



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

## SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## Prayer: Your Steering Wheel or Spare Tire?

Ready: Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow | Part 16  
Tim Badal | May 1, 2016 | 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5



We are finishing up our series titled “Ready” in a couple weeks, then we’ll be starting a series on relationships. We’ll be learning that our lives are filled with all kinds of relationships and how they are to honor God. No matter what relationship—friends, marriage, children, in the workplace or in church—we must live out certain characteristics that give the glory and honor to God in all that we say and do.

But as we come to the end of this series, we come to Paul’s last chapter of this second letter that he’s written to the church in Thessalonica, Greece. Since the beginning of the year we have been learning what it means to be ready, transformed by the grace and truth of the Gospel, and now propelled into a world that at times is different, in a world that at times seems to have the upper hand. God has called us as Christians to be ready, to serve Him, to honor Him, to share the good news of Jesus Christ with anyone with whom we have contact.

As Paul is finishing his letter, he reminds us that none of this will be possible unless we spend some time doing what Paul had come to recognize was the lifeblood of his life and ministry—pray. Without prayer, there will be no life change in us, nor in the lives of those around us.

At the beginning of chapter three, Paul takes a moment and reminds them of the importance of prayer, and I want to share on the subject of prayer from these first five verses. Let’s read 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5:

*<sup>1</sup> Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, <sup>2</sup> and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. <sup>3</sup> But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. <sup>4</sup> And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. <sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.*

Corrie ten Boom, a strong and godly Dutch Christian, followed Christ even through the difficulties of a World War II Nazi concentration camp in Germany. Struggling with the persecution that came during that time in her homeland, Corrie ten Boom knew the importance of prayer in the life of a Christian under fire. She said, “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?” What does she mean by that? This quote has become the title of my message because it gets down to the core of the role that prayer plays in our lives.

As we head out into the parking lot today after the service, we will recognize that our cars are equipped with these two things: a steering wheel and a spare tire. While both are part of the car, they have very different reasons for existence. The steering wheel is what gets you from point A to point B. There’s not a moment in time as a driver in the car that your hands are not on that steering wheel (hopefully). That steering wheel is what keeps you going on the straight and narrow, if you will. The steering wheel allows you to navigate and be protected from the things that may come into your driving space. The steering wheel is needed every moment that you’re in the car. If you’re moving, you need your hands on the steering wheel.

But the spare tire, while needed in the car, is something that plays a secondary role. Some of you have never touched the spare tire in your car. Some of you have no idea where the spare tire is. Others of you recognize that a spare tire is needed in case of

an emergency. But when you hear the flapping of a blown tire and pull off to the side of the road, do your heart and mind race as you think, "I don't even know how to change the tire. I'm not even sure how I'm supposed to get the tire out from where it's hiding. I'm not sure what to do." So we fumble with the idea of getting the tire changed, but then we might just call someone else to fix it.

How is your prayer life defined by this question? Is it a steering wheel or a spare tire? Does your prayer life guide you in every facet of your life? Is it something you have your hands on every waking moment of the day? You can't take your hands off it, knowing that if you stop praying, your life can fall apart at the seams. Or is it a spare tire, something you only use in times of emergency? You forget that it's there. You're not even sure how to use it and find yourself struggling when you need it. You're just all thumbs when you're trying to figure it out.

Some of us remember the lyrics to "Help" by the Beatles. "Help. I need somebody. Help. Not just anybody. Help. You know I need someone. Help!" We tend to look at prayer that way and only call on God when we have a problem. Maybe we find out there needs to be a follow-up medical appointment. Maybe we find out a marriage is falling apart. Maybe our child has done something we never saw coming. Maybe depression has come upon us. Maybe the finances aren't where they need to be. What do we do? As if there's a flat tire in our lives, we throw up this prayer, "Lord, help me. I'm not sure what You can do now, but help. Lord, I'm not sure how to talk to you, but help." We are told in our passage today that if we want to be ready in all things, we must be ready to use prayer like the steering wheels of our lives, not the spare tires.

Paul starts this passage with, "*Finally, brothers, pray for us.*" Let's just stop there for a moment. "*Pray for us.*" First of all, what we see about prayer is that everybody needs it. When Paul says, "*Finally, brothers, pray for us,*" he's requesting prayer on his behalf. Now wait a minute. Why in the world would a super saint as gifted and talented as Paul was need prayer? Paul, the great missionary of the faith; Paul, the great apostle of the faith; Paul, the one who wrote the majority of the New Testament; Paul, the one who met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus; Paul, the one who had incredible experiences with God; Paul, the one who saw thousands upon thousands of people come to know Jesus Christ. Why would this great and gifted man need prayer? Because he's a sinner saved by grace. And every one of us needs prayer, regardless of our gifting, maturity, or our successes.

So this begs the question, who have you asked to pray for you? Who are you aware of in your life today who is praying you through the day, praying you through your week, praying for you in all kinds of situations? Paul says, "I don't want to close out this letter without knowing there's a church in Thessalonica that is praying for me, that is lifting me up in prayer, because I need all the prayers I can get."

There is no greater encouragement than when someone texts me, "Hey, I'm praying for you." Or you put your arm around me in person and say, "I'm praying for you." We all need people who pray for us. If you don't know someone who will pray for you, find someone. Find a trustworthy and reliable person who will lift you up in prayer. Paul needed it. I need it. We all need it. We all need someone who will pray for us.

Number two, when he says, "*Pray for us,*" the word pray is in the present tense. What he's saying is pray and continually pray for us. That means prayer isn't a once-and-done activity, but is something that needs to happen on an ongoing basis. Paul shares this example of how to pray in 1 Thessalonians 1:2: "*We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.*" Prayer is a continual thing. Paul also tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that we are to pray without ceasing. The idea here is that prayer is continually on our minds.

When I was younger and heard sermons on this concept, I was devastated. I didn't pray every day. I barely prayed once a week as a kid. And now the pastor is saying I need to pray all the time? "Doesn't the pastor know I need time for TV, games and work? How am I supposed to be praying at all times?"

Well, if we look at the activity of prayer as simply being a time when we get away and spend time alone, then it will never happen. We would have to become some sort of monk who sequesters himself from the world and dedicates all his time to prayer. Paul is saying that we are to be in a state of readiness when it comes to prayer. At all times and in all occasions, we are to be ready to pray. For example, when we see specific people we lift them up a prayer. "Lord, I pray for so and so. Lord, be with them." When you see something on their Facebook page, simply pray, "Lord, it looks like they've got an important thing going on. I pray that you will work through them." Paul says, "Every time you guys come to my mind I take time to pray." It doesn't need to be long and drawn out. It doesn't need to be filled with flowing rhetoric. It needs to be constant, meaning we are to be in a continual state of lifting people up in prayer.

Notice that Paul then tells us prayer should be done no matter the maturity or age of the believer. The gifted, great Apostle Paul says, "*Finally, brothers...*" To whom is he speaking? He's speaking to the church of Thessalonica. Who are these people? Very

young believers. Infant believers in many ways. Believers who had not figured out their lives yet. Believers who were struggling with sin. Believers who were trying to figure out what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ. The great Apostle Paul—mature Apostle Paul, put together Apostle Paul, doctrinaire Apostle Paul—says to these young Christians, “I want you to pray for me.”

Maybe today you’re thinking, “Well, I’m not the Apostle Paul. I don’t know my gifts. I don’t know how to speak boldly for the Lord. I don’t know how to lead as Paul did. What can I do?” Paul says you may be new to the faith, but what you can do that will have huge impact on the Kingdom of God is pray. So Paul says all of us should pray.

Next notice the word “prayer” or “to pray” literally means “to beg, to implore or beseech.” The idea here is a strenuous activity. Paul says in the book of Colossians that Epaphras, the pastor of the Colossian church, was wrestling in prayer for his people. The idea here is that prayer isn’t just mouthing words to some unseen deity, but we wrestle with God, recognizing that the things we pray for are important. They have an impact on the lives of the people for whom we’re praying. So we want to do all that we can. We want to wrestle with this idea of seeking the Lord, asking the Lord to minister to those who are in need.

Then Paul uses the word “finally.” It would seem that Paul is landing the plane, getting ready to close this letter. A better way to view this is that Paul is tying in the importance of prayer with what he has shared beforehand: “Now that I’ve taught you that persecution is here and the spirit of lawlessness is already in the world, and that the lawless one coming (the antichrist), and because we don’t know the hour or day of the Lord’s second coming, and because we are called to live upright and holy lives, and because of this calling to stand firm and hold onto the truths of Scripture, don’t forget to pray. We won’t ever be able to do these things unless we’re praying for one another, unless we’re seeking the Lord on behalf of each other. We need to pray because of what Christians face on a day-by-day basis.” Paul, in one-half of a sentence, gives us a mouthful on what it means to pray.

But then in the rest of the passage he tells us what we should pray for. There are three requests I want you to see in this passage. Paul wants us to pray, not just in emergencies, but every day and every moment of our lives.

## 1. Pray for opportunities to share the Gospel.

First of all, we need to ask God to give us opportunities to share the Gospel. Notice verse one, *“Pray for us...”* In what way? Paul says, *“...that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you.”* So the first thing Paul wants us to pray for is that the Word of the Lord—the Gospel—will speed ahead. Literally this phrase could be put this way in the original Greek: “That the Gospel would run.” What does Paul mean by that? We need to seek the Lord so that the Gospel will be effective when the word of the Lord leaves our mouths.

Paul prays this on numerous occasions. In Ephesians 6:19 he says, pray *“also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”* Pray for me that I might open my mouth and that the word might be declared boldly. Paul says, “Listen, I need prayer because what I’m going to do is what God has called me to do, what God’s called all of us to do, to proclaim the excellencies of Him Who called us out of darkness and brought us into His wonderful light. And when I share those words, I want you to pray that I would do so boldly and that in that boldness people might hear a clear presentation of the Gospel.” Paul put it this way in the fourth chapter of Colossians: *“Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ.”* You see, as a proclaimer of the good news of Jesus Christ, Paul was concerned how that message would go forth.

Paul wants two things regarding the success of the Gospel. He wants the Gospel to go forth with great speed. In Paul’s days, the delivery of his letters was contingent upon the courier who was going to handle them. Right? They didn’t have the post office. They didn’t have Fed Ex. They didn’t have UPS. They had couriers who most likely didn’t even have horses. Paul would finish writing each letter, then procure a courier for the long trek from Athens to Thessalonica in the northern part of Greece. He would hand him the letter and say, “In all haste, get this letter to the people in Thessalonica, to the church that meets there. I don’t want you to dilly-dally. I don’t want you to take time off midway through the journey. As quickly as you can, your job is to deliver this message in great haste.”

Paul was saying, “Just as I hold the courier responsible for the speed of delivering my letter, I am asking God that the Gospel would run speedily, getting to where it needs to be.” Why? Because Paul recognizes something that we must recognize: our time is short. Paul has just finished telling the people that the man of lawlessness is coming, and that Jesus Christ is coming back. We know that for each day God gives us on this earth we have an opportunity for the Gospel to go forth through our lives. And we recognize that when we share the Gospel it isn’t always received the first time, so we need the Gospel to move quickly in the lives of people because we don’t know if we will have another opportunity.

Since I was 14 years of age, imprinted in my heart and mind is the recognition—because of the death of my brother at 16 years of age—that none of us are guaranteed tomorrow. So Paul was saying, “I don’t know how much more time I have so I want this Gospel that I’m boldly proclaiming to go out as quickly as possible.” It’s not just about the speed; it’s about the Gospel reaching the proper person.

The courier, again, needs to run with all haste. There are two characteristics of a good messenger. First of all, he has to be able to move from point A to point B very quickly. That’s why I would not have been one of those guys. They would have looked at me and said, “Hey, it’ll take him four years to get to Thessalonica. Not going to work. We need someone who’s fast, but we also need someone who’s going to find the location where the letter needs to go.” This courier had to also know where to go. There was no GPS. There were no Google Maps. So Paul says the only way the Gospel is going to get to where it needs to, is through our prayers to God that the message will move quickly and that it will get to the right people.

You see, Paul had faith that the courier would know how to get from Athens to Thessalonica. And once he got into Thessalonica, he would need to find the church that met there, then hand deliver the message. After all, there would be no value for someone to receive this letter and not understand who Paul is, Who this Jesus is, and what Jesus has called them to be ready to do. Paul had written a letter to a group of people who needed this message. Our prayer needs to be not only that the Gospel would speed forth, but that it would hit the lives of people who need to hear it—the lives of people who are going to be changed by it. So we need to pray, “Lord, as I share the good news, as I live out the life of Christ in my workplace and in my school, I pray that this Gospel message would speed forth, that it would run to the right people at the right moment and that they might respond to the Gospel.”

Let me put it this way: Many of us do not see life change in others because we have ceased to pray for the Gospel to go before us. We ask, “Why am I not seeing the results of a fruitful life? Why am I not seeing people coming to know Jesus? Why does it seem that there’s never an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ?” Paul says if we don’t pray for these opportunities, then we will hit closed door upon closed door. So we need to pray. We need to ask God to go before us. We need to ask God not to allow the Gospel to hit dead ends, not to fall upon deaf ears, but to hit the lives of people who need it desperately.

Paul talks about the success of the Gospel, but also about the submission to the Gospel. He says, “I want the Gospel to be successful, to speed ahead, and I also want it to be honored.” Paul moves from delivery of the Gospel to the response at the end of verse one: “*...as happened among you...*” He says, “All right, now that it’s sped throughout the world, now that it’s gone to the right people, let’s pray they will receive it and honor God with their lives, too.”

By the way, just as a point of reference, we’re talking here about couriers in the first century. But we live in a time and an age—through satellite, TV, radio and the internet—that the Gospel goes forth to all four corners of the world instantaneously. We live during an absolutely amazing time. Every once in a while David Wood, our website guy here on staff, will tell us where the website is having an impact, meaning who’s on our website. You would think that our website would only be impacting people in the Fox Valley area, but then we find out there are people from all 50 states visiting our website for one reason or another. In fact, one of the largest areas for downloading sermons from Village Bible Church is Germany. I don’t know anybody from Germany. I’m like David Hasselhoff, not real big in America but big in Germany. Seriously, the Gospel is having an effect in ways that I don’t even know. We live during a time when all four corners of this incredible globe have many opportunities to hear the Gospel. Right now, in a far-flung island of New Guinea, Ben and Missy Hatton are sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people who have never heard of God. We live during an amazing time!

So what do we pray for? We pray that the Gospel gets there and gets there quickly. Then we pray that people submit to it, that it would be honored. The word “honored” here literally means to be admired, accepted, extolled, received with joy and thanks. So Paul is saying that we should pray that the message will go forth and that people will receive the Gospel as it is taught, just as the Thessalonians did. The Thessalonians were sinful, depraved people. The Gospel was preached; they turned from their idols and turned to Jesus Christ, the one true and living God. Paul says, “Just as you received Christ, just as the Gospel has transformed your lives, let it now transform the lives of people around you and thereby be honored. Prayer changes things.” We live in a world that is seemingly out of control. One person came up to me today and said, “Our weather is like our world—a mess.” That’s a good way to put it. As Christians we want to see our country cleaned up. We want to see the world cleaned up. We want to see them turned right side up again. We turn to different things to accomplish this. First, we turn to the White House and we say, “Hey, if we get the right person in the White House, America will change.” But then we find out that doesn’t work, so we turn to the courthouse and say, “If we get the right person on the Supreme Court, if we get the right people in those robes, then the laws will change and things will get better.” But we’re learning that isn’t the truth. So then we turn to the school system, thinking, “The

White House didn't work and the courthouse didn't work, so we've got to change it. Let's get prayer back in schools and make sure we teach creation over evolution. That will change society." But we're learning these efforts don't bring needed change.

Charles Wier put it this way: "If we want revival in America again, it must begin with prayer in God's house." We've got our priorities all messed up. We're trying to change the trajectory of people and nations without God doing the changing. It begins with prayer. Paul says we need to pray that the Gospel will run strategically. Is that part of your prayer life?

## 2. Pray that God would remove the obstacles that hinder the Gospel.

In verse two, Paul says, "...and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith." Let's stop there. Paul sees two hindrances to the Gospel. The first one is "*wicked and evil men*." He says one way the Gospel is kept from running is that people are getting in the way—wicked and evil people. Picture a runner on a track, running in his lane, but someone comes out from the stands and runs into him, causing him to stumble, knocking him down and keeping him from finishing the race.

Well, who are these people? Paul says they are "*wicked and evil men*." Paul is no doubt speaking of real situations that were happening as he was penning these words. We know that Paul was writing this second letter from Corinth and was enduring all kinds of trouble and persecution. Here's the amazing thing: most scholars and historians believe the people who hurt Paul the most were those who once worked arm-in-arm with him to destroy the Gospel of Jesus Christ when he went by the name of Saul. It's very likely that Paul knew these people. He knew they hated Jesus and sought to destroy anybody who preached the Gospel, including Paul himself.

Now listen. This is not a prayer of self-preservation or Paul seeking comfort. Paul was well-acquainted with trouble and persecution. This is one of the few times that Paul says this hindrance is too great and God is needed to stop it. Why? Because they were "*wicked and evil men*." That word "wicked" literally means people who are out of joint, out of place. Literally they're not in the place where they should be. They've gone outside the norm of who they should be. This speaks of people who have been designed by God and created to love Him, to live under the purposes of God, to see God as holy and right, to worship Him and His Son Jesus Christ, but they are so bent out of shape that they hate the very God Who gives them life and breath. They are evil and out of joint. It literally means they are a malignant and aggressive force.

As I studied these two phrases, I realized that we are hard-pressed to find a lot of people here who fall into this category, even among 300 million Americans. Paul's use of the two words evil and wicked, compounded together speaks of such an angry, harsh and gross group of people. Where do we find these people? Are they here today? They are, but no more clearly seen than what's taking place in other places around the world.

Since the invasion of Iraq in the earlier part of the last decade started, Iraqi Christians have seen their population go from about two million down to a couple hundred thousand. They've been decimated. They've been killed by Muslim extremists or caused to flee their homes and live in refugee camps outside their homeland. Why? Because if you're known to be a Christian, your home is branded with the Arabic letter "N" for Nazarene—a follower of the Nazarene, Jesus Christ—and words next to it say to get out or die.

Even though we have incredible freedoms in this melting pot of society, there are people who do not like Jesus and speak against Him. But Paul was speaking of "*wicked and evil men*" devoted to the extermination of God, Jesus Christ and anyone who proclaims His name. Listen, my father's cousins and relatives still live in Iraq and share horrific stories of Christians whose children are taken captive, boiled to death, delivered back to their families on a plate of rice and told if they don't leave, the rest of their family will experience the same thing. These are "*wicked and evil men*."

I recently read in *Reuters News* about a Chinese pastor and his wife who were killed because they would not give up the membership list of their house church. Think about that. The government comes and says, "We want to know everyone who attends Village Bible Church. We want to know right now and if you don't tell us, you're going to die." Can I just be honest with you? I love you, but I would want to save my wife and children first, then myself. This Chinese couple recognized that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was more important, that the people they ministered to were more important, than their own lives. Who did this horrific act? "*Wicked and evil men*."

This begs the question: If that's how people are living right now, why aren't we praying more? If we have such freedom, why don't we pray for those who are seeing the Gospel being hindered? We need to pray because irrational and ungodly people are doing all they can to destroy the Gospel.

Then Paul mentions a second group of people: *"not all have faith."* This picture is in contrast to the wicked and evil men. There are wicked and evil men, but what about everyone else? What about the people we go to school with, the people we work with, our neighbors, who maybe aren't for the Gospel, but neither do they want to kill us? These are the ones who don't all have faith. We need to pray that God would allow us in the opportunities that we have to proclaim the Gospel to them. It may not be a full-fledged Gospel presentation all at once. It may be little by little, through example upon example, by our living quiet and peaceable lives in full view of them, that they might see.

I had the great opportunity to speak at Career Day at the local middle school. My neighbor two doors down was one of the aides in the room when I was speaking. One of the questions a junior high student asked was, "How does a pastor live one way in the church and another way in the world? How do you balance that? Do you live all the time like you live at church?" And my response was, "Listen, I will never be a good pastor if my neighbor sees me one way and the church sees me another way. So my hope and my prayer is that my neighbor (and I said her name) would see Jesus Christ being lived out in my life in every facet of my day. Then I've been a pastor to my neighbor." And I looked her straight in the eye when I said it, as if to ask the question, "Have I done that? Am I missing that in your life? Have you not seen Christ lived out in me? Because if you haven't, I've failed." Because she does not have faith, and my job is to put faith into her life and to show her the faithfulness of God, because not all have faith. Paul finishes and says, "But God is faithful and God's people should be faithful." So we need to live that out for those who are watching.

### **3. Pray that God would instill in us optimism about the Gospel.**

Paul finishes up with a third thing to pray for: not only that the Gospel would run and that He would remove the obstacles along the way, but that God would instill in us optimism about the Gospel. Let me give you a quick follow-up story of a pastor and his wife who died recently in China. It created such an uproar among the people of God that they began to openly and boldly pronounce Christ in that region—so much so that for the first time in Communist China the Premier of the Communist party came out and said that the government has to do all that it can to stop the spread of Christianity. It is the first time that the Communist party in China has ever even shared publicly the word "Christianity." Why? Because what we are learning is that the Christian church in China will be the largest population of Christians throughout the entire world by the year 2020. People are coming to know Jesus. Yes, they are being knocked down and beaten up. Yes, their lives are being taken from them, but God is faithful. And when we pray, we will recognize and know that though life may be hard for us as Christians, God is faithful to see His Gospel go forth.

How does Paul say that? Paul says, "Listen, God was faithful enough to change your life, Thessalonians—you people who were depraved, you people who were sinful, you people who were on your way to hell. God saw fit to save you, and if you think that God's best days are behind Him, listen—the best is yet to come." God is saving people all the time. And either we're going to be a part of it, or we're going to sit idly by living our comfortable American lives, and we're going to miss out on the opportunities.

Paul says, "We have confidence in the Lord. We have confidence that God's going to continue to do His work, not only in our lives but in your lives. We have confidence that the Lord will direct our hearts, and the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ will be a part of our lives." Paul has full optimism that everything is going to go just as God planned. So what that does is instill in him the ability to pray with confidence. He's fully optimistic. He's not worried about the election. He's not worried who's going to fill Scalia's seat on the Supreme Court. He's not worried about what's going on in Target's bathrooms. He has full confidence that God will win the war. And what God says is, "I've already won it, and because I've won it, I want my people to pray." So that's what I want us to do.

I want us to pray about three things: First of all, that God would give us opportunities. Number two, that God would remove the obstacles from the Fox Valley area for us reaching the world, for the obstacles that keep the Gospel from the work that our missionaries are doing, for the Gospel work that's being done in places where people's lives are at stake. And finally, that we would pray these things with such a confidence that God is winning, that so are we. Because the Gospel cannot be chained; it cannot be squelched; it cannot be put down. The Gospel is running, and we need to pray that it will continue to do so.