

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 17 May 1998

No. T0007

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Studies in 1 Thessalonians: The right side up - Introduction

What was the single most important event in the history of Europe? Was it World War II? Was it the rise and fall of Napoleon? Or was it the spread of the Roman Empire? It could be argued that it was none of these but, rather, the coming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That Gospel, bringing as it did the good news of peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, set men and women, boys and girls, in a right relationship with God. That in turn led to the transformation of the lives of individuals and of nations. We live today in the benefit of the undoubted blessing which Christianity has brought to this country and to Europe.

The Gospel to Europe

The bringing of the Gospel into Europe was an event specially marked out by God. You can read about it in Doctor Luke's account in Acts 16:6-10. Paul, together with his companions, Silas and Timothy, was on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-18:22). They had been preaching in Galatia, part of central Turkey (Acts 16:6). It seems that they may have had plans then to continue westwards. However, Luke tells us that they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to do so (Acts 16:6). Similarly, when they subsequently tried to go northwards, we are told that the Spirit of God did not permit them (Acts 16:7).

Why did God interfere with their plans in this very dramatic fashion? It would seem that He had this very special purpose to bring them into Europe. And so, while they were at Troas, a Turkish port just across the sea from Greece, Paul had a vision during the night (Acts 16:9). In this vision, a man from Macedonia, a province of northern Greece, pleaded with him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Paul, Silas and Timothy then recognised that the Lord wanted them to bring the Gospel into Macedonia (Acts 16:9).

Philippi

Their first stop in Europe was Philippi, the capital of that part of the country (Acts 16:12). There Lydia, a seller of the purple dye for which that region was famous, first heard the Gospel. And in a very quiet way, the Lord opened her heart to receive the Saviour (Acts 16:14-15). In much more dramatic fashion, a young woman who was able to tell fortunes as a result of being possessed by an evil spirit, was cured of her demon possession (Acts 16:16-24). And a rough Philippian jailer, as a result of an earthquake (Acts 16:26), heard the message, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31). And he did just that (Acts 16:32-40)! So was planted the first Christian church on European soil.

Thessalonica

Thessalonica was the next stop of Paul and his companions (Acts 17:1). They stayed there for three Sabbath days only - somewhere between two to three weeks. There Paul was able to share the Gospel with them, showing from the Old Testament the necessity for Christ's death and resurrection (Acts 17:1-9). It is noteworthy that, throughout the Acts, these were the twin themes of the preaching of all the apostles - the death of Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins, and His resurrection as God's sign of His acceptance of that sacrifice (see Acts 17:3).

The Lord blessed Paul's preaching in a very special way and, as a result, many of the Thessalonians turned to Christ (Acts 17:4). Amongst them, significantly, Luke tells us, were several of the leading women of that city (Acts 17:4). Men and women, young and old, rich and poor, all were welcomed by the Saviour!

But if the Gospel brought peace to the hearts of many of the Thessalonians, it also aroused antagonism on the part of some (Acts 17:5-8). It does just the same today! Troublemakers created an uproar in the city. Because they could not find Paul, they had Jason and some of his fellow believers brought before the city fathers with the accusation, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too" (Acts 17:6). All unknowingly, they thus rendered tribute to the great power of the Gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation (see Romans 1:16). And this Gospel had only just arrived in Europe!

The accusation made was, of course, only a half truth. The truth of the matter was that the world was already in an 'upside down' condition because of man's sin and separation from God (see Genesis 3:1-7). The Gospel, which Paul and his companions brought, was sent by God to turn man right side up!

Berea

So, in these very early days, those young Thessalonian believers learned the cost of following Christ. Because of the persecution, they thought it wise to send Paul and Silas away by night to continue their work of preaching the Gospel elsewhere (Acts 17:10). That was probably in the early summer of AD 50.

The next stop in Europe was Berea (Acts 17:10). There, too, many believed, including several prominent women (Acts 17:10-14). All these had this very special commendation from God: "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). Could God commend you for a similar readiness to read the Bible? A searching question indeed!

Being Examples

Those three very special weeks left their indelible impression on the lives of those Thessalonian Christians. Just how much of an impression we learn from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians? Of all the epistles of Paul in the New Testament, this may well have been the first to be written. He probably wrote it within months of leaving Thessalonica.

He writes to them in 1 Thessalonians 1:7-10: "So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come".

Just think of that! There were no newspapers, no radio or television, no phones or faxes. News travelled along those long, straight Roman roads on foot or, if you were in a hurry, on horseback. Yet in the space of a few months, news of the conversion of these Thessalonians and of their transformed lives had spread throughout Macedonia and Achaia, an area about the size of England! How was this transformation brought about? Why did the word of God through Paul have such a dramatic effect? Part of the answer must lie in the kind of servant Paul was as he had served amongst them. Some clues as to this we can pick up from 1 Thessalonians.

A model

Here was no time-serving, money-seeking servant of God. Rather he writes about himself, in 1 Thessalonians 2, as being gentle among them, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children (1 Thessalonians 2:7). In the same chapter, he writes also of his encouraging, comforting, and imploring every one of them, as a father does his own children (1 Thessalonians 2:11). The Thessalonian believers were well known for their generosity (1 Thessalonians 4:10). Nevertheless, it would appear that Paul laboured at his trade of tent making during the daytime, so as to impose no financial burden whatever upon these beloved Thessalonian saints. Then, at night time, he would be found busily preaching the word of God to them.

What a servant! He would later write to their fellow countrymen at Corinth, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you" (2 Corinthians 12:15). No wonder these young Thessalonian believers made such rapid progress in their Christian faith. Not only were they able to hear the word of the Lord through Paul but, equally importantly, they were able to see that same word lived out in Paul! In the book *'Uncle Tom's Cabin'*, the slave girl, Topsy, remarks, 'I suppose I just growed.' These infant Thessalonian believers did not just grow! They grew so well because they were nurtured in their Christian faith by this servant of God who loved them dearly.

Suffering

It is likely that the suffering which continually dogged Paul and his companions in their service, and which some of the Thessalonian believers had experienced while Paul was with them, continued to afflict the Thessalonians. So he can write, in 1 Thessalonians 2:14, of their becoming imitators of the churches of God in Judea. As those churches had suffered from the persecution of their fellow Jews, so now were the Thessalonians suffering persecution from their fellow countrymen. Here was Christ's Church being established upon earth. Here was a union comprising Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, slave and freeman (see 1 Corinthians 12:13) - a union of far greater power and consequence, and far longer lasting than any European Economic Union! Here was a union of witness and suffering, not diminished in any way by the suffering, but, rather, growing by it!

But how would these young Thessalonian believers stand up to such suffering? The real shepherd heart of the Apostle shines out in 1 Thessalonians 3. The suspense of not knowing how they were getting on was just too great for Paul. He had to send Timothy, though he could scarcely do without his help, from Athens to see how they were. The good news which Timothy was able to bring back greatly encouraged Paul and Silas.

He can write, "For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 3:8). 'No man is an island, entire of itself', wrote John Donne in the 17th Century. We interact upon each other. It is good that in the Christian family there is this mutual sharing of concern - and mutual sharing of joy. I have to ask myself, How much am I concerned for others? Are others blessed and encouraged by what they see in me?

The Return of Christ

It would seem that Timothy brought back word of one particular problem which was troubling the Thessalonian believers. Although Paul had only been with them for less than three weeks (Acts 17:2), he had during that time been able, amongst many other foundation truths of Christianity, to teach them about the imminent personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ for His Church. How readily they had embraced all Paul's teaching! How eagerly they looked forward to the return of their Saviour from heaven! "Perhaps today!" seems to have been their watchword. But the days had gone by and Jesus had not yet come. Some of their number had died. Would these, then, miss the blessing of their Lord's return?

Immorality

The Thessalonians had turned to God from idols, as we saw in 1 Thessalonians 1:9. That meant turning from the immorality so often associated with idol worship - no easy task for some. In 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12, Paul has to remind them that living for Christ and sexual immorality could not go together. "God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness", he writes (1 Thessalonians 4:7). A quiet life, a good day's work, honest behaviour, Paul writes, are all necessary accompaniments of the Christian faith. We still need that message today!

The Christian's Hope

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul sets out the wonderful truth of the coming of the Lord for His Church. It is this truth for which the epistle is best known. Indeed, the truth of the Lord's coming is referred to in each of the five chapters of this letter. Here is the Christian's hope! I use the word 'hope' in the true biblical sense and not, as I might say, "I hope it is sunny tomorrow." That is only wishful thinking on my part! The Christian hope of the coming of the Lord is sure and certain, though the timing of it is unknown.

Remember, this message of the coming of the Lord is addressed to Christians young in the faith. That living hope is a vital part of our experience, not just when it seems that we have only got a few more years to live! Its message comes to us all, young and old alike. It is the Christian's source of power in doing the Lord's work, of patience in difficulty, and of promise in the disappointments of life.

Paul is able to assure them that those who had died in Christ would in no way miss the blessing of His coming. Rather would they rise first to meet Him (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Christians alive at the time will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Listener, are you ready for that great day? These Thessalonians were ready, not because they were better than their fellow countrymen, but because they had turned to God from their idols. Turn to Christ now as your Saviour, if you have not already done so, and be ready for His coming! Even so, come, Lord Jesus! (see Revelation 22:20)

Pray for us

In closing, in 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul tries to encourage the Thessalonians in their infant faith. He adds, "Brethren, pray for us" (1 Thessalonians 5:25). He had already made clear, in 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10, that they were very much the subject of his prayers. How else could he continue to be a nursing mother, and a loving father, towards them? But in wonderful grace, he now wants them to pray for him. He needed their prayers, and he valued them.

The ministry of prayer can be very much undervalued. There are so many needy folk around. For how many of them do you pray each day? Is the prayer meeting a regular and vital part of the life of your church?

"What can I do for the Lord?" some Christians ask. Pray ... and pray ... and pray! "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of", wrote the poet Lord Tennyson.

But equally importantly, get someone to pray for you. What an encouragement it is, in times of need, and indeed, at any time, to know that others are praying for you.

In closing this introduction to 1 Thessalonians, we cannot do better than use the words with which he closes his letter: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen" (1 Thessalonians 5:28). May that same grace empower us all to live for Christ as the Thessalonians did!

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