

Prayer

Speak to me Lord Jesus in the quiet moments of this day;
 Touch me when I need to be reminded to follow in Your way;
 Encourage me to exercise the gifts and graces You have given me;
 Inspire me to do greater things for You than I have ever done before;
 Walk beside me, and may Your wisdom be with me in all I do and say; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Education

Pray for those you know who are parents of children at school. Much happens to families in the school years, so support them prayerfully as their children grow year by year.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for your health, and His power to heal
- Pray about the serious threat to world peace posed by N. Korea
- Lift to the Lord your prayers for this world and the planet's future

Meditation

Jesus,

Your birth was foretold by kings and prophets;
 And accepted by those who could hear Your voice.
 Your teaching took the old and made it anew;
 And was understood by those who kept close to You.
 Your power to heal changed the lives of the sick;
 And You commissioned Your disciples to do the same.
 Your mercy was given to both men and women;
 And all those You met were treated with equality.
 Your death was a tragedy of evil and misjudgement;
 And You bled for our sins without cursing our souls.
 Your resurrection frightened those first in Your tomb;
 And yet this is now our greatest joy and salvation.
 You ascended to the Father to release Your Spirit,
 And we have been blessed by Your gifts and graces.
 You have done everything according to Your Father's will;

Alleluia!

Bible Study - 1 Thess 5:23-28

²³ May He who is the God of peace purify you completely; and may your spirit, soul and body be wholly blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. ²⁵ Fellow believers, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the believers with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I put you under oath in the Lord to have this letter read to them all. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Review

With these words, we come to the end of what is probably the first of Paul's letters to any of the churches he founded. In future letters, Paul developed the habit of concluding with various greetings to friends and co-workers, but there is none of this here. He has spoken previously in the letter about others such as Timothy (2:1f., 3:1f.), but concludes with few words, most of these expressing warm greetings. One sentence stands out from this conviviality, and this is verse 27, which places the Thessalonians under a stern obligation to read the letter to the whole church! Paul had not written this for the private consumption of leaders or teachers; he wanted the whole Body of Christ in Thessalonica to engage with what he had written!

The phrases used by Paul in these few verses are powerful, and worthy of our close attention. The phrase 'God of peace' is well known, but it only occurs in five places in the New Testament (Romans 15:33, 16:20, Phil 4:9, here, and Hebrews 13:20), in each case towards the end of a letter. This description reminds us that God always works towards harmony, resolution, reconciliation, salvation and wholeness; indeed, all these words are ways of expressing that great Hebrew word 'shalom' that lies behind what Paul says here. In the midst of the tensions of life with its sin and strife, our gaze is too often drawn away from this basic truth about God; so these words avert our spiritual eyes to look again at the truth. God has one supreme desire, which is to see those He has made return to Him in peace, and He has made this possible through Christ for all who have faith in Him.

Whilst speaking in this way, Paul describes people in the classic three-fold manner, as 'spirit, soul and body' (5:23). His intention is to use these words to cover every aspect of what it means to be a living being, but today, many people remain confused about them, in particular 'soul' and 'spirit'. The best way to explain Scripture's threefold description of humanity is to refer to Genesis 2:7, to where God takes 'dust', breathes into it, and creates a 'living being'. Exploring this further, the dust represents the material that makes up the body, God's breath is the spirit (in Hebrew, both are the same word), and the result of God's work is the creation of a living being which is another way of saying a 'soul'. It is impossible therefore to separate out some imagined pieces of ourselves that correspond to 'body', 'spirit' or 'soul', because each word says something about us that is essential to our existence, so it is best to think of each word as a way of describing ourselves. Indeed, the Bible sometimes uses other words, such as 'mind', 'strength', and 'heart', but the three used here are the most basic, and they express the totality of our existence. The Gospel message is that through Christ, every part of our complex life may be found 'blameless' before God and be at peace with Him; it is something God does, not us (5:24)!

Paul's letter begins with words of prayerful greeting (1:2f.), and by asking the Thessalonians for their prayers (5:25), he advocates the basic Christian fellowship of truly shared prayer. Prayer offered by one person for another is not meaningless before God, but shared prayer is both a blessing to us, because we appreciate the fellowship of prayer and the concerns of others, and delights the Father, because He can see that in such prayer we are united in Him. The concept of shared prayer is very important. Indeed, it is rather like the 'holy kiss', which if we understand this properly (and it is not certain that we do), was a formal shared 'kiss on the cheek', that is not uncommon today. When done formally it means little, but when shared in fellowship, it symbolises the unity of the Spirit of those who are 'in Christ'.

Paul's last comment seems sharp (5:27), but it may have been an important reminder to those who received the letter that this was no personal message. A letter from an apostle was intended for public consumption, it seems, from the earliest days, that Paul was

concerned that what he wrote would be shared properly with all who needed to hear it. Verse 27 is a small pointer to the letter's ultimate destiny, to be a part of Scripture.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How may we experience God as a God of peace in our everyday lives now?
2. Discuss the concept of 'body', 'soul', and 'spirit' in your group, and help each other with those parts that seem difficult.
3. Does letter writing still have a place in the lives of people today, or has it been replaced by email, text, or other forms of communication?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find it heart warming to be reminded that God's intention is to enable me to be at peace with Him. I sometimes hear preachers who give us the impression that it is all about people making the right decisions, and although I know this is right, surely the evidence is that God works hard to bring people to the place where they will hear the message of salvation. He is working even now, and we who are His servants must listen to His voice so that we can help His efforts on behalf of others.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What do you feel about the possibility of being held blameless before the 'God of peace' at the last? This is a tough question, and I wonder about it myself from time to time. For those who have faith, the work of Jesus will do this, of course, but it is nevertheless hard to think about; doing so tells us a great deal about our relationship with Jesus.*
- *Pray for the people you meet on a daily basis. If the Lord is touching their lives, then be ready to do the Lord's will and help them.*

Final Prayer

This day, Lord God, is Your precious gift. We ask You to keep us from falling and fulfil Your purposes in us each day and throughout our lives. Bring us to the end of the day rejoicing, and may we be glad to be Your servants, who praise You throughout everything we do and say. AMEN