

Prayer

Give us a heart to sing our praises to You, Lord God. May our souls overflow with hymns and songs of love and worship; and as we sing, help us to remember the great truths of our Christian heritage which they convey. Join us together across the centuries with those who have sung 'How great thou art' and 'Love divine', and open our hearts to sing with every fibre of our being. All praise be to You, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Faith's journey

Pray for the Church whilst, in many places, it seeks to be more effective in its work for the Kingdom of God. Pray for believers to work together with purpose and in unity

On-going prayers

- *Pray for celebrities who are in the public eye at the moment*
- *Give thanks to God the joy and beauty of gardens and flowers*
- *Pray for young couples who are striving to bear children*

Meditation

You, O Lord, do not change Your mind about all the people You have made;
Your love does not change.

You will never go back on Your Word, and You accept us through Jesus Christ;
Your mercy does not change.

You do not accept rebellion and sin, for Your Kingdom is a place of perfection;
Your judgement does not change.

You act against the enemy and respond to those who call on Your name;
Your protection does not change.

You work in miraculous power to show the truth about Your Kingdom;
Your power does not change,

You always seek to draw all things to their perfect conclusion, in Your time;
Your purposes do not change,

Your character, Lord God, is unchanging; but when we first turn to You in faith,
Your justice changes to mercy!

You accept us because of Jesus, and our lives are changed forever.

Bible Study - 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

¹ So when we could stand this no longer, we thought it best to be left alone in Athens. ² We sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow-worker in the Gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³ so that no-one would be disturbed by these trials. You know very well that we were destined for this. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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

Our studies in 1 Thessalonians continue to follow closely the story found in Acts 17:1-15, in which Paul moved quickly from Thessalonica to Berea under pressure from Jews (17:10). Then, when Jews came from Thessalonica to Berea to stir up trouble for the Gospel again, Paul went on to Athens (Acts 17:15), where his travels and evangelism took an unexpected turn! However, as far as this passage is concerned, chapter 3 begins with some reflections on the personal decisions taken by Paul at that time. The central part of the text comments on persecution, and then indicates the reasons why Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to 'strengthen and encourage ... in the faith' (3:2), and to find out whether his efforts had been successful or 'in vain' (3:5).

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). This is a rather controversial comment, because as far as many early Christians were concerned, someone could be a 'fellow-worker' in the sense of an earthly companion, but a fellow worker 'with God' was another matter. The Greek word used here placed 'fellow workers' on the same level, so how could someone be described as God's fellow worker? We know this was a problem to people in the days of the early church, because the different copies of Paul's letter available to us today have a variety of different words written at this point; some have 'fellow worker, with God', or 'God's servant ...' or simply 'fellow worker'. With so much evidence of tampering with the original text, most scholars agree that this would not have happened unless Paul had in fact written 'God's fellow worker' in the first place!

Today, we do not feel that such intricacies of language are a barrier to understanding what Paul says here. In fact, Paul talks about himself and Apollos as 'God's fellow workers' using exactly the same phrase in 1 Corinthians 3:9! It seems that Paul himself had no difficulty with the idea that evangelists worked together with God in the delivery of the Gospel. Though we can imagine from what we do know of Paul that if asked whether the evangelist could be placed on the same level as God Himself, he would deride the suggestion, or the idea that he might have implied this. For Paul, it was a privilege to work together with God, as it was for Apollos and Timothy and all other Gospel workers!

Persecution

There are times when it seems that Paul sounds almost apologetic about persecution. In almost every letter he wrote, Paul expressed the view that suffering and persecution would follow the Gospel without question, but here, Paul seems concerned about whether the Thessalonians properly understood what he said to them about possible trials. He expressly says that he sent Timothy 'to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these trials' (3:2,3), and adds comments about what he believed he said to the Thessalonians about persecution (3:4).

There is some evidence in other papers and documents that Jews and others derided the early Christians for their lack of success. Although the common understanding of the Christian church today is that the early church was a great success and grew rapidly, the only evidence for this is the figures mentioned in Acts (Acts 2:41, 4:4), and other stories in Acts which account for the spread of the Gospel in parts of the Roman Empire. In reality, there will have been places where the Gospel made progress slowly, and undoubtedly, there was a price for the persecution endured by many churches, and some did not survive as well as those we know about from Paul's letters. A case can be made to argue that Paul's letter writing activity was an essential unifying factor that encouraged Christians and

held them together during the more difficult early years when congregations were small. This could well explain why Paul spoke about persecution (3:4), concerned lest the 'tempter' (undoubtedly Satan, see 2:19) drew too many away from faith through trials.

Unfortunately, it is true today that one of the main reasons why people leave the church today is because Satan tempts them to believe that the trouble they experience is God's fault. How many times do we all hear people say 'I can't believe in a God who does ...' where someone quotes a difficulty, personal failure or disaster that has befallen someone who is a Christian? Paul would say 'were you not warned?' and 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 must be aware of it. Thank God our Saviour is greater, as the whole of the Bible testifies!

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?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I would love to be able to look into the history of the early church and look at the actual figures of how the church grew, where and when. There are hints in some documents that some churches sprang up and disappeared, having become embroiled in heresies and because they had no means of knowing better than their own teachers taught them! What I do know is that there are many things we do know about the church as it developed in the latter years of the first century and into the next, and it is all worth studying so that we do not make the same mistakes again in our evangelism and church growth strategies.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *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 say 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.*

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