

Upsetting The Whole World

Series: Mission Accomplished

by Steve Zeisler

Driving back from San Francisco yesterday, I began to reflect on the degree to which that city--in fact, this whole region--has become a living symbol of proud rebellion against God. The business district in San Francisco has thrown up a magnificent skyline proclaiming that the city is one of the financial centers of the world, and yet thousands of its citizens, poor, aged and infirm, live in wretched, debilitating poverty. San Francisco has prided itself on its liberal-minded sophistication and, as a result, has become a resource for pornography, prostitution, and homosexual excess.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul described the world he lived in these terms. and I can't help but think they reflect this world as well:

For many walk, of whom I have often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame... (3:19).

Much of this region we live in glories in what ought to be its shame. Paul said that as he wrote this, he wept, and God willing, we will respond in the same way; we will weep and sorrow at the darkness and slavery that our neighbors in the world close around us live in. But we also need not only God's insight to sorrow properly; we need his insight to respond properly.

Now I think it is at this point that many of us run ahead without sensing the heart of the scriptures as to how we ought to respond. Our tendency is for our sorrow and our weeping to motivate us to various kinds of action that have the effect of applying God's message, of telling his truth to this world outside that needs to hear it. We will, perhaps, support the political campaigns of evangelical Christians who are trying to be elected to office, seeing this as a way of putting a man or a woman of God in a position of prominence where he or she can have influence and the Gospel will be propagated as a result. We often gravitate toward Christian celebrities and try to give them a platform where they can speak widely so their message can be heard and understood by the world around. Others think that if we create some great center, some great Christian cathedral, some great monument to God's work, then the non-Christian world will be impressed and will flock to us to hear the truth.

I find in my own ministry that my tendency is not to be obtrusive but to engage in a program that is motivated by similar thinking. I think that as Christians we should hold Bible meetings in non-traditional settings--in homes, business lunches, dormitories, social clubs--and that as a result of our non-traditional approach, non-Christians will find themselves drawn to us without realizing it; they will hear the scriptures and their lives will be changed. In effect, all of these things are an attempt to respond to a hurting world by saying that the gospel needs to be proclaimed to these people; that it needs to be applied to their lives.

None of us can fault that. None of us can say that these things are not genuine and helpful tools in God's hands. But the problem is, they are very much less effective than they should be because our attempts to use these tools usually suffer from that widespread human weakness of not having done first things first. We attempt and put great time and energy into the proposition of applying the gospel to them, of shining the light of God's Word on the dark corners out there, of seeing that the gospel is presented in such a way that it has an impact on those who don't believe without first having taken the step of saying, "Lord, apply the gospel to me." I need to embrace God's truth with a whole heart so that my life will be changed as a result. If I jump to the conclusion that God's Word is

for the unsaved, the darkened, the miserable and the hurting before I am willing to see that there are areas of unbelief and hardhearted rebellion in me, I will be a much less effective spokesman than if I take the first step of embracing God's truth in my own life, being hard on myself where I need to be, and then turning to proclaim the gospel to a world that needs to hear it.

We are going to learn this morning from a hero church in the New Testament. In fact, the Thessalonian church is the only one that is given the description that it is to be a pattern (a "model", or "type" is the word, actually), of what other churches should be like. In nine short verses in the book of Acts, we have a thrilling, gripping description of what happened there.

There are three things I think we should point out to begin with. First, the amount of time involved was far short of what I, or anybody that I know of, consider to be minimal in accomplishing important things for God--they did not have nearly enough time to do anything significant. It says that Paul preached for three Sundays in the synagogue in Thessalonica and, though certainly he stayed for a longer period of time, the longest estimates are that he spent only a few months there. And yet, revolutionary things happened.

Secondly, it says that a great multitude believed because of the mission to Thessalonica. Now Luke, as has reliably attested many times, is an extremely accurate historian. He is not given to evangelistic number--counting and putting things in ways that make the situation look good even though it wasn't. When he used the term, "a great multitude," he certainly meant that a very large number of people responded to the gospel in Thessalonica. And, not only were they large in number, but all kinds, all classes of people responded. We are told that the leading women in Thessalonica believed, and we can be certain that the lowest of classes believed as well, that the people who believed cut across the board in terms of financial and social class. We are told that Greeks and Jews believed, that these antagonistic cultures came together to form the church at Thessalonica. We are told that men and women believed, and we are led, I think, to the inevitable conclusion that the ministry at Thessalonica not only brought many to Christ, but penetrated every aspect of the culture in a short period of time.

The third thing we see in the ministry in Thessalonica, as recorded in Acts, is that the enemies of the cross of Christ (as Paul described them in the passage I read in Philippians), found themselves threatened, their security was undermined, their strongholds torn down. Those who were committed to opposing God were running scared because of the onslaught of the gospel in their midst, to the point where they had to resort to violence and lies as the only means of protection against what God was accomplishing in their city. From the lips of these enemies the church was paid one of its greatest compliments: those who followed Jesus Christ and who ministered for his sake were described as the ones who were overturning the whole world--"these ones who challenge everything this world stands for and who have been effective in contradicting and overturning everything the god of this world has tried to produce, have come to our town, too." What a tremendous compliment! What a great thing to have said of any of us, that we are the kind of people who are participating in the overturn of the world for Christ's sake.

Now if that is all we knew, I think we should be encouraged and built up and challenged by this Thessalonian ministry. But that is not all we know. Phase two of the mission to Thessalonica is told to us in the book of 1 Thessalonians, chapter 1, beginning at verse 4:

[We give thanks]...knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, [That might be better translated "boomed forth from you." This word was used in the first century to describe the roll of thunder. It was also used to describe the peal of a trumpet leading men into battle.] not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

Two important things are said about the next step in this ministry to Thessalonica that we don't learn about in the

book of Acts. First, they became an example church to the fellowships around them in Macedonia and Achaia. "Example" is really too soft a word. What they became was a pattern, a model church; they became descriptive of the way God ought to operate in a group of people in an urban setting. Secondly, Paul says, they became, as it were, a volcano that erupted God's Word across the whole map. They were a center for a ministry of the gospel that advanced everywhere, so that, apparently, Paul had the experience of going to a town, declaring God's Word, and having people say, "Yes, we've heard what happened in Thessalonica. We've heard what God has done in that place." So Paul says he had no need to say anything because the eruption of truth and its rippling effect across the map had taken place from this one city. They had a minimum amount of time; they didn't have any chance to train the people before they were run out of town; the church was faced with tribulation and hassle and severe opposition. They had none of the kinds of advantages that ought to have made them grow and succeed, and yet they became a pattern church for those around them, and became a center of ministry that crossed the map and advanced everywhere.

Now I hope that fires your heart. I hope that says something that is encouraging and challenging to you. I hope that will answer the gnawing feeling that comes on Christians all the time that we are losing the battle and the tide is advancing against us; that it can't be retrieved anymore, that our best bet is to hide. In a period of weeks this whole thing began and exploded in Thessalonica, and it can happen here. The tide can be reversed here in the same short period of time, with the same kind of results. But if you are like me, the questions you ask yourself as this sense of encouragement and hope and challenge begins to take over are: "How did it happen? What were the techniques they used? What was the style of ministry that produced this igniting effect and this effective ministry?" I find myself longing to know, for instance, what kind of meetings they had. Were they outdoor or indoor meetings? Did they have large meetings or small cell-group meetings? Did they meet in homes or in restaurants or did they rent halls? When they taught the Bible and proclaimed the scriptures, what Old Testament books did they use? What did they start with, the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Psalms? What was their *modus operandi*? I find myself longing to know what their fellowship, their worship services were like. Did they have cell-groups of commandos that hung out together and carried out these ministries, or did they have large fellowships where people knew each other and worked together?

As you read the accounts you find that we are not told much at all about the techniques used. We are told almost nothing about the style, about the way it was carried out. We don't know any of those things. We don't know how they propagated the gospel; we don't know how they proclaimed it; we don't know how they advanced it. We know only one major thing about this great church and the effective ministry that came forth from it: we know how they believed it themselves. We know that this example church in scripture was willing to embrace God's truth in their own hearts and how thoroughly and seriously and deeply they said, "When God speaks, I have to listen for me. I have to obey it. I can't shrug it off, I can't pick out the parts I like. I need to hear him and I need to be changed by him." That is what characterized these people, and that is what gave them the foundation, so that when they did turn to the world to speak they were listened to.

Look at verse 4, "Knowing, brethren, beloved by God, his choice of you [i.e., the activity and choice of God in your life, and the love of God in your life] for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake." The Word did not come as something to be debated; it was not interesting philosophical discussion (the way the Athenians reacted to it). It was God himself talking. It came with power, a "fist-in-the-face" sensation that could not be ignored or set aside until later. There was something dramatic, needful, present and demanding about these words. They were powerful, and they came with full conviction, Paul says.

Paul says further (in verse 6) that these people "received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." There are few things that are clearer evidence of God at work in a thorough and heartfelt way than for people to be joyful in the midst of being hassled, hurt, set upon and denied their rights. This proclaims God's presence as almost nothing else does, and that was true of these people as well. We are told what the gospel did to them; what the truth of God did in their hearts and lives, in their relationships and business.

There are two points of view that serve as a "sandwich," as it were, to this section I have just read. Verses 4-8

describe the second phase of the mission to Thessalonica (the opening phase is in Acts), but sandwiched around that, in verses 2 and 3 and verses 9 and 10 are descriptions of this Thessalonian phenomenon from two different sources.

In verses 2 and 3, Paul says, "We give thanks to God always for you making mention of you in our prayers; [i.e., we're praying about you], constantly bearing in mind [when we think of you, when we're praying for you, three things stand out about you:] your work of faith, your labor of love, and your steadfastness of hope."

Now you will recognize that trio, I am sure. It shows up in many other places in the Bible--faith, hope, and love. Paul ends his great passage in 1 Corinthians 13 on the nature of love by saying that three things last forever: faith, hope, and love. We have the same trio here, but we are not given them by themselves. In each case here these characteristics have some practical outworking associated with them.

The other half of the "sandwich" is given in verses 9 and 10. This is the report, or the analysis, the awareness of the people in other cities in the Roman Empire who have been affected by the ministry as it has rippled out, away from Thessalonica:

For they themselves report about us what kind of reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

There are also three characteristics that are reported by these people as the effect of this Thessalonian ministry extends. It seems to me that the three characteristics mentioned in verses 9 and 10 are really another way of saying the same three characteristics that Paul highlights in his prayer life concerning the Thessalonians. The report from those who had been affected contained three things: "You have turned to God from idols; you have turned to serve the living God; and you have turned to wait for His Son whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus." A work of faith has contained in that little phrase the mentality that you find all the way throughout the New Testament that faith, when it is really faith, always results in a changed life; it always has a practical, day-in, day-out effect on the kind of person you are. Faith is not primarily to be contemplated or discussed; that is not the kind of faith that is spoken of here. This is faith that produces changed lives, and an effective way of describing the work of faith is the first phrase in the report of those who spoke to Paul--that they have turned to God from idols.

All of us have what amounts to idols in our lives, altars at which we worship. All of us have points of view that serve as a primary focus around which everything else revolves. Now a way of discovering whether your faith has the sort of deep seatedness that produces changed lives is to ask whether you have turned from the things that formerly were idols to you, and put the Lord Jesus in the place where these idols were. If I turn from the goddess "security" who promises that everything will forever be all right; who promises that I will forever have enough money and nobody will ever hurt me very much; that my children won't suffer, and say, "Lord, I want what you want, even if there is suffering, even if there is deprivation," I have turned from an idol to God. That is a measure of whether or not my faith works, whether or not my faith accomplishes something.

Secondly, Paul says, "Your love labors." That is a strong word. It is not love that occasionally does partial and insignificant work, love that occasionally ventures out of its shell and paints a building or fixes a tire or does something easy and inexpensive. Love that labors is love that puts itself in the harness; love that is committed to seeing people served even when it is expensive, even when it hurts. Laboring love remains, continues to serve, continues to bear the brunt, and works hard at loving. I think that that, again, is like the description in verse 9. "You have turned to serve a living and true God. In your relationship to him it has been communicated to you that you are there to serve him, and that he cares about these people, and they matter to him, and that their hurts are of considerable interest and concern to him." Laboring love is service to God, and I think these two reports are saying the same thing.

The third word that is given to us is "steadfastness of hope," which corresponds to the phrase, "to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus." Hope in our lives has a lot to do with what our final priorities are. What we hope for is the bottom line commitment. If I can have the approval of one person,

then let it be for me the approval of Jesus Christ. If my life, when it is over, is going to be analyzed by any standard, let it be by his standard. If I can have riches, if I can have value in the eyes of anyone, let it be his. When the whole ball game is over, when all of this has been completed, what I hope for is to be able to say on that day that I amounted to something, that I've been a success, that it has mattered. It might be that my own children will say that of me. It might be that history will write of me, "this man was successful at what he did. This man's life amounted to something." But what I hope for is that the Lord will say that of me. I want him to analyze my life, to stand next to me and put his arm around me and say, "This made a difference." It is because I am so committed to that day that I can steadfastly not listen to anyone else. Hope here is steadfast. It doesn't waver, it doesn't say, "Lord, I want to be approved of by you and to stand before you with a sense of worth and delight, but I also want to be approved of by these people; I would sure like to have everybody admire me," so that my hope in him is not steadfast at all; it wavers. It is there sometimes but it is not there always. These are people, Paul says in the same vein in verse 10, who wait for his Son from heaven whom he raised from the dead. That is, these are people who won't be sidetracked by anything else; they are committed to waiting for the Lord to return.

First Thessalonians gives us the account of an extraordinary missionary enterprise, an absolutely magnificent gospel ministry in a sophisticated capital city very much like our own, a center of influence in its region. In that place the gospel had extraordinary effect, so that multitudes believed and the enemies of the cross of Christ found themselves running scared and resorting to lies and violence to deal with it. Yet despite all that these enemies did, Thessalonica became the center of a gospel ministry that erupted across the map; it became a model church for all those around. If this were to happen in our day we would not speak of anything else. We would be so thrilled to see Tokyo, or New York, or San Francisco, or Nairobi, or any great urban center be taken over by the Lord; to see this happen would fire and enthuse the hearts of Christians all over the world.

We are given this great description of a missionary enterprise in a wicked city, and yet we are not told how it was accomplished. What we are told is that the people through whom God worked were people who believed him, who took his message seriously. Our tendency is to get caught up applying the gospel somewhere else, advancing it into the darkness for unbelievers, and short-circuiting the process by which we get changed. I think if 1 Thessalonians doesn't say anything else, it says that. These were remarkable people because of what God did in them by the way they embraced his truth. We need to be people who will, as we consider the world around us, as we long to see wicked men put out of high places and the men of Christ revered, take the first step and say, "Lord, what about me? Where may I believe this more? How may I give over the things I've held back? Where have I failed to have my faith work and my love labor and my hope remain steadfast?"

Lord, we are grateful to you for this model church. Thank you that we can learn from them. We ask that you will have us question ourselves about what it is in us that might be muting the life that you have intended for your world and taking the taste from the salt that ought to be savor to the world; how it is that we might be inadequate representations of your truth. Help us see those things and give us a heart to obey, and having done so, to turn and say the things you would have us say with freedom and power and honor to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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