
Pray Without Ceasing: The Witness of St. Thecla

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon Salmoon Bashir
The Feast of Thecla of Iconium**

In the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen!

“I am a servant, a daughter of the living God, and as to my state, I am a believer in Jesus Christ, His Son, in whom God is well pleased. For that reason, none of the beasts could touch me. To Him be glory and power for ever and ever.” These were the words of St. Thecla of Iconium. When a government official asked her, “Who are you? And what are your circumstances, that not one of the beasts will touch you?” she answered simply, “I am a servant, a daughter of the living God.”

Today we observe the feast of St. Thecla of Iconium, a disciple of St. Paul, a missionary, and a woman of remarkable faith who had an extraordinary love for Jesus. Thecla was a young noblewoman from Iconium and engaged to be married, but when she heard Paul preaching chastity, resurrection, and devotion to Christ, she was so captivated by his words that she sat for days by the window of her house, listening to Paul’s teachings. Her family and fiancé were furious, accusing Paul of corrupting her, and Paul was imprisoned. Of course she was a woman of courage, Thecla bribed the guards to visit him in jail and learn more about Jesus.

Thecla survived being thrown into the flames when a sudden storm arose and extinguished the fire. Unshaken, she cut her hair, dressed as a man, and went in search of Paul. She found him in Antioch, where a nobleman tried to assault her, but she defended herself. For this, she was put on trial again, sentenced to face wild beasts. In the arena, she confronted lions, bears, and seals. The female lions protected her, licking her feet, and the other wild animals refused to attack. Many in the crowd, especially women, were amazed and praised God. When the governor saw this, he asked her who she was, and after her response, ‘I am a servant, a daughter, of the living God’, he released her.

Thecla returned to Paul and asked to follow him as a disciple. According to tradition, he blessed her but sent her to preach the Gospel on her own. She settled near Seleucia (in modern Turkey), living an ascetic life in a cave, healing the sick, and converting many. Some traditions say she died peacefully in old age.

St. Thecla is also called the protomartyr among women, literally “first martyr,” because she was the first woman, according to early Christian tradition, to suffer persecution and face martyrdom for her faith in Christ. Even though she was not killed and miraculously escaped every attempt on her life, the Church venerates her as a martyr because she offered her life for Christ and endured sufferings equal to martyrdom.

Among all the stories of St. Thecla, what moves me most is her prayer. In every trial—flames, wild beasts, or human threats, she lifted her heart to God without hesitation. There are countless stories about St. Thecla, each filled with courage and faith, but what strikes me most is the way she lived a life of unceasing prayer. She took St. Paul’s teachings of pray without ceasing, in its literal way.

In the heat of danger, when flames surrounded her, when wild beasts circled the arena, or when family and societal pressures threatened to crush her, she turned instinctively to God. Her prayers were immediate, alive, and fearless, as if each word called down protection and strength. She never panicked; she prayed. Those prayers were her shield, her guide, and the source of her miraculous survival. Her unceasing prayer allowed her to remain in constant communion with God. In right relationship with God through prayer. Prayer without ceasing.

I had a friend who recently passed away, she was a Roman Catholic nun. At some point we were talking about

persecution of Christians around the world. I told her I don't know what we can do, we have no power or authority. The only thing we can do is pray. She simply said, "Yes, and the most powerful thing we can do is pray. Pray without ceasing."

Friends, St. Thecla's story is not just about surviving trials; it is about living a life wholly surrendered to God, where prayer is our refuge and shield. In our own trials, moments of fear, loss, uncertainty, or pressure from the world around us—we too can lift our hearts to God in prayer. Prayer is not just words; it is a constant communion with God. St. Thecla showed us how to make prayer the center of our lives, so that in every challenge, we may stand firm in faith, find strength in God, and experience the peace and protection that come only from Him. Then we too can say, "I am a servant, a daughter, a son of the living God, for that reason, none of the beasts could touch me. To Him be glory and power for ever and ever." Amen!

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