

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen

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.

This is God's Word for our meditation.

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

As a new year begins, people often think about New Year's resolutions – changes they want to make in the coming year. In case you are thinking that I have my days and months mixed up, I don't. Today, the first Sunday in Advent, marks the start of a new Church Year. As we start this New (Church) Year it would be fitting to come up with some New (Church) Year resolutions.

What is it that you want God to do with your spiritual life this year? If nothing comes immediately to mind, then let's use Paul's prayer in our text as our prayer for the New (Church) Year: **"Lord, Prepare Us for Your Return."** **"Supply what is Lacking in our Faith,"** **"Make our Love for All Increase,"** and **"Strengthen our Hearts for Action."**

I. The prayer that Paul prayed was for the Christians in Thessalonica. Paul had visited this city on his second missionary journey. He had preached in the synagogue on three consecutive Sabbath Days and during this short period some came to know and believe in Jesus as their Savior. But there were some Jews who were jealous of Paul and Silas. They gathered together some trouble makers and started a riot which succeeded in running Paul out of town. (Acts 17) Unfortunately, the persecution did not stop with the absence of Paul. He was concerned for these new converts and so he sent Timothy to them to see how they were holding up.

Timothy reported back that the Thessalonians were not only standing firm in their faith, but also spreading the Gospel as well. Paul's joy at hearing this prompted him to say, **"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?"** (1 Thess 3:9).

Paul was a lot like a Parent who worries about their children when they are out on their own. Parents too, want reports on how well their children are doing and feel a certain amount of joy when they see their children standing firm in the faith in spite of all the pressures and influences of college or working and living in the "real world." In this way, parents might have an easier time understanding the concern and the joy Paul expressed in our text.

Still Paul knew that his work with the Thessalonians wasn't finished. That's why he went on to say, **"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith."** (1 Thess 3:10). Paul wanted to return and continue the instruction he had started. He had spent only three weeks with the Thessalonians. That was enough time to talk

about Jesus and how he lived a perfect life for us. How he suffered for the sins of the world on the cross and exchanges his righteousness for our sins through faith. That was enough time to talk about how salvation is free and how the Holy Spirit brings it to us by creating faith in our hearts but there was so much more to pass on.

In a way, it's like how we instruct our children. We bring them to be baptized. We teach them about Jesus and prayer at a young age at home. We bring them to church and Sunday School. We continue their instruction with Catechism Classes and the learning really never stops. We all want God to fill in what is lacking in our faith and he does that through his Word and through faithful teachers, preachers and parents.

I'm sure many of you have noticed that sports teams don't stop practicing once the season begins. Every game brings up different experiences and emphasizes certain areas of weakness – gaps to fill and new things to learn. It's an ongoing process. It's the same with our spiritual lives. Growing in our faith is an ongoing process to continue to fill in what is lacking in our spiritual knowledge. Every time you study a portion of scripture, God gives you more insight into the message he is trying to convey to you.

That's why we have opportunities to hear God's Word in worship on Sunday mornings and to study it in Adult Bible Study and Sunday School after worship. That is why we have the Ladies monthly Bible Study and Vacation Bible School. All opportunities to fill in the gaps where we are lacking in our knowledge.

So maybe one of your new church year resolutions might be to stay for Sunday morning Bible Study or to attend the Women's monthly Bible Study or to start having a daily devotion or to read through your Bible or to look for some other way in which to let the Lord supply what is lacking in your faith and your understanding of God's Word.

And as God fills in what is lacking, he will make our love for those around us increase and strengthen our hearts for action.

II. That was the second part of Paul's prayer. **“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.”** (1 Thess 3:12-13).

A Christian is not just someone who knows the Bible well, it's someone who puts that knowledge into action by loving others as Christ loved the world. But note how Paul did not pray that the Thessalonians would love, (they were already doing that) he prayed that their love would increase. Therefore, a good New Church Year resolution is not just that God would make us loving, but that he would make our love increase.

One way to increase love is by loving more deeply. Accordingly, Paul prayed that the love the Thessalonians had for one another would increase. They needed that love and support especially when they were being bombarded by the world and persecuted for their faith. If they couldn't turn to fellow Christians for support, to whom could they turn?

The writer to the Hebrews said, **“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.”** (Hebrews 10:25a) We need each others encouragement and prayers and we find that as we gather for worship and as we have fellowship after our worship services. These times are so important for each of us.

But Paul talks about letting our love overflow as we serve others too. We have different opportunities throughout the year at church, work and in the community to serve others. Maybe a New Church year resolution might be to look for a way to help someone every quarter. Maybe a resolution might be to sign up to help when we have a church work day or to be an usher or to support some of our young people who want to attend the youth rally this next summer. The Lord promises to give us opportunities to let his love shine in our lives – we just need to take some of those opportunities.

As we focus on our Savior, we want to remember that he takes every opportunity to show his love to us. Our theme today is, “When the Lord Comes Near, He Humbles Himself.” We are thankful that he humbled himself and came into this world for us and our salvation. He humbled himself and went to the cross to pay for our sins.

As we look to reflect his love may we do it with a humble heart – thankful for all that Jesus has done for us.

We’re at the beginning of a New Church Year. What will this year bring? What do you want God to do with your spiritual life this year? May we look to the Lord to supply what is lacking by speaking to us through his Word. May our Savior help us to grow in our love for others as we reflect his love more and more in our lives. And may we look forward to celebrating our Savior’s first coming as he prepares us for second coming. Amen.