

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (31-10-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 17:1-10

Additional Bible Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1 & 2:12

The Church in Thessalonica

Introduction

The missionary team moved from Philippi to Thessalonica, 100 miles away. It was a famous city with a well-known harbour and great dockyard in Roman times. It was the capital of Macedonia, named after the wife of the Greek King Cassander who had the city built. Its population of 200,000 made it a very large city for those days. It still exists today, renamed Salonika, with a population of a quarter of a million. It is Macedonia's second largest city, and an important centre of air, road and sea connections.

In Paul's day Thessalonica was a prosperous and wealthy city because of the important East-West road that went through it, bringing much trade. The Gospel arrived with Paul. It was a key centre in which to establish a church because of its influence in the surrounding area. Paul first went to the Jewish synagogue and preached Christ and Him crucified, his constant theme. The Jews were so enraged that Paul had to be smuggled out to Berea by night. Those who believed in that place were greatly afflicted. **In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit** (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

Paul continued to be concerned for the progress of the Gospel in Thessalonica, and he prayed continually for the Christians there. They stood fast, and had a strong affection for Paul. But like every other church, it had its problems. Some members stopped working because they thought the Second Coming was imminent, and there were other problems between the leaders and the members, problems about the Holy Spirit, some who criticized Paul, and some who were in moral danger. Hence Paul had to write two letters to the church, to clear up certain issues that had been misunderstood.

The spiritual life of the members

There are several significant phrases used in 1 Thessalonians 1 that give us an understanding of what being a Christian is. **You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God** (v9). **In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** (v1). **Imitators of the Lord** (v6). **Rescued from the coming wrath** (v10). **He has chosen you** (v4). This was not a social club with religious interests. They did not merely profess, but they definitely possessed.

In Acts 17 we read of how they heard about Christ, and His death and Resurrection for salvation. The preaching they received was based on their Scriptures, i.e. the Old Testament. Their response was a total change in their lives. They turned from sin and idolatry, and became united to Christ. Their lives were bent on pleasing Him, and they had no fear of the future.

It is not enough to have a vague link with the church and do the best you can. Nominal and formal Christianity will not do. There has got to be a turning. Becoming a Christian is something deep, radical and revolutionary in the life. The Christian is someone going in the opposite direction from which they were going. The things we worshipped in the past, the sins we enjoyed, the bad habits, the focus on self – we turn our back on these things, and turn to face the true and living God. δουλεύειν means being his slave or possession. We come under His authority and control and mastery. This is vital, crucial and indispensable. Henceforth we are following Him, not the world, not other people, not ourselves, but Him.

It is not just rank outsiders that need this message, but parts of the evangelical world need the reminder. Some have professed faith in Christ, but they live with things that are clean contrary to Scripture with a very easy conscience. They know little of being different from the world. It does not matter how much of the Bible we believe, or how much we sing about Christian themes, or how much we profess or how long our testimony is, or what church we belong to. The only thing that matters is that there is this turning from self to God, and a radical change in direction. He must be Lord and Master. We are His bond-slave, with our life, possessions, talents, time and self consecrated to God.

What are we doing for Him? **For me to live is Christ** (Philippians 1:21). Do I know I have passed from death to life? Do I know His power at work? Is God all in all to me? Am I living in union with Him?

#### The Christian character they displayed

1 Thessalonians 1 gives a very full description of the character of the Christians at Thessalonica. They possessed the three great theological virtues of faith, hope and love. **Your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ** (v3). Despite their afflictions they possessed **joy given by the Holy Spirit** (v6). This was evident in their worship, as they prayed, as they responded to the Word, as they served the Lord. Their Christian service was not an onerous burden to be endured, but an occasion of joy.

The pervasive power of the Holy Spirit was present in their services of worship, prayer meetings and as they mixed with the members. **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** (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Financially they may have been poor compared with today's churches, but they were rich in the things that mattered – faith, hope, love, joy, the Holy Spirit and a love for the Word.

No wonder they had a zeal for evangelism. **The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere** (1 Thessalonians 1:8). They demonstrate for all time what a Christian church ought to be: **You became a model to all the believers** (v7). Paul did not need to say anything about them to spread their reputation abroad. Their lives spoke for themselves. Their faith in God, and their evangelistic spirit was the talk of other churches.

Churches are only like this when the individual members are like this – full of faith, hope, love, joy, the influence of the Holy Spirit, evangelistic zeal, a love of the Word. It's worth pondering, "If every member were like me, what sort of a church would my church be?" How much attendance, prayer, joy, evangelism, practical support and work? This is a challenge to everyone. The challenge is to give ourselves to God without reserve that He might do His will and do in us according to His good purpose.

### The influence of the Second Coming on their lives

**You wait for His Son from heaven** (v10). Paul gave detailed teaching about the Second Coming, and warned about its misuse. It is a tragedy that there are so many arguments, theories, and disputes over the timetable of the Lord's Coming. It is not unknown for Christians to be refused entry to the Table because they hold the "wrong" interpretation. But there is no reason why we should ignore the subject just because of the controversies and difficulties.

Jesus is coming back. It will be a visible, glorious and personal coming. It is mentioned over 300 times in the New Testament, so we cannot neglect it. Jesus taught it, and so did the Apostles. The early church expected it, and it had a real influence on their lives. Unless it is important to us, our outlook on the future will be bleak indeed.

So here the Thessalonians were waiting for the Son to come from heaven. This is the only place in the New Testament the Greek word *αναμενειν* is used, meaning waiting for someone whose coming is known about and expected. They were waiting with patience and confident expectancy, totally ready. The same attitude as when we are expecting a guest, having the guest room ready, the bed made up, the larder stocked, the programme of entertainment organised.

It was said of Lord Shaftesbury that for the last 40 years of his life, there was not an hour that was not influenced by the Lord's Return. Those early Christians would have said something similar. They loved His appearing. They waited for it. They expected it. When Napoleon was exiled on Elba, his supporters longed for his return. They could not speak openly of their longing, but wore a violet as a secret symbol that said it all.

What is the Lord's Coming to you? A piece of sound doctrine? A subject for a good argument? A source of comfort in bereavement? A matter of delight? A spur to holiness and missionary endeavour? Are you sitting loose to the world, a pilgrim and stranger in this land? The fact of the Second Coming is a bright star on a dark day. It should be our incentive to live soberly, righteously and godly lives in the present world. It ought to guide our decisions, outlook, attitude and choices.

### Conclusion

Have I turned to the Lord? What sort of church member am I? Do I love the Lord's appearing? The church at Thessalonica sets these challenges before us.