

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Justice

Great and Mighty God, we love the world You have made; the truth of Your love which is there for all to discover, the beauty of creation in its finest detail and magnificent splendour. We also love the integrity You have placed at the heart of the natural moral world and the right and wrong which is woven into the fabric of life. May we therefore treasure the true justice which comes from You alone, and walk with You according to Your will and purpose for our lives; in Jesus' name: **AMEN.**

For myself

Pray for your possessions and ask the Lord your God to help you value them properly; not too much and enough to use them appropriately for your eternal benefit.

For others

Pray for those who study the world and whose work helps us understand our environment. Pray that good scientific work will not be overturned by political or financial interest.

Meditation

All around us, people mock religion and God's name:
But You made everything, You stand above our mockery,
And we delight to know You, whatever others may say.

All around us, people delight in evil and wickedness:
But You have given the world a good ethic, a moral heart,
And we rejoice in Your laws, because they reveal the truth!

All around us, our planet is stripped of its resources:
But You hold its certain destiny in the palm of Your hand,
And You have shown You intend to remake it in all its glory!

All around us, the enemy draws people away from God:
But even within the world You have authority over all evil,
And in Christ we may use this power of the Gospel of Hope.

All around us there appears to be trouble and strife:

But the world finds liberation through the saving work of Christ,
And we are glad to be the agents of His eternal truth and love.

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

¹⁷ As for us, fellow believers, having been taken away from you for a brief time in person but not in heart, we made every effort in our desire to see you face to face.

¹⁸ For we wanted to come to you; and certainly I, Paul, wanted to do so more than once, but Satan prevented us. ¹⁹ For what is our hope, our joy, the reason for our rejoicing before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰ Yes, you are our glory and our joy!

Review

In Luke's account of what happened at Thessalonica (Acts 17), we find that after the city disturbances caused by Jewish opposition to his preaching, the believers insisted that Paul and his companions leave for Berea for their own safety (17:9,10). However, having gained such a good response (Acts 17:3-6), it must have been a wrench to leave so quickly, and this appears to have affected Paul. Here, Paul stresses how much he wanted to return quickly, which may be because the letter was written only a little while later, perhaps while Paul was in Corinth (see Acts 18). There had been little time for him to teach the deeper things of faith, and as we know from his other exploits, especially around Ephesus (see Acts 18:1f.), Paul wanted both to disciple converts and make sure the church worked well.

Everything we have read today describes what we might call a fellowship of the heart, that spiritual friendship and common bond felt keenly by those who work together for the Kingdom. Certainly, the first apostles were at the very edge of the world from a spiritual point of view. But what had prevented Paul from returning to Thessalonica and pursuing their fruitful fellowship? Here, he accuses Satan of being an obstacle in the way of God's will, but although this is an interesting assessment he does not justify it. Instead, he quite rightly focusses on the glory of doing the work of the Kingdom, and its earthly as well as heavenly rewards (2:19,20).

Going Deeper

The fellowship of the heart (2:17)

Our passage today speaks firstly about the spiritual fellowship that is felt even though people are physically separated. Married men and women can sometimes experience this, as do God's people who share the work of the Kingdom. It can be described as a spiritual sense of oneness experienced when God's people feel that the true Gospel is indeed held in common and without personal barriers. In our passage, this fellowship is the driving force behind Paul's desire to work again in Thessalonica.

Nevertheless, some of us get on well with each other and some of us not so well, so spiritual fellowship is not always found easily. There are genuine personality differences within the church as well as outside. Within the church, however, we face the duty to accept and love

one another despite such difficulties. So when Paul writes; '*we made every effort in our desire to see you face to face ...*' (2:17), his words would have sounded hollow to his readers if they did not reflect genuine spiritual fellowship; a desire of the heart felt not just by Paul but accepted and received by the Thessalonians. No false religiosity, domination or manipulative teaching can survive where there is true spiritual fellowship and where, 'Christ is in the midst of His people'. He is the focus, not individual people, not even the famous Paul.

Paul an evangelist for the people

Paul makes it clear that he feels there is still a work to be done in Thessalonica. His missionary drive and his sense of fellowship mean that he felt there was unfinished business for the Gospel there and he wanted to get this done. For him, the Gospel was not just a matter of preaching and speaking, of writing letters and making theological statements. It was a matter of relationships and of sharing the things of God.

So often, Paul's letters give the impression of a man aloof, good at writing and telling people what to do even if they did not want to hear it (e.g. his first letter to the Corinthians)! However, if we turn to look at the personal information his letters contain, we see a quite different picture. Paul liked being with people and he spent time with them explaining the Gospel. I strongly suspect that as an evangelist, Paul was as good explaining things 'one to one' as he was preaching to a crowd. He clearly had deep friendships, and his model of leadership was like that of a companion more than a high-powered figure with a protecting entourage.

Dealing with Satan (2:18)

In this passage, Paul says that he clearly wanted to come back to Thessalonica but was prevented from doing so, but the reason for this is not what we might expect. He says, '*Satan prevented us*' (2:18). Now, whether we think God is leading us in a certain way or that Satan is preventing us from doing something is a matter of judgement, and we will eventually be proved right or wrong. So Paul's comment here is a spiritual judgement.

Paul does not often speak of Satan in his writings, but where he does he speaks about the complexities of personal circumstances. He sometimes tells the church to hand people over to Satan who have disturbed the church by false teaching or by sin (1 Cor 5:5, 1 Tim 1:20, 2 Tim 5:15), he describes Satan as one who attacks self control and discipline in Christians (1 Cor 7:5, 2 Cor 11:14). In addition, he considers Satan active in events prior to the return of Christ (1 Thess 2:9) and famously describes him as an '*angel of light*' (2 Cor 11:14).

Most significantly, Paul also refers to Satan messing around with what he considers to be his missionary schedule, and this is in 2 Cor 2:11. Paul knew he was in a battle for the soul of humanity, and so should we.

Paul's first letter?

The two Scriptures references about Satan disrupting Paul's journeys (1 Thess 2:18, 2 Cor 2:11) refer to events that take place in Acts 17 and 18. Without looking at these chapters in further detail, it is worth noting that these chapters describe the highly important decisions Paul took about how to pursue his missionary task (e.g. see Acts 17:16f., 18:6, 19:1f.). God was indeed at work in power, but Paul was also aware that Satan could disrupt the Kingdom on earth, and he did all he could to stand against this.

It is arguable that Paul decided to write to the Thessalonians in order to put a stop to what he perceived to be Satan's interference in God's work, in this way. He had been prevented from going to Thessalonica, so he decided to write to the church there, and this was the first time he had done this. Thessalonians is generally reckoned to be Paul's very first letter.

Glorying in the things of God (2:19,20)

Our passage ends with Paul glorying in the work of the Gospel. He moves beyond Satan's distractions, to give thanks for the good things God was doing in the midst of his difficulties and give thanks for the church at Thessalonica. We might think that Paul speaks rather effusively (2:19,20), but he says the same thing about other churches he founded (e.g. see 1 Cor 15:31, Phil 1:8). Paul felt deeply for all his churches, and regarded them as the evidence of his evangelistic endeavours whilst doing the Lord's work, or as he puts it here, '*what is our hope ... is it not you ... our glory and our joy*'? What shame can there be in fulfilling the call of God?

Discipleship

Application

Proud to be in the heritage of the effective Gospel!

Would that more of God's people were proud 'in the faith', that is, proud to be people who have founded churches and preached the Gospel. This is the lifeblood of the church and the Gospel as people are converted and life is changed for the better for all on earth and eventually for those who join their Lord in heaven. Would that more of God's people aspired to claim such crowns and join the heritage of those who have followed in Paul's footsteps, overcoming the obstinacy of Satan's challenge and continuing, whatever the odds, to preach the Gospel. For only the Gospel can change our world for the best.

What do do when Satan stands in the way - move with the Spirit!

I have found tremendous fellowship with colleagues and friends at times when we have been able to do the work of the Gospel and complete some of the work required of us. I have also known the sense of frustration that can come over people when we cannot conclude what needs to be done, and people feel irritated at lack of progress. Sometimes, it is necessary to observe with Paul, that 'Satan stands in the way' of some endeavour.

In such circumstances we must look for other ways of fulfilling the call placed on our lives and like Paul who turned to the medium of writing, we must perhaps turn to new media to communicate the truths revealed to us. But this is hard to do. The greatest gift is to be able to do what Paul does here, which is to have confidence that the Lord will always have a way to fulfil His work, and be ready to do whatever is required to fulfil that calling.

Ideas for what to do

- *Are there situations or people from your own past, which on reflection, cause you regret because of unfinished Christian or Gospel business? Has a door been closed on this issue by Satan, or is there a reason for you to follow through what was once so important? Pray about this and see if the Lord is leading you to look at another way of going forward in this Kingdom work.*
- *Pray against all the works of the enemy within the Christian church of which you are a part. You may not be able to see all that Satan does, but He will do His best to place barriers against the work of God's Kingdom and the Gospel.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss examples in your group of the fellowship you enjoy with other Christians in doing the work of the Gospel.
2. In what ways does Satan interfere with people's lives to prevent Gospel work being done?
3. What scope is there for founding churches today? Is it right to found churches or to work within existing churches for the extension of God's Kingdom?

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the revelation of Your love in every part of life. Forgive us when we forget that You are there in everything we do, and help us to turn to You, as many times as is necessary, so that we may never reach the end of a day without having come to You in peace, accepting Your forgiveness. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN.