

## Prayers

### **To God**

Lord God, we offer You our hopes and dreams, our thoughts and feelings, and our faith and deeds. Align each of these with the priorities of Your Kingdom and Your eternal plan, and grant us joy and happiness as we live as Your disciples according to Your call. Thank You for calling us and using us, Lord God; may we always serve You according to Your will. AMEN

### **For myself**

*Come before the Lord in thanksgiving for His Word. How often do you read the Bible? Resolve before the Lord to spend time with the Bible as He so reveals to you.*

### **For others**

Weekly theme: Exploration of the universe

*Pray for Christian scientists who face the rejection of their beliefs by their colleagues and who do their best to do their research ethically and with social responsibility.*

## Meditation

I heard the Lord say;

‘Child, your simple faith will make you whole.’  
I said, ‘Thank You’, and strove to do my very best;  
But it was soon obvious that I would need some help.

I heard the Lord say;

‘Child, I will strengthen you if you will trust me.’  
I said, ‘Thank You’, and thought I understood this;  
But I soon found that trusting meant letting go of self.

I heard the Lord say;

‘Child, my love will invigorate your soul.’  
I said ‘Thank You’, and wondered how it could be,  
Until I turned from all my sin and wanted to be free.

I heard the Lord say;

‘Child, my patience towards you will never end.’  
I said ‘Thank You’, and more sure in His presence,  
I had faith for the future because we had walked a little.

# Bible Passage

## 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

<sup>1</sup> You yourselves know, fellow believers, that our coming to you was not in vain; <sup>2</sup> for though we suffered and were shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we took courage in our God to declare the Gospel of God to you in the midst of much opposition. <sup>3</sup> For our appeal does not arise from deceit, impure motives or trickery, <sup>4</sup> but because we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel, even as we speak it, not to please people, but to please God who approves our intentions. <sup>5</sup> As you know and as God is our witness, we did not come with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; <sup>6</sup> nor did we seek praise from people, either from you or from others, <sup>7</sup> (though we were able to make demands as apostles of Christ). Nevertheless, we were gentle among you, like a nurse caring tenderly for her own children. <sup>8</sup> We cared for you so much that we were content to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our very own selves, because you became very close to us.

## Review

As we have already found out, the founding of the church at Thessalonica, recorded in Acts 17:1-9, made a deep impression on Paul. It was the catalyst for much of the missionary work that followed in Greece, and though the story in Acts is told by Luke in a rather minimalistic way, it is fascinating. However, as the passage continues, Paul seems rather defensive in his comments about what happened, even though he is insistent that what happened was the direct result of God's divine plan (2:2,4).

The passage begins well enough, going over the bare bones of the story of what happened when the church was founded. A disturbance had been created in the city because of the preaching of Paul and Silas. Then, when a mob failed to find Paul and Silas, they set upon one of the newly converted Christians called Jason, and hauled him before the local magistrates with a few others caught up in the disturbance. These Christians of only a few days managed to escape a judicial sentence, and remarkably, on being freed, they appear to have been more concerned for the safety of Paul and Silas than themselves (Acts 17:9,10). They made sure that the evangelists were extracted from personal danger, and helped them move on their way to Berea with speed (Acts 17:10). It was a great act of courage and Christian generosity, and one that colours much of what Paul says about the Thessalonians.

Nevertheless, as we read our passage today, it seems that some had accused Paul and his companions of '*deceit, impure motives or trickery*' (2:3). Paul then justifies his work amongst the Thessalonians (2:4), and then appeals to God as his '*witness*' (2:5) when he claims the purity of his missionary work (2:5,6). How extraordinary! Where did these opponents come from? Were some people disturbing the life of the church? Had someone taught something different to the Gospel?

In most of this letter, we get no sense of any animosity towards Paul from the Thessalonian Christians, and the only section of the letter that hints at anything else is in verses 13 to 16 of chapter 2. Here, Paul sounds very cross with 'the Jews', and it is likely that Jewish preachers had come to Thessalonica to challenge Paul's teaching and modify the Gospel to give it a more Jewish flavour. Certainly, we know that this happened throughout the early decades of

the life of the church, and later on, this became a considerable problem for Paul's mission (see Galatians 3:1f. Philippians 3:2f.). It seems likely that this is an early example of the difficulties faced by the church when Jewish preachers came to offer their opinions about the faith after Paul had established a church. In general, these preachers played down Paul's message by demanding that Christians submit to the Law, and in some cases, become circumcised.

So here in this letter, Paul defends himself by referring to the authentic work of God in founding the church (2:1-2), and he claims the rights of an apostle. He does this in most of his letters (e.g. see Galatians 2), and here, he claims apostleship when he speaks of the right of one '*approved by God*' (2:4). In verse 7, Paul also says that he was '*able to make demands as apostles of Christ ...*', which sounds a bit mysterious to us now. But in the days of the early church, it was generally agreed that apostles could take financial and material support from the churches they founded, and this is what Paul was speaking about. From his comments elsewhere we know that Paul normally refused to take such benefits, preferring to work for his living as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). He did this because it meant that no one could claim Paul was acting in the interests of anyone else within the church (see 1 Cor 4). He was intent upon preaching the Gospel '*not to please people but to please God who approves our intentions*' (2:4), and not with '*flattery or with a pretext for greed*' (2:5). For Paul, this was the only way that the authentic Gospel could be preached, free from bounds of human greed and manipulation. It is a point we should remember today.

In the rest of the passage (2:7,8), it is interesting to discover that out of all the ways in which Paul could have described his work for the Gospel, he emphasises the gentleness of his manner and the importance of the fellowship of believers (2:7,8). Paul's words here about genuine Christian fellowship are some of the most endearing in his letters; he says, '*we were gentle among you like a nurse ...we shared ... our very own selves because you became very close to us*' (2:7,8). We might have thought Paul would justify himself by the correctness of his theology or the rightness of his message. But no, he says that the fruit of the Gospel in Thessalonica was found not merely in its proclamation but in fellowship and self giving pastoral care! This may seem to us to be a radically different way to promote and assess missionary work to what we otherwise expect of the early church!

True Christian fellowship is a great gift, and one that makes a tremendous difference to the work of the Gospel. Quite clearly, Paul felt comfortable with these people, and as a consequence, although the visit to Thessalonica was brief, it was productive. It is often true that people are won for Christ when they are approached with respect and challenged within open and honest discussion. They are not impressed by religious philosophy or by verbal or financial manipulation. The Gospel must be preached of course, but the safe place of honest discussion and frank sharing amongst people who trust one another in fellowship is just as important. Indeed, although the purpose of preaching is to enable the Spirit to convict people and obtain a response, many Christians gain their deepest understanding of spiritual things by talking things through with others in fellowship. All this is what lies behind Paul's otherwise strange comment at the end of our passage; '*we cared for you so much that we were content to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our very own selves ... you became very close to us*' (2:8).

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***A Gospel free from greed and human manipulation***

We cannot overestimate the importance of Christian fellowship and being close to others through shared experiences and worship, through sharing the faith, and through growing together in Christ in Bible study and prayer. When people move from one church to another today they often suggest that they are attempting to find a church with a manner and style of worship with which they are comfortable. This may well be an important issue for some, but it is my experience that most people are really seeking a fellowship that exhibits a sense of caring and of being cared for, and also a place of honesty of sharing that is open and empowering. Any church should seek to establish such a fellowship, and ensure its fellowship visibly honours the example of love, care and service given by Christ Himself.

### ***Fellowship in church***

I have known churches where there is great fellowship, and churches where there has been little. But I have had to accept that sometime I do not 'fit' somewhere because I do not feel comfortable in the fellowship that exists. This is a challenge to faith, for all God's people are called to be 'together' in Him. Fellowship works both ways, and we must care for others so that they will care for us! As I read Paul's comments here in this passage, I am challenged about the importance of contributing to the life of the church in such a way as makes fellowship truly work.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- How can you contribute more to the fellowship of your local church, and how could this help improve the witness of the church community? It may be that you have been hurt by things that have happened, but such things must be given over to the Lord and not allowed to affect the church's witness to the Gospel.
- Pray for those who feel unable to contribute much to the fellowship of the church because of time or family constraints. Pray that the Lord will help people see that the more they give, the more they will receive in fellowship.

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Discuss what elements of Christian fellowship are found within Paul's comments here to the Thessalonians.
2. In what ways does the Gospel of Jesus Christ appear to some people to be a form of 'trickery' or a 'pretext for greed'?
3. How can Christians best care for one another today and demonstrate to the wider community the benefits of the Kingdom of God?

## **Final Prayer**

Thank You, heavenly Father, for the gift of those we love and cherish. Thank You for the way that they enrich our lives, for the way that a smile can turn our day around, and for the way that we can testify to the joy of living together in peace and harmony. Sustain us in our families we pray; AMEN