

Truth for Today

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Studies in 1 Thessalonians: Paul - The man and his message - 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20

The Greatest Preacher

Some months ago, an historian posed the question: "Who was the greatest general who ever lived?" The subject made the national press and, in subsequent letters to the various editors, suggestions, all giving very good reasons, were made. The different candidates included Alexander, Alfred the Great, Bonaparte, Wellington, Montgomery and many others.

But supposing the question had been: "Who would be deemed to be the greatest preacher of all time?" Again, no doubt all kinds of names would be put forward, going back as far as Augustine and onwards to the present day: Luther, Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, Wesley and Whitfield. All would no doubt be worthy of consideration. But surely, the answer must be that it would be the Apostle Paul. He was second only to his Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20 we learn something about this servant of the Lord and today our objective is to note what scripture has to say about him.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-6, we find Paul the faithful. In Romans 1:1, he describes himself as "a servant, a called Apostle, separated unto the gospel of God" and in Galatians 1:12, he says that he received that gospel not from men, nor by teaching, but direct from his caller, the Lord Jesus Christ. Then in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, we find that he declares himself to be a trustee of the gospel.

Preaching the gospel

As such, Paul had to preach the gospel. It was a responsibility that could not be avoided. For him it was not a past-time, it was not a hobby; neither was it an occupation in the secular sense. He did not earn his living by being a preacher of the gospel. So we can see how important this grand subject was to him. He speaks about what he terms his entrance among them. We can read about this in Acts 17:1-9 and, from Acts 16:16-40, we read that he had just suffered a period of imprisonment and been terribly treated by the Jews in Philippi. But his coming amongst them had not been put off by his previous sufferings, but he had come despite them. The blessed result is stated in 1 Thessalonians 1:9: "For they themselves show of us what manner of entering we had unto you and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God." So his entrance among them, as he says, "had not been in vain." We have too here what might be termed the mode and substance of his preaching.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:2, we find that he preached "boldly." That means that he was forthright; he preached with authority; he did not hold anything back; he made no apology for what he had to say. Paul had a conviction and he was determined that that conviction should be shown in his preaching. Moreover, it was the truth that he had to declare; it was not deceitful (1 Thessalonians 2:3). He had no ulterior motive. In Philippians 1:15, we read of such a preaching where there were those who preached of envy and strife. In the churches of Galatia, there were those who preached another gospel: "Let them be accursed," says Paul (Galatians 1:8-9). Paul was set for the defence of the gospel. What he had to say was the truth, the truth of God.

Then there was no element of uncleanness about it; it was not impure, it was not morally corrupt. These Thessalonians had been pagans; they had turned from their idols to God (1 Thessalonians 1:9), but in their former beliefs, their former religions, moral corruptness and uncleanness were common. The pagan religions abounded with such. Not so the gospel that Paul preached. And then, it was without guile (1 Thessalonians 2:3), he did not seek to ensnare his hearers; he did not lead them into wrong paths; there was no trickery about his preaching. All this is very much in contrast with much of the preaching of today. The clear facts of the gospel are not presented with boldness but almost with apology. Sometimes it is not even the truth! Sometimes, it is only half the truth, which is tantamount to deceit. Hearers are pointed in a false direction.

Flattery

And then, he did not aim to please his hearers with flattering words. In Paul's second letter to his child in the faith, Timothy, he speaks about the last days. He says that in those days, "Men will heap unto themselves teachers, having itching ears" (2 Timothy 4:3). The hearers have "itching ears." What does that mean? It means that they only want to hear what is agreeable to them, and the preacher responds by giving them their desire. Such is commonplace in these days in which we live. How often do we hear clear, straightforward, bold preaching of the gospel? More often than not, today's congregations are fed with comments on the current events of the day, the latest decrees of political parties or controversial issues that emanate from all kinds of sources.

The whole truth of God

Not so Paul. He did not make comments on politics or philosophy. He preached what the Lord had given him to preach, like Jonah of old. When he was sent to Nineveh, Jehovah said to him: "Preach the preaching that I shall bid thee" (Jonah 3:1). So he did. And so did Paul. His responsibility was to proclaim the whole truth of God. When he met the Ephesian elders as he was returning to Jerusalem, he said to them: "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). And, in the preaching of the gospel, what did that mean?

Well, Paul, first of all, had to demonstrate that man, by nature, is a sinner. Read his opening chapters to the letter to the Romans. See there how he develops the progress of man from depraved sinner to one justified in the sight of God (particularly Romans 1:1-3:20) and there is little doubt that that is what he said in his preaching to these Thessalonians. He showed them the depravity of the human heart. As Jeremiah says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). How many men want to hear such truths as these? But it is so. And it is a necessary part of the gospel preaching because unless men ever realise that they are sinners in the sight of God, there will never be any desire in their hearts for salvation. And so Paul preached the depravity of man. He demonstrated that all men were sinners and, as such, they would come under the penalty of sin, the judgment of sin, which was death. But that is only the beginning. It would be no gospel at all if his preaching ceased at this point the whole gospel was preached and the remedy of God was made known.

He told them of a God who, although wholly righteous and who, therefore, had to condemn and judge sin was also a God whose very nature is love, who loves men, who desires to show mercy to all men. So He, Himself, provided the way whereby men's sins could be forgiven, righteously forgiven, and, ultimately, completely forgotten by God. How was it achieved? It was achieved by God sending His own Son into the world, His own Son becoming man, for the specific purpose of giving His life and dying upon the cross, paying the penalty of our sin, becoming our substitute. As the Apostle himself writes in the passage of Scripture already referred to, Romans 4:25: "Jesus our Lord ... was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." And the Scripture says that all who believe on Him shall be saved (see Acts 16:31). That was the gospel that Paul preached. Not judgement, but salvation and glory.

Paul the caring

Then, in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, we have Paul the caring. Paul was always mindful of the ongoing spiritual welfare of those converted under his ministry. We find evidence of this in Acts 15:36, where he desires to make a second missionary journey and he speaks to his former companion, Barnabas, and says: "Let us go and see how the brethren are getting on."

On his first journey to them these Thessalonian brethren had come to a knowledge of Christ. Paul had been the instrument through which this had taken place. Now he had left them but he had not forgotten them and he was very concerned as to how they were progressing spiritually. He desired that they should grow and make progress in the Christian faith. And so, he wants to go back and speak with them and minister to them again. What a lesson there is for us here! How many evangelists today; if they are used of the Lord in bringing some to a knowledge of Himself, make provision for their aftercare? Usually the practice is that after the gospel campaign, they move on and leave the babes in Christ to the care of others whom perhaps they do not even know themselves. Not so with Paul. You see, God's Word not only shows us the way of salvation but it also gives guidance for what might be termed our ecclesial life.

Just as God does not leave us to determine our own path to heaven, neither does He leave us to flounder as to our conduct as disciples. Many fully believe what the Bible teaches about the way of salvation, but are reluctant to continue in its teaching as to behaviour following conversion. 1 Corinthians, 11:1-14:40, is a present example of this tendency. Though these new believers were far away, he had them upon his heart and he wanted to go back and to see how they were progressing. And so of these Thessalonians, he speaks in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 of his great desire to see them again. Physically, he was separated from them but spiritually, he was joined in heart to them. He had not been able to go because Satan had hindered a return visit. Satan will no doubt do this. It is not his desire, even after he has lost a soul, to see that soul making progress in things of God.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:7, we read of Paul's tender care. The Holy Spirit puts it that he was "as a nurse cherishing her children." This is an expression exactly similar to that in Ephesians 5:29 where it speaks of: "The Lord nourishing and cherishing the church." Just think of that, Paul cared for these children of his in the same way, or so scripture puts it, as the Lord cared for and nourished his church. There was an affectionate desire for them that they might grow in Christ. And to show the reality of this, he would not trade upon their hospitality.

No doubt these Thessalonians would have taken him in and cared for him but no, rather than put any imposition upon them whatsoever, to make it clear that his work was the work of the gospel and the care of these Thessalonian saints, he would rather work to provide for himself. This is a scriptural principle and was Paul's *modus operandi* as Acts 20:34 and 1 Corinthians 4:12 indicate. Whilst the preachers of the gospel should live of the gospel, there is no scriptural injunction for a stipended ministry. A servant of the Lord is dependent upon his Lord and the Lord will provide, although often He will use other believers as His channel of supply. But whilst the Apostle would not wish to be indebted to the Thessalonians for material help, there was something he greatly coveted of them. In 2 Thessalonians 3:1, he requests, 'Brethren, pray for us'.

This is the greatest of all the Lord's servants, he who met the Lord on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-9), the one to whom the Lord revealed the truth he taught, the one who had been caught up into Paradise (see 2 Corinthians 12:4), craves the prayers of these new-born saints. Two things we learn here. Firstly, as followers of the Lord, let us never cease praying for His servants - how much they need our prayers today. Secondly, as servants of the Lord, we should earnestly seek the supportive prayer of our fellow believers.

Walking worthy of Him

In 1 Thessalonians 2:12, we read of his desire for them. It was that "they would walk worthy of God who had called them unto His kingdom and glory." God had called them unto his kingdom and glory. They should walk worthy of Him. Just think what a high and holy exhortation this is. God, in all His greatness and majesty, His holiness, His goodness. He has called us - we should walk worthy of Him. Have we an example; indeed we have. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has manifested God in this world. We have been made sons of God (John 1:12, 1 John 3:1-10) and as He walked, so should we. You see, outward testimony should always follow conversion.

Sadly today, we hear of those who make a profession of belief on the Lord Jesus Christ. They term themselves born-again Christians but their walk, subsequent to this great event, shows very little change from its character before their conversion. Before our conversion we were children of the Devil (John 8:33, 1 John 3:10) who is both the prince and god of this world (see John 12:31, 14:30; 2 Corinthians 4:4), and we lived under his control and under his influences. But our Lord in His prayer to the Father in John 17 says that His disciples "are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:14). And James, the practical writer, says in James 4:4: "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whomever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." If we then are to walk worthy of God, then worldly pursuits, whether they be in business, pleasure, friendships or leisure, must be eschewed.

Examples

Why are we told all these facts about the Apostle Paul? Paul is certainly not exalting himself but rather it is the Holy Spirit who acquaints us with the character of the Apostle. Surely it is because if we ourselves desire to be faithful servants of the Lord, then Paul is a fine example for us. He states in the 1 Corinthians 11:1: "Be ye followers of me," but then he is careful to add: "even as I also am of Christ." And in 1 Thessalonians 1:6 he says that "these Thessalonians had become followers of us. If we follow the Apostle Paul, we are surely following the Lord Jesus Himself and we can thereby learn much in our service for Christ by the ways in which the Apostle himself behaved and acted.

Suffering persecution

Then, in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16, we have what might be termed a little aside, for he gives something of the experiences of these Thessalonians upon hearing the gospel. It says that: "They received the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). The word of God, not the word of men. They had received it as such and had acted upon it. Whilst he had been among them, after their conversion he had exhorted and comforted and charged them. They were his children in the faith and as a father, even in the short time available to him, he had striven to ensure that their lives as Christians began in a positive way. They began to meet in churches as the disciples in Judaea had met. They followed the example of those early believers who were in the very centre where Christianity had been founded. The result was exactly the same for them as for those in Judaea. In Judaea, the brethren there suffered much from their fellow Jews and here, in Thessalonica, these dear brethren immediately begin to feel the opposition and persecution, even as the disciples in Judaea had experienced it, they from the Jews, these Thessalonians from their own countrymen.

The coming of Christ

Finally in 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20, we find Paul the rejoicing one. He looks forward to the coming of the Lord. We were told in the introductory address to 1 Thessalonians that the coming of Christ was mentioned in every chapter, and here it is in this second. "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? (1 Thessalonians 2:19). Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming, for ye are our glory and joy." Paul looks forward to this great event and you can read about it in Revelation 19:11-16. He looks forward to that wonderful day with his dear Thessalonians in mind. Then all the saints of the Lord, all those redeemed by Him, will be brought back at his appearing. The Thessalonians will be there, Paul will be there, and Paul visualises this great event. Here he is, in company with all the ransomed throng. He gazes over this vast multitude of white-robed saints seated upon their snow-white steeds; a company that cannot be numbered. And then, he espies his beloved Thessalonians. Oh, how his heart leapt for joy! There they were, his crown of rejoicing (1 Thessalonians 2:19). Do we look forward to that day with similar anticipation?

*"What a day will that be when the Saviour appears,
How welcome to those who have shared in His cross,
A crown incorruptible then will be theirs,
A rich compensation for suffering and loss."*

Thomas Kelly (1769-1854)

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