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Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I Thessalonians 3:9-13 where the apostle Paul tells the Christians in Thessalonica:

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? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Now 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 ours does for you. 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.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer!

Dear fellow redeemed,

Today we begin the season of Advent. The word "Advent" means "coming." Especially during these four weeks of Advent before Christmas, we prepare to celebrate the coming of our Lord, as he was born in Bethlehem. During our Sunday services our thoughts are focused on God's promises to send the Savior, and we marvel as we see God's gracious plans unraveled before our eyes. In all of this, we must always keep in mind why Jesus was born. He was born to be the Savior, to take away our sins, so that we might spend eternity with him, so that we might be able to stand in God's presence when Jesus comes again at the Last Day. In so many ways, Jesus' first coming, as a baby in Bethlehem, is tied up with his second coming in glory on Judgment Day. Jesus came the first time so that we might "be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes" again.

In the days of the Apostle Paul, they very likely did not have a special time of the year that they called "Advent." Yet it is a true Advent message that we hear from Paul this morning, because he speaks of being prepared for Jesus' second coming; and when we are prepared for his second coming, then we are prepared to truly celebrate and rejoice in his first coming.

What tender, loving, and encouraging words the Apostle writes to the Christians in Thessalonica. We can just feel his love and concern for them. Paul was the one who had proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to those people for the first time, on his second missionary journey. He was their pastor, and as their pastor he says, "Night and day we

pray most earnestly."

We have here the apostle Paul's Advent prayer for the Thessalonians. I don't think it needs to be any secret that your pastor prays for you, for you individually as well as for the congregation in general. So this year, let us begin the Christmas season with The Pastor's Advent Prayer. May God clear the way. May the Lord increase your love. May he strengthen your hearts.

Paul prays: "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you." Paul had not been permitted to stay very long in Thessalonica. He had been there preaching the gospel for only about three weeks, when a violent persecution broke out, so fierce that Paul was forced to leave for his own safety, and for the safety of these new Thessalonian Christians. Three weeks is not a very long time to establish a congregation, and Paul certainly did not have time to fully instruct the people in the truths of faith and salvation. Paul had sent his fellow missionary Timothy to them for a time to strengthen and encourage them, and he also made use of this letter to them to instruct them. But Paul prayed that the Lord would clear the way, so that he, and Silas and Timothy, could return to Thessalonica and share God's word with them more, as Paul says: "So that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."

But unless Satan's roadblocks were removed, Paul knew he would never get back to Thessalonica. He realized that the only one who could clear the way was God himself, by putting enough of a damper on the persecution so that Paul could return without foolishly endangering his own life and without stirring up even greater suffering for the believers in Thessalonica. God did later grant Paul's prayer, and gave him the privilege of returning to Thessalonica and seeing those Christians so dear to him once again.

We are not faced with a violent persecution like the one in Thessalonica that separated the pastor from the congregation. Still Satan constructs whatever roadblocks he can in our midst also. "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you." May God clear away whatever roadblocks stand between pastor and people in our congregation. We're talking about more than barriers to the pastor, but barriers to the proclamation of God's word. May God clear the way for all the members of our congregation to hear his word, to be receptive, to be instructed and to be encouraged. May God clear the way for us to bring his precious gospel message to others in our community. May he open their ears and hearts to his word. May God break down the barriers, the piles of excuses, whatever stands in the way, so that his word might reach the hearts of all, and prepare there a place for the Lord, prepare there a place for Christmas, and the eternal salvation it proclaims.

May God clear the way for our congregation to proceed forward in its work here. As we plan and prepare for another year of serving the Lord by reaching out with his saving word to others, as we plan and prepare for years to come, until our Savior's return, may the Lord continue to shower his rich blessings upon our work together.

Finally, it is not the pastor, but the Lord who strengthens and sustains Christians through his word. Therefore Paul continues in his prayer, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you." Paul asks the Lord to increase the love of the Thessalonian Christians to the point of overflowing. Like a cup on a hot summer day that fills with cold water and then runs

over, letting the sparkling, refreshing water splash about, so may their love overflow, bringing joy to all it touches. May their love overflow in words and actions for each other, and for everyone else, for unbelievers; yes, even for those who were persecuting them. So may our love increase and overflow for one another, and for all people, even our enemies.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his own love for them, and the love of his co-workers Silas and Timothy for them. Paul prays: "May your love overflow, just as ours does for you." Once again we cannot help but notice how deep and how sincere Paul's love for these Christians was. He had endured persecution and hardship for them and with them, and his love and concern for them did not stop when he was forced to leave them, but continued to increase day by day.

Love is something that increases, that grows. Certainly the longer a pastor is in a congregation, the longer he works hand in hand with the members in good times and in difficult times, the more his love grows for the people. It need not be a secret that you are very dear to your pastors. May love be an ever growing thing within our congregation, in our spiritual family of believers, a family in which each one of us is responsible for each other, and we all work together for the good of the whole family; strengthening, comforting and encouraging each other with God's word. Jesus has told us, "All people will know you are Christians, all people will know you are my disciples if you love one another." Especially during the Christmas season we are made aware of God's great love for us, love that gave us that greatest gift of all, his only Son. May his love cause our love to increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.

Finally Paul prays, "May the Lord 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 congregation in Thessalonica was very new, very young. The people did not have a strong Christian background; they were not thoroughly instructed. Likely, most of them did not have the support of Christian relatives. They were living in a wicked society, and they were being severely tested by persecution which threatened to take away their jobs, their possessions, even their very lives. There were so many things that threatened to tear down their faith. So Paul prayed that the Lord strengthen their hearts, strengthen their faith, give them boldness and courage to stand, to remain faithful to the Lord until he would take them home safely to heaven.

So there are many things that threaten to tear down our faith. We live in a wicked society, a society that has little regard for God and his word, little respect for what God says is right and wrong, and little love for us, God's people. We live in a time when God's word is being severely challenged, people unwilling to put up with sound teaching, but seeking after those who will preach what their itching ears want to hear. We live in a time when the love of many is growing cold. May God strengthen your hearts, and the hearts of all in our congregation, 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.

We are now in the season of Advent. May we also be in the spirit of Advent, and that requires hearts prepared for the Savior. God looks past our outward actions, and searches our hearts. May he strengthen your hearts. May he find there sincere repentance for sin, and a sure trust in the salvation that he has won for you. With that you will be holy and blameless when he comes. With that you will be ready to truly celebrate when he came, the birth of our Savior at Christmas.

Before Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians, he had been very discouraged. The constant persecution was wearing him down, and also a fear that the devil might have destroyed the Christians in Thessalonica. Then Timothy came to Paul in Corinth with the encouraging news that the Thessalonians were standing firm in the Lord. Paul was almost at a loss for words as he wrote to them: "Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 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?" Christians standing firm in the Lord are truly a source of joy and encouragement for a pastor, and you are also a source of joy and encouragement to each other, a reason for all of us to thank God together, for one another.

"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 ours does for you. 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." This is not only the Pastor's Advent prayer. May it be on your lips, and in your hearts as well.

Amen.

May he who began a good work in you carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.