

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

A PASTOR'S ADVENT PRAYER

Pastor Paul Eckert baptized me. Right now, Pastor Jasper Sellnow is on the hook to bury me. And in between those Pastors I have been served by Pastors Henning, Huebner, Lindemann, Koelpin, Westendorf, Boehm and Clark. As I think of the Pastors who have served me Paul's advent prayer for the Thessalonians has become their prayer for me and I trust as you think of the Pastors who have served you Paul's advent prayer for the Thessalonians has become their prayer for you and that prayer is simply, "Keep the faith. Increase the love."

Keep the faith.

What makes this an Advent prayer comes from the last words of our text, "*when our Lord Jesus comes with his holy ones.*" Advent means coming and in this text the Apostle Paul is already thinking about the time when the Lord Jesus comes back with all the believers in heaven to take back to heaven with them all the believers on earth.

That's what Paul was thinking when he wrote this letter to the Thessalonians, but the Apostle Paul had not always been that confident about these Christians. The Apostle Paul had originally stopped by the city of Thessalonica on his second missionary journey and the book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us Paul preached for three consecutive Sabbath Days before being run out of town. Even though Paul had only been in Thessalonica a short time, the Lord blessed Paul's preaching and teaching and a number of people, both Jews and Greeks, were converted to the faith. The persecution of these Christians, however, did not stop with Paul's departure. Would these Thessalonian Christians keep the faith and remain faithful in spite of the persecution? The Apostle Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica to see how this church was doing. And not only had Timothy brought back the report that the Thessalonian believers were keeping the faith, but that the word of God was being spoken to other people in the city too.

Advent means coming and normally when we think of Christ's Advent or coming, we think of Jesus' coming at Christmas and Jesus' coming on the Last Day, but Jesus also comes to us and others through the preaching and teaching of God's Word and through the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Like these Thessalonian Christians, our Gospel tells us of the positive reaction the people of Jerusalem had when Jesus came to them on Palm Sunday, riding on a donkey. This day is called Palm Sunday because the people were giving Jesus what we call the red-carpet treatment. The Palm Sunday crowd was singing praises to Jesus and with the laying down of their coats and palm branches they were welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem and into their hearts as their king. The Palm Sunday crowd and their faith was great.

The Good Friday crowd and their faith was lacking. We don't know how many of the Palm Sunday worshippers were part of the Good Friday debacle. The three options are the Good Friday crowd was the same crowd as the Palm Sunday crowd, a different crowd all together or a mixture of some who were there on Palm Sunday and those who weren't there on Palm Sunday. What we do know for sure is the disciples were a part of both of those days and while their faith on Palm Sunday was fine, their faith on Good Friday was lacking.

Like the disciples on Good Friday and possibly/probably some of that Palm Sunday crowd, the faith of the Thessalonian Christians was lacking, and we don't know what they were lacking. Since Paul was only there for 3 sabbaths the lacking could have been knowledge. Maybe the lacking had to do with understanding or

conviction like when a student answers a question, but their answer sounds more like a question. Maybe the lacking was related to courage or endurance. We don't know.

What about the people of Grace Lutheran Church in Glendale, Arizona, the "Gracionian" Christians? What is lacking with our faith? With your faith? Bible class or ministry board meetings, council and congregational meetings are good places to reflect on what might be lacking with our faith, but this time and place is meant for us to reflect on the Apostle Paul and what the Holy Spirit inspired him to write. Here Paul is thankful and full of petitions. "How can we thank God enough for you..." "...we pray most earnestly that we may see you and again and supply what is lacking in your faith ... may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as our does for you. May he strengthen 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 his holy ones."

I am thankful for you being here even though I want you to do more. I am thankful for all of our members even though a goodly number are not here today and I want them to here today. I am thankful for all the people connected to our ministry even though I would love them to be members and partners of our members. I am thankful, genuinely thankful like Paul, but like Paul I and pastors do best when we all petition our God and Father and Lord and Savior Jesus to supply what is lacking for our faith and yours.

Increase the love.

The Advent message of Jesus comes to save us and bring us to heaven fits into this reading and into our lives because Jesus in his Word and sacraments also comes to supply our faith with what is lacking. And the nature of our God is not only to meet our need, but to meet our need with abundant, overflowing generosity. In our text Paul writes, "make your love increase and overflow for each other." It would have been enough to say, "make your love increase for each other," or "make your love overflow for each other," but this doubling up of descriptions is for emphasis. It's above and beyond. It's everything you do and more. It's a joy and a privilege.

Your love for each other can increase and overflow and this is why...because the love of Christ increases and overflows for you and here are 2 ways Christ love increases and overflows for you. Jesus lived a perfectly obedient life in your place AND Jesus was the atoning sacrifice for your sins. A Christmas story has been told of a family gathering that went the wrong way. The adults were passive aggressive, and the children were just mean. The party ended early and the children were sent to bed. As the Father led them in their night time prayers when of the children messed up the Lord's Prayer, angrily petitioning, "And forgive us our Christmases and we forgive those who Christmas against us." 'Tis the season gift giving and our love increases and overflows when we speak kindly to one another and we forgive those who do not speak kindly to us.

Another way Jesus increases his love and has love overflows to us is he brings the gospel to us like he brought the gospel to the disciples AND Jesus includes us in the ministry like he included the disciples into the ministry of the Gospel. Our love increases when we bring one another the gospel and our love overflows when we include others into the ministry or work of the church. You can do everything and more when you like Jesus invite others to join you. Don't just sing in the choir or teach Sunday school or serve on one of our ministry teams, serve and look for others to serve with you and the same at home. Don't just put up the tree and buy the presents and bake the cookies and read the Gospel of Luke chapter 2 yourself, include the next generation in these home ministries and teach and train them to serve as you are serving. For Paul this kind of delegating at times was a necessity, but for Jesus this kind of delegating was always a choice. We do everything and more. We go over and above when we include others into the ministry of the church and the ministry we care out in our homes.

When our Lord Jesus returns we are to be holy and blameless and we are holy and blameless when we forgiven one another our trespasses and when we are holy and blameless when we include others into the ministry of the church. Keep the faith. Increase the love. That's a pastor's prayer and that's God's work in you through preaching and teaching. Amen.