

Footprint Bible Studies

1 and 2 Thessalonians

A 6 part Bible Study

John Birch

Walking together through Scripture

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Study One - Evangelism in the Church

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for the opportunity of meeting around your word, and allowing it to speak to our hearts. Be with us in our thinking and in our discussion, and in the fellowship that we enjoy. Amen

Comment

Thessalonica was destined to be an important town, lying as it does on a major trade route between Rome and Asia and with a mixed population including many Jewish traders. Today it is a popular tourist resort, and capital of the region of Central Macedonia in Greece (and also known as Thessaloniki).

Paul arrived around AD 49 after his initial plans to go to Asia were thwarted by the Holy Spirit (Acts 16:6-10) and he was led, via a vision, to minister to the people of Macedonia. Once there, Paul followed his normal practice of preaching to the Jews in their synagogue, hoping that through them a new church would be established in Thessalonica that would spread throughout the region. But it was fringe group of believers, known as the 'God-fearers' who proved more fruitful, and this caused a deep rift between Paul and the Jewish community who objected to the idea that God would accept these 'God-fearers' without first going through the ritual of circumcision. This disagreement eventually led to Paul leaving for Berea, so he was actually not in Thessalonica very long at all.

Paul gives a very positive 'thumbs-up' to the believers, and we discover a little about the way in which the message was received, not only by word, but also by deed and through power (the Spirit). The Thessalonians did not simply hear the gospel through human speech, but lived it through their lives and in the display of spiritual gifts - a little like Jesus' disciples being sent out in Matthew 10 to live by faith, heal the sick, cast out demons and preach the word.

We also find three key words within Paul's spiritual vocabulary, namely faith, hope and love (see also the end of 1 Corinthians 13) which are understood to be 'active' words.

The apostles met much opposition to their ministry. The ancient world was full of wandering 'holy men' who peddled their messages and were known to be greedy and unscrupulous. Paul was accused of being one of these, and in Chapter 2 he seeks to counter this lie, talking of the team's methods of evangelism as being more akin to a 'nursing mother caring for her children'.

Discuss

What, if anything, has been lost in the decline of letter writing, and the increasing use of email and instant messaging?

Key Verse

'We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.'

(1 Thessalonians 1:3)

Discussion

Q1 This is a young church and there have been difficulties along the way, but what do the first 4 verses of the passage tell us about how it is getting along?

Q2 Look at the words Paul uses (v.1) to describe this newly established Christian church in his greeting. What might be the reason for this extended description?

Q3 What do you think is the 'work produced by faith' mentioned in verse 3?

Q4 What do verses 4-7 tell us about the reception a growing Christian community was facing so soon after its formation?

Think about the current opposition that Christianity faces in the West, more often from atheists than other faith groups - might that cause believers problems in the future?

Q5 Can you imagine living at a time when the Emperor was called a 'son of the god', and being worshipped as such?

How difficult, or dangerous, might it be to establish a community that said there was only one true Son of God, demonstrated by his rising from the dead, and what does that tell us about the believers in Thessalonica?

Q6 Who were your role models as you were growing up, and what qualities did you admire in their lives?

Q7 Turn to chapter 2 and verses 1-8. Can you imagine what the reaction today would be to a trio of strangers entering your town and trying to convince the population to totally rethink their whole religious (or non-religious) lives. What would be the likely reactions on social media and in local newspapers?

Q8 From what we know of Paul, and knowing his background pre-conversion, we might think him to be quite a dominant personality, certainly highly educated and not one to be trifled with. It may be that he'd previously been accused of being something of a dictator, and hence the comment in chapter 2, verse 7. What are the qualities of a caring mother that might suit the persona of a Christian leader?

Q9 The Church in parts of the world today suffers persecution, and believers daily put their lives at risk by refusing to deny their faith in order to save their lives. What do you learn of the growth of the early Church from chapter 2 and verses 14-16?

Q10 The great hymn, 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' includes the line, 'Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod'. If you take a step back and look at the bigger picture of how Christianity has spread over the earth, and then take your magnifying glass back to those early Christians in Thessalonica, what impression are you left with?

Takeaway

Are there opportunities locally to get involved in Christian outreach and community projects, such as the local Foodbank or Street Pastors?

Prayer

Pray for all those who are considering or starting to establish a new Church plant, putting a Christian presence into an area which does not currently have one that is active.

‘The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose.’

(C. S. Lewis)

‘Evangelism is not an option for the Christian life.’

(Luis Palau)

‘The church as a whole has strayed quite far from biblical evangelism; that is, sharing the Gospel in the way that Jesus did, the way the Apostle Paul did, and the rest of the disciples and prophets in Scripture.’

(Kirk Cameron)

‘Spend more time in study and prayer. That’s the secret of successful evangelism.’

(Billy Graham)

‘People who don’t believe in missions have not read the New Testament. Right from the beginning Jesus said the field is the world. The early church took Him at His word and went East, West, North and South.’

(J. Howard Edington)

‘The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed’

(Hudson Taylor)

Study Two - Paul's love for the Church

Prayer Speak to us, gracious Lord, through the words of Scripture and our discussion of them, that we might inscribe your truths upon our hearts and learn from them. We ask this through your dear Son Jesus Christ. Amen

Comment Establishing a new Church in fresh pastures can always throw up difficulties that are, if not totally unexpected, then certainly frustrating. It can be legal technicalities, misunderstandings with local communities or disagreements between team members that conspire to delay or lessen the impact of the work that is being undertaken, and lower the spirits of the team.

The work to establish the new Thessalonian Church was a case in point, with Paul having to make a hasty exit after upsetting the local Jewish population. According to Acts 17:2 Paul was only in Thessalonica long enough to preach on three Sabbaths, so can't have been there much more than three weeks, but in that time had great success in terms of people responding to his words. However, this was at quite a cost as Paul's life is now in danger because of those he has upset!

Having talked about how the apostles were like 'caring mothers' to the believers, Paul now finds himself forced, for his own safety, into journeying south to Berea, Athens and then Corinth. But he is always looking for the opportunity to go north again to see his Thessalonian friends - these new children in the faith who Paul loved so much - and being thwarted every time as 'Satan got in the way.'

It is quite possible that death-threats followed Paul south, and made it safer for him to work elsewhere until the situation in Greece calmed down. His enemies might even have suggested that Paul had a police record and was nothing less than a criminal on the run, based upon news from Philippi (Acts 16:16-40). If you want a feel for the opposition that there was to evangelism among the Jews, then turn to Acts 17:5, 13 and particularly Acts 18:5,6 where we can feel Paul's frustration keenly in his decision to stop evangelising among the Jews, and instead direct his efforts toward the more receptive Gentiles.

The thought in Paul's mind might well have been that three weeks was such a short time in Thessalonica in which to begin something that would not only last, but spread and blossom. No wonder he was so concerned to receive news from the 'front line' and why, when Timothy joins him in Athens, he sends him back to Thessalonica to get the necessary update, which fortunately was good!

Discuss

Have you ever signed your name to a petition demanding change to local or national policy? What was the point at which you felt you had to say or do something, and on reflection was that because of how it would affect you, or the community in general?

Key Verse

'Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith.'

(1 Thessalonians 3:7)

Discussion

Q1 Paul hated being away from the believers. Have you spent a long time away from someone you love - maybe a partner working away from home, or children going off to university?

What were the feelings that went through your mind?

Q2 Paul sees his thwarted travel plans as being the work of Satan (chapter 2:18). That's probably not a word that's used much in similar situations these day, but is that a good thing?

Are we right to dismiss the possibility of dark forces at work in the world?

Q3 What does verse 19 of chapter 2 say about Paul's attitude to the work he was doing?

Q4 Jesus' instruction to his disciples in Matthew 28 was to go out and make disciples of all nations. Paul's words in chapter 2:19 suggest this was certainly in his mind. The crown he speaks of is the victor's crown in Greek games. Does the Church today still fulfil Jesus' Great Commission, and if not why might that be?

Q5 Chapter 2 and verses 2-5 remind us that Paul was part of a team. What was Timothy's role?

Q6 What do you think worried Paul about the Thessalonian Church at that time, full as it was of enthusiastic new converts?

Q7 How important is encouragement in any sphere of life and what difference can it make to outcomes?

Do you have any personal examples?

Q8 Does the Church underestimate the power of prayer, and how confident are you that it is effective (chapter 3:10)?

Tom Wright in his commentary compares learning to pray like learning a musical instrument - it takes time and practice, starting with simple words and short prayers, as you might learn to play nursery rhymes on the piano, before moving slowly over time toward more complex pieces. Does this analogy help, and if it does how could you use it in your church situation?

Q9 In chapter 3:11-14 we discover the focus of Paul's thoughts in this short prayer. What words stand out as you read it, and are they ones we have come across before in these opening chapters?

Q10 Paul's prayer also looks forward to the Second Coming of Christ, in his hope that the believers will not be found lacking in faith and holiness. We might not have this always in our thoughts, but consider the familiar Lord's Prayer and how its words might be seen in the same light.

Takeaway

It's easy for a church to feel a little isolated from God's bigger picture and what is happening in the rest of the world. Some churches have 'twinned' with others, maybe across the country or further afield, and keep in touch to find out what is going on, what the prayer needs are and, if this is a church in the developing world, to maybe offer help via fundraising.

Prayer

Pray for the various churches in your town, of all denominations, and their faithful congregations that meet regularly for worship.

'The Christian church in the U.S. is still strong numerically, but it has lost its decisive influence both in American public life and in American culture as a whole, especially in the major elite institutions of society.'

(Os Guinness)

'A greater persecution shall befall the Christian Church than has ever been in Africa, and will last until the year 1792, when there will be a revision of centuries.'

(Nostradamus)

'The Church is not a gallery for the better exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones.'

(Henry Ward Beecher)

'The story goes that a public sinner was excommunicated and forbidden entry to the church. He took his woes to God. "They won't let me in, Lord, because I am a sinner." "What are you complaining about?" said God. "They won't let Me in either."

(Brennan Manning)

'Because I was suspicious of the traditional Christian church, I tended to tar them all with the same brush. That was a mistake, because there are righteous people working in a whole rainbow of belief systems - from Hasidic Jews to right-wing Bible Belters to charismatic Catholics.'

(Bono)

'I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.'

(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Study Three - Living to please God

Prayer Gracious God, we thank you for the opportunity to read, discuss and learn from Scripture's words, and ask that you will open our hearts and minds to all that you would have us understand from the wisdom of your servant Paul. Amen

Comment Paul has a bit of a reputation when it comes to love and sex, at least in the views he expresses, so as we find ourselves at Chapter 4, here's Paul back on what appears to us to be a familiar theme. In asking why that is, it is good to examine a little the context of life within Thessalonica.

Demosthenes (384-322BC) wrote: 'We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.'

The Greeks generally enjoyed a lifestyle that was both promiscuous and permissive, where pagan temples often doubled up as brothels and sexual practices of all sorts were tolerated. The believers in Thessalonica had come out of such a society. Even among the Jewish population, marriage does not seem to have been regarded as highly as it was intended by God. Divorce had become relatively easy, not confined simply to the allowable charges of adultery or 'a matter of shame'. Liberal Rabbis used the phrase 'a matter of shame' very loosely (for example, talking with men in the street, or going into town with head uncovered) as reasonable grounds for the dissolution of a marriage.

In Rome it was no better, with the writer Seneca telling us, 'Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married'. It is reported that some of the fashionable ladies identified the passing years by the names of their husbands, and the Roan poet Juvenal talks of one woman having eight husbands in five years.

It might be worth considering how attitudes to sexuality when Paul was writing compare to those in today's society, where sexuality and sexual freedom continue to be important topics within the Church. We do not have to go back too far in our own history to find a society which conveniently looked the other way when a husband took a mistress, and yet female infidelity could lead to a lifetime of disgrace.

We have to look at Paul's teaching in the light of the society into which he was introducing Christian concepts of holiness and purity. It was very challenging teaching and certain to find opposition - self-control within marriage, no cheating on each other, honouring the marriage vows.

Discuss

It is generally thought that there was a sexual revolution in the West during the 1960s and 1970s. Is 'revolution' the right word, and what do you consider to be the positives and negatives of this movement?

Key Verse

'For God did not call us to be impure but to live a holy life.'

(1 Thessalonians 4:7)

Discussion

Q1 Paul's has had an encouraging report from Timothy (Chapter 3:6ff). If verse one of chapter four was summed up in a short comment within an end of term report, what would it say?

Q2 Thinking about your own experience of Church life, can you think of aspects that might please God (v1) and perhaps even one or two that might not?

Q3 We find the word 'Holy' in verse 4 in relation to how the human body is used and respected. How big an ask is that of believers?

Q4 Children growing up today are likely, whilst still very young, to being exposed to pornographic images, often via mobile devices given by their parents. This can be via peer pressure and the sharing of images, or through use of social media such as Twitter. How serious a problem is this in your opinion, and what could the Church do to raise awareness?

Q5 Barclay in his commentary quotes an unnamed economist as saying, 'Contraception is the most important event since the discovery of fire.' Is that a fair comment, or too simplistic?

Q6 There was an obvious clash between the prevailing Greek and Roman cultures and that of God's kingdom when it came to relationships and particularly marriage. Those living in a multicultural community will know of times when friction is caused because of differences in beliefs and customs. Was Paul right in taking a hard line here, or should he have taken a softer approach so as not cause disagreement?

Q7 The Church is naturally looking to bring a message that is both challenging and attractive to those who are searching for spiritual answers. Paul in Romans 12 says, 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world'. Jesus' own words suggest that we should be 'in' the world, but not 'of' it. The Church has at times been accused of trying to close the gap to increase its popularity, but how could this sense of 'being different' be seen as a positive and indeed attractive lifestyle choice to those on a spiritual journey?

Q8 Verse 9 talks of 'Brotherly love' or 'love for one another' and there was an expectation here that 'love' would have a practical expression in a generosity of giving that included self as well as money. This is seen with the early believers in Acts 2:44,45. The emphasis was on supporting the Christian 'family' and extending this care into the community. How might the Church today better reflect this approach, and what examples are there locally of this happening?

Q9 Some of the Thessalonians had given up work to eagerly await the Second Coming. In their defence, the Greeks lived for leisure and there was an underlying belief that manual work was degrading, better done by slaves where possible. In contrast, Hebrew thinking saw work as a part of worship and service to God (verse 11).

How does your attitude to work affect your enthusiasm for getting up in a morning and beginning the morning commute?

Q10 How might Paul's encouragement in verses 9-12 impact on the mission of the Church in a city that was a major financial and business centre and trading port, with a large mixed population, and could it have the same effect today?

Takeaway

Is there anything your church can do to help families, maybe by hosting a Mother and Toddler group, or one where fathers can bring youngsters and enjoy a bit of fellowship (these are sometimes called 'Who Let The Dads Out?' - www.wholetthedadsout.org.uk)?

Prayer

Pray for all those in your community whose work involves the help and support of families.

'Revenge, lust, ambition, pride, and self-will are too often exalted as the gods of man's idolatry; while holiness, peace, contentment, and humility are viewed as unworthy of a serious thought.'

(Charles Spurgeon)

'The desert has its holiness of silence, the crowd its holiness of conversation.'

(Walter Elliot)

'If a country is to be corruption free and become a nation of beautiful minds, I strongly feel there are three key societal members who can make a difference. They are the father, the mother and the teacher.'

(A. P. J. Abdul Kalam)

'Together with a culture of work, there must be a culture of leisure as gratification. To put it another way: people who work must take the time to relax, to be with their families, to enjoy themselves, read, listen to music, play a sport.'

(Pope Francis)

'This, and this alone, is Christianity, a universal holiness in every part of life, a heavenly wisdom in all our actions, not conforming to the spirit and temper of the world but turning all worldly enjoyments into means of piety and devotion to God.'

(William Law)

'About the idea of a clash between cultures, between civilisations, I don't believe in it. It's something some political leaders tried to use, and that the media tried and are still trying to sell us, in order to simplify the world and their work.'

(Paulo Coelho)

Study Four - The Coming of the Lord

Prayer

Be with us Lord, as we meet together to read, discuss and learn from your Word. Open our eyes, hearts and minds, that in our meeting together we might also grow as a fellowship, one with each other and with you. Amen

Comment

Hope comes in many shapes and forms. For those whose crops are wilting under a blazing summer sun, it is a hope for the rains to come. For those who are homeless, it is hope for a roof over their head when the icy winds of winter start blowing. For the poor it is a hope that their daily struggle to survive might be eased even slightly, and for the sick and broken it is to be made whole.

There are also of course some whose hopes might seem more trivial; that a risky investment on the stock market might prove lucrative, profit forecasts show an increase, the expensive holiday be restful. We are all different and that is reflected in our hopes for both the immediate and longer term.

Paul discovered that there was a need to teach the Thessalonians about hope, because of the prevailing attitude to death. Their particular worry was when members of their church died, they might miss out on the celebration of Christ's return. The Greek poet Theocrates had written: 'There is hope for those who are alive, but those who have died are without hope.' A Greek tombstone reads: 'I was not, I became, I am not, I care not.'

What the Thessalonians needed to hold onto was the Christian hope that death is not the end. Paul's task is to try and explain this, which he does by picking up on a creedal statement, that 'Jesus died and rose again' and expands this to present a picture to his readers. Paul's apocryphal language resembles that of the Book of Revelation. Those who have lived in Christ, even if they die, are still in Christ and will rise with Christ. It is a relationship that cannot be broken.

Paul adds the shout of the archangel and God's trumpet call to emphasise the joy of that moment!

Discuss

What is the difference between our hopes and prayers in relation to our daily lives?

Key Verse

'Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.'

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Discussion

Q1 Read chapter 4:13 again and think about Paul's words. Do you find them challenging the way that you look at the death of loved ones, and others whose funerals you have attended?

Q2 Paul uses the language of pictures, quite a collection in fact, to encourage the believers in the hope of Christ's Second Coming. Do you find these pictures helpful?

Q3 Chapter 4:17 has been used as the premise for sixteen books and three movies (The 'Left Behind' series) which see people in a moment of time, 'the rapture', being snatched out of homes, jobs, streets, cars and planes, leaving their families, friends and the rest of humanity behind. How does this concept (which has been very popular, the books alone selling over 65 million copies) fit in with your own faith?

Q4 In chapter 5, verse 5, Paul tells his readers that they are 'children of the light, children of the day!' How do you see this relating to the Jewish belief in the 'present age' and the 'age to come', one incurably bad, the other a golden age of God?

Q5 Read Ephesians 6:10-20. In our reading from Thessalonians at 5:8-11 Paul just mentions two defensive pieces of equipment, the helmet and breastplate, to defend against whatever the world throws at believers. Are faith, love and hope enough in this world?

Q6 For those who have worked in any organisation, big or small, what are the things that make it a good and happy place in which to be employed?

Q7 What might Paul mean in chapter 5:19 by warning the believers; ‘Do not put out the Spirit’s fire’?

Q8 Paul tells his readers to ‘Test everything’ in relation to what is said. If a sermon or talk leaves you feeling a little unsure about what was said, do you ever do anything to reassure yourself that the speaker is actually right?

What could you do, or encourage others in the fellowship to do?

Q9 In chapter 5:16-18, Paul gives us what could be thought of as a blueprint for the life of the Church - filled with joy, prayerful and thankful. How would you see such a church impacting within a community?

Q10 One of the greatest promises in the Bible could be said to be in Chapter 5 and verse 24, which tells us that ‘The one who calls you is faithful’. How would you say the faithfulness of God is seen within the Bible?

Takeaway

This Sunday, note the passage that the Preacher is using, and later on in the day look at a couple of online commentaries (try BibleGateway.com) if you don't have the books, to see what they have to say about it.

Prayer

Pray for those who are mourning, and for the Vicars, Pastors and Presbyters who have the task of ministering to the newly bereaved, their families and friends.

‘The second coming of Christ will be so revolutionary that it will change every aspect of life on this planet. Disease will be eliminated. Death will be abolished. War will be eradicated. Nature will be transformed.’

(Billy Graham)

‘We are very near the final climactic events that end with the Second Coming of Christ.’

(Hal Lindsey)

‘We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.’

(Plato)

‘It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.’

(Aristotle Onassis)

‘At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.’

(Albert Schweitzer)

‘I’d like to see the Second Coming in every one of us. That we all be Jesus. That we all embody that consciousness.’

(Jane Siberry)

Study Five - The end is not yet!

Prayer

Thank you, Gracious God, that in freedom we can meet and enjoy fellowship together around the reading and understanding of Scripture, entering in some small way into the world of Paul and the believers in Thessalonica, and from it look at our own lives, faith and experience, and how we might grow as a loving community. Amen

Comment

Paul's second letter to the believers at Thessalonica was written just a few months after the first one, but has a colder tone than its predecessor, perhaps reflecting Paul's annoyance at hearing news of false rumours spreading in his name, and being unable at this point to be there in person to set the matter straight. Paul's anger and frustration at this incident comes out in the language he uses, which even today can raise an eyebrow!

Of course, anyone who has begun a new project expects that at some point there will be unforeseen setbacks, because it is difficult to take into account all the possible outcomes of any actions we take. It is unlikely that Paul would have anticipated he would have so little time in Thessalonica before leaving in a hurry following opposition from the Jews, among whom he was hoping would come converts and a church that would reach out to the Gentiles.

Fortunately, there were a number of Gentiles known as 'God-fearers' in the area - those interested in Judaism, though not circumcised, who felt that the God of the Jews could be the one true God. Paul and his team could work with people such as this, and they did indeed prove fruitful.

The Church was growing, the people strong, but the opposition that dogged Paul wherever he went was now directed at these new believers, and by rumour and lies was beginning to undermine Paul's teaching, particularly on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. And yet, despite opposition, the word that comes to Paul is that the faith of the believers is holding firm, so he is careful to begin his letter on a positive note, giving thanks for their perseverance and demonstrable faith, shown through their lives and worship.

Discuss

How well do you deal with opposition if it's your idea that's being opposed?

What would you say are the good and bad ways of handling such situations within a group of people, particularly when opinions are strongly held?

Key Verse

'With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.'

(2Thessalonians 1:11)

Discussion

Q1

Paul starts this letter with a reminder to himself that he ought always to thank God for the believers in Thessalonica. Are we sometimes like the child who loves to receive a gift through the post but needs a constant reminder about writing a letter of thanks? Think about your own church situation and make a list of some things (big or small) that are encouraging to the fellowship, and for which you feel you ought to thank God.

Q2

Think of those two words, 'Grace' and 'Peace' which Paul uses to bless the believers. What do they mean to you in the context of the life of a Christian?

Q3

Paul has some strong words to say to the believers, but finds three marks of a vibrant Church which he highlights in chapter 1:3,4. What kind of picture does this paint of the Thessalonian Church?

Q4

Paul goes on from verse 5 to say that the state of the church in Thessalonica is proof of the justice and judgement that will come alongside God's kingdom. What do you think Paul means?

Q5

It can be a familiar cry for those who are suffering; 'Life is so unfair!' Do verse 6 and the first half of verse 7 hold some comfort for those who think likewise? (nb. The image of blazing fire in 7b is a traditional Old Testament picture of God's judgement)

Q6 Paul has talked about the Second Coming of Christ in his first letter to the Thessalonians, but in returning to the theme here he uses much more strident language and apocalyptic imagery. Read verses 6-9 which talks of God's justice. What is your reaction to this passage, and how would you explain God's justice to a non-believing friend who asks?

Q7 After the shock of Paul's language regarding the fate of those who have opposed the Church, we have in chapter 1:9b-12 a rather more uplifting image for the believers. What does the image in verses 9b and 10 tell us - about the Thessalonian Church and indeed believers throughout history?

Q8 Moving on to chapter 2 verse 4, Paul might be thinking of someone like the emperor Gaius Caligula who had ordered a statue of himself to be placed in the Temple. Roman emperors were starting to believe themselves to be gods. What has history taught us about such people?

Q9 How easy is it to be blinded by the views of one person, or perhaps a few, who have seemingly created a world within which they believe half-truths and lies which seem so plausible to us because they are spoken with such sincerity? Can this be true within the established Church, and could Paul be alluding to it in chapter 2 verse 11?

Q10 These verses are, in a sense, all about the difference between those who are for, and those who are opposed, or indifferent to God. How do they leave you feeling?

Takeaway

If you have internet access, do a search for art on 'The Last Judgement' and see how some of the great artists have tried to depict the Biblical language of the Second Coming of Christ.

Prayer

Pray for the Christians in the world who cannot meet openly because of opposition from the authorities or those of other faiths (In North Korea it has been estimated that between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians are being held in detention camps. In the world more generally the charity Open Doors believes that there may be up to 100 million Christians who face persecution of some kind).

'To have faith is to trust yourself to the water. When you swim you don't grab hold of the water, because if you do you will sink and drown. Instead you relax, and float.'

(Alan Watts)

'What gives me the most hope every day is God's grace; knowing that his grace is going to give me the strength for whatever I face, knowing that nothing is a surprise to God.'

(Rick Warren)

'Happiness cannot be traveled to, owned, earned, worn or consumed. Happiness is the spiritual experience of living every minute with love, grace, and gratitude.'

(Denis Waitley)

'I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.'

(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

'When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace.'

(Jimi Hendrix)

'My trust in God flows out of the experience of his loving me, day in and day out, whether the day is stormy or fair, whether I'm sick or in good health, whether I'm in a state of grace or disgrace. He comes to me where I live and loves me as I am.'

(Brennan Manning)

Study Six - A request and a warning

Prayer Gracious Lord, thank you for missionaries throughout the ages who brought your gospel message to these lands, and sowed the seeds of which we are fruit. As we think about Paul and the believers at Thessalonica, may we also consider our part in the continuing missionary activity of making disciples of all nations. Amen

Comment Prayer seems to be a common theme in Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians. We might be expecting him to pray for them, but there's also the realisation that however great in stature Paul and the others might be at this time, they also felt a real need to know they had the prayer support of new believers in the churches established through their various missionary activities.

Bear in mind also that these were probably the first of Paul's letters to the churches that he had founded, written about AD 51 and very close to the beginning of his important work. Paul had a world to reach with the gospel message, and must have known that time, and the world, could be against him. We might be daunted at the prospect of keeping in touch with what is happening weekly within a missionary organisation, even equipped with modern technology. Think for a moment about Paul and his team, often separated for long periods, relying on messengers and the occasional letter to keep on top of what was happening within a growing number of fledgling churches.

Many churches today support missionary organisations, both great and small, and a number also have contacts with specific workers based in countries a long way from home, receiving updates from time to time about what is going on, along with requests for prayer. But of course it is not only at infrequent intervals that these missionaries need prayer support. Like Paul they will face unforeseen issues and problems on a weekly basis, and be relying daily on God's strength and protection.

So within the Christian community, at home and further afield, prayer is a dynamic element within our faith. We pray for each other. We pray for the world. We pray for our faith leaders and they pray for us. It could be thought of perhaps as our spiritual support network, remembering of course that at the centre of this network is God!

Discuss

What would you say is a good balance in the life of a Christian between the demands of work, church and leisure, in order to be effective in service to God and the world in which we live?

Key Verse

'As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you.'

(2 Thessalonians 3:1)

Discussion

Q1 Read verses 13-17 of chapter two. Can you see within them a description of the timeline of a Christian's life?

Q2 Someone once said, 'A saint is a person who makes it easier for others to believe in God.' Has that been your experience and if so how can we apply the description to ourselves?

Q3 Paul encourages the believer in turbulent times (chapter 2:15) to stand firm and hold on to the teachings (or traditions as it is sometimes translated) that had been passed on. What do you see as the important traditions or teachings of the Church that you could not contemplate being abandoned?

Q4 The hope of Paul when he began his work anywhere was that the message would have legs and run (chapter 3:1) but more often than not it was a race over hurdles rather than a sprint. What stops the Church today from becoming more involved in outreach and mission activity in the community?
Are the hurdles outside or inside?

Q5 Prayer was central to Paul's work, and there's a real confidence in his request for the believers to pray for the work (chapter 3:1-5). Note the word 'perseverance' or 'patience' in verse 5. Are we sometimes guilty of praying once and moving on, and how might we better follow Paul's advice in praying for the work of God in our own churches?

Q6 There's a warning against idleness in chapter 3:6ff and this is because some had assumed that Christ was coming again soon, and therefore there was no further need to work. The Jews considered work to be a duty of all who were able, and even Rabbis had a trade, taking no pay for their teaching. What responsibility should the state have, and the Church encourage, to find employment for those who currently have none?

Q7 Paul is trying to establish a church that exists as 'family' and practices the kind of love which is known as 'agape' - which is not only about supporting each other in love, but going further and supporting those who need it financially as well. That's reflected in the way he asks the believers to treat those who are stepping out of line, in verses 14-15. How practical today is it for Church to live as if they were family?

Q8 How does your church handle those who 'step out of line', and could it do this better?

Q9 Just a couple of decades or so before this letter was written, nobody outside of northern Palestine would have heard of Jesus, and certainly not linked to the word 'Lord'. Now in Macedonia they not only know of him but ask from him the transforming and freely offered love and grace that Paul prays for them in the last verse of this passage. A blessing that we would recognise within our own worship. What can this tell us about the character of the early Church, apart from that which we gain from letters such as this?

Q10 What picture do you have in mind of Paul as a person?

The only possible description we have is, according to David Pawson 'short (Paulus means 'little'), bow-legged, hooked-nosed and balding, a man whose eyebrows met in the middle, and had very rough hands.'

This man never stays in one place very long, has been in trouble with the authorities and spent time in prison, is a very dogmatic preacher, unmarried, speaks in tongues and is a part-time tent maker. Would you put someone with that description on the short list for pastor of your church?

Takeaway

Check which mission organisations your church is involved in supporting and look them up on the web (if possible) or sign up for their newsletter, to see what they are currently doing and where, and whether they have any current needs that you or your congregation might be able to help with.

Prayer

Pray for those who are engaged on missionary activities, whether locally or internationally, that their needs might be met, their lives be protected and that they might know the same joy that Paul felt when looking at the fruit of his labours.

‘Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do.’

(Pele)

‘I do not think that there is any other quality so essential to success of any kind as the quality of perseverance. It overcomes almost everything, even nature.’

(John D. Rockefeller)

‘To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.’

(Martin Luther)

‘In my deepest, darkest moments, what really got me through was a prayer. Sometimes my prayer was ‘Help me.’ Sometimes a prayer was ‘Thank you.’ What I’ve discovered is that intimate connection and communication with my creator will always get me through because I know my support, my help, is just a prayer away.’

(Iyanla Vanzant)

‘Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one’s weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.’

(Mahatma Gandhi)

‘Prayer is an act of love; words are not needed. Even if sickness distracts from thoughts, all that is needed is the will to love’

(Saint Teresa of Avila)

Leader's Notes

Q1 - To Paul there are signs of life in this church, identified by demonstration of faith, hope and love within the community of believers. They didn't become Christians by accident, but had heard the word and were showing the fruits of their new found faith within their daily lives - it was an active and working faith.

Q2 - Macedonia was the kingdom of Alexander the Great who had dreamed of a world dominated and enlightened by Greek culture. Into this very Greek society, with the gods of Greek and Roman paganism everywhere, Paul may have felt the need to emphasise that this was to be community of believers worshipping one God alone, the one true God known both to Jew and Christian as Father, and the one who sent Jesus as Messiah.

Q3 - Most work for money, some through fear, others simply because of a sense of duty. Paul is talking of the believers being inspired to offer their lives in service to God, and to believe that what they are doing in their workplace is ultimately for the glory of God. How we approach our daily work can have a profound effect on those who we work for and also work among.

Q4 - That there was opposition is plain, possibly because of a threat to the status quo in that place, the rejection of so many idols as worthless, and what seemed to be outrageous claims about one God and his son. Tom Wright in his commentary equates it to asking a modern city today to do without cars or mobile phones!

Q5 - Paul is obviously impressed with the courage of the believers and how their perseverance, faith and hope under pressure had made them a wonderful example to other communities around this part of the world. They had only been believers for a short while and yet people hundreds of miles around had heard about their faith. Could others say that about us?

Q6 - We learn a lot from watching and learning about others. Paul, in chapter 1:6, is pleased that the Thessalonian believers have in some part modelled their Christian lives on those of himself, Silas and Timothy.

Q7 - Check out Acts 16:16ff to see some of the problems that Paul and Silas had encountered in Philippi. But the world at that time was full of wandering salesmen and so-called 'holy men' making money out of the gullible. Paul is anxious that the Thessalonians don't see them in that light (2:3)

Q8 - Share from experience - examples could be displaying wisdom, patience and love, but also being firm when the need arises.

Q9 - Persecution comes as part of the package perhaps! There's quite a catalogue here of sins committed by some of Paul's fellow Jews who had killed the prophets and Jesus, persecuted the Christian believers, did not even try to please God and were generally hostile to everyone. They considered themselves the Chosen People, which they were, but from a position of arrogance rather than service, not wanting others to share in the love of God. What might the world say of the Church today that we might find uncomfortable?

Q10 - The Church challenged the powers that were active in the world, and still does. The battle between God and the powers of darkness came to a head on the Cross. That does not mean that sin and evil are no more, but that the Church is charged with the task of implementing that victory. The Thessalonians were suffering, but the Church was there and growing, and because it was standing firm other churches were springing up elsewhere, spurred on by their example.

Q1 - Paul's words mirror that of an anxious parent, and we find him often referring to his team as 'sons', which says something for the character of the great apostle.

Q2 - Paul sees Satan's work as putting up road-blocks that prevent the Christian from proceeding. However, as Paul found, road-blocks can be circumvented. If Paul had not been in the situation he was in, we would not have had his letters to read and learn from!

Q3 - Paul's sole focus was the people he was working among. Whether being physically present or temporarily exiled, they and their new-found faith were both the reward for the hardships he was enduring and the joy in his heart. Paul was criticised for many things, including being a trickster and opportunist, but here we see someone who is certainly not self-centred.

Q4 - How does the group see this working out in this country and more locally? Could the Church at large do better, and have the group ideas about how local churches could better engage with the task?

Q5 - Timothy met up with Paul again in Athens (Acts 17:14 - 18:5) and from there was sent not just to check on what was happening, but also as an encourager and helper.

Q6 - The fledgling Church was suffering persecution from, among others, the Jews. As well as the normal temptations that believers might fall into, there might also be the thought that if their new-found faith was less visible in daily life, they might not be noticed and life would become more comfortable

Q7 - Paul could be said to be showing great pastoral skills here. His words are full of affection, interest and joy. There's a real sense of relationship between the apostle and this group of believers.

Q8 - Paul certainly didn't! From his words we can see that it was at the heart of everything he was doing.

Q9 - Paul consults God for guidance regarding his travel arrangements, and the whole prayer is God-centred. He doesn't mention the Holy Spirit, but implicit in the prayer is God's Spirit working within the lives of both believers and apostles.

Q10 - In the Lord's Prayer there is a strong future dimension, as we pray for forgiveness, deliverance from evil and God's kingdom to come. Like Paul's prayer that the Thessalonians might be found blameless and holy, it also has that sense of preparing God's people both for now and the future.

Q1 - Paul is careful in his choice of words, not criticising the believers for their lifestyle, which has presumably seen some change, but rather encouraging them to go that little bit further - like a proud parent standing on the side-lines at a school sports day shouting encouragement at his children to make that extra bit of effort to get to the winning post.

Q2 - Here we're really looking at how those outside might view what the church does, how it behaves, and the message and examples that come out from it in the way individual churchgoers behave.

Q3 - The call from Paul is for holiness. God longs for us to be the kind of people who reflect his image, as was always the hope ever since the creation story in Genesis.

Q4 - There is plenty of advice on the internet, but this from the NSPCC is helpful:

'Talking to your child is one of the best ways to keep them safe. You can also use parental controls on social networks, online games and browsers and on both hardware and software that can filter or monitor what your child can see. Preventing your children from using the internet or mobile phones won't keep them safe in the long run, so it's important to have conversations that help your child understand how to stay safe and what to do if they ever feel scared or uncomfortable.' (<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>)

Q5 - It could be said that contraception has altered considerably the way in which humans interact with each other, have casual relationships, live together, marry, decide whether or not to have children, and indulge their sexual appetites. It has offered the possibility of avoiding or planning pregnancy. On the downside, perhaps it has fuelled an increase in casual sex, which may or may not be a good thing, and denominationally it is still not approved by the Catholic Church.

Q6 - Whatever our own personal views on marriage and sexuality as they affect our relationships, there seems little doubt in Scripture that we are called to embrace a holiness and purity in our lives that marks us out as different, which of course might also make us vulnerable to criticism - but Paul would no doubt say that criticism is not a bad thing in such circumstances.

Q7 - Let the discussion roam, but bring it back at some point to Paul's emphasis on the word 'Holy' which he uses three times in the first seven verses of chapter 4. Jesus did not come to maintain the status quo, but overturned a lot more than Temple tables in his teaching and the example of his sacrificial life.

Q8 - Both in the ancient world and increasingly in the modern can be seen examples of Christian communities reaching out where there is need - Involvement in work with ex-offenders, the homeless and refugees, or supporting foodbanks, credit unions or street pastor schemes, to name just a few.

Q9 - Paul's encouragement is in effect saying that the best way in which Jesus Christ should find them would be quietly and diligently getting on with whatever is their daily work.

Q10 - Outsiders would be looking closely at how these early believers lived out the life that their leaders were encouraging, particularly where there were cultural clashes, perhaps in attitudes to sexuality, marriage, work and caring for the needy. As Barclay says so eloquently in his commentary, they were to '...commend Christianity to the outsider, by the diligence and beauty of their lives.'

Q1 - To put this in context, Paul is talking to Christians about believers who have died, and comparing the Christian hope of life after death with that of the pagans who had no such expectation, and whose grief was one of hopeless mourning. There are a variety of opinions as to what might happen to those of no faith or other faiths who die, and it may be that our time is better spent praying and working among them while they are still alive, and handing the rest over to God.

Q2 - It has been suggested that Paul is using images as a form of poetry, which often uses word-pictures to try and express things that ordinary speech would struggle to explain. Maybe members of the group could suggest more contemporary picture language that might be used today.

Q3 - Paul is using the language of Daniel 7 in verses 16 and 17. To take them literally can raise more questions than they answer. Tom Wright uses a different picture, that of Roman citizens in a colony going out to meet and greet the emperor when he makes a state visit, and then following him back into the city itself. Ultimately, Paul is offering comfort to his readers, that there will be a day when God's purposes will be fulfilled and all grief will be turned to joy.

Q4 - With so many pictures in this passage, it is easy to become confused. As children of the new dawn of God's kingdom, that bright day inaugurated by Jesus Christ, we are called to live as if we already belong to the Messiah, to hold fast and walk in his light!

Q5 - At the heart of Christian faith is the hope in verses 10,11, 'He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up...'

Q6 - Compare the answers with chapter 5:12-15.

Q7 - One of the prominent gifts of the Spirit in the early Church was that of prophecy, seen as forth-telling (proclaiming the Word of God by teaching, warning, exhorting, encouraging, comforting, and strengthening people using Scripture's words) and foretelling (predicting events that will happen in the future). Paul is really telling the people that if one of the believers feels they have something to say then don't stop them from saying it.

Q7 - The flames of that first Pentecost were still in the minds of the early believers, along with the Spirit's power that so enabled Jesus' disciples to preach so powerfully and become the means through which the miraculous happened. It may be that within a Spirit-filled fellowship the gifts were not only being used but being viewed with suspicion, and the 'fire' being dampened down.

Q8 - There is no substitute for going back to Scripture, as a preacher will generally be talking about a particular passage or verse. There are online commentaries which will help to explain the text, looking at it from a variety of viewpoints, and these can help to answer questions or doubts raised. But hopefully there is also the opportunity to raise these points with the preacher before they go!

Q9 - The group may like to think about what first strikes a visitor when they come into a service of worship. Do the congregation look as if they are happy being in fellowship together? Is prayer simply a ritual, or does it reflect the needs and joys of the fellowship and wider community? Is this a fellowship that appreciates God's blessings, even in times of hardship?

Q10 - Taking Scripture as a whole we can see a continuing story of God's people letting God down and God refusing to give up on them - a love for humankind ultimately seen in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and by God's Spirit empowering the Church to be his spiritual body in the world.

Q1 - Paul didn't think he was merely sowing seeds of an idea when he preached the gospel message in a town, or giving a pep talk that would give them a temporary lift - he saw it as the means through which God's grace would reach out and touch hearts and minds, not for a moment but for a lifetime. The result, seen in Thessalonica, was such that it brought a gift of pure joy to Paul's heart, for which he gives God his grateful thanks.

Q2 - Wikipedia define 'grace' as follows, 'the love and mercy given to us by God because God desires us to have it, not because of anything we have done to earn it', or 'the benevolence shown by God toward the human race'. Peace has many meanings such as a state of quiet or tranquillity, freedom from anxiety or fear, and a harmony between individuals.

Q3 - A faith that is growing is one that is growing in strength. A faith that is sure. A love that is growing is shown in service to one another and particularly to those in need. The word that is translated as perseverance or endurance in some versions is 'hypomone' which describes the characteristic of someone who is not swerved from their deliberate purpose and loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings.

Q4 - God's kingdom will in time displace all other kingdoms, and preaching or believing such a message will inevitably cause conflict with the world. But the perseverance, faith and love of the Thessalonian Church was proof to Paul that God's grace was at work in these lives and his kingdom was (in part) being established and beginning to impact on the world around it.

Q5 - Paul's using Old Testament and apocalyptic imagery used of God and applying it directly to Jesus, and as with all such imagery it is open to more than one interpretation.

Q6 - In the context of this passage, Paul's anger seems to be directed against those who are persecuting the believers in Thessalonica. He includes within this both the Gentiles who have no understanding of the God he knows, and also the Jews who have rejected the message he preached concerning Jesus Christ - these are the ones who 'do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus'.

Jews, like Gentiles, had been adamant in their opposition to Christians in Thessalonica and its vicinity (see Acts 17:5, 13) and, says Paul, they will feel the wrath of God's judgement for their actions, if not now then in due course.

Q7 - Perhaps the encouragement that Paul offers the believers is that because of the changes that have taken place in their lives, so the standards of the world about them would begin to change, and God made known in Jesus would ultimately be glorified.

Q8 - These were turbulent times. The emperor Gaius was killed in AD 41, and between 68 and 69 four more emperors in quick succession were dead, and the Temple at Jerusalem lay destroyed in AD 70. Paul was a clever and well-travelled man, and no doubt kept abreast of what was happening on the larger world stage. He could see that all was not well politically, and knew the dangers of idolatry clashing with the true God.

Q9 - The Lord's Prayer reminds us every time we use it of the need for repentance and forgiveness, and also of not allowing ourselves to be deceived - lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. So we must always be alert to the subtle deceptions of the 'Man of Lawlessness'

Q10 - The message of the Gospel is essentially one of hope for believers. Theological views concerning the fate of unbelievers or those who follow different gods vary, from the strict and literal interpretation of Scripture, with its fiery furnace to a much more liberal view that has God's love ultimately bringing all of humankind back into his family. The Great Commission is still very much our primary responsibility, to go out and make disciples of all nations!

Q1 - Christian life begins with a call from God, a journeying with others in Christ's footsteps, the teaching and understanding of God's word, and the support of those who lead Bible studies and have written books and other material to help Christians understand the message of Scripture and how it applies to, and is seen through daily lives.

Q2 - How genuinely faith is expressed through daily life is such an important witness.

Q3 - There are many, but you might consider the eucharist and baptism as essential elements of a worshipping congregation, alongside the basic facts about the gospel and the shared love between believers that spills out into daily lives.

Q4 - The hurdles that Paul faced are fairly well documented through his letters, but it's worth considering what hurdles there might be today in our local towns and villages to even small-scale mission activity. Then ask whether these hurdles are actually big enough to cause a problem?

Q5 - A book with prayer requests might help jog the memory, or the establishment of a group within the Church who commit to praying regularly for specific issues.

Q6 - All his life Paul was a tradesman as well as a trained Rabbi and later missionary/evangelist and church planter! Jesus was famously a carpenter, and there was a saying among the Jews that 'He who does not teach his son a trade, teaches him to steal.' Perhaps society today does not have this same compulsion to work!

Q7 - In this particular context of discipline, how different it is to be chastised by someone in authority and told we've done wrong rather than experiencing a quiet word between brothers or sisters and put on the right track. Paul's idea of 'family' is not one of communal living, simply that as with a family the church members care for one another, and share the household duties.

Q8 - There are the obvious historical sexual abuse problems in some denominations which have not been dealt with very well, but it may be true, as Tom Wright suggests, that those in leadership are more inclined to suggest to people that they might like to do this or that, rather than tell them that this must be done. It's about the right and proper use of authority.

Q9 - Ask the group to bring out some of the characteristics of the Thessalonian Church that make it effective, even though it was going through difficult times.

Q10 - God has a regular habit of choosing people who we might consider unlikely - the Bible is full of them!

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www.brainyquote.com (a great source of inspirational quotes)

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A depiction of St Paul by Bartolomeo Montagna (C15th)

