Christians lose sight of the first and primary allegiance, they will squabble. To put it more positively, “when Christians do grow in their love for each other, for no other reason than they are loved by Jesus Christ and love Him in return, their growing love is an infallible sign of grace in their lives. As Paul hears reports of the Thessalonians, he is struck by their growing love. Such love must be the work of God, and so it is to God that Paul directs his thanks” (Carson, 42, 43).

Lastly, Paul speaks proudly about the Thessalonians’ perseverance and faith among other churches, as well. Paul’s gratitude is not only private; he thanks God openly as an encouragement and challenge to others. Because God is at work, Paul can boast in the Lord by speaking about what God has done to other churches.

Thus, Paul’s prayer in 1:11 is rooted in an attitude of thanksgiving that sees God at work in those whom He has saved (1:3, 4). Paul looks for God’s work (signs of grace), thanks God for it, and tells others of what he sees.

Confidence in the Prospect of Vindication

1:5 This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

The Thessalonians’ faithfulness under trials is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment (Carson, 44); that is, their perseverance constitutes evidence (ESV); it is a proof, or “a manifest token” (KJV), that God’s judgment (i.e. His decision to consider them worthy of the kingdom of God) is just.

How is persecution evidence that they are worthy of the kingdom of God?

The Bible assumes that Christians will suffer and that they will persevere in their faith in spite of it (Matt. 24:13; Jn. 8:31; Heb. 3:14; 1 Jn. 2:18–19). Jesus had taught that it was necessary for Him and His followers to suffer to enter glory (Lk. 24:26; Jn. 12:24ff.). In Acts 14:22 Paul said, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Also, in Romans 8:17 he wrote, “we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.”

Therefore, perseverance in suffering was visible evidence that they were truly followers of Jesus. The Thessalonians were not suffering for the sake of suffering; they suffered because they refused to abandon their faith as they looked forward to the goal that awaited them—the kingdom of God (1:5b). Thus, their faith was proven to be real by their actions; they were “shown to be worthy” (Morris, 198, 199) of entering the kingdom of God. Thus, God’s decision to grant them entry into the kingdom is righteous (it is just; it is right).

To paraphrase: “The Thessalonians’ faithfulness in suffering for the kingdom of God is evidence that God’s judgment in deeming them worthy to enter the kingdom is just.”

Some take this verse as meaning that the suffering of the Thessalonians was right because God will judge His church (1 Pet. 4:7; Wanamaker, 220, 223; Green, 284–286). However, it seems like the judgment spoken about is the future judgment that occurs at the coming of Christ as verses 6–8 explain. Likewise, the kingdom of God in this context is the final consummated kingdom in all its glory (the reign of God in the new heavens and earth); it is the kingdom that the Thessalonians were striving to enter.

When some look at the suffering church, they automatically think that injustice is being done and wonder why God does nothing to stop it. 2 Thessalonians 1 tells us why. God uses the church's suffering to work out His eternal purpose in demonstrating that they are worthy of the kingdom. To state it differently: God's righteousness is seen in that He is using suffering to accomplish His purpose of counting them worthy to enter His kingdom. At the same time, God will be seen as righteous in His judgment because those who persecute the church will be held accountable. Judgment will fall upon them in the end (1:6ff.).

***1:6 For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,
1:7 and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,
1:8 dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.***

Verse 6 introduces additional information about the judgment of God spoken of in verse 5 (Green, 286), but looks at it in relation to the wicked. The term “just” (δικαίως) in verse 6, and “righteous” in verse 5 are the exact same words in Greek; the repetition links the two verses together. “Just as it is true that it is a righteous thing with God to bring believers to salvation and blessing in His kingdom, so it is a righteous thing with Him to bring punishment to those who persist in courses of evil” (Morris, 200).

The judgment spoken about will happen “when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven.” Typically, the Bible speaks of Christ's return as His coming (parousia; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 5:23), but here “appearing” is used which “directs attention rather to the thought of uncovering what is hidden. Now the Lord is hid from the view of the world, and it is even possible for men to deny His existence. But in that day He will be revealed in all His glory. He'll be shown to be what He is” (Morris, 202).

Paul proceeds to describe this revelation with three prepositional phrases. It will be (1) from heaven, (2) attended by angels, and (3) in flaming fire. These are the external features that describe the revelation (Frame, 229).

“[From heaven] conveys the thought that the highest place of all is His and is His now. He is enjoying the glory of the Father. When He comes it will be with the very highest authority, and His task will be that divine task of judgment” (Morris, 202). In 1 Thessalonians 1:10 it said that the Thessalonians were waiting for “His Son from heaven.”

In 1 Thessalonians 4 the return of Christ was spoken of as the Lord coming in the clouds. Here He is revealed from heaven in flaming fire. “The majesty of the appearance of the Lord who is revealed is brought out by comparing it to that of flaming fire. This comparison is to be found in other places as

Exodus 3:2, Isaiah 66:15, Revelation 1:13 f. On outstanding occasions, like the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, fire is the symbol of the divine presence” (Morris, 203). It is also common imagery with judgment (Stott, 152).

When the Lord comes, He will be revealed in judgment. “God’s recompensing activity is not confined to the repayment of the wicked. It has its application in the relief of the righteous as well. Paul looks to God to grant rest to the afflicted” (Morris, 201). In that day He will bring justice on those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (1:8). That is, there will be retributive justice—“the inflicting of full justice on the criminal . . . nothing more, nothing less” (Morris, 204).

1:9 These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power,

1:10 when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed-- for our testimony to you was believed.

Verse 9 gives the nature of the fate that awaits those who do not know God, and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (1:8; Marshall, 178)—they face eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.

“Pay the penalty” (δίκη dike) is another word formed from the same root as “righteous” (δίκαιος dikaios; in verse 5), “just” (δίκαιος dikaios; in verse 6) and “retribution” (ἐκδίκησις ekdikesis in verse 8). “It brings us the idea of a just penalty, of a punishment meted out as a result of an even-handed assessment of the rights of the case” (Morris, 205). Findlay says, “it connotes justice in the penalty, punishment determined by a lawful process” (Morris, 205 n. 28).

The penalty that is paid is destruction (Frame, 234). “Destruction” does not signify annihilation but the loss of all that is worthwhile, utter ruin (Morgan, Hell Under Fire, 144–146; Morris, 205); it is banishment from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. By contrast, the believer’s destiny is “being with the Lord always” (1 Thess. 4:17) and “living together with Christ” (1 Thess. 5:10); being in the Lord’s presence and being banished from it are clearly the best and worst case scenarios imaginable. The former is bliss; the latter is the complete loss of all that has worth.

The adjective “eternal” means literally “age-long,” and everything depends on the length of the age. In the New Testament there is never a hint that the coming age has an end—it is the continuing life of the world to come. When the life of believers beyond the grave is spoken of it is with the use of the same adjective. “Eternal life” is that life which belongs to the age to come. Therefore it has no end. At the same time “eternal” is a quality of life. It is not only that life in the age to come will be longer than life here: it will also be of a different quality. All of this has to be borne in mind when we consider the other expression “eternal destruction.” It is the opposite of eternal life. It is the end of all that is worthwhile in life. As eternal life can be defined in terms of the knowledge of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 17:3), so the eternal destruction which is here in mind is “from the face of the Lord.” “From” appears to have the meaning of “away from” (contrast 1 Thess. 4:17). It indicates that separation from the Lord which is the final disaster. The solemnity of this thought should not be minimized. Those who

oppose the things of God here and now are not engaged in some minor error which can easily be put right in the hereafter. They are engaging in that defiance of the will of God which has eternal consequences. Life here and now has a high and serious dignity. In particular, the facing up to the gospel invitation is a choice fraught with the most solemn and lasting consequences (Morris, 205–206).

In short, this is not saying that those who are judged will be annihilated eternally, but that their punishment will not end. First, “eternal” is not an action that occurs in a point of time, annihilation does, so annihilation cannot be eternal. Even if we were to argue that Paul is saying that the consequences of the destruction lasts forever, it is still hard to square with annihilationism since eternal consequences seem to demand eternal existence in some form (Moo, *Hell Under Fire*, 106). Secondly, this coincides with Jude 7 that speaks of those who undergo the punishment of eternal fire. Revelation 14:11 also states that “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night.” The opposite is eternal life (Matt. 25:46). In the present context separation from the Lord is of little consequence if those punished are not conscious of the separation (Marshall, 179). No hope is given for a second chance.

Paul’s purpose in verses 5–10 is to comfort the Thessalonian Christians, who are suffering persecution. When the Lord returns God will reveal His justice. God will grant Christians relief and the unbelieving will be punished (Moo, *Hell Under Fire*, 103–109).

In sum, these verses show the following:

- The time of the judgment is when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven (1:7b, 10).
- The nature of the judgment is retributive (1:8a). That is, God will reverse the fortunes of both the Christians and the unbelieving. He will afflict those who are afflicting His people (1:6), and give relief to those who are afflicted (including the apostles; 1:7).
- The objects of God’s judgment are those who do not know God, and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (1:8b).
- The outcome in judgment is eternal destruction and the exclusion from Jesus’ presence and majesty.

Verse 10 returns to the thought of the coming of the Lord: “When He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day.” The “day” is the day of the Lord (a time marked by salvation and judgment—see notes on 1 Thess. 5:1–11), but in the context it is when the unbelieving will be judged—in THAT (same) day Christ will be glorified in His saints.

What Paul means by “in” His saints is unclear. In Greek, this could mean “in His saints,” “among His saints,” or “with His saints.” All make sense. Although the verse cannot mean all of these things at once (Paul has only one intended meaning), all could be true.

The following thought that He will “be marveled at among all who have believed” (1:10b) seems to favor the second meaning (among the saints). However, Morris, Stott, and others see this as the glory of Christ being shared by believers (see verse 12). As Calvin says, “Paul declares that our Lord Jesus in no

sense reserves His glory to Himself but possesses it only in order to radiate it to all the members of his body” (Morris, 207n. 36).

Stott explains how he sees the differences of meaning (but believes “in” Christ is what is intended):

So how will the coming Lord Jesus be glorified in relation to His people? Not ‘among’ them, as if they will be the theater or stadium in which He appears; nor ‘by’ them, as if they will be the spectators, the audience who watch and worship; nor ‘through’ or ‘by means of’ them, as if they will be mirrors which reflect His image and glory; but rather ‘in’ them, as if they will be a filament, which itself glows with light and heat when the electric current passes through it.

The distinction between these models is important. A theater is not changed by the play which is performed in it. An audience he is not necessarily moved by the drama enacted before it. A mirror is certainly not affected by the images it reflects. But a filament is changed. For when the current is switched on, it becomes incandescent. So when Jesus is revealed in His glory, He will be glorified in His people. We will not only see, but share His glory. . . . We will be radically and permanently changed, being transformed into His likeness. And in our transformation His glory will be seen in us, for we will glow forever with the glory of Christ, as indeed He glowed with the glory of His Father (Stott, 149–150).

Many places in the Bible speak of the glory we will have. 1 Corinthians 15:52 says, “the dead will be raised imperishable, and *we will be changed.*” 1 John 3:2 says, “*when He appears, we will be like Him.*” Philippians 3:21 says that God “*will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His [Christ’s] glory.*” Believers are one with Him and He will share His glory.

Whatever Paul is intending to say, two things are biblically true: (1) believers will be glorified, and (2) they will glorify Christ at His return; so there will be glorified saints who proclaim the glory of Christ and reflect the glory of Christ. Though the wicked will be judged and God’s righteousness will be displayed, the judgment of the wicked will not take center stage. It is only incidental. Jesus will be marveled at and His glory will be seen in His people.

Although verses 5–10 are pretty straightforward, they challenge the thinking of some modern Christians.

First, they challenge Christians as to their zeal for Christ’s return. All Christians acknowledge the return of Christ as a point of doctrine, but many have no real anticipation of the Lord’s return. The result is devastating. Instead of being focused on the eternal, people devote almost all of their time, energy, and money on temporal things.

Secondly, many modern Christians despise the concept of retributive justice (justice based on the punishment of offenders and the compensation of victims). Many believe that an-eye-for-an-eye theology falls short of the Christian concepts of grace and forgiveness that displace revenge. They say it is vindictive, petty, harsh, and unworthy of those who follow Christ. This mindset is not biblical but secular. The biblical concept of justice includes retribution. As Carson says,

The truth is that every Christian who has thought long and hard about the cross begins to understand that God is not merely a stern dispenser of justice, nor merely a lover who lavishly forgives, but the Sovereign who is simultaneously perfect in holiness and perfect in love. His holiness demands retribution; His love sends His own son to absorb that retribution on behalf of others. The cross simultaneously stands as the irrefutable evidence that God demands retribution, and cries out that it is the measure of God's love (Ro. 3:21–26). That is why, in the Christian view of things, forgiveness is never detached from the cross. In other words, forgiveness is never the product of love alone, still less of mawkish sentimentality. Forgiveness is possible only because there has been a real offense, and a real sacrifice to offset that offense. . .

In the worst case, people may become so hardened in their vaunted independence that they pour scorn on those who have come to know the joys of God's forgiveness; they may even take it upon themselves to do as much damage to them as they can. That was the situation the Thessalonian believers faced: implacable opposition to everything they held dear. What, then, is the result? "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you. . ." (V.6).

The final picture is not a pretty one. Some people think of hell as a place where sinners will be crying out for another chance, begging for the opportunity to repent, with God somehow taking on a "tough guy" stance and declaring, "Sorry. You had your chance. Too late." But the reality is infinitely more sobering. There is no evidence anywhere in the Bible that there is any repentance in hell. The biblical pictures suggest that evil and self-centeredness persist and persist—and so does the judgment. Men and women wantonly refuse to acknowledge God as God; they will not confess His essential rightness; they will not own His just requirements; they will not give up their perpetual desire to be the center of the universe; they will not accept that they are guilty of rebellion; they will not accept forgiveness on the ground that God himself makes provision for sinners in the sacrifice of His own Son. "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence from the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (v. 9).

In a fallen world order, these people once seemed so strong, so inevitably right, so wise. But Christians understand that the final vindication of God's revelation, of the claims of the gospel, comes at the end of the age, "on the day [Christ] comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed" (v. 10; Carson, *ibid*, 48–49).

Paul's Prayer

***1:11 To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power,
1:12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.***

"To this end also we pray. . ." can mean "with this in mind, we pray. . ." or "in order that this may be, we pray. . ."

Paul's prayer is framed with thankfulness for God's work of grace in the Thessalonians' lives and with the believer's destiny in mind (1:3–10). Thus, Paul prays that (1) God will count the Thessalonians worthy of their calling, and that (2) they would fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power.

The NIV paraphrases verse 11 well: "With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith."

that our God will count you worthy of your calling

In the writings of Paul all whom God calls are saved. For example, in Romans 8:30 Paul writes, "Those whom he predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified." Used in this way, to be called means to be saved (Carson, 52).

Paul never believed that people can do enough good to be worthy of being called—as if they could earn or deserve their salvation—so he would not be praying this here. Rather, Paul is praying that they live up to their calling.

That means these believers must grow in all the things that please God so that He is pleased with them, and finally judges them to be living up to the calling that they have received. In short, they are to "live a life worthy of the calling [they] have received" (Eph. 4:1) (Carson, 53).

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This is one of the themes to which Paul returns again and again. We are to grow up into Christian maturity. In a strange paradox, Paul is constantly telling people, in effect, to become what they are; that is, since we already are children of God because of His free grace to us in Christ, we must now become all that such children should be. God has graciously called us; now we must live up to that calling. That cannot mean less than that we should become increasingly holy, self-denying, loving, full of integrity, steeped in the knowledge of God and His Word, and delighted to trust and obey our heavenly Father.

We are not strong enough or disciplined enough to take these steps ourselves. That is why Paul prays as he does. If the holy God is to count us "worthy of His calling," we must ask Him for help. That is why Paul is praying: he is not simply asking the Thessalonians to try harder, he is praying for them to the end that God will count them worthy of His calling. Such a prayer is tantamount to asking that God will so work in their lives, so make them worthy, that ultimately He will count them worthy (Carson, 54–55).

that our God will fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power

"With this in mind we constantly pray for you, that our God . . . by His power may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith."

What Paul presupposes is that God's people have been so transformed through their conversion to Jesus Christ and his gospel that they now developed new sets of goals. Prompted and shaped

by goodness and faith, they inevitably formulate new purposes, decidedly Christian plans, Christian goals.

. . .

Paul prays that God by His power may “fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.” That is simply marvelous. Assuming that Christians will develop such wholesome and spiritually minded purposes, Paul now prays that God Himself may take these purposes and so work them out as to bring them to fruition, to fulfillment. We may have all kinds of wonderful ideas about what we as Christians might do, yet somehow never get around to doing any of them. Alternatively, we may immediately proceed to organization and administration, and never seek, except in sporadic and accidental ways, the decisive approval and blessing of God on our Christian dreams. The truth is that unless God works in us and through us, unless God empowers these good purposes of ours, they will not engender any enduring spiritual fruit; they will not display any life-transforming, people-changing power. “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (Psa. 127:1). And unless the Lord fulfills our good, faith-prompted purposes, they will remain arid, fruitless—either empty dreams or frenetic activity with no life, but in either case spiritually anemic (Carson, 56-57).

Because no human effort is sufficient to fulfill these God-born desires, Paul prays that the power of God may work in every believer, so that their God-given, good desires may come to pass.

so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him

Verse 16 tells us why Paul desires that Christians might live up to their calling, and see their good, faith-prompted purposes fulfilled by the power of God. Namely, it is because if these things occur Christ will be glorified. The ultimate end that Paul is praying for is that “the Lord Jesus be glorified in consequence of such growing maturity and fruitfulness on the part of believers” (Carson, 57).

When Christ-like purposes, godly character and Christian maturity become apparent in us, it will become apparent that they have come from Him, and He will be glorified. Paul wants the Thessalonians to “be such a bright and shining testimony to the reality of their salvation that the Savior will be seen to be the wonderful Being He is” (Morris, 211).

In addition, Paul wants the Thessalonians to be glorified, too. “Their glory will result from their association with the Lord, and thus Paul speaks of their being ‘in’ Him in this connection. On that day, just as He will be glorified in them on account of what they have become, so they will be glorified in Him on account of what He is” (Morris, 211, 212).

As Carson says,

When we glorify God, we are not giving Him something substantial that He would not otherwise have. We are simply ascribing to Him what is His. But when we are glorified . . . we are being made more like Him, we are being strengthened or empowered to exhibit characteristics that we would not otherwise display. . . He is the one who makes our glorification possible, so that

our glorification itself becomes the most spectacular means of bringing Him glory. To think that rebellious, self-centered mortals become children of God, increasingly mirroring His character, and one day enjoying the unclouded bliss of a perfect existence in the presence of the Triune God—this could not possibly be the fruit of our own endeavors. Rather, Christ is glorified, He receives the praise that is His due, as we are glorified, as we are conformed to His likeness (Carson, 59).

according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Again and again Paul comes back to the great thought that Christians owe all that they have and all that they are to God. So now he adds to this picture of glory the thought that all is *according to the grace of God* . . . The glory at the last time will be due to God’s grace to man” (Morris, 211, 212). As Carson says, “We become fruitful by grace; we persevere by grace; we mature by grace; by grace we grow to love one another the more, and by grace we cherish holiness and a deepening knowledge of God. Therefore Paul reminds his readers at the end of his prayer that everything he has asked for is available only on the basis of grace. The Savior himself cannot be glorified in our lives, nor can we be finally glorified, apart from the grace that He provides” (Carson, 60, 61).