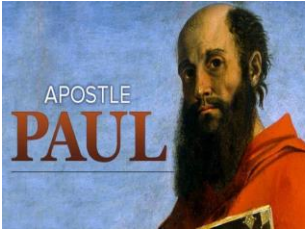


Daily Spiritual exercise



Who was the Apostle Paul?

Paul's name was Saul before he began his mission to the Greek speaking world. He was born in Tarsus of Cilicia, in modern-day south-eastern Turkey. His father was a Pharisee from the Jewish tribe of Benjamin. He was born a Roman citizen which saved him many times as he could not be "flogged" without the appropriate guilty verdict (see Acts 22). His trade was making tents which was popular in Cilicia. He was a devoted Pharisee who persecuted the early Christians. He was one of the witnesses of the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7 and 22. He went to Damascus to persecute Christian believers and bring them to Jerusalem to be tried by the Sanhedrin. On the way to Damascus, God turned his life around. There are different versions of his conversion, all confirming that something extraordinary happened **only** to him (see Gal 1:15; Acts 9:7, Acts 22:9, Acts 26:14). His conversion was not from being a sinner to a believer, but a major change of one religious' perspective to another. His conversion was sudden, clear and direct. We do not know what Paul saw from his own description. Interestingly when you look at the literal translation of Galatians 1:15 it seems as if he had an internal experience of God revealing **Christ** in Paul. Paul made it clear that this was not a subjective experience. It was a revelation of the risen Christ who set him apart to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth.

The Apostle Paul was called by God for a special task, namely, to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul conducted his ministry with zeal and conviction, motivating and training others despite many sacrifices and personal sufferings (see 2 Corinthians 11). Paul followed a Pastoral ministry, visiting the different congregations and he stayed in touch with them. He organised the early church and planted churches in Asia minor.

His ministry begs the question: What is our calling as believers in the "Covid-19 time" of self-isolation? What is God calling us as a church to do? Amen

Monday 25 May 2020

Galatians 1:15-16 "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen ..."

Heavenly Father,
we gather and
come in the
wonderful and
powerful Name of
Jesus Christ.

Help us as a church
during this Covid-19
crisis to discern
what you are
calling us as
believers to do.

Speak Lord, your
servants are
listening.

Amen



Daily Spiritual exercise



Disputes in the early Christian church

Paul settled in Antioch in Syria. Although he visited Peter and James in Jerusalem, the rest of the church in Jerusalem did not know much about him. He was familiar with Tarsus and Antioch in Syria and Damascus, his first mission field. There was a dispute in the Jerusalem church as recorded by Acts 6 between the Greek-speaking followers (Hellenists) and other Jewish followers (Hebrews). The conflict arose when the Christian converts from Judaism, who spoke Greek as their mother tongue, accepted the Greek culture and who had earlier accepted Gentile converts into Judaism. They were most probably Jews who returned from Gentile territories and who could not attend the Temple regularly. The Temple in Jerusalem was not so important to them and they were open to Gentiles becoming believers of Christ. Their fellow Jewish congregants were Aramaic speaking Jews who had become Christians. Judaism was centred on the Temple and resistant to the Greek culture and to accepting Gentiles into Judaism. After converting to Christianity, they continued to emphasize the importance of Jewish practises as an expression of their new faith. The conflict and tension between the two groups came to a head over the neglect of the distribution of food to the Greek speaking widows. It was part of Jewish law to look after the widows who had no family members to support them. The early church took over this responsibility to make sure the widows were well cared for, however, a form of "racism" against the Greek speaking widows meant that they were neglected. No wonder the Greek speaking followers were upset. The 12 apostles brought the two disputing parties/factions together and allowed them to elect 7 of their own men, full of God's Spirit and wisdom, to look after the needs of all the widows.

From the start of the early Christian church, there were tensions and factions which continue to this day. In this case the conflict/tensions led to the greater good. The 12 Apostles settled the dispute by offering a solution that was acceptable, realistic and transparent to all parties. Their great intervention started a new office in the church namely the office of deacons. In the Reformed Churches, deacons are lay people that serve alongside elders, looking after the elderly, sick and all those who are vulnerable. Conflict/tension/disputes do not have to be negative. If handled properly people's opinions and views can be heard and dealt with. We should always ask ourselves: How can we solve our disputes/factions in a positive way? Amen

Tuesday 26 May 2020

Acts 6:1

"But during this same time, the Greek-speaking followers had an argument with the other Jewish followers. The Greek-speaking Jews said that their widows were not getting their share of the food that was given out every day."

Lord, make me an
instrument of your
peace;

Where there is hatred,
let me sow charity;

Where there is injury,
pardon;

Where there is error,
the truth;

Where there is doubt,
the faith;

Where there is despair,
hope;

Where there is
darkness, light; and

Where there is sadness,
joy.

Amen



Daily Spiritual exercise



First Missionary journey

Paul sailed with Barnabas and others from Antioch to Cyprus and then on to the coast and the south-central part of modern-day Turkey. Cyprus was the third largest island of the Mediterranean and important for its copper. It was during this journey that his name changed from "Saul", to Paul. Paul started his ministry in the southern part of the Island among the Jewish communities. It is interesting to note that he started in the synagogues and then moved on to preach to the Gentiles which corroborates well with Romans 1:16. There was an argument between Paul and Peter with Barnabas siding with Peter over the Gentiles. Peter refused to eat with any Gentile at a table. Peter would continue to preach to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. Paul left Barnabas and travelled to Greece (Macedonia) with Silas. They sailed from the island of Samothrace to Neapolis, the seaport near Philippi. From Philippi there was a major road called the Via Egnatia, which connected northern Greece from the Aegean Sea to the Adriatic. Along this road was the city of Philippi where Paul planted his first churches in Greece, Amphipolis, Apollonia and Thessalonica, the capitol of Macedonia to which Paul wrote his first letter. Paul followed his old pattern by going to the synagogues first. Due to the Jewish opposition Paul moved to the house of Jason, one of his converts. It becomes clear now that the early church developed as a household church, with the early Christians meeting in the houses of prominent members of their community.

Paul's journey sounds exciting to us. A boat trip through the Mediterranean visiting all the wee cities and towns, drinking coffee in a nice coffee shop outside while Greek music is playing in the background. I think we need to forget this idyllic picture and remember that in those days the ships were basic and the journeys treacherous so say the least. Paul sacrificed a lot to preach God's Gospel of truth to all people. As believers, we can make such a difference by telling others about Christ in subtle and not so subtle ways, not necessarily through our words but our actions of love and justice to all people. In lockdown we can reach out to others in ways that Paul did not have in his time. We do not have to travel for miles to bring God's message of hope to the world. We can just write an email, pick up the phone or write a letter/card! Amen

Wednesday 27 May
2020

Acts 13:4

"Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit. They went to the city of Seleucia. From there they sailed to the island of Cyprus."

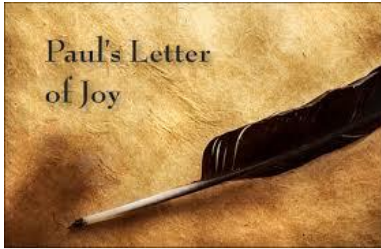
Heavenly Father, we thank You for the glad tidings of great joy that were given to all people through that angelic host so many years ago. Thank You for Jesus and the joy and peace that floods the hearts of all who have found in Him the rock of their Salvation.

Help me to share this joy of knowing Jesus with all those who You place in my path, so that they too may experience the joy and peace that passes understanding which is freely available to all who paid heed to the glad tidings of the gospel of grace.

Amen



Daily Spiritual exercise



Paul's letter to the Philippians

Paul remembered the congregation in Philippi with affection and joy. In this letter he expresses his joy over 30 times. It seems to us as if he wrote this letter while he was in a particularly good place, mentally and physically. This assessment cannot be further from the truth. In fact, Paul's letter to the Philippians is written at a dark and difficult time in his life. He is imprisoned and expecting execution. Yet the tone of the letter reflects thankfulness, joy and confidence, especially when he remembers all the things of the present, and past. His capacity to remember seems to lift him beyond his circumstances. He remembers the care and affection of his friends in Philippi. He remembers the things God has been doing in and through THEIR good will. He remembers their common purpose of sharing the Gospel. He remembers that God will be with him no matter what. He knows that God is with him in his bad circumstances. He has the true and certain hope of inheriting the kingdom of God because of his faith in the redemption, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. These thoughts made him thank God. I am sure not all his memories were so positive. I am sure he must have thought of his life before God called him into a life of faith. He must have been feeling a wee bit guilty towards all the people that he prosecuted and persecuted just because they had faith. As he reflected on his own condition, he must have realised the suffering and injustice that he was once the cause of. He knew that God was a loving and forgiving God. All through his letters we read about God's grace, mercy and forgiveness. He learned from experience that God could offer healing, restoration and a new start. It is no wonder that he could say the words: "I thank my God every time I remember you" despite his circumstances. Remembering might not be easy, that is why perhaps for generations people have come together in acts of remembrance, supporting and helping one another in their struggle and need. But let us use the memories of the past to find God in the present. Let us not be afraid to shed the odd tear, or even express our anger and despair to God, who does not demand of us that we come to him in a state of polite composure, but through remembering, sharing our stories, and laughing and crying together we will find the strength for each new day's challenge. Amen

Thursday
28 May 2020

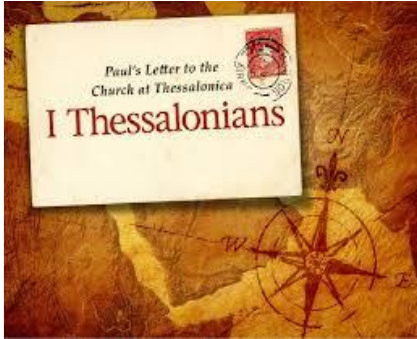
Philippians 1:3

"I thank my God every time I remember you".

Lord,
May the light of Christ
shine in our lives and
show us a way forward
through the darkness.
And may we walk gently,
feeling our pain, and
befriending it,
understanding that pain
is present because love
was there first.
Amen



Daily Spiritual exercise



Paul's letter to the Thessalonians

In Acts 16 we read more about Paul's first missionary journey. When they went to Philippi, a leading city in Asia Minor at that time, they met a woman called Lydia. We know that she came to faith and that she was their contact to get into the city. It seems that a lot of things went completely wrong especially when they changed the life a slave girl who used to help her owners make loads of money by fortune telling. When the apostle Paul took her gift away, her owners were rightfully angry and upset because they lost their income. Paul and Silas were attacked and brought before the rulers of the city and imprisoned (read more in Acts 16:9-24). Eventually a miracle happened when a massive earthquake struck, and all the doors opened, and all their chains fell off. During the night Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica, I imagine for their own safety.

Paul met with great opposition in Thessalonica but insists in his letter to the Thessalonians that his mission was not a "failure" despite all the conflict and hardship they endured. In his letters to the Thessalonians he encouraged the church to live as he had taught them to live.

Paul was often a prisoner and had often been the subject of torture and hardship, but he did not allow his circumstances to hinder him from proclaiming the good news. How could he possibly manage to stay focused and hopeful?

I think he decided to put on the "right glasses" to see the bigger picture, the picture that God has. I am sure he decided to put on the glasses of faith, where he could clearly see the impact of Jesus' redemption of the world. When he looked through them, he could rejoice because he knew he was not alone. He could see the presence of the Lord all around him. He could clearly see that this life was not his end. It could not have been easy for Paul, but he did it because he was sure of Jesus' resurrection. He was sure about the saving grace and love of Jesus for all humankind. How do we cope when life gets tough and difficult? We have two choices; we can be miserable because of our circumstances or joyful despite them! Amen

Friday 29 May 2020

1 Thessalonians 2: 13

"Also, we always thank God because of the way you accepted his message. You heard his message from us, and you accepted it as the word of God, not the words of men. And it really is God's message. And that message works in you who believe."

Loving God, we bring to you in our prayers all those who make up our family circle. We love them but we know your love for them is much greater. Thank you for all who love us and for your special loving care. Help us to love our friends and neighbours with your kind of gentle love. Help us when we are annoyed or tired to control our behaviour so that we do not hurt other people by what we say or do.

Amen



