

3. Thessalonica in Paul's Day (3Q 2012—1 and 2 Thessalonians)

Biblical material: John 11:48–50, 1 John 2:15–17, 1 Cor. 9:19–27, John 3:3–8, 1 Cor. 16:19, 1 Cor. 9:19.

Quotes

- Custom adapts itself to expediency. *Tacitus*
- When virtue is lost, benevolence appears, when benevolence is lost right conduct appears, when right conduct is lost, expediency appears. Expediency is the mere shadow of right and truth; it is the beginning of disorder. *Lao Tzu*
- What is the appropriate behavior for a man or a woman in the midst of this world, where each person is clinging to his piece of debris? What's the proper salutation between people as they pass each other in this flood? *Buddha*
- The more man meditates upon good thoughts, the better will be his world and the world at large. *Confucius*
- Christianity is not a theory or speculation, but a life; not a philosophy of life, but a living presence. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*
- Love is unselfishly choosing for another's highest good. *C S Lewis*

Questions

Why would it be important to know the situation there in Thessalonica? How do we apply this to our own times? How does our personal experience impact the way we see God? Despite our individual problems, how can we know that God is still there and working on our behalf? How do we reveal God's character in our own lives?

Bible summary

Political expediency is well expressed in John 11:48-50. The arrival of the Romans in Israel had severe consequences, and they were also present in Thessalonica. This affected the situation that Paul had to deal with in presenting the gospel. The harsh reality of being willing to sacrifice one for the sake of the people shows what happens when you think in this way. 1 John 2:15-17 reminds us not to love this world, because it is passing away—an important message for us as well as to the people of the ancient world.

In 1 Cor. 9:19-27 Paul sets out his strategy of witness—being all things to everyone so he might win some. He is not concerned with any other objective, but he takes an interest in what others are thinking and doing so that he can witness to them. This is said similarly in 1 Cor. 9:19.

Even though we are very much in this world, we must keep our eyes fixed on the spiritual, as Jesus told Nicodemus I John 3:3-8. 1 Cor. 16:19 references the churches of Asia, of which Thessalonica was one. These were of course home churches, since no specific church buildings had been constructed, and people met in their respective homes, sharing together.

Comment

The background details provided in the lesson are surely useful, since they help us understand the problems faced by the Thessalonians and how Paul spoke to these issues

while presenting the good news. However it's disappointing that we cannot integrate these details more effectively with the Bible study that Sabbath school is meant to be. As the lesson study itself admits, "this lesson is not directly focused on the Bible." (Sabbath afternoon's lesson).

The biblical material presented for this time references various situations that does involve politics and government. Our intention here will be to make sure we understand more about how the good news really was transformational for the Thessalonians, and how this gave them hope in what was for many of them a desperate and hopeless situation. As the lesson makes clear, life in Thessalonica was good for a few, and tough for many. As a city "adopted" by Rome, they had to pay tribute, and like all taxes was problematic in placing an extra burden on the inhabitants.

In addition their religious systems did not offer hope. Many of the populace were ground down in the monotonous demands of life, made worse by the seeming pointlessness of it all. The "old gods" were not relevant; religion seemed to offer no answers. This is why Paul stresses the Christian hope as a vital part of the good news. He spoke to the ordinary people on the street, who were receptive to the good news. They met together in homes, and talked about what they had learned, worshiping God and celebrating the gift of Jesus.

Here we see a model for us. While it has been helpful in some way to develop a large church administrative organization that can do more than we can as individuals, this has come at some cost. We need to recapture the spirit of these original home churches, focusing on people rather than buildings and institutions, working for family, friends, and neighbors. We need to address very specifically the problems and concerns they have, and show them how God can help them and answer their questions. Most of all we need to lead them to the Savior Jesus who tells us all, "if you've see me, you've seen the Father." Why is this so important? Because we can only have perfect love if that love drives out our fear, especially our fear of God. We cannot love God if we fear him. Knowing God as he is revealed to us in the life and words of Jesus means we can truly love him accept his healing salvation, and become his witnesses to those around us—and to the entire universe.

Ellen White Comments

God has given men reason, and the noblest use to which the intellectual faculties can be put is the study of his word. And when through diligent and prayerful application the will of God has been discerned, nothing should be allowed to come in between God and the soul to swerve it from the path of strict obedience. No suggestions of propriety, no motives of expediency, no selfish desire for gain, no fear of loss, dishonor, or reproach, should be considered for a moment. God commands, and that is enough. The light shines, and it is our duty to walk in it. {ST, July 24, 1884}

In Jesus mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other. In His life and character He not only reveals the character of God, but the possibility of man... As the sinner looks upon the Redeemer, he finds hope, assurance, and joy. Faith takes hold of Christ in love. Faith works by love, and purifies the soul. {ISM 349.2}