

1 and 2 Thessalonians Lesson 1 3Q 2012

The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica

A little history of Thessalonica:

The City of Thessalonica.

The city of Thessalonica flourished for hundreds of years, partly because of its ideal location. It was situated on the banks of a hospitable harbor in the Thermaic Gulf near the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea. In the Apostle Paul's day it was the chief seaport of the Roman province of Macedonia. Thessalonica ranked with Corinth and Ephesus, the main ports of the provinces of Achaia and Asia, as a great shipping center.

Thessalonica also enjoyed another advantage. The Egnatian Way, the main Roman road from Rome to the Orient via Byzantium (modern Istanbul), passed through the city. This put Thessalonica in direct contact with many other important cities by land as well as by sea. It was one of the most important centers of population in Paul's day, occupying a strategic location both governmentally and militarily.

Estimates of the population of Thessalonica in New Testament times place it at near 200,000 (Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964, p. 245). Most of the inhabitants were native Greeks, but many Romans also lived there. Orientals and Jews likewise populated the city. Wherever commerce flourished in the ancient world one would find Jewish businessmen. The Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica was influential; many Greek proselytes were present when Paul preached there (Acts 17:4).

First Thessalonians reflects the moral climate of the city. The pagan Greek religion of the largest segment of the population produced many forms of immorality but

whetted the appetites of some for spiritual reality. Evidently the higher standards of Judaism attracted disillusioned Greeks, Romans, and Orientals to the synagogue.

Thessalonica was built by Cassander in 315 B.C. near the site of an ancient city called Therma, named for the hot springs in the area. He chose this place for its excellent location and named it after his wife, Thessalonica, who was a half sister of Alexander the Great. Cassander was a Greek general under Alexander.

Many years later, when the Romans conquered the area (168 B.C.), they divided Macedonia into four districts and named Thessalonica the capital of one of these. In 146 B.C. the Romans reorganized Macedonia and made Thessalonica the capital of the new province which encompassed all four of the older districts. In 42 B.C. Thessalonica received the status of a free city from Anthony and Octavian (later called Caesar Augustus) because the Thessalonians had helped these men defeat their adversaries, Brutus and Cassius. The Romans ruled Thessalonica with a loose hand; though the Roman proconsul (or governor) lived there, no Roman troops were garrisoned in the city. The citizens were allowed to govern themselves, as in a Greek city-state, which they did through a group of five or six politarchs, a senate, and a public assembly.

In World War I the Allies based soldiers in Thessalonica, and during the Second World War the Nazis extracted 60,000 Jews from the city and executed them. Thessalonica still exists today with a population near 300,000. It is called Salonica (or Thessaloniki)¹

¹ Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). Vol. 2: *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (687). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Luke gave a detailed account of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–10). Paul taught in the synagogue for three Sabbaths. He worked to bring in support (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8) and also received offerings from the Philippian church (Phil. 4:16).

Paul was forced out of the city and went to Berea (Acts 17:11–12). Jews from Thessalonica disrupted the ministry in Berea, forcing Paul to depart (Acts 17:13–15). Paul moved on to Athens and left Silas and Timothy in Berea to continue the work. Silas and Timothy eventually joined Paul in Athens (1 Thess. 3:1–2). From there Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica. Paul had gone on to Corinth where Timothy again caught up with him and brought news from Thessalonica (Acts 18:1–5). Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth.²

Thoughts about the history of Thessalonica?

Read Memory text 1Thes 2:13: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."

Thoughts about this?

How do you think the Thessalonians knew this was the word of God?

- Checked it with OT Scripture?
- Had miraculous signs and wonders?
- Conviction in their hearts by the HS?
- It made sense?
- It was more reasonable than any other religion they had heard?

² Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary*. The Tyndale reference library (615). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

It was a pretty radical teaching Paul brought them, but, were they prepared because of their own prior beliefs? What were some of the common pagan concepts?

Was it surprising for them to hear that a god left heaven and became a man? Or that God was interacting with men?

What was the typical character traits of the gods of the Greeks? Weren't they fairly selfish in character? Didn't they use power, might, lightening bolts, etc. to force their way?

Did the gods of the Greeks demonstrate selflessness or did they incite fear?

Would it have been appealing to hear a message that God is actually like Jesus? Could this contrast in character have met the longing of the heart – to be loved, for a Savior to deliver, rather than a deity to demand sacrifice from the worshiper?

From *Rediscovering the Scandal of the Cross* by Green and Baker:

“Among the Greeks and Romans, then, sacrifices were offered in recognition of the supremacy of the gods and in exchange for their favors. Walter Burkert refers to this function of worship as ‘crisis management.’ Although he is aware that, in ancient Greece, sacrificial rites fostered fellowship among the worshipers who shared in the sacrificial meal, he also recognizes that ‘adversity teaches prayer.’”

All the great crises that leave men helpless even when united may be interpreted as caused by the wrath of the Stronger Ones, gods and heroes: bad harvests and infertility of the soil, diseases of men and cattle, barrenness of women and abnormal offspring, civil wars and defeat by a foreign army. Conversely, if these powers are appeased, all kinds of blessings must return, rich harvests, healthy

children, and civil order. The traditional means to secure the one and prevent the other are sacrifice and prayer especially in the form of vows.

“This does not mean that the Gentiles among whom Paul proclaimed, and to whom he wrote, concerning the cross of Christ were well-prepared culturally for this message... It does mean, however, that Paul’s Gentile audiences were likely to read the story of the cross with certain guiding presuppositions. Chief among these would have been the arbitrariness of the gods, whose anger must be turned away and whose benefits must be sought. It is puzzling that many of our American readers share these same assumptions about God – in spite of the fact that neither the Scriptures of Israel nor Paul himself supports this view.” (p. 50-51)

Thoughts? How many today approach God in “crisis management” mode – trying to appease him and obtain blessings?

Do you think the Greeks, getting a glimpse of a God who sacrifices Himself, rather than demands sacrifice, resonated with this truth?

The last paragraph states, “But our confidence in God is even more solidly grounded when it is based on the clear teaching of His Word.”

Thoughts about this idea?

If the Word is so clear why are there so many Christian denominations and so many disagreements even within the same denominations?

Is it because the Word is vulnerable to the culture lens of the reader? And could it be that this vulnerability to cultural interpretation and misunderstanding is magnified because the

Word is used in isolation and other threads of evidence are excluded?

I want to suggest a new method of studying God, let's call it the Integrative Evidence Based Approach and it requires we harmonize three threads of evidence:

- Scripture
- God's laws in nature
- Experience

Here are a couple of quotations from one of the founders of our church that supported this approach:

- In the study of the sciences also, we are to obtain a knowledge of the Creator. **All true science is but an interpretation of the handwriting of God in the material world.** Science brings from her research only fresh evidences of the wisdom and power of God. **Rightly understood, both the book of nature and the written word make us acquainted with God** by teaching us something of the wise and beneficent laws through which he works. {CE 66.2}
- **Rightly understood, both the revelations of science and the experiences of life are in harmony with the testimony of Scripture to the constant working of God in nature.** {Ed 130.3}

What do you think about an approach that requires integration of all three threads of evidence? Does it offer any benefits to approaches that use only the Scripture? What benefits?

Which is more likely to end up with erroneous beliefs – Scripture only, or an integrated approach that requires harmony of all three threads?

SUNDAY

The lesson asks us to read Acts 16:9-40 and asks why the people reacted so negatively to the gospel.

In the account Paul presented the gospel to Lydia and her family and they accepted it quite readily. Then a slave with a demonic spirit, who was used for fortune telling, followed Paul and Silas shouting that they are bringing the truth for salvation. Paul cast out the demon and the owners of the slave aroused opposition to Paul and Silas for the loss of the slave's abilities and their means of making money.

So, why did the town get aroused against Paul and Silas? Because the owners of the slave were upset at losing their "cash cow."

When you read the story did you wonder why the demon inspired the woman to follow them and shout they were bringing the truth for salvation? What reasons could there have been?

- Demons are notorious for telling the truth and promoting the gospel?
- Demons are helpless and are compelled to tell the truth in the presence of an Apostle?
- To discredit the work of Paul – how many believed the spiritual women?
- To distract Paul and unsettle him?
- To ultimately entice them to cast out the demon so the owners would turn the city against them?

Thoughts?

Read first paragraph, "The gospel..." thoughts?

How do you hear this paragraph? Would you express it differently? How?

How do you define forgiveness? Is it God's personal pardon? Is it reconciliation with God? Is it transformation of the believer back to God's ideal?

Are people sometimes confused by this question? Could statements like this be part of the problem?

David was pardoned of his transgression because he humbled his heart before God in repentance and contrition of soul, and believed that God's promise to forgive would be fulfilled. He confessed his sin, repented, and was reconverted. In the rapture of the assurance of forgiveness, he exclaimed, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile." Psalm 32:1, 2. **The blessing comes because of pardon; pardon comes through faith that the sin, confessed and repented of, is borne by the great Sin Bearer.** Thus from Christ cometh all our blessings. **His death is an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He is the great Medium through whom we receive the mercy and favor of God.** {OHC 83.5} 1891

What do you think? How do we understand such statements?

What about covering of sin?

In Hebrew there is something called parallelism in which one verse is followed by another which expands or elaborates on the previous verse.

Example:

"But let judgment run down as waters,
and righteousness as a mighty stream." Amos 5:24

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Ps 19:1

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile." Psalm 32:1, 2

Do you see the parallelism? Sins forgiven parallels with the Lord not imputing iniquity – to forgive means not to hold it against someone.

And to cover parallels with "in whose spirit is no guile"

Fantastic – notice it is not a covering up, but a cleansing such that no guile is in the spirit of the forgiven.

The Hebrew translated to cover can mean – "to keep to oneself, to not respond with knowledge, i.e., keep information from others, though known and understood by oneself" ³

So Happy is the man whose sin is forgiven, who isn't exposed, humiliated, ruined, who God doesn't find fault with and in whose spirit is no evil.

Here is a clarifying comment from the same author 5 years later:

But forgiveness has a broader meaning than many suppose. When God gives the promise that He "will abundantly pardon," He adds, as if the meaning of that promise exceeded all that we could comprehend: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:7-9.

God's forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by

³ Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness for sin, but reclaiming from sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:10. And again he says, "**As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us.**" Psalm 103:12.
 {MB 114.1} 1896

Notice, forgiveness is not about covering up our sinful condition, but about removing sinfulness from us, so that no guile is left in our spirit!

Then why the language of pardon?

Because we need the assurance of His pardon because sin causes guilt and fear, and we doubt He could possibly love us and want us after we have sinned. Consider the evidence:

- Adam and Eve in the garden – what did they do? Ran and hid, why? They were afraid, where did the fear originate? What did God do? How did He respond?
 - Did God forgive before or after they repented?
 - But what needed to be communicated in order to bring them to repentance?
 - The truth about God's forgiveness so their fear would be removed.
 - The kindness of God brings us to repentance (Rom 2:4)
- What about the woman caught in adultery? What did Jesus do? Who do we see when we see Jesus?
 - Did God (in human form) forgive first or did she repent first?
 - What empowered her to live a better life?
- What about those who put Christ on the Cross? What did Jesus do?
 - Did Jesus forgive?
 - Did they repent?

- And the Scripture says,
 - “While we were still sinners Christ died for us.”
 - “If God is for us who can be against us...”
 - “For God so loved the world that he gave...”

The evidence reveals that God is forgiving, without any action from anyone, including Christ, but we could not be healed, reconciled, rebuilt, restored to unity with God without the action of Christ.

We need to hear the assurance from God that he forgives, pardons, doesn't condemn, to calm our sin-based fears of condemnation and rejection, but God has nothing originating in him that requires action in order for him to forgive or pardon.

Read second paragraph, “Being that the gospel...” thoughts?

This certainly is a reason some people reject the gospel – is it the only reason? Do you think this reason would be why Buddhist monks reject the gospel, for money, sex and power? Can you think of any other reasons?

- Don't believe they actually have a problem that needs fixing
- Don't believe in the gospel they have heard – because it doesn't merit belief
- Believe the problem is something other than it is and thus have another solution, like meditation, reincarnation etc.

Bottom green section asks, “What are the things of the world that, if we're not careful, can draw us away from the Lord?”

- Worries
- Bills
- Health problems
- Politics – in the civil government and in the church

- Ball teams
- Entertainment
- Substances
- Sex
- Relationships
- Education
- Career
- Worldly system of government and law accepted into the religion, such that we become controlling and Pharisaical

MONDAY

Paul's preaching strategy - what do you understand the strategy of Paul to be?

Read bottom green – “Notice that Paul...” This is correct, Paul tried to understand the minds, biases, belief, attitudes of his audience and then shape the gospel to their understanding.

Is Paul the only one who did this in Scripture?

What does this mean for how we must read and interpret Scripture?

Could the various metaphors of Scripture be crafted to the mindset of the audience being addressed? In other words, might we err in making too much out of a particular example, metaphor or angle of approach?

I am thinking particularly of any legal language, would Paul tend to use more legal examples when speaking to Jews who were very legalistic? Does that mean we should understand Paul to be promoting a legal gospel?

TUESDAY

Read first paragraph, “Since ancient times...” thoughts?

What led to the elimination of the suffering texts? Would it be a misunderstanding of the problem?

If the problem was that God was offended and God needed appeasement by sacrifice that might lead to one type of interpretation of Scripture. If understanding the problem is that mankind is defective and needs fixing, then that would lead to another type of interpretation.

Read third paragraph, “Of course, a major problem...” thoughts?

Do we as Christians do any better job of incorporating a balanced view of God’s character? Or do we present God as two faced, a god who is not only loving, but also just, a god who returns with a look of love on his face for the righteous, but a look of anger and wrath on his face for the wicked?

Will Christ come with two faces?

The Jews wanted a Messiah who would use power to destroy their enemies, and what do Muslims want in their Twelfth Imam?

- A powerful deliverer who will punish and destroy their enemies.
- And what do Christians preach about Jesus’ return?

What is the difference between what the world is waiting for today and what the Jews were wanting 2000 years ago?

Did Jesus change His character in the last 2000 years? Will He who forgave his enemies and told us to love our enemies come back with something other than love for his enemies?

The lesson suggests there is much confusion about the second coming – what is the second coming of Christ confused with or about?

Could it be the common teaching of the second coming and how Christ will treat the wicked, fits more with the beast of revelation than with the Lamb of God?

What will Christ's attitude be toward the wicked in the end? If he has a forgiving heart, why do they perish? Because their condition is not healed – they die of a terminal condition.

Bruce Reichenbach in *The Nature of the Atonement* describes that sin kills, whereas God, through Christ, heals:

Why is the death of the Servant of Physician necessary? For most atonement theories this is the heart of the problem. If God is omnipotent and merciful, why demand a route to salvation that exacts the price of the death of God's Son?

Our response can be traced to the virulence of our disease borne by the Servant. What he takes on is no trivial matter; the wages of sin are death (Rom 6:23). Death, in some form, came into the world through sin (Rom 5:12). Christ voluntarily assumes this virulent poison, so strong that it brings death, ours and his, but at the same time not so strong that death can permanently hold the Physician. The death is in the sin. Our sin, not God, kills the Physician. God's part is in mercy to send his Servant/Physician to heal and then to restore him to life and power.ⁱ

Thoughts?

WEDNESDAY

Suffering Before Glory

What does the title mean to you?

Can you think of any examples other than Jesus?

- Olympic Gold medal winners – do they suffer before glory? How, why?
- Nobel Prize Winners – any suffering before glory? How, why?
- Great artists – any suffering before production of masterpieces? How why?
- Individual character development and victory – any suffering before glory? How and why?

Why is there suffering before glory?

What do you think of this quotation, do you agree?

A refining, purifying process is going on among the people of God, and the Lord of hosts has set His hand to this work. **This process is most trying to the soul, but it is necessary in order that defilement may be removed.** Trials are essential in order that we may be brought close to our heavenly Father, in submission to His will, that we may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness. . . . **The Lord brings His children over the same ground again and again, increasing the pressure until perfect humility fills the mind, and the character is transformed;** then they are victorious over self, and in harmony with Christ and the Spirit of heaven. **The purification of God's people cannot be accomplished without suffering.** . . . He passes us from one fire to another, testing our true worth. True grace is willing to be tried. If we are loath to be searched by the Lord, our condition is one of peril. . . . {ML 92.2}

It is in mercy that the Lord reveals to men their hidden defects. He would have them critically examine the complicated emotions and motives of their own hearts, and detect that which is wrong, and modify their dispositions and refine their manners. **God would have His servants become acquainted with their own hearts. In order to bring to them a true knowledge of their condition, He permits the fire of affliction to assail them, so that they may be purified.** The trials of

life are God's workmen to remove the impurities, infirmities, and roughness from our characters, and fit them for the society of pure, heavenly angels in glory. . . .
The fire will not consume us, but only remove the dross, and we shall come forth seven times purified, bearing the impress of the Divine. {ML 92.3}

Thoughts? Why is there suffering?

THURSDAY

Read last paragraph, “What we can see here...” thoughts?

Why is the gospel for all people? Because all suffer with the same problem and need the same solution.

Do we ever struggle with communicating the equality of all men, the commonality of all humans, the underlying difficulty with which we all struggle?

FRIDAY

Read and discuss questions 1 and 2

¹ Beilby, J., Eddy, P., *The Nature of the Atonement*, Intervarsity Press 2006, p. 137.