

The Year of St. Paul

The First Letter to the Thessalonians



As we saw last week, selection by God — of Paul as Apostle to the Gentiles, and of the Church in Thessalonica — was predestined, that is, the desire of God. This predestined choice by God did not, however, eliminate the free will, the freedom of Paul or the people, to choose this new faith in God through Jesus Christ. Paul celebrated this enormous outpouring of love by God in describing his selection as an apostle, and of the Thessalonians' selection as a people of God.

He directed them in community living and its importance for the whole rather than individuals and their personal preferences.

These are important for us to grasp as so often we forget that our faith in Jesus Christ is first and foremost a gift from God. The gift of faith is a predestined act of love by God and not of our own accord. Our freely choosing to hold to this gift of faith is our acknowledgement of the grace given us. God started the ball rolling as it were.

In the same regard, our living this faith life is left to us. Often we like to think we're at Burger King and "have it our way". Paul's reminder to this early Christian community is a reminder to us — God's way is the only way for salvation. But it remains our choice.

TWO MORE MAJOR THEMES

Regarding the Lord's Coming

This is of great concern to the inhabitants of Thessalonica. What will happen to the faithful who will die before the second coming of our Lord?

St. Paul tried to describe something that simply cannot be described as no one has died, gone to heaven, and returned to tell us about it. Yet St. Paul almost makes us think that it may be better if we were dead before this second coming of the Lord takes place. Far from the truth.

Using traditional apocalyptic imagery such as "trumpet" and "voice" and "clouds", St. Paul, in this section of 17 verses (4:16-5:11) wished to show that in reality our resurrection is directly connected to the resurrection of our Lord. The second coming, while acknowledged in a "general" coming, also occurs individually when each person dies. Here we meet the Lord face-to-face. *"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring*

with him those who have fallen asleep...For the Lord himself...will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. (4:14-16)

The above underlined words need our special attention since it is clear that we must die in Christ here — live a life worthy of Christ — for us to be considered dead in Christ, rather than dead removed from Christ because of our sinfulness.

GOD FIRST

Year Three, Part 8

September 21, 2008

The "Day of the Lord", in reference to the coming of the Lord, again highlights the fact that this day will be specific to individuals as well as at the end time, so vigilance must be maintained.

We do not know the day, nor the hour, nor the place when this will occur. St. Paul tells this early community of faith, that if they continue to progress in faith and in the by-product of that faith — living lives worthy of Christ, sharing in the building up of the community, the kingdom, then they can be sure of being worthy of salvation in, with and through Christ.

What strong, human symbols Paul uses when he writes, *"...putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet that is hope for salvation."* (5:8) And as he continued he reminded them of God's predestination of them to gain salvation rather than wrath. Finally, *"encourage one another and build one another up, as indeed you do."* (5:11)

Progress in the Christian Life

Holiness in sexual conduct (4:3f) was foreign to any pagan of the world at this time. We need remember that sexual activity was in many locales practiced in line with worship of a deity. What St. Paul tried to establish in the minds of these believers and anyone who would read this letter, is the sacredness of the body, a temple where the Holy Spirit of God dwells. Such a teaching was not heard previously.

St. Paul recognized that community living required that mutual love (4:9f) control the heart and mind of all the members of that community. He

recognized the giant leaps of faith taken at times by this people, but wished to encourage them to even greater concern and faithful living to what has been taught them. *"...aspire to live a tranquil life...mind your own affairs...work with your own hands..."* as meant for the common good. With this instruction St. Paul set a guard against those who were busy-bodies and those who tended to take advantage of the work of others while failing to do their fair share.

This teaching continued when St. Paul expressed the need for respect of those whose responsibility it was to make known the teaching, and continue to build up the Church. His final instruction made it clear *"...always seek what is good for each other and for all."* (5:15) The best and easiest way for this to occur was to *"Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing."* (5:16)

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Idleness, revenge and other such vices should be shunned as destructive of life in the community. Yet we see this constantly occurring even today. Failure to use the gifts, especially the charismatic gifts of the Spirit, and holding to grudges with a mind bent on revenge are constantly present in the lives of many. Only by seeing life as a celebration of joy in the abilities given by God can a believer change a mindset and way of life.
2. In this first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul basically tells the reader that learning and growing in oneness with Christ is a life-long journey. No one is strong enough or perfect enough to excuse himself or herself from seeking greater unity in Christ who gave completely of his own life for our sake.
3. The tone of Paul's letter concerning the second coming of Christ tends to make readers think that an eminent return was expected. We know otherwise, and are cautioned even in this letter to be vigilant, not able to predict how or when God will work in this or any other aspect of life. Preferring death over life is not considered an option.

Wheel taken from "Reading the Acts, Epistles and Revelation by Kingsley E. Dalpadado, OMI, St. Paul Editions

PERSONAL ACCOUNTING

1. Is the sexual permissiveness of our society any different from the activities of society St. Paul found in Thessalonica? How well do I consider the whole of my body a temple of God's Spirit?
2. The teaching of St. Paul concerning actions taken for the common good of all is a paraphrase of Jesus' teaching of the two great commandments. Where do I need to improve concerning putting others before myself? Of maintaining little regard for others, especially the poor and vulnerable? Of prejudice toward others (remember Jews and Gentiles needed to learn to respect each other).
3. Idleness takes many forms. What gifts have I received that I do not use for the sake of my brothers and sisters? How much do I involve myself with the affairs of others rather than working as I should so that I may also better provide for the community?
4. St. Paul admonishes to *In all circumstances give thanks..."* Am I in good times and bad?