Advent 3 • 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 • December 14, 2014

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wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (3:9). Is that not divine love demonstrated daily, for us who believe and for the salvation of others who have not yet believed?

The first two weeks of Advent combine elements of Christ’s second coming with his first coming in Bethlehem. From a human perspective it is traditionally a time of expectant waiting and preparation for Christmas. But, based on our text, could Advent also be a time to prepare the world for Christ’s second coming? This text enables the preacher to remind the congregation that as believers in Christ, we are already prepared for the end of the world by Christ’s death and resurrection (Titus 3:5–7, Romans 6:3, 5, and Ephesians 2:8–9). Since this is true, then the importance of diligence in living lives of holiness and godliness (3:11) is not to somehow improve upon one’s own salvation; rather, it is for the sake of the scoffers who do not yet believe, the neighbors who have not heard, and for mutual encouragement among the faithful. God spreads his gospel through the lives of his saints on earth, the baptized, to demonstrate His love for the lost: “. . . not wanting that any should perish apart from Christ” (3:9).

The goal of the sermon is not for the hearer to make time for witnessing and outreach as if it is another thing the baptized must do; rather, witnessing and outreach should happen naturally by how Christians live all the time. Scoffers take notice when believers are living differently. When the baptized devote themselves to sacrificial acts of kindness, forgive freely, care for the poor, obey the laws, help the stranger and the co-worker, and generally invest in the lives of those around them—people notice, especially unbelievers. Such holiness and godliness will not go unquestioned in today’s world—and that is a goal God has for his people—to be witness of his gospel in preparing the world for the upcoming advent of Christ.

Jeff Thormodson

Rejoice always. This is not a power of positive thinking admonition, nor is it to be taken in a literalistic and legalistic way, as if Christians do not have their times and ways of grieving—although never without hope (1 Thes 4:13). Rejoicing is a regular and consistent expression of life in Christ. The work of the Spirit in the lives of fellow believers is regularly a cause for joy (1 Thes 3:9). All such rejoicing, however, is done ultimately in the Lord (Phil 4:4), that is, in the past, present and future work of Christ for us and all creation.

Pray unceasingly. Ditto on not reading this literally. But, as Ole Hallesby reminds us, prayer is designed precisely for the helpless, and as believers live in unending and joyful dependence on God’s care and provision in Christ, those believers will simply pray as dear children as their dear heavenly Father—without ceasing.

Be thankful in everything. One of the most difficult things I experience in life is the need to adjust to constant change. But, if the God who delivered me in Christ is ever and always at work through (and despite) life’s changes, then at the least I can in faith be thankful to him for the work he is doing. Thanksgiving, prayer, and rejoicing are God’s will for me in Christ Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is like a fire, purifying and flaming in and through our lives. He comes through the gospel powerfully to create faith and to sustain joy (1 Thes 1:5, 6). His call to obedience must not be resisted in the area of sexual purity (1 Thes 4:7) or elsewhere lest we run the risk of quenching that Spirit’s work within and through us.

God’s word is the source of every good. When genuine prophecy comes directly from the Lord or (by extension) when God’s apostolic word is proclaimed, the only proper response is to believe and respond. To despise prophecy or God’s word is to despise the speaking God who gives it and to regard his word as merely the words of men (1 Thes 2:13).

There is still mourning; death and decay and evil still lurk everywhere. Believers must learn to test everything so as to turn away from what is evil and to hold fast to what is good—Christ Jesus, the Spirit-born word about him, the Spirit-produced fruit that blesses our neighbor even when he offers us evil (1 Thes 5:15). The evil in our world and (still) in our flesh comes in many shapes and sizes. Every form of it must be kept at a distance. This too is God’s will for us in Christ Jesus the Lord.

One could preach the whole text, and offer to the congregation a general and powerful testimony through St. Paul to the life lived in Christ. Or, one could focus on any of the exhortations and illustrate what it would look like to live the sanctified life of faith even as we look for the day when the God of peace will sanctify us completely, having kept us until the Parousia of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thes 5:23). This God is faithful. We are up and down, and back and forth, but this God is faithful and he will do it (1 Thes 5:24).

Jeff Gibbs