



# LEARNING FROM HOW THE APOSTLE PAUL PRAYED FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

2 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5 (BACKGROUND FROM ACTS 17:1-9)

*Note: Other International Day of Prayer resources that may complement this sermon outline are available at [persecution.com/idop](http://persecution.com/idop). Resources include short (15- and 30-second) promo videos, a 5-minute story video and downloadable discussion questions for families, classes or groups. A bulletin insert and guided prayer slides are also available for download.*

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## Introduction

HAVE YOU EVER UTTERED A “GENERIC” PRAYER?

“Father, please bless them, I pray.” I have. Those prayers always seem dissatisfying and insufficient.

Is that the best I can pray for them? I sometimes wonder. Shouldn’t I be more specific?

When I pray such a generic prayer, I often cringe at the similarity it has to the titleholder among all broad prayers: “And please bless all the missionaries everywhere.”

Honestly, without some teaching on the matter, all of us struggle to pray well for other Christians. And intercession for others is something all of us should want to improve because praying for others is core to our Christian discipleship. (Source idea: Donald Whitney, Prayer for One Another)

For many of us, praying for others is a daily or even multiple-times-a-day endeavor. We pray privately and in community for health, finances, relationships and spiritual maturity, pleading with God for intervention, comfort, breakthrough and awakening. Some believers seem to readily grasp that they have a “direct line” to the throne room of heaven, while others confess that it appears their prayers never make it past the ceiling.

You know that the activity of praying for others is fundamentally good, but have you, as you struggle to move beyond generic prayer, ever had these thoughts:

- » Does my prayer really matter?
- » Why should I pray?
- » What should I pray?
- » What are some biblical models of prayer?



Today, I want us to gain understanding about the practice of prayer from the Apostle Paul as he writes to persecuted Christians in the city of Thessalonica.

The Apostle Paul, once named Saul and a persecutor of Christians, was miraculously saved when the risen Christ revealed Himself on the road to Damascus as he was headed to persecute believers. Paul, who was a missionary apostle to the Gentiles, was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked and mocked for the sake of Christ. We know him as author of much of our New Testament, which includes letters he wrote to the churches he helped establish as outposts of the gospel on missionary frontiers. But Paul was also fervent in his intercessory prayer for fellow believers. He includes prayers for the saints of God no fewer than 42 times in his writings! As we look at one of those prayers, which is found in Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica, it is helpful to understand something about the believers' situation.

The church at Thessalonica is one that Paul personally established during his second missionary journey. His time in Thessalonica was cut short by an uprising by Jewish leaders (see Acts 17:5–10). This second missionary journey is thought to have occurred in A.D. 50, and the writing of the first of the Thessalonian letters shortly thereafter. His second letter to the Thessalonians was written during his longer stay in Corinth, probably less than a year later (time for him to have received a reply to his first letter that likely included some alarming news — “For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies” [2 Thessalonians 3:11]). We know from Acts 17:1–9 that Paul's gospel preaching and teaching in synagogues in Thessalonica resulted in opposition, which subsequently led to the extortion of new believers by local authorities.

Before we jump into Paul's specific prayer for persecuted Christians, let's consider how we should think about persecution. General troubles in our fallen world are a type of suffering that every person experiences; both believers and nonbelievers lose their jobs, get life-threatening illnesses, etc. But suffering for the sake of righteousness (1 Peter 4:13–17) is a specific opposition that every biblical disciple, no matter where they live, will experience as a result of their bold and faithful witness. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, it hated me first” (John 15:18).

How do we distinguish between these two types of suffering?

Christian persecution follows this pattern:

**CHRISTIAN FAITH** (*which results in the ACTION of a bold and faithful witness of Christ*)

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**A PERSECUTOR** (*individual or group opposed to the witness of Christ and His message*)

+

**ATTACK** (*the motive of the attack is an opposition that intends to silence the witness*)

=

**PERSECUTION**



### ILLUSTRATION FROM SCRIPTURE:

Let's look briefly at Paul's encounter in Thessalonica to apply the formula for greater understanding:

Found in Acts 17:1–9

**CHRISTIAN FAITH** (*which results in the ACTION of a bold and faithful witness of Christ*)

Acts 17:3–4 (Paul) explaining (3 days in the synagogue) and proving it was necessary for Christ to suffer and rise from dead (some were persuaded)

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**A PERSECUTOR** (*individual or group opposed to the witness of Christ and His message*)

(Acts 17:5) but the Jews (leaders)

+

**ATTACK** (*opposition that intends to silence the witness*)

(vv. 5–9) jealousy, uproar, lies, extortion

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**PERSECUTION**

Quote: “There were two kinds of Christians: those who sincerely believe in God and those who, just as sincerely, believe that they believe. You can tell them apart by their actions in decisive moments.”

—Richard Wurmbrand quoting Girolamo Savonarola, from *In God's Underground*

*Transition: With that understanding of the experience of persecuted Christians in Thessalonica and a broader definition of persecution, let's examine Paul's prayer for his persecuted brothers and sisters so that we might be better equipped to pray for persecuted believers.*

### **READ 2 THESSALONIANS 3:1-5 (ESV)**

*Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*

Paul is a persecuted Christian (and a former persecutor). Before he prays for the persecuted believers in Thessalonica, he asks his brothers and sisters for prayer. Paul demonstrates, by asking for prayer, that his ministry of advancing the gospel is dependent upon the prayers of God's people. Paul's specific requests lend insight to the focus of our prayers for persecuted Christians. One mark of true fellowship is entering into this authentic relationship of prayer for one another.



1. Paul's prayer request of the believers in Thessalonica:

- » “That the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored” (v. 1).
  - Common to the Thessalonian story — Paul wrote from either Athens or Corinth, and his desire was for God's Word to prevail there as it had in Thessalonica.
  - Speed ahead — Speed indicates a lack of obstacles (speed bumps are installed on roadways to slow vehicles down).
    - What are some known obstacles to the speed of the Word of God in our city? Our world? How can we pray that these speed bumps will be overcome?
  - Honored — We typically hold value to the weight of that which we honor. Honor is the foundational belief in the life of the hearer of God's Word, because if the Word is honored it is more likely to be received. The Holy Spirit's work is a convincing work. The Holy Spirit works in the life of the hearer to convince him or her to accept as truth the facts regarding Jesus in His Word (John 16:8).
    - Who in your life needs to have a mindset shift (brought about by the Holy Spirit) to honor God's Word so that they might receive the message of the gospel?
  - Word of God unbound — (2 Timothy 2:9) Paul reminded Timothy that the Word of God is not bound by chains and is loosed to lead us to salvation.
    - I read recently that The Voice of the Martyrs is praying and working to ensure that every believer in a hostile area and restricted nation will own a copy of God's Word. Might we join them in praying that God's Word will not be bound by the oppression of hostile and restrictive governments and communities.
- » “that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men”
  - Delivered — God may choose to answer this prayer in one of several ways, and each answer can be the will of God:
    - That those imprisoned by wicked and evil captors will be released from captivity.  
*May we pray that their release advances the gospel.*
    - That those imprisoned by wicked and evil captors will be delivered from the torture and anguish of prison to a joy in God's current assignment.  
*May we pray that their joy advances the gospel.*
    - That those imprisoned may be delivered to their heavenly reward, passing from this life, as they faithfully endured the oppression of wicked and evil captors to the end.  
*May we pray that their deaths glorify God and lead many to faith, and may we pray that the God of all comfort will comfort their families.*
  - Rationale — Each of the results above are for the advancement of the message of salvation through faith alone in Jesus Christ.



- In another letter to a church, Paul indicates that for him to live is Christ and to die is gain. That mindset should be one we embrace (Philippians 1:21).
  - Promise — The Lord is faithful to establish us and guard us from Satan.
    - In the midst of our bonds, we know that we are in the hands of a loving and powerful God who meets our every need.
  - Leads to confidence in obedience for persecuted believers.
    - Our perspective and our commitment to follow Jesus no matter the cost will lead to continued obedience.
2. The heart of Paul’s prayer for persecuted Christians in Thessalonica:
- » May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and steadfastness in Christ (v. 4).
    - God does direct the hearts of believers.
      - The word *direct* is from the Greek root *kuros*, from which we get the words LORD and MASTER.
        - » Refers to the supremacy of God as LORD.
        - » Implies the submission of man.
      - Literally the prayer is, “May the Lord master your heart” or “May the LORD lord your heart.” *May we pray that in all things the Lord God is the master of the hearts of our persecuted brothers and sisters as they serve as bold and faithful witnesses.*
    - The direction of God leads to love — always (v. 4).
      - This lording of our hearts by the Lord God results in love.
        - » May seem counterintuitive that one’s master is loved.
        - » Our love for our LORD leads to an alignment in love regarding the perspective that God is good (may be difficult to believe, but it is still true).
          - God is good!
            - Mark 10:18 “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” (Jesus speaking)
          - God’s plan is always good!
            - Romans 8:28 “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”



- God's provision for His children is good!
  - James 1:17 “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”
- The result of loving God is steadfastness in Christ.
  - Jesus is the source of our salvation (Hebrews 5:9).
    - » Our salvation puts us in right relationship with God.
    - » Our salvation ensures purpose on earth.
  - Jesus is the living hope of our future (1 Peter 1:3–4).
    - » A hope that cannot perish, fade or be defiled.
  - Jesus is the source of our steadfastness (Hebrews 12:1–3).
    - » As we fix our eyes on Jesus
      - Endured the cross
      - Despised the shame
      - Seated at the right hand of God

How do you think Paul's prayers for persecuted Christians in Thessalonica (both his prayer in this letter and his unrecorded prayers) were answered? How did his prayers meet the needs of the persecuted believers in Thessalonica?

In Paul's writings, there is no named leader of the church at Thessalonica other than Timothy, Paul's mentee who was assigned to work there for a season. Demas (mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:10) was a co-worker who abandoned Paul and fled to Thessalonica, but that was an act of backsliding, not appointment to leadership.

Some may be disappointed to learn that Paul's prayers were not a grand symphony that God honored in a visible way. Evidently, Paul's prayers did not launch the church at Thessalonica to the top of a list of great and powerful churches, and yet we are still talking about the church at Thessalonica almost 2,000 years later. The reality is that many, if not most, of the answers to our prayers will be a mystery until we are in heaven. An unknown answer should neither deter our prayers nor weigh us down with worry or anxiety. The unknown nature of the answer to our prayers is a faith-building activity in our intimate relationship with God. Our prayers should build a faith that knows we have a God who hears us (Psalm 66:19), that acts according to His good measure (Philippians 2:13) and that celebrates our privilege of entering His holy presence with boldness (Hebrews 4:16).

If the Apostle Paul could pray fervently for fellow believers and perhaps never see the answer this side of heaven, we would do well to imitate him. There certainly is a need. Our brothers and sisters in Christ are experiencing the evils of persecution because of their bold and faithful witness each day in over 70 hostile areas and restricted nations. It is our privilege to stand with them by lifting their needs to the throne of grace. Paul's prayer helps us know how and what to pray.



## Conclusion

### ILLUSTRATION OF THE POWER OF PRAYER:

In the introduction to this message, I asked a question that many believers wrestle with (some without uttering a word): “Does my prayer really matter?”

Petr Jašek (Peter YAH-shek) has worked with The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) to help aid and assist persecuted Christians in hostile areas and restricted nations for more than 20 years. His background in hospital administration was beneficial in his role overseeing VOM’s efforts to provide medical care to Christians injured by Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria. As Petr traveled to meet with persecuted believers, he encouraged them with stories from his own experience growing up as the son of a pastor who was persecuted in communist Czechoslovakia.

In December 2015, Petr’s life changed dramatically when he was arrested at the airport in Khartoum, Sudan, after meeting with Christians there to evaluate how VOM could best serve them. Instead of continuing his work with imprisoned Christians and their families, Petr became a prisoner himself. Instead of delivering VOM aid to families of persecuted Christians, Petr needed VOM to help and support his own family.

The Czech government negotiated Petr’s release after his conviction and life sentence on charges of espionage in February 2017. Petr experienced times of discouragement, but he also found God’s faithfulness to be real and true in prison. He turned his imprisonment into an opportunity to grow in Christ, sharing his faith with others and encouraging the Christians imprisoned with him.

Throughout Petr’s 445 days in prison, VOM and Christians around the world stood with his family through prayer and other means of support.

Does my prayer really matter? Petr said, “The more I felt emotionally depleted in this prison, the more the Lord lifted me up through the restorative power of his Word, through the healing presence of his Spirit, and through the ministry He allowed me to have in the Al-Huda prison chapel. I also knew that my church back home in the Czech Republic was praying and fasting regularly for me. I had not been forgotten by them, and I had not been forgotten by God. I found myself right in the Lord’s will and purpose.”

As we pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters, let us lift them boldly to the throne of grace, as modeled by the Apostle Paul.