



### Looking Inwards (15 mins) *Caring For Each Other*

*Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however, 'it's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



### Looking Outwards (15 mins) *Concern For Others*

*Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours; or church, which you would like to share (please be careful not to pass on anything that is **confidential** or which you think the person/people concerned would not wish to be shared) for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



### HG49: A Church Thrives In Troubled Times *(1/5) Prayer In Times Of Difficulty*

**2 Thessalonians 2:1-12**

**Home Group Study Notes**

8<sup>th</sup> May 2011 - Pauline Woolnough



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION **BEFORE** THE MEETING!

*Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group with you, along with any previous notes and other resources which might be helpful.*



### Welcome/Ice Breaker (10 mins)

The benefit of hindsight is a great thing. Can you look back to a time in your life when things were difficult yet God brought good out of it?



### Looking Upwards (10 mins) *Worship*

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...





## Looking Upwards (40 mins) Bible Study

Read through the text for this study 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12, and any references given below, alongside those in the sermon notes, then answer the following questions - you may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, of your answers with your

1. Read through this quote from Open Doors: *“Everyday around the world, your persecuted brothers and sisters know that prayer works. They rely on prayer for continual protection, for courage to defy their culture, for their daily needs ... They ask you to remember them by getting on your knees.”* No one in their right mind would want to seek persecution but spiritually, who is the richer?

2. The Thessalonian Church knew, and today’s persecuted church *knows* that prayer works. Read again the two great quotes from Ronald Dunn and Brother Andrew and Martha and Edet’s requests to us to pray. Does all this encourage, inspire, and prompt you to discover it more for yourself by praying more?

3. What might you see as persecution of the church in the UK today?

If you are going through difficulties right now know that he can use it for your good and to glorify Him, know that nothing has the power or the authority to overrule his original plan for you, God is never trying to come up with a plan for you or some bit of work for you to do, he doesn’t adlib or think on his feet... he has a plan. He wrote our destiny in advance: *“We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”* (Ephesians 2:10).

The works He prepared for you to walk in were planned "beforehand," and they are “good” however even God needs our co-operation and we can choose to collaborate with him or not, but when we do we know peace of heart.

In his book, Authority in Prayer, Praying with Power and Purpose, Dutch Sheets says *“Deep in our DNA is the nature of a King. He speaks to us from within our inner nature, and sometimes when we’re under mounds of circumstantial rubble, “in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer”* (Romans 8:37). *We were made to rule!*”

Some people think that God takes our age into consideration and that he falls in line with the employment law of the country and retires us off at 60 or 65, I don’t think so and I don’t believe that God decided to make some people’s lives more interesting and purposeful than others. He didn’t look at Mother Teresa or Billy Graham, the Pope or Archbishop of Canterbury and say I’ve got plans for them, interesting fulfilling and challenging work for them to do but for most of the rest, they can go about their lives doing 9-5 work and just worship me on a Sunday. Listen to him say to you, *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* (Jeremiah 29:11).

Regardless of our age or circumstances if we will co-operate with him he will bring his plans to fruition in our lives. Some of those plans may involve living through difficult times, circumstances may cause us to suffer all manner of things but we can be confident that God is alongside us watching over us, looking out for us, and we can we pray with the authority that we possess as His royal priesthood that He might be glorified in everything we do.

### Stay Focused and Stand Firm

When times are difficult it sometimes takes all our strength and energy simply to get through the day never mind get through whatever it is we are facing, and it’s all too easy to give authority to the hardship and allow it to attack our faith and question God’s goodness. All our focus goes on just getting through the bad time, but Romans 8:28 tells us *“We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”* As believers in Jesus and if we understand this truth, we can know that fate, luck or negative circumstances do not determine our destiny. It doesn’t mean that things won’t hurt us in life, Jesus said *“In this world you will have trouble,”* (said Jesus). *But take heart! I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). No one would want to underestimate the pain many of you may have experienced or are experiencing but if we can keep our focus steadfastly on God then we can experience his peace deep in our hearts no matter what trials, difficulties or pain we may suffer.

When things are going well however, when life is good and we are in control, when nothing affects us personally, then gathering to pray is not a priority, there is not the same need and urgency. What a shame, because see what God does when people turn to him in their times of need.

### **Our Secret Weapon**

In Nigeria Martha Azi's husband was shot dead during the religious violence that engulfed the capital of Plateau State in November 2008. Only in her twenties she is the sole provider for her two children. However Martha testified that she is experiencing God's miracles in her life as the result of Christians praying for her. she said *"My greatest joy in this difficult situation is that the people of God are praying for me. Please keep it up."* (source *Open Doors*). She experienced miracles and amazingly, she had joy, - only God can do that for someone in her situation. Also in Nigeria, Pastor Israel Okhouya died of injuries after being attacked by a mob of thirty Muslim extremists armed with machetes in June 2009. His wife Edet said, *"Pray that I will be able to forgive the killers of my husband wholeheartedly. It is not easy."* In a stunned and silent courtroom, Edet was able to tell the suspects that she loved them with the love of Christ and even offered to pay their bail! She said *"I am so happy to know that I am not alone in this battle of faith and that is why I am strong. The Good Lord will bless you richly in all your endeavours."* (source *Open Doors*).

She loved her husbands killers with the love of Christ and offered to pay their bail, - only God can help someone forgive a loved one's murderers, - only God can keep someone strong in the face of such a terrible situation. Ronald Dunn says *"Prayer is the secret weapon of the kingdom of God. It is like a missile that can be fired toward any spot on earth, travel undetected at the speed of thought, and hit its target every time... Satan has no defence against this weapon; he does not have an anti-prayer missile."*

What a shame we only really turn to him when things are bad, what would he do at other times when life is good, what would he do if His church was more diligent in prayer because understanding God's plan of partnership answers so many of our questions. Brother Andrew says this *"If we want to leave an indelible mark on the world, there is no more powerful way to do it than by joining in God's purposes through prayer. Our Prayers can go where we cannot. While many things may seem impossible from a human standpoint, in the realm of prayer there are no impossibilities."*

### **God has a Plan**

God had a plan for the Thessalonians, Paul said in V 11 *"With this in mind we pray constantly for you that our God may count you worthy of his calling and that by his power he may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."* God had a purpose, or a plan for them. He had chosen this small group of believers to pioneer the gospel and to bring glory to his name and one day they would be astounded at how the society they lived in would be transformed as more and more people turned to Christ and the God that he had made known would be glorified.

God had a plan for the Thessalonians and a thousand years before you were born God had a plan for you. A plan that nothing, and no-one, human or otherwise has the authority to steal from you. Corrie ten Boom said *"God has plans - not problems - for our lives. Before she died in the concentration camp in Ravensbrück, my sister Betsie said to me, "Corrie, your whole life has been a training for the work you are doing here in prison - and for the work you will do afterward."* Even when difficulties come and hinder his plan, he has another one up his sleeve to get you back on course. God has a plan!

4. When things go wrong in your life has the thought ever occurred to you that it may be as a result of God's displeasure, (i.e. The Principle of Retribution)?

5. Psalm 33:1-22 reminds us that God has the power to carry out his plans, he is *"our help and our shield"* v 20 Discuss with each other whether you really believe that deep in your heart so that it underpins your life and dictates your reactions to difficult situations that come your way?

6. Thousands of years before you took your first breath God knew you would be reading this study and reminding you about his unique plans for you. Take time in prayer to consider and review where you are. Remember also to respond to the request from our persecuted brothers and sisters to *"get on our knees"* and pray for them.



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



## HG49: A Church Thrives In Troubled Times (1/5) Prayer In Times Of Difficulty

### 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

### Home Group Sermon Notes

8<sup>th</sup> May 2011 - Pauline Woolnough

#### Introduction

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians about a year previously he had encouraged them in the face of their persecution and hardships. At the time there were many different religions, cults and sects around (*1 Cor 8 1-6*) who saw the new Christianity as a threat because it called people to turn away from their old loyalties and fully commit to Christ. Many reacted against this and the new church came under challenge and persecution. He reminded them that what they were going through was temporary and that when Christ returned he would deliver them from all their sufferings and their persecutors would be judged. Some had taken this too literally as many left their jobs and sat about waiting for Christ's return and the end of the world thinking it was imminent. Mostly though, they had made him proud and he told everyone how they remained faithful but he knew that he had to correct the wrong thinking about waiting for Christ's return. He advised them that while they waited they should learn perseverance and faith from their suffering and assured them that God would use the persecution to show his justice at the right time. He was thankful that their faith and love for each other was growing and he saw their endurance as evidence that God's grace was at work in them and of it being a sign that they were part of God's kingdom.

#### The Persecuted Church

We don't face the kind of persecution in the UK that the Thessalonians Christians did and that's probably because we are not really a threat to anyone. Say you are a Christian... or worse that that you go to church and people think you are religious, I wouldn't call myself religious. Christians with strong convictions are thought to be out of touch, irrelevant and a bit quaint. Think of how the media portrays Christians in TV comedies like the Vicar of Dibley, its very funny but would it be so popular if the lovely Dawn French wasn't the vicar who led her congregation of misfits, each one dafter than the next? Then did anyone see The Rev, it was funny, at times rude and often irreverent, (also sometimes fairly accurate), but in the main what these programmes can do is trivialise spirituality and belief, they show half empty churches attended by only the very eccentric, certainly not for the faint hearted and Christianity becomes something to make fun off and not to take seriously. However check out the Persecuted Church on Google and you will find that it is alive and well today all over the world. Open Doors list the top 50 countries in order of severity. North Korea apparently is the most difficult place to be a Christian they make up only 1.7% of the population but there are an estimated 50-70,000 in labour camps. Even in the face of such difficulties the church is growing. In some countries Christians face physical violence and death; others face unjust imprisonment, denial of religious liberties and discrimination in employment and education.

Open Doors says that, "A staggering 2,000 Christians lost their lives in Northern Nigeria in mob violence from anti-Christian extremists in 2010. Already this year, over 200 were killed in Jos in

attacks on a Christian community. Despite this violence however, Christians are learning to forgive, the Church is becoming more united and more people are choosing to follow Christ.

In Iraq In the last five years, there has been a systematic campaign to kick Christians out of the country. They are saying, 'You Christians are not accepted here – get out while you still can'." – Rev. Emanuel Youkhana, Church of the East." You may remember just a few weeks ago that China was in the news when Chinese police detained at least 30 Christians belonging to an unregistered Beijing church as they gathered for an Easter service. Chinese Christians are required to worship in churches run by state-controlled organisations but more than 60 million Christians are believed to worship in unregistered "house" churches. The growth of such churches has taken off in recent years and unsettled China's rulers who are always suspicious of any independent social group that may challenge Communist authority.

#### The Keys to Survival

The church seems to thrive in the face of such difficulties and that's because the key to surviving persecution is endurance and faith and at the very heart of everything it does is prayer. These things strengthen the believer enabling them to stand firm. People looking on see the authenticity of its members commitment, belief and their support of one another in the face of persecution and they discover that Jesus is real. When we are faced with troubles we have a choice, we can stand firm like the Thessalonians and know that God will use our trials for his glory or we can slide thinking instead that God has forgotten us and once we go down that route its not too difficult to believe that our sufferings are as a result of God's displeasure. Is anyone brave enough to admit that that thought may have crossed their mind at times? Things are going wrong, so God must be unhappy with me, he is punishing me and trying to teach me a lesson. Its called the Principle of Retribution and is at the heart of every major religion, in other words, if you upset the gods you risk flood, famine, disease etc and many religions take steps to appease their gods with offerings. Some Christians also believe it because it is something we learn from childhood when our parents, often in desperation, offered us treats when we were good and withheld them when we were not so good.

Paul reminded the church that God is a gracious God who will equip them with the faith they needed to persevere and be victorious, and peace to assure them that God wasn't displeased and he would see them through this time. In fact God was doing great things in their lives through the troubles they experienced. They were an example to other Christians who could see that Christianity worked! They saw that God does not desert his children when times are tough, rather he uses it as a time for their faith and trust in Him to grow. God puts persecution to work for us because suffering brings people together. Look at the persecuted church and see the connection between suffering and spiritual growth in faith. Nothing builds deeper love and respect than suffering and praying together and our deepest relationships are made when we suffer alongside others who share the same cause and belief.

We have seen many times that when someone has a need, or someone is sick, the church responds to the need and comes together in prayer. It is in the difficult times that our love and friendship for one another is tested and we are most able to show our support for each other. Sufferings also brings us closer to God because where else do you go when you have no where else to go? You go to your heavenly Father and you pray like you have never prayed before. If life was indeed a bed of roses we wouldn't need to trust God for anything, our faith would never be exercised and our endurance would never be tested. When tragedy strikes in the community, when there is a national disaster, when a child goes missing, the church is always the focal point, people are drawn to the local church as they seek the comfort of one another and of God. The church grows and thrives in the face of persecution because people realise that their only hope is in God.