

Prayers

To God

Praise the Lord for what is happening to you now, whatever that is. If you do not feel that this is relevant, then think carefully about what Jesus might say to you about your present circumstances.

For myself

What does the Lord your God require of you this day that you do not expect and too often ignore? To do some physical exercises, or some spiritual exercises? To speak up or to shut up? To write some things down or get some things done? Wait on the Lord to hear what He would have you do ...

For others

Weekly theme: Exploration of the universe

Dear Jesus, is it true that millions die each day without knowing the love You have for them? Is it true that millions go about their work each day with no other guidance for their souls than self-centredness? Is it true that millions have no hope today because no one cares for them? Is it true that You have given Your people everything they require to change the world? Then may Your people turn away from their bondages and be released by You into the service of the Gospel by which our world will be transformed! Hallelujah!

Meditation

O Lord, you told us that life would test us and be tough,
But You promised us Your presence and guidance.

So,

When the enemy finds our weaknesses and tempts us,
May we deny his authority and uphold the faith:

When the events of the day shatter our hopes and dreams,
May we stand firm in the truth and trust in Your love:

When the people we work with manipulate or hurt us,
May we stay strong in faith and give our feelings to You:

When time yields little hope for our anguished prayers,
May we accept that Your will lies beyond us for now:

When the rest for which we long lies too far in the distance.
May we refuse to give up and face everything in peace:

O Lord, your Word and Your work are fulfilled in our lives;
And in You, everything '*works together for good*'.

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

¹³ We also give constant thanks to God, because when you accepted the Word of God you heard from us, you received it not as human ideas but as God's Word at work in you who believe, and this is what it truly is. ¹⁴ Fellow believers, you have become like the churches of God in Judea who believe in Jesus Christ, because you have also suffered the same things from your fellow citizens as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ the same people who killed the Lord Jesus as well as the prophets, and drove us out through persecution. They displease God and are enemies to all people, ¹⁶ and they hinder us from speaking to the Gentiles in order to save them. They are always pushing towards the limit of their sins, but wrath has now overtaken them completely!

Review

We are now reading from the second chapter of this letter, but Paul has not yet begun to teach something specific about the Gospel! He is still reflecting on what he has heard about the church since he went there to evangelise. Nevertheless, he is grateful for how the Christians at Thessalonica received the Gospel (2:13), and he does them the credit of comparing them (2:14) with the churches of early Christianity in Judea (and Jerusalem).

Paul is not just paying compliments, however, he is encouraging the church to stand firm in the face of opposition, specifically that of Judaism. Jews had made the early Christians in Judea suffer (2:15,16), and Paul knew all about this because he had been involved himself (Acts 8:1-3). But he now urges the young Christians at Thessalonica to resist Judaism, just as he had done when he first came there (Acts 17:1-9). His argument is that the Jews had lost their way by murdering the Messiah, opposing God's followers and becoming '*enemies*' of people everywhere (2:15). Moreover, their religious demands (such as circumcision) stood in the way of the Gospel by which people were '*saved*' (2:16).

Paul pulled no punches. Whoever stood in the way of the salvation of souls was subject to the wrath of God (2:16)! His assessments of the dangers to the church of his day encourage us to be equally careful. Nothing must stand in the way of the Gospel of God!

Going Deeper

Receiving the Gospel (2:13)

In this verse, Paul commends the church for accepting the truth of the Gospel, but it has a number of fascinating features. Paul gives thanks to God for the reception of his preaching and he also praises the people who received it. Arguments have raged through the centuries about whether people have completely free choice to believe, or whether they are pre-determined to respond to the Gospel and become God's servants. Certainly, some argue that the sovereign will of God to choose His servants is more important than the free choice of individuals to follow His will.

How can we resolve this? Whilst some Scriptures speak of the predetermined election of God's people (Rom 8:29,30, Acts 4:28), most descriptions of evangelistic work in Acts and the letters of Paul both give thanks to God for the fruits of evangelism and speak freely of people's choice to respond to the Gospel. In this passage, Paul accepts both truth. He does not fail to thank God for the fruits of evangelism, which he describes as '*God's Word at work within you who believe*'. However, he gives thanks to the Thessalonians for making their own choice, '*you accepted the Word of God ... you received it not as human ideas but as God's Word at work in you who believe ...*'

This letter of Paul says that people respond to the Gospel for two reasons. First because they are given a chance to do this by God, who works through the circumstances by which someone hears the Gospel, and which happens, of course, by His direction alone. Second, some respond to the message by accepting it, and it has always been true that some also reject it by their own free choice. The church is therefore built on both God's election and the free choice of those who believe.

Suffering in the early church within Judea (2:14)

Paul, as ever, tries to help the early Christian churches perceive their connections; he presents true Christians as united in faith and practice. We must surely realise that those who came to faith in the decades after Jesus died would have been in awe of those who may have witnessed Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem. The church at Jerusalem was the mother church of Christianity, which is why in Acts 15, James the brother of Jesus, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, is called upon to make major decisions for the church. The unity of God's people was not just essential for the growth of the church, it was logical!

Here, Paul points out two connections between the church of Thessalonica and Judea (including Jerusalem). A true church is one in which Jesus Christ is central; he says, '*the churches of God ... believe in Jesus Christ*'. It is also united in suffering for the sake of the Gospel; he says, '*you have suffered the same things ...*'. When we try today to work out how to show the world that the church is united in Christ, we must first agree on the Gospel we preach. But such things proves little to our world. Instead, those who suffer for what they believe are the true authentic servants of the living God, and even today, their voice is an essential part of the Gospel witness.

The accusation against Jewish preachers (2:15)

Throughout the New Testament the accusation was made that the Jews killed God's representatives, or as Paul says here, '*killed ... the prophets*' (Matt 23:31, Luke 11:47, Acts 7:47, Rom 11:3). It was a harsh judgement, but also a difficult subject. For while there is clearly evidence that prophets were slaughtered by irreligious regimes (e.g. by Jezebel - 1 Kings 18:4,13,19), many well known prophets suffered terribly (e.g. Jeremiah - Jer 18), and many were threatened (see Amos 7). However, not many were slaughtered because they prophesied.

Nevertheless, in the first century, it was generally held that true prophets died for what they believed. Jesus played on this when he taught the famous parable of the servants in the vineyard, who slaughtered the owners representatives and then his son before being evicted (Matt 23:33f.). This belief undoubtedly helped early Christians with the persecution they later endured, a significant proportion of which came directly or indirectly from Jews.

The path of the Gospel or the path of wrath! (2:16)

The only pathway open to the evangelist is to preach the Gospel, and anything that stands in the way of this stands in the way of God's work. This is one way of summarising verse 16, which follows on well from the previous verse. But there is one very interesting phrase within

verse 16. Paul says of the Jews, *'they are always pushing towards the limit of their sins ...'*, and he adds, *'wrath has overtaken them completely!'*

Many other Scriptures reveal the meaning of God's wrath, and even explain why Paul often speaks, as here, of 'the wrath', rather than, 'God's wrath'. However, this verse succinctly puts before us the truth of the Gospel and the human condition. The choice for each soul is clear; salvation through faith in Christ found through responding to the preached Gospel, or the prospect of being caught up in the insatiable march of sin both within the world at large and in the individual soul. In a nutshell, this is the Gospel as preached by Paul.

Discipleship

Application

Suffering - an authentic mark of the effective Gospel?

Perhaps those who point the way forward for the church today are not successful churches promoting their own programmes in competition with every other church in the Western world. We should not ignore the example of churches, for example in the Middle East, who are suffering the appalling injustices of being driven from their homelands by the march of Islam and the politics of hate that dominate the region. But what example is this? We turn away in horror at the injustices heaped upon Christians in Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya and throughout North Africa and the Middle East, and Asia, feeling there is little we can do for them.

Remember, Jesus teaches and history shows that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to people like this, the poor of spirit who mourn and suffer appalling and unjust persecution. Unless we address the spiritual and cultural reasons why we do not perceive that their witness is possibly greater in this world than that generated by huge congregations of happy Western Christians, then it is we who have wandered from God and will ultimately fade away, not them.

Faith or sin?

What will a person decide when confronted with the claims of Christ? To believe or to reject and follow a pathway of sin? It is not common for evangelists to speak much about sin for fear of being labelled 'oppressive' or a 'hell fire and damnation preacher'. But the consequences of sin never just disappear, and Scripture offers us some harsh assessments of what it can mean to reject Jesus. It does not speak harshly of sinners who know no better because they have not heard of the love of God, a state which I fear describes most people in my home country of the UK. It speaks harshly of those who decide to reject the love of God and choose sin's temptations, knowing that in so doing, they reject what is good by all worldly and spiritual measures.

The Bible warns that sin entraps people. The psalms speak of this frequently (e.g. Psalm 7), Jesus warns against the dire consequences of choosing sin (Matt 12:31), and Paul speaks here of people *'pushing towards the limit of their sins'* (2:16). God's wrath is surely not His vindictive anger, but His just and heartbroken response to the rejection of His love, as demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Ideas for what to do

- Check back in your own mind to consider the choices you made when you became a Christian, even if it took many years and many 'mini' decisions. Do you feel your faith connects with those who suffer? If you find this difficult to answer, explore the plight of persecuted Christians throughout the world by using the internet, and find out what they reveal to us about God's will for our times.
- Pray for those who find it hard to accept the Gospel because it goes against everything they have been brought up to believe. It is very important that we develop an understanding of people in such circumstances so that we communicate the Gospel to them with care and good effect.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways are we united with our brothers and sisters of other churches, and how do we know we believe in the same Gospel?
2. How do you respond to what this passage says about the Jewish people?
3. How can we develop the discernment that helps us know how and when to respond when hearing the Gospel.

Final Prayer

Holy Spirit of God, we do not trust in our own strength, but in the words, the love, the compassion, the understanding, the strength and the truth of Your presence in the world. May we be agents of Your love, ready to accomplish Your will in this world. AMEN