
Prayers

To God

Pray to confess the sins of your church to God. Ask the Lord to forgive you for Your part in what it does wrong, and seek His will for you and your church fellowship.

For myself

Father God, bless me I pray with the wisdom to know when I must act to do Your Word and when I must hold back to await Your revelation. Make my spirit sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, so that I become a useful servant of Yours in every circumstance of life, I pray: **AMEN**

For others

Weekly theme: Exploration of the universe

The Universe is a fascinating place, and for centuries, people have gazed at the stars with amazement with anything from abject superstition to incredibly revealing science. Pray for the Lord's hand to visit the world of astronomy with bright revelation, and to visit the world of astrology with justice and judgement.

Meditation

When will we learn we cannot escape the gaze,
Of God, our Creator and powerful Lord?

Each ray of light is His presence in His world;
Each wave of sound His vibration in our ears:
The Spirit is the common breath for all who breathe;
And life is only lived partaking in His air.

The thoughts we think connect, eventually, to Him
To all that is the mind of God, immeasurable and free:
And the feelings thought so private touch the world
Through Him who made all things to be together.

When will we learn we cannot flee the gaze,
Of Him who is our Great and Powerful Lord?
And what obtuse desire would remove from Him
The soul He made that only finds fulfilment in His love?

Bible Passage

I have had to change the expected Bible studies because of matters beyond my control. We will now study 1 Thessalonians and pick up Luke again at a time when the readings will connect directly with the Easter story.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

¹ Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace and peace to you.

² We always give thanks to God for all of you, remembering you unceasingly in our prayers, ³ keeping in mind before our God and Father your work of faith, labour of love, and perseverance of hope through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, fellow believers loved by God, that you were chosen; ⁵ since our Gospel did not come to you in words alone, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with great conviction; and you know what kind of things we did for you.

Review

Paul went to Thessalonica, the capital city of the Roman region of Macedonia, after he had been to Philippi on his second missionary journey, probably around 50AD. At the time, this was the farthest Paul had ever travelled, and he went there after some remarkable experiences (recorded in Acts 16) with his travelling companions, Silas and Timothy. Not too many years later, and for reasons we can only guess at, Paul felt it necessary to write to the Christian community at Thessalonica to encourage them, and this letter is the result. It is commonly believed that this was one of the first letters written by Paul that has come to be accepted as a part of Scripture.

The letter begins just like many of Paul's other letters, with a word of introduction from himself and his companions, and a dedication to God, followed by the greeting '*grace and peace to you*' (1:1). He then continues by commending the church at Thessalonica with words of encouragement and blessing (1:2). Every word of this opening passage powerfully bears witness to the events by which the Church was being founded in the decades after the the Holy Spirit came on the disciples at Pentecost. He commends the church for the work done to spread the Gospel (1:3), he reminds the church that they are the chosen people of God (1:4), and describes the spiritual heart of the Gospel they are called to proclaim (1:5). In all this, Paul is careful to speak of the authority of God and the saving work of Jesus Christ, without whom there was no Gospel to proclaim.

In the opening of his letter, Paul mentions that the letter is from himself, but also Timothy and Silvanus. Paul always shared his missionary work with others, and many of these fellow workers were his lifelong friends. Timothy is the famous young man to which Paul also wrote two very personal letters about leadership in the church (1 Timothy and 2 Timothy), and Silvanus is someone we know little about, except that he may be the same person as 'Silas', Paul's frequent and trusted travelling companion and fellow worker in the Gospel (Acts 15:22, 16:6f. 18:5f.). 'Silas' is a shortened form of the name 'Silvanus' in Greek.

The famous greeting '*grace and peace*' (1:1) was a powerful combination of Greek and Hebrew greetings. Paul took the traditional Israelite greeting of '*Shalom*', or '*peace*', and added to this the Greek greeting '*charis*', or '*grace*', which expressed favour and, to a certain extent, love. Together, these words are an immensely meaningful Gospel declaration and

they remain so to this day. The word 'grace' describes the supreme work of God to redeem humanity by means of His love, which is undeserved and freely given. Moreover, peace is the gift of God to the soul that has turned to Him through faith in Christ. '*Grace and peace*' is a greeting, and so much more!

Paul begins the bulk of his letter by giving an appreciation of the faith of those to whom he wrote (1:2). Today, it may seem a little 'over the top' if we were to say of anyone '*I always give thanks to God for all of you, remembering you unceasingly in my prayers ...*'. However, it is hard for us to appreciate fully the sheer excitement and energy that was generated by the early spread of the church, which is surely reflected in these words. The first converts had no churches to join; they had to do what seemed right according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and they kept in touch with each other as best they could. Churches sprung up all over the Roman world, and their unity in Christ across this vast area of the known world was a miracle in itself. The Gospel was indeed changing people's lives completely, and what the church was doing was new and extraordinary. If we think of what all this means, then perhaps these words of Paul are not as extreme as we might think. He may well have prayed 'unceasingly' for those who had been saved through his ministry, and now formed the basis of church doing God's work in the world!

In verse 3, Paul reflects this sense of the miraculous in his prayer about the '*work of faith, labour of love, and perseverance of hope ...*' of the Christians at Thessalonica. The very existence of the church was a miracle, and in his spirit, Paul and his companions must have been amazed at the answers to prayer they had witnessed. The church had grown even though they had visited only briefly (Acts 17:1f.), and this was surely no human achievement but the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit!

It is interesting that at this early stage in Paul's ministry, he was keen to put together the three great Christian virtues of faith, hope and love (1:3). They occur together in many Scriptures, and must surely have been a key part of Paul's own understanding of God's work within the human soul. In his well-known first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes one of the most famous chapters in the Bible, the hymn to God's love (1 Corinthians 13), which ends with these famous words; '*these things will last for ever, faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.*' (1 Cor 13:13)

Then, in the last two verses of our passage today (1:4,5), Paul continues to speak of the enormity of what was happening at Thessalonica. He knew very well that those who had responded to the Gospel were not casual Christians; the report in Acts 17 tells us the cost of discipleship as the Gospel was first preached. He encourages the believers by telling them that they have been '*chosen*' by God Himself (1:4), and God had worked among them '*in power ... and with great conviction*' (1:5). These early Christians had to stand firm in faith in the midst of opposition and the incredulity of those to whom they spoke; what they proclaimed and lived was radically different from what other people believed. In these difficult circumstances, they were aware of the work of the Holy Spirit amongst them producing what Paul elsewhere calls the '*fruit of the Spirit*'.

All together, the beginning of Paul's letter encourages us to be like the early Christians and follow their example of faith, just as Paul so often asked the early Christians themselves to copy his faith, and as Paul himself sought to copy Christ (1 Cor 4:17, Gal 5:25). We all respond to encouragement!

Discipleship

Application

Expectations

Sometimes, Christians today wish that they could experience something closer to the life of those early Christians. It is an understandable desire, but our task is to read about what happened, and capture for ourselves the sense of vision and purpose in which the church was born. However, although the early days of the church can never be repeated, the power of God's Spirit is no less bright and energetic today. If we are in tune with what the Holy Spirit is saying to us now then we will not envy others or their experience of practical and lively faith.

Today, there are many unique and pioneering tasks to be done now for the Kingdom of God. Rather than imagine we can recapture past glories, perhaps we should be inspired by Paul's praise of the Thessalonians to accept the challenge of the greater works of God required for our own generation.

Personal challenge

Whenever I read the beginning of one of Paul's letters, I am filled with a sense of excitement as I wonder what it must have been like to be a Christian in those early days. Surely, they must have asked themselves, 'why me, Lord?' with a sense of wonder and awe. The changes that the early Christians had to make in their lifestyle were considerable, because the moral and ethical issues involved in being a Christian were so different. Moreover, they had to learn to deal with living in the highly superstitious and religious world of the Roman Empire. It has never been easy to be a man or woman of faith, and all of us have to make choices!

Ideas for what to do

- What are the most significant moral and ethical issues that separate a Christian from other people in the world today? If you are someone who reads, then think about a novel you have read recently, and consider the difference between the Gospel and the basic morality found in that novel.
- Pray for all who do the work of the Gospel today in pioneering situations. If you know any people in this role, then do your best to pray for them regularly.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Look up in a Bible or other resource where Thessalonica is situated in Macedonia, and check out the route of Paul in Acts 16 and 17.
2. Discuss in your group the meaning of the great greeting of Paul; 'grace and peace'. What does it mean to Christians today?
3. How is the Holy Spirit at work amongst the Christians you know, and what is He doing to create the church of the future?

Final Prayer

Bless those we love this day, Lord Jesus; keep them in Your care and protect them from all evil. If there are problems between us, may we be humble enough to let you heal us; and if we need to face challenges together, may we help each other with unfaltering love and persistence. Lord Jesus, we give You the glory, for You have given us each other. AMEN