

## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme: Justice*

*Pray for God to judge the world in justice and mercy. May we receive His mercy and understand His justice and its everlasting consequences.*

### For myself

Give me a heart to sing Your praises, Lord God. May my soul overflow with hymns and songs of love and worship; and as I sing, help me to remember the great truths of my Christian heritage which they convey. Make me conscious of the privilege of singing great songs such as 'How great thou art', 'Love divine', and 'Bless the Lord O my Soul (10,000 reasons)', and open my heart to sing with every fibre of my being. All praise be to You, Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God. **AMEN**

### For others

*Pray for North Africa and the unrest in that part of Africa which threatens world peace and economic stability.*

## Meditation

We believe in God:

Who does not change His mind about all the people He has made;  
Whose love is unconditional and faithful.

Who never goes back on His Word, and accepts our faith in Christ;  
Whose mercy is constant and unchangeable.

Who does not endure rebellion or sin within His perfect Kingdom,  
Whose judgement is true and unchanging.

Who hears all who call on His name and fights the enemy for us;  
Whose protection keeps all danger at bay.

Who works in miraculous power to reveal His glorious Kingdom;  
Whose strength is without equal in vigour,

Who seek to draw all things to their perfect conclusion, in His time;  
Whose purposes, we can never negotiate,

Who is constant and dependable at every point in the lives we lead  
Whose justice has decreed our mercy!

We believe in God because of Jesus, and life is now changed forever.

## Bible Passage

### **1 Thessalonians 3:1-5**

<sup>1</sup> So when we could stand this no longer, we thought it best to be left alone in Athens. <sup>2</sup> We sent Timothy, our brother and a fellow-worker with God in the Gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, <sup>3</sup> so that no-one would be disturbed by these trials. You know very well that we were destined for this. <sup>4</sup> In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we would suffer persecution, and so it turned out, as you know. <sup>5</sup> For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and our efforts might have been in vain.

## Review

The background to this is Paul's mission in Greece (Acts 17:1-10), and we already know that opposition from Jews drove him out of Thessalonica after only a few days of fruitful evangelism (Acts 17:10). But to understand today's passage, we need to read what happened as the evangelists went from Thessalonica to Berea, a town not often associated with Paul's missionary journeys! While there, the Jews were '*more receptive*' to the Gospel, and '*many of them believed*' (Acts 17:11,12), but Paul was not safe, so this is what happened next:

*<sup>13</sup> But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the Word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. <sup>14</sup> Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. <sup>15</sup> Those who guided Paul brought him as far as Athens; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him. (Act 17:13-15)*

So, after the successful short mission in Berea, Paul was taken rapidly to Athens, and the next story is that of his famous sermon in the Areopagus, the 'University' of the ancient world (Acts 17:16-34). It was an amazing Gospel opportunity! However, the work of the Gospel continued, for Silas and Timothy '*remained behind*' in Berea to encourage the church (Acts 17:14), and Timothy, despite great danger, even went back to Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:2), the source of all the trouble! Timothy is traditionally thought to have been a weak character, partly because of comments made by Paul in his letters to him (e.g. 1 Tim 5:23). His courage in returning to Thessalonica nevertheless marks him out as a man of great courage in evangelism.

## Going Deeper

### **Getting priorities right**

If we now look back at the passage, we get a sense of the crises endured by the evangelists. Paul, speaking of having been taken to Athens by guides and without his beloved travelling companions, sounds deeply troubled when he says, '*so when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left alone in Athens*' (3:1). Let us be clear, Paul was willing to sacrifice his usual sound rules of mission and remain alone for a period of time in Athens because the situation demanded that Timothy return, dangerously, to Thessalonica, and reinforce the Gospel message. It would not be until well after Paul's famous sermon in Athens and his further journeying to Corinth before he was reunited with Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5).

The point is this; if a preacher disappears at the sight of trouble, then some will question the message! Timothy's task was to reassure the Thessalonians that the Gospel was no 'flash in the pan', '*to strengthen and encourage you in faith*' (3:2). How easy it would have been for Paul to say that the Lord had called him on and he had to move on, to Athens no less! How important for the Gospel! No, he felt for the people he left behind, and wanted them to know that he cared for them; the churches at Berea and Thessalonica were as important as anywhere else, and this was why he sent Timothy back there.

### ***The sending of Timothy***

Timothy is of course an interesting figure in the story of the New Testament church. He appears in a number of places in Acts and in Paul's letters, as well as the two letters written to him by Paul. The interesting thing about what Paul says about Timothy here is that he is called '*God's fellow worker*' (3:2). It is a rather interesting comment, because early Christians could have easily understood it if Paul had said Timothy was a 'fellow-worker', for this would have meant someone with whom he worked as a companion. But this was not what Paul said; he called Timothy '*a fellow-worker with God*' (3:2); meaning something very different.

Timothy was someone with his own unique ministry, not just a companion; he had a special role in the proclamation of the Gospel! There is some scholarly debate about what was actually written here by Paul, but it makes good sense for Paul to use a phrase such as this. It means that each one who serves the Lord has a distinct place and value in the Kingdom of God, just as Jesus would have it! Paul was not simply mentoring Timothy to be like him and be a pioneering evangelist like himself. He was training Timothy to do what he was good at, which was working with newly evangelised young churches to get them on a secure footing. This analysis from our passage today is born out by Paul's letters to Timothy, which deliver exactly this message about Timothy and his ministry.

### ***Persecution***

There are times when it seems that Paul sounds almost apologetic about persecution. In almost every letter he writes, Paul expresses the view that suffering and persecution will follow the Gospel, without question, that much is clear. However, Paul seems concerned here about whether the Thessalonians will properly understand this point, possibly because he was not with them long enough to explain it adequately. He reminds them that he has sent Timothy not just to encourage them but to explain that '*no one should be disturbed by these trials*' (3:2,3). More than this, he says that he told them they would have trouble, and '*so it turned out, as you know*' (3:4).

There is some evidence from papers and documents of the first century that the early Christians were known by Jews and others not for their growth but for their lack of success, which may come as something of a surprise to us. The common understanding of the Christian church today is that the early church grew rapidly, and this may have been the case in the very early days, as recorded in Acts (Acts 2:41, 4:4), and other stories from Acts which account for the spread of the Gospel to various parts of the Roman Empire. In reality, the

Gospel seems to have made progress slowly, and persecution was undoubtedly endured by many churches. Some did not survive as well as those we know about from Paul's letters.

It may be that Paul's letter writing activity was indeed a unifying factor that encouraged Christians and held them together during the more difficult early years when congregations were relatively small and spread out across vast regions of the ancient Roman world. Certainly, if Paul was aware of this it would explain his concern that churches stood firm against persecution (3:4), concerned lest the 'tempter' (undoubtedly Satan, see 2:19) drew too many away from the true faith through trials and suffering.

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***Showing care and equitability in the church***

Even today, God's people of any church want to know that they are cared for, in crisis or in the regularity of life, and such care cannot be shown by mere words or the reciting of principles. Moreover, we need to know that each church is as important as another and deserves the support of the whole people of God. We all know very well that someone cares for us when they are willing to depart from their normal way of life and doing things, and all for us. This was what Paul did, and his letter says to the Christians at Berea and Thessalonica, 'yes I cared for you and I meant it!'

#### ***Working with others***

Paul's description of Timothy as a 'fellow worker' is a reminder to us all that we have a ministry which makes sense in God's Kingdom and is unique to us. How the church would be blessed if people were to take this message on board! In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul describes his fellow evangelist Apollos as '*a fellow worker with God*', acknowledging that he was one of God's servants just as he was. In that letter, Paul was taking the Corinthians to task for being grouped in sects around 'Apollos' and other evangelists and theological 'parties' (1 Cor 1:12-16). He makes it very clear that the different work of the evangelists and other church workers were no excuse for divisions in the church; it is one of his main points in 1 Corinthians! Would that God's people accept this point today.

#### ***The trouble with suffering!***

Unfortunately, one of the main reasons why people leave the church today is because Satan tempts them to believe that life's troubles are indeed God's fault. How many times do we all hear people say something like this, 'I can't believe in a God who does ...' quoting some instance of personal failure or disaster? Paul would say this, 'were you not warned?'

We would be advised to teach all new converts the sure fact that Satan will attempt to make God appear cruel or unreasonable in their eyes through whatever trial or persecution to which they are vulnerable. This is life, and we should know it. Thank God our Saviour is greater than all evil and whatever form it takes, as the whole the Bible testifies!

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

- What do you do to assist the work of the Gospel? This may seem a hard question to throw out, and I ask it of myself. Nevertheless, try to pray about this and answer it as honestly as you can.

- Pray for those who are called to set everything aside in order to serve God's church and live according to His will. Many throughout the world do this under conditions that are sometimes quite different to what we might understand or expect.

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

1. What trials disturb the church of God today? What can be done about this, and how do we perceive the spiritual side of these trials?
2. Who are the real servants of faith in today's church (like Timothy), and how can they be enabled to do their work well?
3. Are people afraid of persecution, and should they be afraid of persecution? How can we handle this issue today?

## **Final Prayer**

Dear Lord Jesus Christ. We pray to You each day with confidence that You are leading us and guiding us; and yet when little seems to happen, we wonder whether You are really at work. Come by Your Holy Spirit to expose our sins so that we may deal with them, and then empower us to do Your will, whatever it may be. AMEN

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