

Pray for the Persecuted Church 2 Thessalonians 1

Nov. 8th 2009
“The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church”
HPC, Evening

[Intro]

Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP). And we're going to join millions of other Christians around the world to pray for the persecuted church.

What we're going to do tonight is first take a look at 2 Thessalonians 1 to see what Paul has to say about the persecuted church and how to pray for them. Then after the break, we'll get into small groups to pray, focusing on four countries - North Korea, India, Iran and Burma. There'll also be a prayer group for the children. Each group will pray for a specific country by following the given prayer sheet.

Before we get into the passage, let's pray.

[Opening Prayer]

I have to admit, I find it hard to pray for the persecuted church. There are a few reasons why. **I don't know these people personally.** We read their stories in the prayer guide but it all seems so removed and **remote**. “Out of sight, out of mind”. Sitting here in my comfortable church in Sydney, it's sometimes difficult to connect to these situations. I also find that it's easier to pray for our own missionaries because we know them personally and feel a connection with them. But it's much harder to pray for the national Christians. I have friends serving in the Red Sea. If they got into any trouble, I would be devastated and would pray hard. Often from their newsletters they write about the persecuted national Christians but I still don't remember to pray for them.

It is great that at HPC, we have monthly prayer meetings or times like tonight. These help me to pray for specific individuals who are being persecuted and help me know what to pray.

Another reason I find it hard to pray for the persecuted church is that when I read the stories and testimonies, **I am overwhelmed by the extremely challenging situations.** Hearing about people being tortured, imprisoned, beaten and disowned makes me feel **helpless**. Reading about the oppressive, Communist regime of Kim Jong Il in North Korea who is to be worshiped as a god, or thinking about the power-hungry junta ruling Burma denying basic human rights - I simply don't know how to pray. Where do we start? I have doubts as I pray: Do our prayers really make any difference at all?

And I also find it hard to pray because **it makes me aware of my own indifference and complacency.** I don't pray for the persecuted church because my life is too busy and I have too many other people and things filling my prayers. I'd rather choose not to read about these dreadful things. Ignorance becomes my excuse for not bothering to spend quality time in prayer.

So, there you have some honest reasons why I find it hard to pray:

too remote,
too helpless,
too complacent.

Maybe you can relate!

As we now turn to the 2 Thessalonians passage, I want to address these reasons by asking three questions:

1. Who are we praying for?
2. What is our motivation for praying?
3. What are we to pray for?

1. Who are we praying for?

2 Thessalonians is the letter Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians who were persecuted by unbelieving pagans around them. In his letter, Paul addresses these persecuted Christians as his “*brothers*” (v3). He gives thanks for these brothers in Christ. As he thinks about them, he is compelled to thank God for them. He’s heard from Timothy about their growth in faith and love - “*your faith is growing more and more*”, “*the love everyone of you has for each other is increasing*”. He’s heard especially about their perseverance in the midst of increasing persecution. These brothers have stayed true to the Gospel. Even though they are suffering, they have been faithful to Christ and have loved one another in increasing measure. The whole letter addresses the issue of ongoing steadfastness in trusting God. Paul is encouraging them in their faith during this time of great persecution and suffering. In fact, in v4 he **boasts** about their faith and perseverance. Paul regularly instructs the churches that persecution is to be expected for all who follow the Messiah and live a godly life (2 Tim. 3:12). Persecution, hardships and afflictions are givens for all Christians. God is at work amongst the Thessalonians and Paul is grateful to God for what He is doing in His people.

Tonight we are praying for people who are far-removed from Hurstville, whose names may be difficult to pronounce and whose faces we’ll never recognise. We are praying for situations what we don’t fully comprehend and that seem very remote. And yet, Paul reminds us that we are praying for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are praying for our family; our spiritual family. We are praying for those who are living godly lives, following the Messiah, standing firm in their faith despite the consequences.

At the moment, there are millions around the world who are suffering. According to the Voice of the Martyrs, more than 200 million people in over 60 nations face violent persecution or detention because of their identity as Christians. Most martyrs suffer and die anonymously, unknown, forgotten, their deaths unrecorded except in heaven.

Although they are unknown to us, we pray for them as part of the Christian body - just as it says in Heb 13:3 “*Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.*”

Whenever our friends ask us to pray for them, we pray. Tonight, many of our brothers and sisters who are persecuted are asking us to pray. So let’s pray for our spiritual family.

2. What is our motivation for praying?

We can feel helpless and overwhelmed when we read of the persecution and suffering. “Do my prayers make a difference?”, “Why should I pray when it seems like things will never change?” What motivates us to pray?

Paul gives us the motivation to pray: - **God is just** and **God is all powerful**.

In v5 Paul writes that God's judgment is right. God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who are persecuting Christians. When feeling helpless in the face of oppression, remember, the Lord Jesus will return from heaven in blazing fire to judge those who don't know God and don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

We pray because we can be assured that the enemies will pay the penalty. They will face everlasting destruction. They will be shut out of His presence. Being created in God's image, this is the ultimate loss - being cut off from the face of the Lord.

Why should we pray when it seems like things will never change? Because, things WILL change. Christ WILL return. Christ WILL judge. Enemies will be brought to justice.

In the face of their present persecutions, Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that God will also give relief to those who are troubled. Another motivation to pray is that God is all powerful. In v10, Paul writes that there will be a day when **Christ will be glorified in His holy people**. The believers in Thessalonica are among those who will bring eternal glory to Christ. They will be present among the redeemed. Christ will be marveled at among all those who believe. Paul is using language from Psalm 68 where the psalmist is extolling the unparalleled grandeur and greatness of Yahweh - "*Marvelous is God among his holy ones*". For Paul, this language is just perfect for the coming of Christ. Christ will come to judge and Christ will come to rule in grandeur. God is all powerful. Persecuted Christians will be among the holy people who will marvel at the coming of Christ. And so we **pray** for them to stand firm. And we call upon the powerful and strong name of our Lord Jesus.

3. And finally, what are we to pray for?

Three things we can pray for. *First*, in v11 we are to pray that God would make Christians "*worthy of their calling*". God called His people. **We** are to believe and respond to God's prior call. Pray that those who are suffering for their faith would cling to their first love and that they would not abandon the call of Jesus.

Second, in v12 Paul prays that the name of the Lord Jesus would be glorified in the believers and that they would be glorified in Him. The ultimate purpose, the chief end, for all Christians is to see Christ glorified, to lift up His name and honour Him through our words and actions. It's easy that we want to honour Christ, but when facing torture, imprisonment, beatings or death, it might not be so easy.

We have many forerunners throughout the history who have testified Christ when they're facing death. When Polycarp, a student of the apostle John, the second century bishop of Smyrna, was given an opportunity to save his life if he denied Jesus, he said, "For eighty-six years I have served him. How then should I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"

10 years ago, at Columbia High School, after the gunman fired his shot at Rachel Joy Scott's leg, he asked her if she still believed God. The 17-year-old Rachel said, "You know I do." Then he murdered her.

How would you respond if you were called to die for your faith? Pray that those being persecuted would give glory to Jesus, even to the point of dying for Him.

And *thirdly*, from v8, we can pray that God is just and those who persecute His people will pay their penalty. God is not mocked - He will come one day to Judge and bring vengeance on all his enemies.

Come Lord Jesus!

[Conclusion]

Tonight is our opportunity to focus our attention on specific countries and situations around the world. They may seem remote. We may feel helpless. We may be indifferent. And yet, these are our brothers and sisters in Christ. God is just and all powerful. Jesus is to be glorified amongst His people - including us. So let's encourage each other to pray and call upon the name of the Lord to hear the prayers of His people all over the world.