

Don't Be Fooled
Pray For the Mission
2 Thessalonians 3:1-2

Introduction: To get us started, let's talk about prayer in a general way. The following three foundational truths concerning prayer in the Bible are some of the most important ones for you and me to know:

- (1) Those who repent and believe in Jesus are given the right to experience the same freedom and normalcy of talking with God that a child is supposed to have with their parents.**
 - A. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15)**
 - B. "9 Pray then like this: "Our Father ..." (Matthew 6:9)**
 - C. "Jesus probably used *abbá* for God not only in Mk. 14:36 but also whenever the Gk. *patér* occurs. It denotes childlike intimacy and trust, not disrespect. In Paul (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6) it may be a liturgical reminiscence, possibly of the opening of the Lord's Prayer. It undoubtedly expresses the new relationship with God proclaimed and lived out by Jesus and then experienced by believers in him."¹**

A second foundational truth about prayer is that,

- (2) Prayer is conversing with God; therefore, it involves listening and speaking.**
 - A. No Bible verse tells us this in a straightforward command, but we have 66 books in the Bible that contain an absolute plethora of testimonies to it!**
 - B. Although you can't read the Bible without seeing these natural, sincere, unregulated conversations with God all over the Bible, nothing in church history has been more overcomplicated in people's heads than prayer! It's nothing more or nothing less than a conversation with God. Period.**
 - C. But, for it to be a conversation, both parties need to be involved with listening and speaking. It's not hard to think about what it means to say something to God, but what does it mean to listen to God?**
 - D. Once again, let's not overcomplicate it, but that question does take us to a third important foundational truth we need to understand about prayer in the Bible.**

¹ Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1985). In [*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*](#) (p. 2). W.B. Eerdmans.

A third foundational truth about prayer in the Bible is that,

(3) We listen to God by meditating on His Word. Prayer in this context becomes the verbal response of our heart and mind to what He shows us in His Word.

- A. As I meditate on Scripture, my first prayer is, “God help me to understand Your Word correctly.” As the psalmist wrote,
- B. **27 Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works. (Psalm 119:27)**
- C. I can’t properly ponder the relevance of something to my life if I don’t first correctly understand it! Therefore, the first thing I do is ask God to help me understand what the text is actually teaching so that I don’t jump to conclusions that the Bible isn’t pointing to!
- D. For example, if the Bible says, “The Chicken crossed the road,” it doesn’t mean only chickens cross roads. Furthermore, that sentence alone has no information on when the chicken crossed the road, how wide the road is, what the road was made of, who made the road, who the chicken’s friends and family are or aren’t, or even why the chicken crossed the road in the first place. The only way I can learn anything else other than there was some unspecified but specific chicken (THE chicken) that crossed an unspecified but specific road (THE road) is to read the sentence in its context and see if it gives me any other information. Reading it in context may answer those questions, or it may not. I may find out as I read the rest of the paragraph or chapter that the chicken crossed the road and then got eaten by a coyote on the other side of the road. That may then lead me to ask God for the wisdom to learn what’s on the other side of a road before I cross it! It could be that the context tells me that after crossing the road, the chicken got scared, turned back, dashed back across the road without looking, and got run over by a car. That would then lead me to pray for the courage to not act out of fear and panic! Finally, I could find out that after crossing the road the chicken flew up on top a fence and got into somebody’s garden and ate all the sunflower seeds they were growing in it, which would then lead me to wonder if my neighbors had chickens eating my vegetables, and for God to protect me and my family, friends, church, etc. from the “chickens” who want to come in and make a mess of our lives!
- E. The point is never to assume anything in your meditations of Scripture that the Scriptures themselves are not pointing you to in context! So, for instance, last week we studied this passage.
- F. **16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, 17 comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)**

- G. After asking God to help me understand the passage, I spent time learning what it means to comfort somebody. It means to fuel their hearts with **courage, strength, and love**. So I've been praying that way for myself, my family, and others! I've been asking God to fill my heart with His courage, strength, and love so that I can both live in and from it and, as such, bless others with it. Furthermore, after researching what the Bible means by "good work" and "good word," I prayed for God to establish my heart, the hearts of those in my family, and others in **His good work** and **His good word**.
- H. Now understand, prayer is not exclusively responding to what God says to us, as in, the only things we can say to God are those things that are a response to His Word. I'm not suggesting we can't speak to God unless spoken to, kind of thing! There are thousands of examples in the Bible of people talking to God about the stuff in their lives! Jesus himself tells us to do that! It's why Paul wrote,
- I. **6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)**
- J. So, my point in teaching you this fundamental truth is not for you to think that you're not allowed to speak to God unless He speaks to you, nor that you're only allowed to speak to God about the things He speaks to you. It's just that prayer isn't a conversation unless you're also hearing from God, and the way to hear from God is through His Word.
- K. Prayer becomes way more fulfilling when we interact with God about the things He is saying to us, because the best conversations are when there is speaking and listening by both people in the conversation! That means I can tell God whatever is on my heart, but if I want that telling to truly have fulfillment, I then need to turn to God's Word so the Holy Spirit can begin to speak to me concerning what I just shared with God.
- L. So, in context to the verse I just read for you from Philippians, if I were to tell God about some stuff that's got me worried, after telling Him that stuff, I might then find myself meditating on Philippians 4:6, which tells me to trust Him with it. God has heard my prayer because I'm His kid, and God is always trustworthy, so I've got nothing worth worrying about, even if God doesn't do what I want! Be thankful, God heard your prayer, He's in charge, and He loves you! More on that in a little bit.

Now, with that as a basic understanding of what the Bible teaches about prayer, Paul gives some very specific instructions on something he wants the church in Thessalonica to pray for, and in doing so, it points us to something we should be praying for as well!

Proposition: Paul gives two specific prayer requests that relate to the Mission of God through Christ's Church.

The first prayer request is for the success of the mission.

(1) Paul asked the church in Thessalonica to pray for the success of their effort to lead people to Jesus in places where the Gospel had not yet been preached! (3:1)

A. 1 Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, (3:1)

B. "The word of the Lord"

1. This is necessarily a reference to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe I read this to you a few weeks ago, but as a way of reminder,

2. 1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

3. For time's sake, we aren't going to go anywhere else in the Bible to prove the point, the word of the Lord Paul is referring to is the Gospel, and the Gospel is the GOOD NEWS about who Jesus is, what He has done, is doing, and will do. But I do want you to notice that Paul told the believers in Corinth that there were plenty of important things to deliver to them, but the thing that was of FIRST IMPORTANCE was the Gospel because the Gospel alone is what saves! More on that in a second!

C. "may speed ahead and be honored,"

1. This is a really cool word picture! "Speed ahead" can also be translated as "race ahead" or "run ahead." The words reference a person in a foot race! G. L. Green notes,

2. "The combination of 'run' and *be honored* suggests that the apostles visualize the word as a runner who competes in the games and wins the prize, and so receives the honor that is due."²

² Green, G. L. (2002). *The letters to the Thessalonians* (pp. 334–335). W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos.

3. R.J. Utley notes, **“The gospel is honored when fallen humans respond to it appropriately and are changed.”**³
 4. This Gospel is considered utter foolishness to those who reject it (1 Cor 1:18), but to those hearts that it penetrates and stirs, it opens their eyes to an eternal glory they could not see otherwise! The Good News of who Jesus is, what He has done, is doing, and will do, not only brings us to the place that we can gladly surrender our lives to the King and creator of the universe but it also promises us that all who do so are adopted into His Kingdom as His fully favored sons and daughters forever!
 5. It’s why Paul wrote to the believers in Rome and said,
 6. **16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16)**
 7. Therefore, in asking them to pray for the Gospel to speed ahead and be honored, Paul is necessarily asking them to pray that they will not only be able to bring the Gospel to places that haven’t heard it but that when people hear it they will repent and believe in it so much so that they gladly surrender their lives to Jesus Christ just **“as happened among you.”**
- D.** Now, before we move forward to verse two, I want to make sure you don’t miss something that is massively important in what we just looked at.
- E. The first priority of our prayers should be the spiritual condition of ourselves and others, of which nothing is more urgent than being saved!**
1. I do not understand prayer. God is sovereign and does all that it wants. He doesn’t need me to do anything, and He certainly isn’t waiting around for me to give Him instructions! Yet somehow God uses prayer and wants me to pray. Somehow, in praying, I’m joining Him in His work. I don’t understand it, but there is no doubt that there is power in prayer!
 2. In praying, however, there are all kinds of things we can pray about. This isn’t the only thing Paul asks them to pray for! In a second, we are going to see his second prayer request. But it can’t be missed that Paul’s first priority was his prayer request for their missionary journey to accomplish the purpose of the journey—lead people into salvation and the life experience found in the abiding relationship with God that only comes through Jesus Christ!

³ Utley, R. J. (1997). *Paul’s First Letters: Galatians and I & II Thessalonians: Vol. Volume 11* (p. 142). Bible Lessons International.

3. It's crazy how so few "prayer requests" and "prayer meetings" have anything whatsoever to do with the first priority, that is, the thing Jesus died to grant us—eternal life! Christians will pray for everything known to man, and we can and should do so with boldness, but somehow we forget to pray for the single most important thing in the universe—being rescued from eternal damnation!
4. Imagine if you're a doctor working at a hospital with tons of patients suffering from horrible diseases, but instead of using the knowledge you have that could heal them from these diseases, you instead offer them new cars and vacations. Instead of treating their illnesses, you record videos of them and post them on social media that make them famous, but never bother to get around to healing them of their disease! This is precisely what the prayer life of so many Christians looks like. They pray for nothing that has to do with the problem or that offers any solution! The average Christian spends almost no time praying over their spiritual growth or the spiritual growth of others, and even less on the salvation of the lost in their life and around the world.

The second prayer request has to do with their protection as they encounter those who seek to persecute them.

- (2) **Paul asked the believers in Thessalonica to pray for the physical safety of him and his team as they preached the Gospel. (3:2)**
 - A. **2 and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. (3:2)**
 - B. Many scholars believe Paul wrote this letter from Corinth during his second missionary journey. Acts 18 tells us things got really dicey while Paul was there! This prayer request was in no way a product of baseless paranoia, but on his history of being persecuted, which included one particular time some people thought they had successfully killed him when they dragged him outside of the town and stoned him! He could see what was happening in Corinth and knew exactly where it could lead, so he asked the people of Thessalonica to pray for their protection.
 - C. Interestingly, this is what ended up happening in Corinth:
 - D. **12 But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, 13 saying, "This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law." 14 But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. 15 But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these**

things.” 16 And he drove them from the tribunal. 17 And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this. (Acts 18:12-17)

- E.** Now that’s really cool to read how God answered the prayer Paul asked the believers in Thessalonica to pray for them. However, you and I also need to understand that eventually Paul was beheaded by Nero for preaching the Gospel. It wasn’t on this missionary journey, but eventually, the prayers for Paul not to be harmed were not answered as people had hoped they would be. The reason I’m telling you that is so that you won’t take what I’ve said out of context and somehow think that if you get enough people to pray for you, or that if you somehow have enough faith that God will do what you want!
- F.** Prayer is not a method for commanding God. God is not informed or instructed by us. He is all-knowing and He is sovereign! He is commanded by NOBODY! He is The KING! Therefore, prayer is not trusting God to do what we want; it’s laying our concerns before the God who is worthy to be trusted!
- G.** Biblical prayer can then confidently ask God for a person to be healed, protected or successful, and do so with the faith that God not only hears our prayer, but also cares enough for us and whoever it is we are praying for not to act based on our massively finite knowledge but on His perfect plan to work in and through everything in the Universe to accomplish His plan for redeeming His people from sin and eternal death and into everlasting life. We can pray those things knowing that no matter how we interrupt what’s going on, God always acts from His love. Just as when my children don’t understand how some of the hard things I make them go through are because of my love for them, even more so, we often have no way of understanding it with God, who is working all things together according to His will, which is never separated from His love!
- H.** Last week, I sang a song that I find myself singing to the Lord in my prayers, but today I want you to hear from the person in our marriage who’s actually gifted at singing! My wife wrote a song using the words of Psalm 13. It’s a prayer of David, and in it you will hear exactly what I’m talking about. It’s an honest expression of the frustrations and worries of David, but done so with complete confidence that no matter what, God is worthy of our trust and praise! It’s David praying the way Paul, a thousand years later, taught us to do in Philippians 4:6.

Challenge: What does your prayer life look like—sporadic, wandering, absent, or intentional, focused, and fulfilling? How much of your prayer time is spent praying for things related to the salvation of souls?

To finish up our time, our campus pastors are going to come out and walk you through a practical way to bring some structure to your prayer life and ensure that at least two days a week, you’re able to make God’s first priority your first priority in your prayers. The goal is to get everybody in Venture praying the same way for the lost in their life on Saturdays

and praying the same way for our mission to bring the Gospel to people groups who have no access to it on Sundays! We call it the “First Priority Prayer List,” and we want you to sign up!