

Prayers

To God

Can you be happy in the Lord today? What prevents you? Talk to the Lord your God about the truth on your heart.

For myself

Submit your hopes and dreams to the Lord and listen to the words of love He has for you.

For others

Weekly theme: Exploration of the universe

God, our Father, You know the deepest parts of the Universe, which are as much a part of our world as a speck of dust on my hand or the land under my feet. You have created both galaxies of enormous size and the minute particle structures of the atomic world. Moreover, You will always know what physicists strive for, because You were there when the universe started, and You lead us ever closer.

Give us a sense of proportion so that we do not lose ourselves in the world's vastness or imagine ourselves more significant than we truly are within Your awesome Creation. Then, with due modesty, may we understand both our limitations and our possibilities, under Your grace and favour. **AMEN**

Meditation

Renew us, Lord Jesus Christ, Immanuel,
By Your Holy Spirit, renew us;
Restore our bodies through rest,
and strengthen them with exercise;
Replenish our minds by Your Word,
and fill them with Your knowledge and truth;
Re-ignite within us the fire of Your love,
so we may shine in this world for You;
Recover our zeal and energise our souls,
By a shot of faith, hope and love;
Replace the tiredness of our flagging hearts,
with enthusiasm and spiritual vigour;
Rescue our feelings from the grip of the enemy,
and set us free from his manipulation;

Recharge the energy of our willing spirits,
through our worship of You day and night;
Renew us, Lord Jesus Christ, Immanuel,
By Your Holy Spirit, renew us!

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you welcomed the Word in the face of severe suffering with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ and in this way, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ As a result of this, the Lord's message has been broadcast not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known; so we have no need to speak about it! ⁹ They themselves report what kind of reception you gave us, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the true and living God, ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead; Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come!

Review

Following the beginning of this letter with its introductions and greetings, Paul's words reveal that he was clearly moved by his recollection of the young Christian fellowship at Thessalonica. Here in this passage, Paul speaks with pleasure about what happened after he first came to preach the Gospel and establish the church there. He says, '*you welcomed the Word in the face of severe suffering and with ... joy ...*' (1:6). This sets the scene of the rest of the passage. Clearly, what happened at Thessalonica had become known in the region (1:8) and the good example of a few early Christians had been amplified to good effect as others heard their story.

One thing we may not immediately realise is that Thessalonica was the capital city of Macedonia (what is now northern Greece), and so it is understandable that what happened in the 'capital' of a region was influential elsewhere. Paul also tells us that that the story of the young church had also become known in Achaia. Now this region is what we now call southern Greece, and it contains important cities such as Athens and Corinth. A map of Paul's 'second missionary journey', if you have this in your Bible, will show you some of the geography. This great venture of Paul turned out to be probably the most significant missionary ever mounted, and the details of this can be found in Acts 16:1 to 18:22.

What, however, does Paul mean when he speaks of '*severe suffering*' (1:6) amongst the Christians at Thessalonica? It is worth remembering Jesus said when He first began to teach that His disciples would face persecution (Matt 5:11,12), and after Pentecost, the church in quickly learned that the coming of the Spirit did not mean that the growth of the Jerusalem church would be without cost (see Acts 3,4). Paul knew all about dire trouble and persecution himself; for example, he was stoned in Lystra on one of his earlier journeys (Acts 14:19).

Persecution happened for a number of reasons. Sometime the coal Jews were jealous of his work and did not like him to use their synagogues to preach a controversial message. But most persecution of Christians took place in the towns and cities of the Roman world, where

superstition was rife, and the preaching of Paul about the resurrection of the dead caused uproar in some cities, notably Philippi (Acts 16:19f.), and later on at Ephesus (Acts 19:23). If this was Paul's experience, then local Christians probably endured much more that has never been recorded.

Our passage today reflects the fact that when the Gospel is preached with clarity, it confronts people with God's truth, and truth requires people to make a decision whether to accept it or not. Paul rejoiced in the small number from Thessalonica who made the choice to accept faith, because their choice affected others (1:9) and this was a small example of what he knew would carry the Gospel throughout the world to change it for the better! The religions, beliefs and concerns of those who opposed the early Christians have long since been forgotten within world history, and we no longer hear of 'Gnosticism' for example, and the world of Greek and Roman Gods is studied with academic interest but not practiced! Paul's words in this passage reflect how the Kingdom of God grows; the Word is received *'in the face of severe suffering with the joy of the Holy Spirit'* (1:6), but it grows throughout the world until the return of the *'Son of God from heaven ... who reuses us from the wrath to come!'* (1:10)

We do not know the details of the all stories that spread around concerning the founding of the Thessalonians church, but the record of Acts 17:1-9 is fascinating reading. Paul and his companions were received at the local synagogue, and preached there for three Sundays in a row explaining that Jesus was the Messiah. Some Jews then stirred up opposition to Paul, and attacked the house of a believer called Jason whom they dragged before the local authorities accused of upsetting the local peace (a serious matter in the Roman world). Jason managed to pay bail and extract himself from the situation, but the local believers immediately urged Paul and Silas to leave and sent them on their way to Berea (Acts 17:10). Who knows what other acts of heroism and kindness happened?

We would love to know more, and feel a little cheated by Paul's comment here *'we have no need to speak about it!'* (1:8)! Whatever happened, it seems that when Paul went later to Athens and Corinth, the two great cities of Greece (Athens - 17:15f. And Corinth - Acts 18:1f.) he discovered that some of the people living there amongst the Jewish community had already heard about what happened in Thessalonica (1:8,9). Moreover, these stories were of kindness and generosity to God's messengers, of turning to the Gospel and rejecting pagan gods, and of enduring in the face of opposition (1:9). Paul was delighted, for as far as he was concerned, this was authentic 'Gospel'. All together, this was a true account of a genuine and lively response to God, and he rejoiced in it, as should we whenever we hear of the power of the Gospel at work.

In the last verse of this passage, Paul describes the faith of the Thessalonians as authentic, and saying that they were *'waiting for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come'* (1:10). In writing this, Paul was not just extending appreciative comments, he was indicating what was to come later on in the letter. There was indeed a reason for him to write to the Thessalonians, and it was not simply to commend them for their faith. The Thessalonians had become over concerned about what would happen when Christ returned, and Paul was worried lest some had picked up erroneous beliefs. All Christians of that day expected the Lord's return very soon, and many were concerned that it had not yet happened. For them, this was a major challenge to their faith.

Throughout his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul was intent on offering guidance about this, but he did not start by confronting the issue. He wanted the Thessalonians to know how much he appreciated their faith and their testimony. It was having a world wide impact!

Discipleship

Application

Impact

Undoubtedly, the church at Thessalonica had a big impact on the missionary ventures of Paul in the regions of Greece including Athens and Corinth, the capital and commercial centre of the old empire. Today, we try hard to make sure that we plan for success. Church programmes are put together with research into the effectiveness of methods, with detailed studies of the different peoples who are to be targeted and with training in suitable methodology. Also, young person today can gain a Phd in missiology with a lot of academic and Biblical research, much good will, and relatively little mission experience.

All of this is part of the way God's people approach their mission in today's world, and much good can come from people who have exercised carefully discipleship and researched how to communicate the Gospel. However, the key ingredient of this great venture of Paul is the Holy Spirit. At each major point in the story we find Paul prompted by the Spirit to take the right companions (Acts 15:36-40), directed unexpectedly by the Spirit (Acts 16:7) or led to take radical or surprising action (Acts 19:2f.). So here in this passage, Paul's mention of the Holy Spirit in verse 6 is essential. For the Christian, the '*joy of the Holy Spirit*' is the only antidote to persecution and suffering!

Getting things known

It is a sign of the success of the church when people begin to speak about what it does or what effect it has on its locality. Sometimes, people will gossip about what happens at a church for the wrong reasons, but it is far better for the church to be known than not known. There is no time left for us to be complacent in our world. The testimony of Christ needs to be 'out there' and not inside us, and what we do needs to be affecting the world around us. If it is not, we have become irrelevant! But because the Holy Spirit is never irrelevant to the world, it is us who have the problem, not Him!

Ideas for what to do

- Are you someone who is very private about your faith, or are you gregarious and willing to talk about it wherever you are? Pray about this, and ask the Lord to help you understand what you can do to be a witness within this world, either as an individual or as a member of your local church.
- Read through the stories in Acts 17 which surround the events we are talking about here in this passage of 1 Thessalonians. What do these scriptures teach us about the spiritual reality of witnessing to the Gospel?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do we suffer to proclaim the Gospel today? Discuss in your group how to help Christians who face persecution.
2. How far has the news of the faith of your own church travelled? Who knows about it, if anyone, in the locality?

3. What idols have people turned from today in order to serve the living God, or is Paul's comment about idols irrelevant to today?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, in those difficult times when life feels numb and love seems far away, come gently, we pray. Bring a word, a touch, a sense of Your presence; and place within us the seeds of hope and renewal. Then, with every day that passes, may we increasingly know Your graciousness and care and rejoice in the transforming power of Your love. Thank You Lord Jesus; **AMEN**