

1 Thessalonians 1: Examples of Faith

When we consider our own steps in life, and our journey towards the coming Kingdom of God, we are privileged to have the examples of those who have gone before us. Walking the same walk as we, the examples of faithful men of old can spur us on, by providing an example for us to follow. In our New Testament reading for today, our attention is directed to the example of the Thessalonians. Both in the way in which they received the Gospel of Truth in the midst of adversity, and their conduct in the face of persecution, we can find examples to learn from. So the Apostle commanded them: “ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the Word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit: So that **ye were ensamples** to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia ...” (1 Thes. 1:6-7). For our exhortation today, we shall consider the example of faith as exhibited by this Gentile ecclesia, in response to the teaching of the Apostle Paul.

As per above, we are informed that the saints at Thessalonians received the Word preached “in much affliction”. The account where this is recorded is Acts chapter 17, where we have the description of the apostolic preaching in the synagogues. The Apostle “three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures, Opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead: and that the Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ” (Acts 17:3).

The response to Paul’s message was mixed. The disbelieving Jews “moved with envy took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar” (vs 5). But the Gentiles received the Word very differently: “some of them believed, and consorted with Paula and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few” (vs. 4). These Gentile converts, it would appear, were persecuted by the Jews because of their reception of the Word preached (see 2:14-15), but they were strong in faith, recognising that what was being preached was the Word of God, and not Paul’s own opinions:

“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it **not as the word of men, but as it is in Truth, the word of God** which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thes. 2:13).

There is an example in these things that have a direct bearing on our preaching. What Paul taught was not of men, but the inspired Word of God. The power that the Gospel has to save, is not in man’s own interpretation of things, but the fact that it is Yahweh’s Inspired Word. So Paul himself declared elsewhere: “Christ sent me not to baptise, but to preach the Gospel: not with the wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are being saved, it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:17-18).

Anything that differs from the Gospel that Paul preached is therefore not “a different point of view”, as some say, but is a departure from the Truth, which results in preaching a different Gospel (see Gal. 1:6-7) which cannot save. Sometimes it is said that those of “other churches” have merely “come to a different conclusion” about things, and that we should fellowship them also. But Scripture tells us that their “names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). We need to be very careful in our preaching and interaction with others, that we present the simplicity of the Truth as revealed in Scripture. As an elderly brother (now fallen asleep) used to say, we need to be able to state “Thus saith the Lord ...” in our preaching, for the message is his in both form and content.

This revealed Word is not simply ink on a page. Words are the vehicles of meaning, and the meaning of God’s Word contains a power which is able to totally transform the hearers/readers. As Paul said to the Thessalonians, it “effectually worketh also in you that believe”. It is “living and powerful” (Heb. 4:12), and is able to enlighten the darkest recesses of the heart. For this reason, we are told to “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom ...” (Col. 3:16) – and it logically follows that this is impossible, unless we put it in us. We need to give daily attention to our spiritual diet just as much as

the natural diet to meet our physical needs. We have spiritual needs also, and we must daily partake of the bread of life, which will strengthen us to do spiritual things.

we read in 1 Thessalonians 1: "our Gospel came unto you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance" (1 Thes. 1:5). The Apostles had the Holy Spirit gifts, which although they confirmed the validity of the spoken Word, did not detract from it. So the emphasis on Acts 17 is on the message itself: "Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days **reasoned with them out of the Scriptures**" (Acts 17:2-3). The record in Acts does not record what Spirit Gifts were used to reinforce the message, but it rather focusses on that which matters most: the Word of the Gospel was preached.

In our preaching, we must take care not to diminish the power of the Gospel, and Christ Crucified. The power to save is in the Gospel message itself, and not in the draperies which are sometimes added to make that message more palatable to men. Sometimes the emphasis is to get as many as we can through the door: to try and baptise as many folk as possible. But that is not the emphasis of the Apostles: "Christ sent me not to baptise, but to preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 1:17). Our remit is not to simply attract numbers, but to preach the Gospel that saves, and not to detract from the power of that message in an effort to make more converts.

A THREEFOLD EXAMPLE

Returning to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, we find that there are three aspects in which the believers at Thessalonica excelled at, as an example for us. So Apostle remembered:

"Your **work of faith**, and **labour of love**, and **patience of hope in** our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father" (1 Thes. 1:3).

The first aspect of each of these three things (Work, Labour and Patience) come together again in the Apocalypse:

"I know thy **works**, and thy **labour**, and thy **patience** ... and has borne, and hast patience, and for my Name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted" (Rev. 2:2).

Although the ecclesia to whom Messiah was speaking had other aspects in which they needed to improve, they were commended for having these three things.

Again, the second aspect of these three things (faith, Love, Hope) are brought together again in 1 Corinthians 13: "and now abideth **faith, hope, love**, these three: but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

Love is superior, for it will endure for ever. In the kingdom where aspirations of the saints become reality, there will no longer be a need for faith and hope. Faith will become reality, with all our hopes being fulfilled, and all that remains will be love – which therefore must be the dominating feature of the message we preach.

The First aspect then, is "work of faith". It is perhaps unusual to consider "faith" as being a "work," but it echoes the words of Messiah himself:

"Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is **the work of God, that ye believe** on him whom he hath sent" (Jno. 6:28-29).

Whilst it is true that our faith must be matched with actions (see Jas. 2:18), it is also true that we cannot earn salvation by those actions. Our faith, or belief in the things of God is what is important, and that faith will be counted as righteousness - as in the cases of Abraham and David of old (see

Rom. 4). It is important then for us to have faith: but faith in what? Only faith in the system of things that comprise the Gospel that saves. To believe in the fables and opinions of man cannot save.

The Second aspect is “labour of love”. The labours that we exert in the Master’s service ought not to be by constraint, or compulsion. The motivating power that drives us to minister to our brethren and sisters is love. So the Apostle uses the expression again in Hebrews chapter 6;

“For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and **labour of love**, which ye have showed towards his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints and do minister” (Heb. 6:10). Ministering to the saints therefore, is a vital aspect of life in the Truth, and It should be a delight and privilege to be engaged in by those who love the brotherhood.

The Third aspect is “patience of hope”. The idea of Patience includes Endurance. Patiently enduring tribulation for the hope that is set before us, is something of great value indeed. The saints are characterised as those “who by patient continuance in well doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality” (Rom. 2:7). Again, James tells us:

“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations; knowing this, that the trial of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (Jas. 1:2-4)

To endure, is to have patience, as we look toward the coming of our Redeemer. Later in the second Epistle to the Thessalonians, the Apostle speaks of this again: “and the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into **the patient waiting for Christ**” (1 Thes. 3:5). That is the true “hope” that we look towards, and it is a joyous vision of that hope that will enable us to overcome at the last.

WAITING FOR MESSIAH

Having embraced the principles of saving Truth, the Thessalonian believers repented from their sins, and fixed their attention on the coming of Messiah:

“... 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” (1 Thes. 1:10).

There is therefore, a patient waiting that we ought to be engaged in, as we look to the appearing of Messiah at his second appearance upon the earth. The situation is not dissimilar to that of Moses and the Children of Israel. Having led the people out of Egypt, Moses ascended the mountain to receive the foundation principles upon which the kingdom would be established. The people were to patiently wait for his return, upon which they would be able to go forward and take up their inheritance. However, they quickly ran out of patience, and turned back to the idols they had worshipped in Egypt:

“And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him” (Exod. 32:1).

So Yahweh told Moses: “They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them ...” (Exod. 32:8). So Moses returned to the camp of Israel – but what did he find? The noise of battle as they earnestly contended against the powers of sin? That is what Joshua expected to find:

“he said unto Moses, there is a noise of war in the camp”

But Moses knew better:

"And he said, it is not the voice of them that shout for mastery, neither is it the voice of them that cry for being overcome: but the noise of them that sin do I hear" (Exod. 32:17-18).

Here are those who were lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. The irony is that it would seem that Moses was just about to return when they forsook Yahweh for idols. But what of ourselves? Our Messiah, the Prophet like unto Moses is about to return again: what sound will he hear? The sound of revelry and celebration like Moses and Joshua? How tragic would it be, if just as Messiah is about to descend to be with his brethren, we turn away through lack of patience in waiting!

The people thought that Moses "delayed" his return. However, that was not so: there was no time period given. There was no delay, but not knowing the time of his return, for them, it was taking longer than they would have liked. So it is in our situation: in real terms there is no delay, but the Lord is longsuffering and is allowing opportunity for others to embrace the Truth before he comes. Peter describes this situation: there are those who are tired of waiting: "and saying, Where is the promise of his coming?" But the answer is:

"The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:4, 9).

There is no delay in real terms, the remains a "appointed day" in which the Lord will judge the earth, and we need to be ready at all times, for it is not revealed to us precisely when that day will be. We need to be found ready and watching for the coming of our Master. As we read in Hebrews 9:

"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto **them that look for him** shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28)

We ought not become distracted by the cares of this life therefore, but with singleness of heart, we should serve the Lord, and look for his appearing. So we conclude with the stirring words of the Apostle to Timothy:

"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also **that love his appearing**" (2 Tim. 4:8).

We know that as a matter of fact that Christ is going to return: but when that day comes, will it be welcomed by us? Will we love the appearing of Messiah, or will it be an unwelcome interruption to our daily lives? Only we can decide for ourselves, but we have the faithful example of the Thessalonians to guide us, and prepare us for the coming kingdom.

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