

# Encouragement For Persecuted Believers

Scripture tells us about some incredible saints of the past who faithfully suffered because they believed in God. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are three such examples. They were threatened with death in a fiery furnace if they did not worship King Nebuchadnezzar's idol. Daniel 3:6 states these three men knew what form of death they might experience if they refused to worship the king's idol. Now imagine knowing that you could be thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to just quickly bow down and worship a gold idol! By the way, the furnace was a kiln used to fire bricks. It was a very hot oven. Even though these three men did not know if God would rescue them, they remained faithful to God.

The prophet Daniel was thrown into a lions' den because he refused to stop praying for thirty days. Daniel also knew the form of death that he could experience, but he prayed anyway. He was a bold saint. He left his windows open. Some men saw him pray. As a result, he was thrown into the lion's den. He could have been eaten, bite-after-bite, but God rescued him.

Daniel trusted God and remained faithful.

Hebrews 11 gives us a long list of men who died because they trusted in God and remained faithful. Verse 36 says,

... and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute,

afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. Hebrews 11:36-38 (NASB)

We believe that the prophet Isaiah was the one who was sawed in half.

Some of the early Christians suffered horrible deaths, such as being burned at the stake, being eaten by lions, or being tortured in a Roman gladiator arena. The catacombs in Rome have pictures of Daniel and his friends on the walls, as an encouragement for Christians to remain faithful to God. Revelation chapters 2-3 tell us that the churches in the cities of Smyrna and Philadelphia suffered persecution. Jesus told the church in Smyrna that some would be imprisoned and die. Historical

records state that all the apostles were martyred, except the apostle John. Peter reportedly died on an upside down cross. Bartholomew was flayed to death with knives in India. James, son of Alphaeus, was crucified and then sawed into pieces.



Christians are even martyred today. Some have died on a cross. Some have been tortured by fire, and others have suffered more gruesome forms of death.

Our study is from 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5. We have already discovered in this letter that the Thessalonian believers were being persecuted (2 Thessalonians 1:4-7). Their persecution was so bad, that they thought they had missed the rapture and were in the tribulation. Consequently, they thought they

were going to hell since only Christians are raptured. So if they missed the rapture, that had to be bad news. In chapter one of this epistle, the apostle Paul explained that their perseverance in the faith in the midst of persecution was proof they were true believers. Then in chapter two, Paul explained the rapture will occur before the tribulation.

So, in the first two chapters of 2 Thessalonians 3, Paul attempted to comfort these believers with doctrine. Now beginning in chapter 3, he encourages these believers with application. This is normal for New Testament writers. For example, Romans 1-11 is all doctrine. Then in chapters 12-16 he gives the application. In the book of Ephesians, chapters 1-3 are doctrine and chapters 4-6 are application. In Hebrews, chapter 1-11 are doctrine and chapters 12-13 are application. In 2 Thessalonians, chapters 1-2 are doctrine and the last chapter is application. So when we come to our study, Paul now seeks to encourage these believers with application. He wants to focus their attention in four different areas.

**PRAY THE LORD WILL SPREAD THE GOSPEL.** The first thing that Paul does in 2 Thessalonians 3 is to encourage them to pray for the gospel. He said,

**Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you . . . 2 Thessalonians 3:1 (NASB)**

Now Paul is very personal here. He calls these believers brothers and sisters. These believers are from the church that is mentioned in Acts 17:1-11. This passage describes the first time that Paul presented the gospel in the Jewish synagogue in the city of Thessalonica. Verses 2-4 of Acts 17 says that Paul taught and gave evidence for three Sabbaths in the synagogues that Christ had suffered and then rose from the dead. As a result, some people responded to the gospel and believed in Christ. This occurred sometime between A.D. 50-53, or during his second missionary journey. Some of these brothers and sisters to whom he wrote were most likely among the first believers.

*The Gospel is the Word of the Lord.* Now notice in verse 1, that Paul uses the term “word of the Lord” to refer to Scripture. In Luke 22:61 and Acts 11:16, the “word of the Lord” refers to the teachings of Jesus. In Acts 13:44-49 “word of the

Lord” includes the gospel, and in 1 Peter 1:25 the “word of the Lord” refers to all of Scripture. This means that Paul asked these believers to pray for him so that the Scriptures would be taught, and the gospel would spread rapidly. The point of his request was that the Lord can cause the gospel to spread rapidly.

*The Lord Sends Out Workers.* I love what Paul said in this verse. He reminds us that we are not the reason people respond to the gospel. Frankly, sometimes I think we forget that we are not the reason people become believers. Notice that Paul did not ask these believers to help Paul learn how to present the gospel better. He did not ask them to pray for a pastor of evangelism, or a website or new ministry committed to evangelism. Instead, Paul asked them to pray that the Lord would cause the gospel to spread rapidly and for God to be glorified.

Do you remember what Jesus said to His disciples about the harvest? Let’s read Matthew 9:37-38. It says,

**Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore, beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.” Matthew 9:37-38 (NASB)**

This is an amazing passage. The harvest symbolizes a world filled with many unbelievers. The workers are believers who know the gospel. Therefore, Jesus told the disciples that there are few believers who are committed to telling unbelievers about the gospel. So, what was Jesus’ solution? He told the disciples to pray that God would send out people to share the gospel.

Our typical approach to evangelism is that we usually devise a plan, and then we ask God to bless our plan. We pray that God will bring us success in sharing the gospel. But that was not Jesus’ approach. He said pray first. In Luke 10:2-3 we learn that after Jesus urged them to pray, then He sent them out to share the gospel.

**And He was saying to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Luke 10:2-3 (NASB)**

Once again, this reminds us that salvation is the work of God. We are to pray first and then we are to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Romans 10:14-17 tells how God has designed salvation to work. Read the passage carefully,

**How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!"**

**However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. Romans 10:14-17 (NASB)**

How has God designed evangelism to work? This passage says someone must share the gospel, people must hear the gospel, and then believe that Jesus Christ is their Savior. The implication is that then they are saved. That is God wants you and me to share the gospel so that someone hears it. Then they can respond in faith.

*What Must We Say About the Gospel?* Now what does God want us to say when we share the gospel? This is a serious question. We can thank God that Paul outlines the basics of the gospel for us in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. In verse 1 Paul refers to the gospel. Then in verses 3-8, he describes the gospel. Here is Paul's summary of the gospel,

**For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (NASB)**

The core explanation of the gospel has three facts. First, Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures. The second fact is that He was buried, and the last fact is that He was raised three days later according to the Scriptures. That is the gospel. Those three parts are included in Peter's first message in Acts 2:14-36, in his second sermon in Acts 3:11-26, and again in Acts 10:34-43. Paul also included those three truths in his presentation of the gospel in Acts 26:19-23. Those three facts are the core of the gospel. Those three facts should be included when we share the gospel.

*When to Share the Gospel.* Next, how do we know when to share the gospel? First, we need the Lord's guidance. In Acts 16:6-9, we are told the Holy Spirit stopped Paul from preaching the gospel in the region known as Asia. For most believers, that is difficult to understand. In verse 9 we are told the Holy Spirit stopped Paul from going to Asia and redirected him to Macedonia. Now I cannot tell you why God did not want the people in Asia to hear the gospel. But that is what happened. This is an important lesson for us. There may be times that we want to share the gospel or try to share the gospel, but God may block us. So, how can we know when we should share the gospel? The answer is we need to pray for open doors. That is what Paul was asking these believers to do. We must remember that salvation is the work of the Lord.

*Strategizing How to Share the Gospel.* Now I want to add another point before I stop teaching about how to share the gospel. I find Jesus' parable in Luke 16:1-9 about a man who managed the affairs of a household to be very important. We are told that this manager was not a good steward of the master's possessions. As a result, the master planned to fire him from his job. Therefore, the unfaithful manager summoned some of those who owed his master money and negotiated a reduced payment for their services. Now why did he do this? He did it to make friends with the master's debtors. When he lost his job, then he might be able to work for them. Verses 8-9 tell us what Jesus said next.

**And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness.**

teousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings. Luke 16:8-9 (NASB)

Now notice Jesus' stunning comment about Christians. He said that unbelievers are shrewder than Christians in making friends. Why? Unbelievers are better at using their money to make friends. Then in verse 9, Jesus urged believers to use their money to spread the gospel and thus make friends in eternity. Jesus means that we should use our money to spread the gospel. That is being shrewd. Then those new friends will greet us when we go to heaven. What a joy that will be!

So, we are to pray that God sends workers. The Lord's workers are to strategize how to use their time and money for the gospel. Believers are to learn what is the gospel and then share it. As a result, some people will believe, and some day they will greet us in heaven. This is Paul's encouragement to these Thessalonian believers. He wanted them to focus on spreading the gospel and making disciples.

**THE LORD IS ABLE TO RESCUE BELIEVERS.** Then Paul encouraged them to pray for a second thing in verse 2. He said,

... and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. 2 Thessalonians 3:2 (NASB)

In verse 1 and now in verse 2, Paul asked them to pray for him, Silvanus, and Timothy that God would rescue them from perverse and evil people. The Greek word for "perverse" is *atopos*. It literally means "out of place" or "outrageous." It has the idea that this person is extreme. Then Paul connects the word with "evil." The Greek word is *poneros*. It has the idea of "aggressively wicked." Together these two words picture an outrageously evil person who will persecute Christians. This is the fearful part of evangelism. Now they hinder the spread of the gospel, but these types of people cannot stop the spread of the gospel. So Paul asked the Thessalonian believers to pray that God the Father would rescue them. I believe Never-Thirsty.org has been attacked recently by Satan. We have had very unusual, unexplainable problems recently that have been increasing rather than disappearing. So pray for us and each other that the gospel will spread rapidly and that the Lord will protect us. But this tells me that we are on the spiritual battle-

front of sharing the gospel.

**THE LORD WILL ESTABLISH AND GUARD BELIEVERS.** The third encouragement comes in verse 3.

But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. 2 Thessalonians 3:3 (NASB)

In the Greek the most important part of a verse comes at the beginning of the sentence. In this verse, the first words are "faithful is the Lord." Paul emphasized here the faithfulness of the Lord. Paul's point is that God is faithful.

When Paul says the Lord will strengthen and protect us, a better understanding of the words "strengthen and protect" is "establish and guard." "To establish" means the Lord is securing us in the faith. Philippians 1:6 is a great promise of our eternal security. It says,

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6 (NASB)

Paul says that God did more than begin a good work in us. He will continue His work until the day of Christ. Now that is a promise of eternal security. True believers will never abandon the faith. Once they truly believe in Christ, they are eternally secure.

The word "guard" refers to being protected from the evil one. This does not mean that we will not suffer. In fact, we might suffer just as Paul did when he had a thorn in the flesh by a demon (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). A good passage that helps us understand what Paul was saying is 1 John 5:18-19,

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. 1 John 5:18-19 (NASB)

Another passage that helps us understand is Luke 22:31.

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not

fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. Luke 22:31-32 (NASB)

Notice Jesus' comment to Peter after He had told Peter that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat. Jesus did not tell Peter that he would not suffer. Instead, Jesus said that He had prayed for him to not lose his faith. That means God guards our faith. Jude 24 is another great verse,

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy . . . Jude 24 (NASB)

Also, the Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-17) is our defense against the evil one. If we put all of this together, Paul encouraged these believers that God is faithful and will ensure that they grow in the faith until death.

**THE LORD IS MAKING US BECOME LIKE CHRIST.** The fourth encouragement is found in verses 4 and 5. Verse 4 says,

We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. 2 Thessalonians 3:4 (NASB)

Paul puts the word "confidence" first in the sentence. Paul's point is we can be confident that God is working in us to make us obedient to the Word of God. This is happening because the Holy Spirit helps us understand Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:2-14). He convicts us when we sin (John 16:8-11). He fills us to empower us to obey (Galatians 5:16-23; Ephesians 5:18-19). Finally, God disciplines us when we are disobedient (Hebrews 12:4-11). So, Paul says, "We have confidence in the Lord concerning you that you are doing and will continue to do what we command." What Paul is really saying is that God is making us more righteous. He is doing it. We may lose focus on being holy. We may sin, but God has not lost focus.

Then in verse 5, Paul puts the Lord first in the sentence once again. He says,

May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. 2 Thessalonians 3:5 (NASB)

Paul says two important things in this verse. First, he says, "May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God." The Greek grammar can have two meanings. The first meaning is that the Lord would help them understand God's love for them. The second meaning is that in response believers would love God more. As we understand His love for us, we will love Him. That is a good motivation to study Scripture and watch what He does for us.

Then Paul desired that God would direct them into the steadfastness of Christ. Since the Greek word for "steadfastness" is *hupomone*. It is more accurately translated as "endurance." According to Romans 2:7, God is patiently enduring our sin. Once again, the Greek grammar seems to suggest a dual meaning. That is, Paul desires that God will help us understand that Christ is patient with our sin. 1 John 2:1-2 tells us that when we do sin, Christ is our Advocate. He defends us. That does not mean we can sin and sin without consequence. But it does mean that we will never be condemned for our sins. We are going to heaven. As we understand Christ's endurance while we sin, that should motivate and give us endurance to not sin.

**CONCLUSION.** Throughout all five verses, Paul is concerned about the deepest emotional needs of these believers. So he encouraged them that the Lord will advance the gospel and people will be saved. He emphasized that the Lord has the power to rescue us. He emphasized that the Lord has secured our salvation and guards us. He emphasized that the Lord is making us more like Christ. Finally, the Lord will help us to know God's love and love Him in return. The Lord will help us understand that Christ is not eager to punish us for our sins. That should motivate us to not sin.

Throughout all five verses, Paul has been emphasizing the character of the Lord. Whatever may happen to us, we can rest in God's loving care.