

Thanksgiving in Thessaloniki

Based on 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13
Given at Evangelical Free Church, East Lindfield
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by Bob Mendelsohn

Shalom! Thank you friends on the Council for letting me come along today to teach and to bring the message of Jesus to the saints here. Thanks for opening the pulpit to one of the Jews for Jesus here in Sydney. And thanks for your love for the Lord who brings us all new life.

From what I hear you've been studying the book, actually letter of Paul the Jew for Jesus, to the people of God in Thessaloniki, a marvelous, albeit short communiqué which unpacks deep truths about the love of God and so much more. And today I've been asked to teach from the section (2.17-3.13) just read.

Let me try to outline this short section and then let's rehearse it in more depth.

1) Who are Paul and the Thessalonians to each other?

- a. Assurance of Paul's affection for the church in Thessaloniki (2.17-20)
- b. We (you and I) are destined for affliction (3.1-5)
- c. Partner's report (Timothy returns with the news) (3.6-9)

2) Paul's prayers for the Thessalonians (10-13)

- a. To complete what is lacking in your faith
- b. For God to guide me to you
- c. To love one another more
- d. So that you are blameless to the end

So let's go back and have a longer look at this section, and see what it might have to say to us, in Sydney, geographically far from Greece/ Macedonia, and chronologically far from the First Century.

1) Who are Paul and the Thessalonians to each other?

- a. Assurance of Paul's affection for the church in Thessaloniki (2.17-20)

I like this part of the Bible. It's so unlike other ancient and hagiographic material. In other religious writings, you wouldn't find such personal data. You wouldn't get a glimpse of such personal affection. Listen to these words, "For you are our glory and joy." Or again, "all the more eager with great desire to see your face."

This personal consideration is a good word for a missionary like me to remember. When I write or visit a church, I can be that personal and that's even encouraged in the Bible. Paul is so passionate, it's warm and fuzzy.

b. We (you and I) are destined for affliction (3.1-5)

As quickly as I liked the first section, I really don't like this section of the letter. Who wants to suffer? Certainly men don't like to suffer; it's good that women have the babies, isn't it?

The classic Jewish view is stated by Victor Frankl¹ who said, "We can discover meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by doing a deed; (2) by experiencing a value; and (3) by suffering." The need for suffering actually plays into the Jewish Day of Atonement. That's the day of getting right with God which we just noted last Sunday/Monday. The most important day in the Jewish liturgical year. (Leviticus 16. 30). After the destruction of the temple, it was believed that the day itself rather than the temple ritual atoned for Israel's sin. "Suffering brings forth a redemptive act of charity" (*Judaism and disability: portrayals in ancient texts from the Tanach* by Judith Abrams, p. 95, 97)

But suffering doesn't atone, any more than good things chastise us or cleanse us. Those are consequences, and situations, but not what can cleanse us of sin. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

But as for suffering, Helen Keller said, "The world is full of suffering, it is also full of overcoming it." Maybe that's what the Apostle Paul had in mind here. He says, "we have been destined for this" and again, "when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know."

You and I might think of sufferings as the sniffle of a spring flu or being delayed on the Waringah freeway, but think about those in Indonesia and Samoa this week who suffered earthquakes. Think about them, but that's still not what the Apostle is referencing.

Paul is referencing the suffering that a believer endures for his faith. It's not suffering of health or suffering associated with the weather.

¹ van Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. Frankl was the founder of logotherapy, which is a form of Existential Analysis, the "Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy". His best-selling book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (published under a different title in 1959: *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*, and originally published in 1946 as *trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*), chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp inmate and describes his psychotherapeutic method of finding meaning in all forms of existence, even the most sordid ones, and thus a reason to continue living. Frankl was one of the key figures in existential therapy.

It's suffering for our faith, the kind that believers in Jesus in Indonesia suffer from raging Muslims in Aceh, or underground Christians in China feel from threatening and menacing governmental authorities. It's the kind our Jews for Jesus missionaries cop from anti-missionaries in Israel even this week, as they angrily rage against our efforts to bring the Gospel to the Jewish people.

I'm receiving updates from our Israel team and if you'd like, you can sign up today using those white cards you received. Please fill it out and turn it into the office or to me at the resource/ materials table after the service. We'll keep you posted.

Peter Kreeft is one of my favourite authors. He wrote a classic book to help the Christian understand suffering in 1986, *Making Sense out of Suffering*. It's full of great wisdom, no doubt gained from great suffering. I commend the book to you as a very helpful resource for this painful subject.

Kreeft quotes John Locke² who recommended to parents to let their children walk to school with holes in their shoes. Yup, he encouraged parents to put holes in the shoes, so that the children would learn better. Why? Suffering together builds togetherness and if togetherness is more important for us and for one joy than freedom from suffering is, then God is good to allow this suffering. (Kreeft, p 72)

There are problems with this understanding but Paul is arguably in favor of joint suffering. That's probably his understanding in our passage. He's saying, "I told you we would suffer; I told you you would suffer." Sort of, 'let's embrace this situation and grow in it.'

What's the situation? The persecution that Paul and Silas and others had experienced in Philippi just 80 km from Thessaloniki and in their own city (Acts 16, 17) in the next chapter. Persecution included being locked up, being slandered,

² an English philosopher. Died 1704. Locke is considered the first of the British empiricists, but is equally important to social contract theory. His ideas had enormous influence on the development of epistemology and political philosophy, and he is widely regarded as one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers, classical republicans, and contributors to liberal theory. His writings influenced Voltaire and Rousseau, many Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, as well as the American revolutionaries. This influence is reflected in the American Declaration of Independence.[2]

Locke's theory of mind is often cited as the origin for modern conceptions of identity and "the self", figuring prominently in the later works of philosophers such as David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. Locke was the first philosopher to define the self through a continuity of "consciousness". He also postulated that the mind was a "blank slate" or "tabula rasa"; that is, contrary to Cartesian or Christian philosophy, Locke maintained that people are born without innate ideas, and that knowledge is instead determined only by experience derived by sense perception.[3]

experiencing false testimony in court, being beaten and ridiculed...all because of their faith in Jesus.

That, friends, that is biblical suffering.

c. Partner's report (Timothy returns with the news) (3.6-9)

Then we see the response of the apostle in light of the news report of Timothy who returns with updated information. He's pleased; in fact, he's happy. If the apostle is ever happy, this might be a moment. He said, "now we really live"

Then we get to the final section, the prayer of Paul for the believers.

2) Paul's prayers for the Thessalonians (10-13)

These prayers can be summarized in four categories.

- a. To complete what is lacking in your faith. Growth.
- b. For God to guide me to you. Reunion.
- c. To love one another more. Love for all men.
- d. So that you are blameless to the end. Blameless.

Nothing here is groundbreaking. But all of it is useful for us to consider. Paul is hoping that God does stuff in the lives of his friends and fellow saints.

And that stuff is for them to grow, to be in fellowship with him and the apostles, for increase in love and for holiness. The NIV commentary rightly helps us understand this final theme.

"The goal of Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians is that the Lord will grant them inner strength to be "blameless" in holiness "in the presence of our God and Father" when the Lord Jesus returns. He looks forward to the time of final accounting. An overflow of love (v. 12) is the only route to holy conduct in which no fault can be found (v. 13). Unless love prevails, selfish motives inhibit ethical development by turning us toward ourselves and away from God and blameless living. The holiness of God is the ideal we must seek (cf. Lev 19:2; 1Pe 1:16)."

Here's what the author of the commentary is saying about 'selfish motives inhibiting.' If you are looking at 'blamelessness' and thinking of a checklist of your goodness, you will be selfish. In other words, if your relationship with God is based on your performance, on your accomplishment of certain sets of activities be they Bible reading or praying for 10 minutes or attending church, then all you will have happen is a man-centered religion. Here's what I mean. If you think you are good because you have done some religious activity, if you are acceptable and accepted by God because of what you have done, then you are missing it. You will be thinking in human terms and giving yourself approval, then you will be proud. If you fail to perform, then you will be condemned. Either way, it's filled with 'selfish motives' that inhibit.

On the other hand, if you are aware of your acceptance by God on the basis of what He has done, then you are onto it. Holiness is a response to God, not a way of getting God's attention.

Brothers and sisters in East Lindfield, God has given us a reunion today and we are hearing from the apostle. We are encouraged to love others, not only those in the church, but with *Jesus all about life*, and with your own program of evangelism and growth, to those outside the church. God wants us to represent him in the dark world. God wants us to help others know him. And that's hard work. And you might cop some serious persecution. You might be rejected for being a "Holy Joe" or a "Holy Joanna" but at the end of the day, "we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts." (2.4)

We moved here from New York City in 1998 to start Jews for Jesus. And yes, we've made a difference. We've endured some persecution on us, on our book shop, on our advertisements, on the reputation of Jesus... all because of our faith. And we have to ask...is it worth it? Our answer...like the apostle, YES!

We've been approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel. Men may be pleased like Gary and Natalie, like Paul and Carolyn. All Jews, all new believers. With each I continue to speak and watch them grow like the apostle would have been in touch with those in Thessaloniki.

Is it worth it? What would you say? I hope you agree with me.. it's worth it all.

If you are here this morning (or reading this online) or hearing this sermon online, I hope you will also consider Jesus for yourself. He has the answers to all life's questions. He understands suffering like no one else, since he had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth. The innocent died for us and took our penalties for sin on himself. And he did it willingly.

If you have never accepted Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, do it now. Repent of your sins and ask Him to forgive you. And he will do it. And you will be part of the growing community of faith represented here at East Lindfield and in Jews for Jesus and in so many countries and churches worldwide.

Then "may He establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus". For that day we wait and until that day we work.

Shalom.

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