

It was mid-afternoon in central China on May 12, 2008, and when disaster struck! An earthquake hit with a magnitude of 8.0 on the Richter scale. Concrete panels, crumpled steel, and crushed tile buried tens of thousands of people. Rescue workers reported that they heard people screaming; there was hopeless and ongoing screaming. Don't lose this image. We'll come back to it several times in this sermon.

This sermon is called “Praying Like Paul” and it's based upon 1 Thessalonians 3:10–13. Let's get some context. In chapter two the apostle describes his relationship with the Thessalonians, “like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7) and “like a father with his children” (1 Thessalonians 2:11). He even writes, “We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Paul is no armchair theologian. Paul doesn't sit in an ivory tower. Paul is anything but aloof and distant! ***Paul dearly loved these people!***

But then the earthquake hit! Paul and his companions were run out of town. Luke tells us about it in Acts 17. Some of the Jews were jealous of Paul so “they formed a mob” and “set the city in an uproar” (v. 5). They cried out, “These men who have turned the world upside down have also come here.” (v. 6) Paul had to run for his life under the cover of night.

But then there were aftershocks. Even though Paul escaped, the Thessalonians felt stuck under concrete panels, crumpled steel, and crushed tile. Paul writes about it: “You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.” (1 Thessalonians 2:14–15) There was hopeless and ongoing screaming.

I hear the screaming. I'm sure you do, too. We all know people who are buried, especially this time of year. December often brings unsettling earthquakes—holiday stress, Christmas blues, and massive debt. And it's no wonder. The month presents a dizzying array of demands—shopping, baking, cleaning, traveling, and entertaining. And then there is that party with the dreaded Uncle Steve. Enough said. For many people, the holidays are a painful reminder of what once was. This is especially true for those who have experienced a significant loss such as the death of a spouse or a parent, or have gone through a break-up or a divorce. What does Paul do for those he loved

and who were suffering so much? Who felt as though they were screaming in their pain and loss? Paul prays for them. So can we. We can pray like Paul.

PRAY FOR PEOPLE TO GROW IN FAITH “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.” (1 Thessalonians 3:10). Sometimes we think prayer is like a heavenly slot machine. Put in the coin, pull down the handle and presto, maybe we will hit the jackpot! At other times we think prayer is like a rabbit’s foot or a four-leaf clover. “It just might bring me some good luck!” At still other times we see prayer like a visit to the dentist’s office. “Ya gotta do what ya gotta do.” That’s not Paul. He **earnestly** prays **night** and day. In fact, in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 the apostle even writes, “Pray without ceasing.”

Look at the content of Paul’s prayer; to “supply what is lacking in your faith.” The term translated “supply” appears in the New Testament in contexts where fishermen mend their nets. Paul knows that the Thessalonians have faith; they have nets. But Paul also knows this; they are lacking. Their nets need mending!

We know that feeling. When our net has a hole in it, life seems futile. “Why try? Why get up in the morning? Why keep on fishing? I’m just going to lose everything again today, just like yesterday.” Nets need mending! Faith needs strengthening. Look at Paul’s prayer more closely. He prays that he is the answer to his prayer! Paul wants to mend nets. Of course! Paul is anything but aloof or distant! **Paul dearly loves these people!**

PRAY FOR PEOPLE TO ABOUND IN LOVE “May the Lord make your love **increase** and **overflow** for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.” (1 Thes. 3:12) Question: What do you call it when you put on pounds but don’t gain any muscle? You call it Dan Welch, eating too much pizza at night, and that’s called fat! What’s the point? If we don’t increase love, all we will have is spiritual fat. If we increase in knowledge without increasing in love, all we’ve gained is a fat head! That’s why Paul prays for love to **increase** and **overflow**.

When our world collapses the temptation is to become self-absorbed. And being self-absorbed never works. Let me repeat that. *Being self-absorbed never works*. So, we pray for people to begin, again, to live outside themselves. To serve. To assist. To help. For their love to increase and overflow.

PRAY FOR PEOPLE TO BECOME SECURE IN HOPE “May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.” (1 Thess. 3:13) What do people need most when they are going through tough times? They

need to see the big picture. They need to see what God has planned. Our Lord Jesus will come with all his holy ones.

Five days after that massive Chinese earthquake in 2008, a group of rescue workers found the dead body of a young woman. She was kneeling. Her back was hunched over, supporting a crumbled ceiling; her arms stretched forward, her hands thrust firmly into the muddy earth. As the rescue workers walked away, suddenly the team leader understood. He ran back to the woman and reached underneath her body. There, in the tiny shelter that the woman created by using her body as a protective shield, was a baby. He was about three months old, alive, unhurt, and sleeping soundly. Inside the baby's clothing, was a cell phone. On it was this message. *"My dear child. Remember, I love you."*

Matthew 27:54 says that the day Jesus died there was another massive earthquake, but this one was from hell, literally. Talk about being buried and trapped! There was also hopeless and ongoing ... screaming. Jesus knows all of that, and so much more. Listen closely. His death means you live. His protective shield means you are safe. And his message to you is exactly this, *"My dear child. Remember I love you."*

We pray for others to become secure in this hope; the hope that this crucified and living Christ is coming again to restore everything we have lost. This is the promise of 1 Thessalonians. "Lo! He comes with clouds descending!" All the years of pain will be erased; every tear of disappointment will be wiped away; and the symphonies we missed and sunsets we didn't see will be beautifully played over again and again! The spouse, the parent, the child snatched by disease will run into your arms. The health that eluded you in the winter of your life will return a thousand-fold. The friends and family members who died in the faith will sit next to you, singing in the heavenly choir, forever!

How do we help people who are crushed by holiday stress, or loss or depression? Who are hanging on by a thread? Whose silent screams are ongoing and seemingly endless? We can pray. We can pray like Paul. Amen.