

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Justice

Pray to give thanks for the justice system in your country, and pray for those who act as judges and the interpreters of what is right and wrong

For myself

Pray about what you eat - too much - too little? Pray about when you eat - too often - not enough? Pray about why you eat - for pleasure - or for life?

For others

Lord God Almighty, You have made a truly magnificent world, and You have given us all the pleasure of living in it! Give us a heart that is willing to see its beauty and offer praise to You, and a heart that always seeks its truth and offers thanks, and always pursues its good and fights the wrong. With all Your people throughout the world, we give You praise and glory; Hallelujah! AMEN

Meditation

Let us worship the Lord our God in every possible way!

Let us sing songs of faith which will lift our hearts in joy!

Let us confess faith with enthusiasm, confidence and love;

Let us then confess sins with honest and heartfelt repentance;

Let us hear the words of grace that say; 'Your sins are forgiven'!

Let us read psalms together with generations of the faithful;

Let us pray in intercession, as we are bidden by Scripture;

Let us sing our hymns of faith, to declare what we believe;

Let us hear the Words of Scripture, proven by Your people;

Let us listen to a preacher, prophesying the eternal Word;

Let us share bread and wine in thanksgiving for our salvation;

Let us bless each other with the grace, to bind ourselves in love.

Let us not fail to meet regularly to worship the Lord our God;

Thanks be to God for the gift of worship!

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

⁶ But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always think kindly of us and that you long to see us just as we long to see you. ⁷ Therefore, fellow believers, in all our distress and affliction we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we live, because you are standing firm in the Lord! ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we feel in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and complete whatever is lacking in your faith.

Review

It seems that Timothy, having earlier been sent back to Thessalonica (3:5) by Paul, really did find him again in the middle of his writing this very letter (3:6)! He reported that everything was well, and that, *'faith and love'* (3:6) were indeed at the heart of the new church, so Paul was reassured that his efforts at Thessalonica were not in vain. This letter was not written years later, but as events unfolded, and in the excitement of truly pioneering evangelism!

Timothy found Paul in Corinth, busily occupied with *'proclaiming the Word'* (Acts 18:5); it was a work that did not stop. Paul was delighted that his fellow-worker brought encouraging news, and the whole passage positively glows with a sense of warmth and spiritual delight that God was blessing the work of His servants, *'how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we feel in the presence of our God because of you'* (3:9).

Yesterday, we read Paul's warning to the church about the need to stand firm against persecution, but in today's passage, he speaks of resting in the knowledge that he and his team have done the right thing. He says, *'now we can live'* (3:8), and expresses the earnest hope that God's will be done not just in the evangelism of the spoken word, but through true fellowship, in which he would help new disciples *'complete whatever is lacking in ... faith'* (3:10). To read this letter is to find that Paul and those he evangelised truly felt for each other with a bond of affection and love, reflecting some of the last things Jesus ever said, *'everyone will know you are my disciples by your love for one another'* (John 13:35).

Going Deeper

By Timothy's report, the church at Thessalonica was well and thriving; no numbers are mentioned but we can feel Paul's joy that the Gospel had been fruitful, and this was enough for him. He always surrounded all his evangelistic ventures in prayer, as we so often find in Paul's letters (see Rom 8:26f. Eph 3:13, Col 1:3f.), and his prayer here is that he might now be able to return to do more work with a church that had been founded in just a few dramatic days (3:10). It was an understandable desire, but one that was never fulfilled; but we can still learn a great deal from these brief verses.

Infectious joy, and the unity of God's people

We all know what it is like to receive news that makes us happy and glad, and this will affect us positively, so that in general, life feels good and holds out better prospects. This is certainly the case here, but the stakes are much higher. We cannot know for sure what Paul

and others like him felt about their evangelistic task on a day to day basis, but Scripture gives us a few glimpses.

From a couple of decades after Jesus' death (50 AD onwards), the state of the Jerusalem church was declining because Jews (and Christians) were being forced to move out, and around the whole Roman world. When those left rebelled against Rome, Jerusalem was raised to the ground (70 AD). At the time Paul wrote this letter, he knew the future of the church was not at Jerusalem (e.g. see Acts 18:6), but in the Gentile world. He was confident that future of the Gospel lay with churches and fellowships established throughout around the world. It is therefore understandable that Paul should value even the smallest church plant such as that at Thessalonica!

The importance of staying together

He was beginning to realise that although he could not be everywhere, teaching and preaching in every church, letter writing gave him the opportunity to exercise spiritual authority over many churches. It is more than likely that as he wrote, Paul was led by the Spirit to understand this radical new form of spiritual leadership, which has eventually given us the New Testament!

In addition to this, in the first half of the first century AD many churches were being founded by the apostles. However, only by staying in touch could the church develop as a significant force within the world. They had to be in contact to ensure common faith and teaching at the very least, so the heritage of apostolic faith could be passed down to us without error. We cannot underestimate the importance of this or the difficulty faced by the church's pioneers who had to both work this out and follow the Spirit's guidance. Jesus told the disciples they had to be 'one' in Him, and so after His death, they had to follow the Spirit's guidance to put this into practice in what may have seemed to them to be an impossible environment. But it was no less daunting than the prospect we face today of evangelising Muslims!

The importance of faith binding God's people together

We are used to reading what Paul says about the great theological themes of faith; for example, the letter to the Romans explains of faith from beginning to end and Galatians is the same, with the twist of explaining that Judaism is wrong! Here, however, the word 'faith' occurs in verses 6,7 and 10, and although he does not explain it theologically, we presume that he is talking about the faith that he preached in his evangelism. However, there is perhaps a little more to the word here in this passage, which we will now explore.

Paul uses the word 'faith' as part of his general comments about the life of God's people; he is delighted by their '*faith and love*' (3:6), he is encouraged that '*by your faith*' (3:7) they stand firm '*in the Lord*' (3:8), and he longs to help complete '*what is lacking in your faith*' (3:10). I am sure Paul meant in every case 'faith in Jesus Christ by which the repentant are saved'. But here, faith is a reason for the warmth happiness and of fellowship (3:6). In the very next verse (3:7), faith is the antidote to the '*distress and affliction*' of the persecution endured by early Christians (3:4). Then in the last verse (3:10), faith is what will come from sharing and fellowship; when God's people meet '*face to face*'. Moreover, as we have already spotted, Paul is not laying down the law about what faith is and what is lacking that must be made up, he is talking far more about the spiritual context in which true faith is fostered.

Discipleship

Application

Faith in Christ, through everything

I find it hard when people I know at church are uncomfortable talking about Jesus in everyday conversation, perhaps even in prayer, to bring their 'hopes' before Jesus and the Father. In addition, I find it difficult when reports written for church meetings have little or no reference to Jesus, to the Spirit's guidance or to God Himself. I have sometimes been rebuked by a comment that suggests I should not expect spiritual matters in a financial report - or something similar.

Frankly, this is to misunderstand not just faith but the incarnation of Christ, who broke down the barriers between what we think of as 'of God' and 'of the world'. If God and His Son Jesus Christ are not a part of how we do everything in the church, and not just covered by saying a brief prayer before a meeting or gathering, then something is desperately wrong. The story line here in 1 Thessalonians is easy to follow, but the underlying theme is of Christ's involvement in every part of life as God's people, and in every situation in the church.

Paul, the concerned Christian

The fact is that Paul was no 'grandstanding' preacher, speaking to people in a detached way about spiritual things of such depth people were left working it out for the rest of their lives! We learn here in this intimate letter that Paul was a man who understood life in all its peculiarities and details, naturally, according to the life of his day. He offered a common sense message calling for a response to Christ, without hesitation or deviation. He lived what he preached.

Speaking about Jesus in everyday life

Paul was happy to speak about Jesus in the course of his conversation about the practical details of life, and so should we. I was once shocked after hosting a famous Christian speaker for the day at a major event where he was booked to preach. In the course of conversation, I spoke briefly about Jesus helping me in some personal situation; I was just 'making conversation'. However, my words drew from the man a blank and quizzical stare, and he said, 'what has God got to do with that?' I wanted to say 'everything', but was rather tongue tied, for a few minutes later this man was speaking to more than a thousand people with great eloquence about the grace and mercy of God. I was just left feeling very puzzled by the whole experience, and I have had to be careful not to be dismissive towards the preacher concerned! He seemed unable to relate to the everyday application of faith.

Ideas for what to do

- Recall incidents in your recent life where you have felt like praising God for your faith and the wonderful things God has done for you. If you cannot think of such incidents, then ask the Lord what is happening in your spiritual life, and whether there is something wrong.
- Pray for those who are working across the boundaries of Christian churches and organisations to maintain the coherence of the 'Body of Christ', and if you cannot think of who this might be, ask around your church about who might fit this description. Others may be able to help!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What personal faith in Christ is expressed within this passage? How does this differ from the technical description of faith found, for example, in Romans 3:21-26?
2. Is faith just a prop when things become difficult? Why do people believe this?

3. In the life of the church today, how are we connected to other Christians throughout our region, our country, and throughout the world?

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord God, for the little things of life which make our day and give us security in what we do: the love of those who are close to us, the things we do each day for others, and what they do for us, the food we eat, the drinks we enjoy, and the conversations we share each day. May we never stop praising You for the little things that make life good. AMEN
