

A Call to Pray (2 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

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Sometimes the best thing you can do for the health of your soul is not to read a new book. It's to re-read an old book. I recently set aside the better part of a day to re-read Tim Keller's book, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. Much of the strength of his work lies in collecting spiritual insights on prayer from writers throughout the history of the church. Two of the most important things I do as a pastor are pray for you and preach God's Word to you and I've sensed the Lord wants me to strengthen my practice of the former over the next year.

As I worked slowly through Keller's book, I realized you can tell a lot about what someone believes (or doesn't believe) about God from the way they pray. On the one hand, you have people who pray all the time and are afraid to miss a beat lest they miss out on a divine blessing might otherwise receive. If something goes wrong in their life, their first thought is, "How could this happen? Did I not pray enough?" Their life verse is James 4:2, "You do not have, because you do not ask."

On the other hand, you have people who never pray because it feels irrelevant. If God's sovereign, if he's in charge of all things, why bother trying to change his mind? Whether good, bad, or between, *que sera sera*. Their life verse is Psalm 135:6, "Whatever the Lord pleases, he does..." It's especially easy to drift into this lane on the heels of unanswered prayer. Rather than deal with the seeming contradiction between what the Bible says about the power of prayer and the long list of unanswered prayers in our life, we conclude prayer must not be all it's cracked up to be.

Everything depends on prayer. Nothing depends on prayer. Let the ping-pong game begin. Enter 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5. In these verses, the Apostle Paul gives us a master class on prayer. In particular, he shows us how the sovereign power of God, the Lord who does what he says he will do, is anything but a disincentive to pray. To the contrary, it's the very reason we pray.

We pray because the faithfulness of God ensures his word will bear fruit.

The nature of Paul's request for prayer and the example of his practice of prayer illustrate as much.

I don't know what your practice of prayer was like in 2019. I don't know what you hope your practice of prayer will be like in 2020. I do know that God hasn't left us to figure out prayer on our own. It's too important. The Lord cares about it too much. So he equips us to practice the kind of biblical prayer I just described by providing an answer to some common questions about prayer: What should we pray? Why should we pray? How should we pray. Let's consider each of them in turn. Biblical prayer is...

1) SUPREMELY CONCERNED FOR THE LORD'S MISSION

The humility Paul displays in the very first sentence, which contains the only explicit command in the entire passage, is remarkable. "Finally, brothers, pray for us..." Think about the significance of those words.

Who's asking for prayer? The Apostle Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. Humanly speaking, they were the reason there was a church in Thessalonica. They were the ones who first explained the good news of the gospel and taught them how to follow Jesus. They were their spiritual fathers in the faith – mature, wise, godly, and experienced. Given their relative maturity, it would make sense for the Thessalonians to request prayer and Paul and coworkers to provide prayer.

However, Paul knows something we easily forget. As Ed Welch says, "We are all needy and needed." Paul knows he needs prayer just as much as the Thessalonians do. He gladly embraces his apostolic leadership role and the responsibility for their spiritual welfare that came with it, but he doesn't put himself or allow the Thessalonians to put him on a different level when it comes to continual dependence on the Lord.

Verse 1 practically screams – "Listen, guys! I need Jesus JUST as much as you do." Is that your attitude, friend? I doubt any of you would go so far as to say, "I don't need prayer." But when was the last time you took initiative to ask someone to pray for you? When was the last time you asked someone younger in the faith to pray for you? Or the spouse who never rarely reads their Bible to pray for you? Or has a subtle arrogance taken control of your heart such that only pastors or other spiritual leaders in your life receive a heartfelt request for prayer?

I remember several years ago when a young woman engaged me in conversation after a sermon. She wasn't a member of the church. The interaction was a bit socially awkward. My mind quickly flooded with all the other people I needed to see



and conversations I wanted to have that morning. It seemed like an ideal moment for a graciously quick exit. And then she quietly asked, "How can I pray for you?"

I was immediately convicted. I know I need prayer, but really? Right now? From you? Lord, forgive me. Humble me. So I stopped, shared a very real and vulnerable area of need, and waited as she prayed. The Lord cared deeply for me in that moment as she poured her heart out for the good of my soul. He also taught me a lesson in humility as a pastor that I never want to forget.

The sheer fact that Paul asks for prayer orients us to our mutual dependence on the Lord. But the content of his request is no less an expression of humility. Verse 1, "Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you..." It almost seems incoherent. Paul, you say, "Pray for us," but then your first requests has nothing to do with you. It's about "the word of the Lord," which we know from 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15 is the truth of the gospel, the good news of all Jesus has done to accomplish salvation for mankind.

The supreme concern in Paul's heart, the dominant need in his mind, the desire occupying center stage when given an opportunity to request prayer for himself is the advance of the gospel, the fulfillment of Jesus' mission to bring glory to his Father in heaven by drawing sinful men and women from every tribe and tongue into the joy of a saving relationship with God.

That's Paul's deepest hunger. That's his greatest longing, his highest ambition. Let your kingdom come, Lord. Let your redemptive rule extend from the east to the west as real people, in real places, living in real neighborhoods and real cities bow their knee to King Jesus. Spiritual conversion to faith in Christ, spiritual awakening to the beauty and goodness of Jesus, the exact same thing that happened to you, Thessalonians – I want it to happen again and again and again to millions more.

And I don't want it to happen slowly. I want it to happen quickly. I want the gospel to "speed ahead," to "run" as it were, passed from mouth to mouth, from forgiven sinner to forgiven sinner, compelling the joy of wholehearted obedience to your commands, Jesus. For where your word is honored, you are honored!

It's not an abstract request. It's not a super-spiritual desire. He doesn't ignore everything he really wants and give the "Christian" answer. "What do I want for Christmas? Oh, nothing for me, Lord. I just want you to be glorified." No! Paul isn't faking anything. He's for real. He loves God so much, he's so jealous for the glory of



Christ's renown, that what he wants more than anything else is the triumph of Jesus' mission in the world.

He so identifies with Christ and is satisfied in Christ that his mission is Paul's mission. Jesus' work is Paul's work. What Jesus delights to accomplish, Paul delights to witness. The souls Jesus died to save are the souls Paul longed to see come home to God. When you ask people for prayer, what do you request? When you pray for yourself, what ambitions and desires pour out of your soul? Is God's mission your mission? Or has some lesser glory assumed the throne of your heart?

Is it wrong to pray for our own physical or material needs? Is it wrong to pray for financial provision or bodily health? No! 1 Peter 5:7 says cast "all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." There is no "spiritual concerns only" footnote after Psalm 46:1, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." But there's a reason Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:9-10, "Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come...'"

May the Lord purify and cleanse us from all the selfish, petty concerns that occupy more emotional bandwidth in our heart than the supremacy of his renown and the glory of his kingdom. For what do we pray? We should pray, first and foremost, for the advance of the gospel and the demise of all who oppose it – not as a prequel to what we really care about, but because God's glory is our consuming passion. Biblical prayer is supremely concerned for the Lord's mission. Second, biblical prayer is...

2) SUPREMELY CONVINCED OF THE LORD'S FAITHFULNESS

The contrast between the end of verse 2 and the beginning of verse 3 is both striking and intentional. Why does Paul ask for deliverance from the schemes of "wicked and evil men" as he labors to share the gospel? Because "not all have faith." You could almost say, "Duh, Paul. You think we didn't know that already?" He's not trying to state the obvious. He's making a critical point. Scripture is both brutally honest about the reality of evil and crystal clear on the explanation for evil. All wickedness in our relationships with one another, including the evil of religious persecution, is rooted in a problem in our relationship with God.

Remember, the Thessalonians were languishing under severe persecution. It's what forced Paul to quickly leave the city back in Acts 17. When you're experiencing



human enmity, human wickedness, it's easy to see nothing but a human problem. Paul knows better and reminds the Thessalonians of as much.

Remember, guys, the enmity your experiencing is rooted in a conflict bigger than you and ultimately directed at someone far greater than you. It's a result of the absence of faith in God and the transformation of heart and life that only come with repentance of sin and faith in God. Their issue isn't ultimately with you. It's ultimately with the Lord. The problem is they don't believe Jesus, they don't trust Jesus, and they hate his people accordingly. "Not all have faith."

Verse 3, "But the Lord is faithful," or more literally, "Faithful is the Lord!" In other words, Thessalonians, remember that Jesus is for you and toward you, which is everything your persecutors are so painfully not. What are they doing? Working to undermine your faith and destroy you on behalf of Satan, the Evil One. So what is Jesus doing in response? Two things. Verse 3, "He will establish you and guard you against the evil one." Jesus will enable you to persevere in following him and he will protect you from the schemes of your spiritual enemy. Brothers and sisters, that is the best news we could hear!

Are you struggling to follow Jesus, knocked about by doubt and fear or mired in a pit of depression? Jesus himself will be faithful to establish you. Power to endure the race comes not from you. It all comes from him! Are you beset on every side by strong temptations to sin? Jesus himself will be faithful to protect you. 1 Corinthians 10:13, "...God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Fear not. Surrender not. Look to Jesus and take heart! For the one he establishes cannot be struck down and the one he protected cannot be destroyed. Faithful is the one who created you. Faithful is the one who saved you. Faithful is the one who has gone ahead to prepare a place for you!

Paul's just finished telling the Thessalonians how to pray for him and his coworkers in verses 1-2. So we might expect him to say, "But the Lord is faithful. He will establish us and guard us against the evil one." But he doesn't say that. He says, "He will establish you and guard you against the evil one." Why does he switch subjects? Because they have a shared need!

He recognizes as he shares his prayer requests in verses 2-3 that the Thessalonians are undoubtedly thinking, "Oh man, that's exactly what we need too - deliverance from 'wicked and evil men' so the word of the gospel continues to bear fruit in our own lives even as we pray for it to 'speed ahead and be honored' through Paul's ministry." Here again, biblical prayer isn't the "have's" praying for the "have not's." It's the needy praying for the needy. It's intercession from a position of mutual need for Jesus and mutual trust in Jesus. Paul assures the Thessalonians that the same Savior who will be faithful to establish and guard him will be faithful to establish and guard them.

But he's not just giving them a reason for comfort. He's giving them a reason to pray! How do we know that? Because the very thing Paul tells the Thessalonians to pray in verses 1-2 (that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men) is the exact same thing Paul says the Lord will do in verses 3, "He will establish you and guard you against the evil one." The fact that Jesus has promised to "establish" and "guard" his people is the very thing that gives Paul confidence to request prayer for deliverance from "wicked and evil men."

In that sense, the promises of God in verses 3 provide the basis or the reason for the prayer request in verses 1-2. Paul isn't just telling the Thessalonians what to pray. He's teaching them why they should pray for it. Ask Jesus to deliver his people from "wicked and evil men" because Jesus has promised to demonstrate his faithfulness by establishing and guarding his people against the evil one.

Here's where Paul really helps us with the dilemma I posed at the beginning. Does everything depend on prayer or does nothing depend on prayer? Do we pray fervently? Or do we trust the promises of God? What's the biblical answer? We should pray fervently because we trust the promises of God!

Don't excuse your spiritual laziness by saying, "Soul, because God is faithful, I don't need to pray." Say to your soul, "Because God is faithful, I have an immeasurably great reason to pray! For I know that the substance of my requests - Lord, let your kingdom come - will most surely come to pass, and my King has chosen, in his infinite wisdom, to advance his kingdom through my prayers. Matthew 9:37-38, "Then [Jesus] said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'"

Friends, there is tremendous spiritual power in turning the promises of God back to him in prayer. It's not an exercise in divine manipulation – “You said that whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully. I put my tithe in the offering last week, so pay up!” It's not an exercise in divine recollection – as if the Lord could forget what he had said he would do. No, praying the promises of God is powerful because it helps us pray in accordance with his will.

1 John 5:14-15, “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.”

Paul wants the Thessalonians (and us!) recognize that when we pray for the advance of Christ's kingdom, we are praying for a cause that is guaranteed to succeed! So why should we pray that “the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored?” Because the Lord promises in Psalm 147:15, “He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.”

That doesn't mean we should only pray verbatim for the things God has already promised to do. He's a good Father. We do well to ask him to meet the infinite variety of our spiritual and physical needs as an overflow of the love he proved once and for all when Jesus died for us on the cross. It does mean that far from undermining our prayers or rendering them unnecessary, the faithfulness of God sustains our prayers and fills them with joy, even in suffering, as we wait for Jesus to do what he has said he will do.

As Paul declared in 2 Corinthians 1:20, speaking of Jesus and the spiritual blessings he won for us through the gospel, “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.” Biblical prayer is supremely convinced of the Lord's faithfulness. Finally, biblical prayer is...

3) SUPREME CONFIDENCE IN THE LORD'S WORK

Having explained what the Thessalonians should pray in verses 1-2, and why they should pray in verse 3, Paul finishes in verses 4-5 by teaching them how they should pray. Verse 4, “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 the steadfastness of Christ.”

Paul is supremely confident that the Thessalonians “are doing and will do” the word God has spoken to them through his two letters. That’s what being “established” in the faith looks like in action. Paul is confident they will persevere on the path of obedience to King Jesus, despite the severity of their suffering. The big question, of course, is why, and whether the same could be said of us. The answer is found in the simple phrase, “in the Lord.”

Notice Paul doesn’t say he has confidence in the Thessalonians. His confidence concerns the Thessalonians and relates to the Thessalonians, but he’s not confident in the Thessalonians. His confidence is “in the Lord,” because he knows it is ultimately the Lord, not the Thessalonians, who will keep them on the path of obedience and transform them on the path of obedience more and more into the image of Christ.

2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

Friends, this verse is the reason I wanted you to hear the testimony Karin shared earlier on this particular Sunday. Her story, and in particular the way God taught her to trust him with the work he was doing in her husband, is exactly what Paul’s getting at here. How will a spouse who is supremely convinced of the Lord’s faithfulness relate to her seemingly “less mature” Christian husband? She will pray for him with a supreme confidence in the Lord’s preserving and sanctifying work in his life. That kind of Godward confidence, in any relationship you have with another brother or sister in Christ, will have a tangible impact the message they pick up and absorb from you in nearly any conversation.

If you don’t have a supreme confidence in the Lord’s work in your spouse’s life and you say, “Hey, why don’t we pray together before bed tonight?” or “Why didn’t you sign up for the men’s retreat?” what is your husband going to hear no matter how “nice” you say it? All he’s going to hear is, “When are you going to stop being a spiritual failure?” If you don’t have a supreme confidence in the Lord’s work in your friend’s life and you say, “Hey, I read a good book recently and I thought it might help you?” what is your friend going to hear? “Why can’t you stop making the same dumb mistakes over and over again?”

You don’t have to say, “I don’t trust God’s work in you,” for them to know you don’t. They’ll pick it up. They’ll sense it. Godward confidence is conspicuous in its presence

and absence. Follow Paul's example, my friends. Go out of your way to say, "Listen, I just want you to know, I trust God's work in you." And if you really haven't in recent months or years, start with a confession, "Will you forgive me for not believing God will be faithful to you?" In the moment, doubting whether a fellow Christian will persevere in obedience can feel "realistic" after years of disappointing fruit. In reality, it's a daring denial of the covenant faithfulness of God.

We must pray the way Paul prayed back in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it." If you're a Christian, it's the faithfulness of God that will keep you faithful to God. Don't have try to work up confidence in yourself. Don't try to work up confidence in someone else. Have confidence "in the Lord."

How does God keep his own faithful? He employs two means in particular. He directs our hearts, he focuses our spiritual gaze, on "the love of God" and "the steadfastness of Christ." How do those two graces compel our obedience to his Word? The love God demonstrated by dying in our place, for our sins, so we could be forgiven, reminds us that we can never earn his welcome, acceptance, or favor. While we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Friend, he didn't love you because you were lovely. He loved you so that he could make you lovely. Remember that. Nothing you can do, Christian, can make God love you any more or any less. Don't obey him to earn his love. Obey him because he has freely lavished his love upon you in Jesus. God's love is the first thing that has the power to sustain your obedience. Here's the second - the "steadfastness of Christ."

Hebrews 12:1-3, "...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."

Friend, in very suffering you endure, in every temptation you face, know this - Jesus has gone before you. You're not the first one to walk this way. The Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, has walked this way before. He knows your trouble. He knows your frame. The same Spirit that empowered him to persevere the ascended Christ has poured out on you that you might endure. And because his story ends in



glory, you can rest assured yours will too. Biblical prayer, the kind Paul models for the Thessalonians in verses 4-5, is supremely confident in the Lord's work.

CONCLUSION

What do we pray? For the Lord's mission. Why do we pray? Because we're convinced of the Lord's faithfulness. How do we pray? With confidence in the Lord's work. Concerned for the Lord's mission, convinced of the Lord's faithfulness, confident in the Lord's work – that's what biblical prayer looks like in action. 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5 is a call to pray. So pray, KingsWay, and keep on praying, because the faithfulness of God ensures his word will not fail to bear fruit.

Pray for the word of the gospel to bear fruit in your own heart. Pray for the word of the gospel to bear fruit in our church. Pray for the word of the gospel to bear fruit in our city, our nation, and other countries around the world. As a community that holds to a high view of the sovereignty of our faithful God, we of all people should be the most eager to pray and the most confident in our prayers. Let's ask for God's help to do that right now as Jesus himself taught us to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.