

Our Task of Intercession: Praying for the Persecuted Churchⁱ

Ephesians 6:18-20, Colossians 4:2-4

Persecution is a reality – and more and more believers face the truth that following Christ is costly indeed. For that reason, we must be praying for our global brothers and sisters who deal daily with opposition from oppressive governments, religious leaders, and even angry family members.

1. Hear the urgency.

ILLUSTRATION/APPLICATION: Describe times in your life when you or your church members prayed with desperation and urgency. Ask, “do we pray with such urgency for believers under persecution?”

- In Ephesians 6:18-20, Paul says, “You pray.” Listen to how he says this, noting the repetition of the word “all.”
- In Colossians 4:2-4 is a similar call to pray. The phrase, “Continue steadfastly in prayer,” has a sense of ongoing commitment and fervor: “devote,” “commit,” “persist,” “keep pressing on,” “don't stop praying.”

APPLICATION: Describe some ways your church might pray for the persecuted church.

2. Hear the call to be alert.

- In Ephesians 6:18, Paul calls the believers to stay alert with all perseverance and intercession. This is keeping alert in the battle as we just keep praying.
- In Colossians 4, Paul calls the Colossians to be watchful in the battle. There's also a sense of being aware of the world around them, recognizing those things that hinder the spread of the gospel.
- Think about missionaries we send into risky areas. Consider new believers they're discipling—believers whose decision to follow Christ gives rise to opposition.

ILLUSTRATION/APPLICATION: Using the prayer guide on imb.org/persecuted, help listeners see that “being alert” includes praying with knowledge and insight about the reality of persecution.

- In Colossians 3-4, Paul essentially says, “If you're going to be praying for me, you put to death what is earthly in you. You put on the new man and let the word of Christ dwell richly in you.”
- Why does that matter? Paul is a church planter under arrest for his faithfulness. He's in this war, and he wants prayer support—but he wants to know the people praying for him know how to touch heaven because they're walking with God. We who are praying for persecuted believers must walk with God.

3. Hear the request of the apostle in prison.

- Ephesians 6: “Pray for me that I will speak the gospel boldly . . .” This is a man under divine compulsion of his calling to be a gospel witness.
- Why would Paul say, “Pray for me that I will have courage”? Paul understands the very people he's trying to reach as he evangelizes:
 - Ephesians 2:1-3: they are dead in their trespasses and sins, by nature children of wrath, and they follow the prince of the power of the air.
 - Colossians 1:13: they are in the domain of darkness until God intervenes and transfers them to the kingdom of his beloved son.
 - 2 Corinthians 4:3-4: they are blinded by the god of this age.
 - Acts 26:18: Jesus says, “I'm sending you to open their eyes that they may move from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.”
- Spiritual warfare heats up when we evangelize and make disciples.
- As he writes this letter, Paul is in prison because he has spoken the gospel boldly. Now, he says, “You pray for me that I'll keep doing what got me here in the first place.”
- Colossians 4:3-4: Paul knows it is God who opens up doors—who prepares hearts to hear the gospel—and he says, “You pray for me that God will open up a door for me.”
- Then he says, “You pray for me that I'll make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.” This is Paul's brokenness over lostness around him. And, when you're that broken over lostness, you keep witnessing even in prison. Around the world today are persecuted believers, in fact, who remain faithful despite the cost, often seeing God reap a harvest through their efforts.

ILLUSTRATION: Again, using resources on imb.org/persecuted or nikripken.com, tell stories of persecuted believers who have stood strong in God's power. Point out that believers press on through persecution under the prayer support of God's people.

- So, then, how might we pray for believers under persecution? *We pray for them to remain faithful to proclaim the gospel boldly and clearly, and we pray they might have opportunities to evangelize regardless of their situation.*

What, then, do we do with these teachings?

1. Evaluate your own life to make sure you're praying from an obedient heart.
2. Be alert to the needs of the world and the opposition to believers, and pray with urgency.
3. Intercede for the persecuted church the way Paul requested for himself even when he faced opposition: for boldness, clarity, and opportunity.
4. Pray the same for each other, knowing we, too, could face persecution in the days to come. Our prayer-supported boldness today will help keep us faithful in the future.

ⁱ Adapted from a sermon Chuck Lawless preached at the 9Marks conference at Southeastern Seminary in 2018.