

First Sunday in Advent – November 29, 2015

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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.

Put yourself in the place of Lot and his family as we heard it described in our first lesson. What if two angels were to come to you tonight to spend the night and tomorrow morning tell you to flee because the city where you live is going to be destroyed? There is no time to pack up all your belongings to take with you. There is no time to say good bye. Flee on foot, run as fast as you can and don't look back! Imagine the panic and feelings of helplessness in such a situation! We may not live in the city of Sodom, but our situation is not much different. We are waiting for the Last Day and Jesus' second coming when this world will be destroyed. That day will also be one of panic and helplessness for many people in this world. And that day could come at any time. And so to help us get ready for that day, the apostle Paul gives some instructions in our text from 1 Thessalonians 3. As we look at these **Advent Instructions**, we will focus on the what and the why of getting ready to leave—what we are to do and why we are to do it.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians was probably one of the earliest New Testament books written by Paul. He had visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey preaching in the synagogue for three weeks (Acts 17). But then Jews who were jealous started a riot and so the Thessalonians had to send Paul away at night. Later Paul sent Timothy to check on them and offer encouragement and this letter is in response to Timothy's report. Verse 6 before our text describes that "Timothy has just now come to us from you and brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you." Since Paul's time with them had been cut short, he wanted to write to them for encouragement. And so we see in these verses three instructions for the Thessalonians and for us on what we are to do as we wait for Jesus to return.

Verse 10: "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith." Paul wanted to go back and visit to supply what was lacking in their faith. His teaching had been cut short, they hadn't been able to cover everything in just three Saturday sessions. Studying God's Word would give them the tools they would need to cope with what they would face while they waited. Most of us have studied God's Word for more than three weeks, but the same instructions apply to supply what is lacking. It may be lacking because we've forgotten. It may be lacking because we haven't learned everything yet. It may be lacking because it's been pushed aside by the current difficulty in our lives. And so we will continue to supply ourselves with God's Word so that our faith is strong to face our lives and the uncertainty of their ending.

Verse 12: "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you." Paul had praised the Thessalonians for their love, but there was always room for more. As their love increased it would overflow into the lives of

others. As we look around at our world it wouldn't be hard to see that love is decreasing. Violence is a part of the world and national and local scene. More and more people care only about themselves and what they can get in life. Differences in opinion lead to hatred and animosity between different sides. In such a world, our love is to increase and overflow. On our own of course this is impossible. But God is the one who fills us with his love. His forgiveness to us is the forgiveness we show to others. His love in us will overflow because his love is limitless. It ties into supplying what is lacking. We find his love in Word and Sacraments and so we will continue to fill up on his love so that it can overflow to others.

Verse 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." The last instruction on what to do to get ready talks about being blameless and holy. The Thessalonians were no different as Christians from us on this point. They were not blameless and holy on their own. They were sinners, too. No human being can hope to stand in the presence of God on the Last Day and say, "Look, God at how holy I was! I can't be blamed for anything!" This instruction is only possible through God. He forgives our sins, all the times we are unholy and full of blame. And then he strengthens our hearts to live for perfection. We will still sin, but our attitude is that we want to be holy as our way to live for him and be ready when he returns.

Which brings us to why we are to do these things. Why do we supply what is lacking in our faith? Why does our love increase and overflow? Why should we be holy and blameless? So that we are ready when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Paul never mentions here when Jesus is coming. Jesus never mentioned when he was coming. The Last Day could come at any time. Our own death could come at any time. And so as Jesus said in our gospel lesson, "Be always on the watch" (Lk 21:36). It's easy for us to lose our focus. We get wrapped up in our everyday lives. Jesus hasn't come back for almost two thousand years and so we lose our sense of urgency. But just like an expectant mother who has her bag packed ready to go to the hospital because she doesn't know when her baby will be born, so we are always ready to go to our home in heaven. And just as that same mother still goes about her normal routine while waiting for labor to begin, so we will continue to live in this world while waiting to go to our home in heaven. Our readiness to leave is again not based on our own abilities, but through the strength that God provides.

The last reason as to why we are to do these things is in verse 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?" It can seem strange at first glance when Paul makes statements like this. He's thanking God for them? These three-week Christians brought him joy? Shouldn't it be the other way around? They should be thanking God for Paul who brought them this joy. But this is exactly how it works. When we follow these Advent instructions, when we get ready to wait for Jesus, we bring others joy. There is the joy for Paul in seeing the Holy Spirit work faith in the hearts of these new Christians. There is the joy for others who will be touched by the love of these Thessalonians and get to learn about Jesus through them. So we get ready to go, not just for ourselves, but for others. Following those instructions brings joy to our fellow Christians as an encouragement to keep getting ready. Following those instructions brings joy to others as the Holy Spirit works faith in their hearts through the love that overflows in our lives.

We can only imagine what Lot and his family went through as they fled their home and ran for their lives. His wife did not make it as she did not follow instructions and was turned into a pillar of salt. As we look at the Advent instructions before us, we can be thankful for our God's mercy or there would be many piles of salt in this world. As we wait for Jesus' coming,

we can do the what—supply what is lacking in our faith, increase and overflow in love and be blameless and holy because it is God who gives us the strength to do so. Why? So that we're ready for that day as we encourage each other with joy. Putting a different spin on Paul's wish in verse 11—now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come home to him in heaven. Amen.