

The Thessalonians' Election

“... knowing, brethren beloved of God, your election, how that our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance even as ye know what manner of men we showed ourselves toward you for your sake. And ye became imitators of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit; so that ye became an ensample to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thess. 1:4-7).

Paul continues his address to these brethren, thankful for them, mindful of their work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope. In the cited verses above, he is certain they remember how it was they had learned and obeyed the gospel: “your election” is the way he puts it. Paul wrote to brethren calling them “God’s elect” and sometimes, in addition, he wrote of their election. The scriptures clearly teach that some men are the “elect” while others are the “non-elect” — not because God predestined either of the two to their destiny, but simply because they chose, by the lives they lived, their own destiny.

The election of the Thessalonians came through the gospel Paul preached to them. The gospel (God’s power to salvation) had come to these brethren not only in word, but also in power. The apostles were sent out to teach all nations and to these first preachers were given power to work signs and wonders to confirm the word they proclaimed (Mk. 16:19-20). The account in Acts of Paul’s labors in Thessalonica makes no mention of any miracles he wrought while he was there, but his statement here is implication that he had worked miracles among them.

The gospel came not only with power but in the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the apostle reminds these brethren of the divine nature of the message they heard for in the second chapter he thanked God that brethren had received the message “not as the word of men, but as it is in deed and in truth, the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13). Christ’s promise to His apostles was that the Spirit would be with them, reminding them of what He taught, leading them into all truth, and that the Holy Spirit would speak through them (Jn. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:13-14).

Not only did the gospel come in power and the Holy Spirit, it came in much assurance. “Gospel” means good news and the “good news” it brought was assurance of forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Christ, as well as Christ’s promise to be with His elect ones, listen to their prayers, be attentive to their needs; strengthen them in temptation, be with them in tribulations they experienced, and finally, welcome them home to the city not made with hands when life was finished for them on earth. Such promises truly constitute a blessed assurance, and a coveted one.

In addition to these, the Thessalonians had seen the conduct of Paul, Silas, and Timothy when they were in their midst, and their manner of life was the demonstration of the kind of lives believers must live once they obey the gospel.

And so the Thessalonians, having been obedient to the gospel revealed to them, imitated the lives they saw in their teachers and heard to have been in their Lord. They received the word with both affliction and joy. That one could have joy while at the same time experience persecution and tribulation is one of the paradoxes of Christianity. Yet such an unlikely combination is recorded time and again! When all the apostles were imprisoned and save for the intervention of Gamaliel, might have been martyred; they were beaten “charged ... not to speak in the name of Jesus ... they therefore departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:40-41). James wrote, “Count it all joy ... when ye fall into manifold temptation” (James 1:5). Peter said, “Wherein ye greatly rejoice though now for a little while, if need be, ye have been put to grief in manifold trials” (1 Pet. 1:6).

Likely no one is happy when he is afflicted, but when that affliction comes because he is a servant of Christ, he can rejoice because he knows his life must please the Lord if it displeases those who are His enemies! And, we can rejoice that our names are enrolled in heaven; that God is concerned about us and that the name of Jesus has been magnified by our lives! Thus Paul urged us to be “patient in tribulation” (Rom. 12:12).

Jim McDonald