



Bible Study Guide

No. 36

(September 2006)

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PRAYING FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM

By John Halford

As we go to press, the Middle East is once again engulfed in war. What will the situation be by the time you get to read this?

That is anybody's guess. But it is not anybody's prophecy.

Whenever events start heating up in that unhappy and unstable part of the world, prophecy buffs and pundits start quivering. Is this it? "It" being the series of events that some believe will lead directly to the return of Jesus Christ. Well—let's hope they are right. But don't get your hopes up. The prophecy buffs have never have been right before.

For the last 2,000 years, self-appointed Christian prophets have been appropriating world events to trumpet their personal interpretations of prophecy. It is a dismal record of pride, false expectations and shattered dreams. You'd think they would have learned from history to be cautious—and that we'd have learned to ignore them.

Yeah—but this time they may be right? And maybe not. Maybe there will be another major war and Christ still will not come. Or maybe things will once again settle down to the uneasy tension that passes for "peace" in this troubled region.

"Careful now," I can hear some readers saying. "Remember what it says in 2 Peter, chapter 3."

Yes, I know. It says, "In the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, 'Where is this "coming" he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation'" (verses 3-4).

That's why I'm not scoffing. Prophecies are in the Bible, and they do mean something. Many of them seem to have very specific references to events that lead up to Jesus' return. At least, that is one way of looking at them. But not the only way. One thing is certain: no one can know for sure until God is ready to make the meaning plain.

So let's not scoff, but let's not panic, either. Peter's epistle was written to help us keep our balance, not to send us careening off centre with speculation and irresponsible knee-jerk reactions whenever hostilities flare up in the Middle East. If there is one thing that trying to figure out "where we are in prophecy" should have taught us, it is that we don't—and can't—know.

Even the most "timely" prophecy does not cancel out the timeless instructions of the Bible. Just before the warning about scoffing, 2 Peter says: "I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles" (verse 2). The epistle reminds us that the return of Jesus will come suddenly, unexpectedly, taking everyone by surprise. For those who are not prepared, it will seem like a catastrophe. And indeed there will be "winners and losers." But the winners will not be those who have been able to sort out the "coded messages" of prophecy. It will be those who by patient, consistent and diligent discipleship have shown that they truly want the life of the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

In some ways I hope that the "end time" panic merchants are right this time, because I'd like to see the end of the suffering and repeated cycles of war and destruction. I love that vision of Isaiah, who saw Jerusalem not as an epicentre of contention and strife, but a source of peace and happiness (Isaiah 2:2-4). I'm not sure exactly what it means, or when it will happen. But whatever it is and whenever it is, it is something to look forward to.

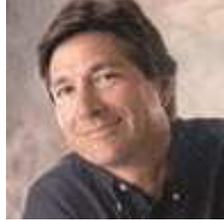
In the meantime, we'd do well, as the psalmist said, to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:6). Because, whether this is "it" or not, people are getting killed and maimed, lives and property are being wrecked and yet another generation is growing up knowing only this seemingly endless, bitter cycle of misery.

By John Halford

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Perichor...what?

A discussion with
C. Baxter Kruger,



Founder of Perichoresis, Inc.

Christian Odyssey: Most of us can't even pronounce perichoresis, much less spell it. What does it mean?

Baxter Kruger: Some years ago a woman walked into my office around Christmastime with a stack of newsletters in her hand. She was crying, and she slammed the newsletters down on my desk and said, "I just feel like a pile of junk!"

I said, "What is wrong?"

She said, "I've been reading these newsletters from these people from all over the world, and they and their children are all doing all these great things for God, and it just hit me what a worthless life I have. For Pete's sake, I'm married and I've got three kids. When I'm not grocery shopping, I'm cooking the groceries, and when I'm not cooking the groceries I'm cleaning up, and when I'm not doing that I'm trying to find clothes for my children and keep this mess of a house presentable. And sometime in there I'm trying to find time for my husband. I don't even have time to read my Bible. What do I have that I can do for God?"

I stopped her, and I said, "Wait a minute, hang on here a minute. Yesterday you spent two hours driving around Jackson searching for a coat for your daughter. A winter coat, and not just any winter coat but one she would like, one that would be large enough to put away for next year but not look like it was bought this year. And one that was on sale. And you did it, you found it, and she's thrilled."

The woman said, "What's that got to do with this?"

I said, "Where did that concern for your daughter come from? Did you wake up yesterday morning and decide you were going to be a good momma?"

She said she had been thinking about the coat for a week.

"The Triune God meets us not in the sky or in our self-generated religions, but in our 'ordinary' human existence."

I said, "Isn't Jesus the good Shepherd who cares about all his sheep? He put his concern for this sheep (your daughter) in your heart. You see, you are participating in nothing less than Jesus' life and burden. He was tending to his sheep through you. What is greater than that?"

In the light of the fact that Jesus Christ has laid hold of the whole human race, cleansed us in his death, lifted us up in his resurrection and has given us a place in his relationship with his Father and Spirit in his Ascension, we've got to rethink everything we thought we knew about ourselves and others and our ordinary human life.

The simple truth is there is nothing at all ordinary about us and the life we live. Caring for others, from orphans to our friends and the poor, our love for our husbands and wives and children, our passion for music and beauty, for coaching, gardening and fishing; these things do not have their origin in us.

They are not something that we invented. It is all coming from the Father, Son and Spirit. When this dreadful secular/sacred divide is exploded, we can see and honour life as it truly is—the gift of participating in the life and relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit.

CO: So we're really talking about God meeting us in our day-to-day lives?

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BK: Exactly. Through the work of Jesus, we have been adopted into the Trinitarian life. The concept of perichoresis helps us understand what our adoption means for us. We could define perichoresis as “mutual indwelling without loss of personal identity.” In other words, we exist in union with the Triune God, but we do not lose our distinct personhood in the process. We matter. We are real to the Triune God.

Only the Trinity could have union without loss of personal distinction. If you have union without distinction, you tumble into pantheism, and we would be united to God in such a way as to be completely absorbed into him. There would no longer be a distinct “us” to feel and taste and experience the Trinitarian life.

If you have distinction without union, you end up with deism, where God is just up there watching us from a distance, and we never see our humanity as included in the Trinitarian life. Motherhood and fatherhood, work and play and music then appear to be merely secular, non-divine aspects of our human experience. Deism leaves us with a Christ-less humanity, and forces us to search beyond our humanity for connection with God.

In Trinitarian theology we say “no” to both pantheism and deism. We have union but no loss of personal distinction, which means that we matter and that our humanity, our motherhood and fatherhood, our work and play and music form the arena for our participation in the Trinitarian life of God. The Triune God meets us not in the sky or in our self-generated religions, but in our “ordinary” human existence.

“We are now free to let go of our racial and personal prejudices, and to love and accept one another.”

CO: So the gospel is about God knowing us and us knowing God.

BK: Exactly. Let me give you a quick story. I like stories better than long and convoluted theological explanations. Many years ago when my son was six (he’s 18 now), I was sitting on the couch in the den sorting through junk mail on a Saturday afternoon. He and his buddy came in and they were decked out in their camouflage, face paint, plastic guns and knives, the whole nine yards. My son peers around the corner of the door and looks at me, and the next thing I know, he comes flying through the air and jumps on me. We start wrestling and horsing around

and we end up on the floor. Then his buddy flies into us and all three of us are just like a wad of laughter.

And right in the middle of that event the Lord spoke to me and said to pay attention. I’m thinking, it’s Saturday afternoon, your son comes in and you’re horsing around on the floor, it happens every day all over the world, so what’s the big deal? Then it started to dawn on me that I didn’t know who this other kid was. I had never met him. He had never met me. So I re-wound the story and thought about what would have happened if this little boy would have walked into my den alone. Remember, he didn’t know me and I didn’t know him, and he didn’t know my name and I didn’t know his name. So he looks over and sees me, a complete stranger, sitting on the couch. Would he fly through the air and engage me in play? Would we end up in a pile of laughter on the floor? Of course not. That is the last thing that would have happened.

Within himself, that little boy had no freedom to have a relationship with me. We were strangers. He had no right to that kind of familiarity and fellowship. But my son knows me. My son knows that I love him and that I accept him and that he’s the apple of my eye. So in the knowledge of my love and affection, he did the most natural thing in the world. He dove into my lap. The miracle that happened was that my son’s knowledge of my acceptance and delight, and my son’s freedom for fellowship with me, rubbed off on that other little boy. He got to experience it. That other little boy got to taste and feel and know my son’s relationship with me. He participated in my son’s life and communion with me.

Then it dawned on me that that’s what perichoresis and our adoption in Christ mean. Jesus is the one who knows the

Father. He knows the Father’s love and acceptance. He sees the Father’s face. Jesus has freedom for fellowship with his Father. And Jesus shares his heart with us. He puts his own freedom for relationship with his Father in us through the Spirit, and like that little boy we get to taste and feel and experience the relationship Jesus has with his Father. He shares it all with us. He unites himself with us, and we get to experience his divine life with him. He shares with us his own knowledge of his Father’s heart, his own knowledge of the Father’s acceptance, his own assurance of his Father’s love, his own freedom in knowing the Father’s passionate heart. He reaches into his own soul, as it were, and pulls out his own emotions, and then puts them inside of the whole human race. We’re all included in the Son’s

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relationship with the Father in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

CO: Then we never have to worry about whether God accepts us and loves us?

BK: Never. What does the understanding that we are accepted into the mutual indwelling and communion with God remove from our hearts? Fear and hiding. So because of Jesus' knowledge of the Father's acceptance, which he shares with us, we now are free to let go of our racial and personal prejudices, and to love and accept one another, which leads to the freedom to know and be known, which leads to fellowship and mutual indwelling.

This is what the kingdom of the Triune God is all about. The kingdom is simply the life and love, the communion, the fellowship, the camaraderie and joy of the Father, Son and Spirit, being shared with us and coming to full and abiding and personal expression in us, in our relationships with one another and in our relationships with the whole creation, so that the whole earth is full of the Son's knowledge of his Father in the Spirit. As to why we don't experience our life in Christ more fully, that is a question for another day.

C. Baxter Kruger is Director of Perichoresis, Inc.
A Trinitarian Ministry

I think God hates me!

by

Keith Hartrick

Although a charity, The Plain Truth is not a church, or a counselling agency, but often people do write to us for help. There are some we just can't ignore. So our managing editor sent a copy of one such letter to me, as well as to the other trustees of The Plain Truth, and asked us to pray about it.

Let me just quote a few excerpts.

'Will you please pray for me and my family? Last week I was told I have cancer again, the second time in 20 years. ... Last year I was told I was a diabetic. I am frightened. I cannot pray as I don't know how... many bad thoughts are running through my mind. ...my husband is worried sick.

I have no friends I can trust... friends have failed me in the past. One even cursed me ...now I think these bad things have happened because of her curse. Since Mum died it has been one thing after another.... I think God hates me. I can't blame him – I hate myself.'

This letter affected me deeply.

I read it with tears in my eyes feeling this person's sadness and sorrow in every line. She was obviously worn out, discouraged and suffering from depression. I am not qualified to offer help about that, although I know enough about it to suggest that perhaps she does seek some professional help. It is not a sin to be depressed and there is much that can be done to help.

But one line of her letter did stand out – shriek out, actually – and I am qualified to offer her some advice in this area. She said 'I think God hates me. I can't blame him – I hate myself'.

For her own reasons the writer did not want a reply sent to her home – and of course I respect that. But I hope she may read this and find some comfort as a result. And I hope others who entertain such a thought will read it too. Because no one – no one – should ever feel that God hates them.

But so many of us do feel that way at some point in our lives, don't we? We may not reach the depths of despair that this reader feels. But we do feel unworthy of his love and care, and may be afraid to even try to pray to him, because of the unworthiness we feel.

Unfortunately, some may see the statement as a lack of faith and wonder how anyone who calls themselves 'Christian' can think that God hates them. Their advice would be, 'Stop that nonsense. Pull yourself together. You should be ashamed of making such a statement about God.' They may point to some upbeat scriptures to show there is no excuse for a Christian ever be that depressed. Well, they are wrong.

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Doesn't need criticism

And even if they were right, it is not what our reader needs to hear right now. She doesn't need criticism or correction. She needs someone to listen and share her problems without any judgement or today's 'fast-fix instant solutions'. Today's society can grind people down and make them feel emotionally drained. Add to that the pressure of a life-threatening illness, the comparatively recent loss of a parent and it's easy to understand why they may feel God has cursed them. It can happen even to the greatest of God's servants – like Elijah.

Few people ever worked as hard, or risked as much in God's service as he did. But, almost immediately after one of his greatest triumphs (you can read the story in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings, chapter 18), we find him exhausted, frightened, depressed and ready to end it all. The Bible tells us that he ran off into the desert wilderness, lay down under a tree and told God, 'I have had enough, Lord' he said. 'Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.¹

That was probably the best thing he could have done. It's hard to see things straight when you are exhausted. So God let him rest a while. And then, instead of criticizing him for his lack of faith, he began to carefully refocus him on doing the work he had been called to do.

God understands

God does not throw people away when they break down. His love for us does not depend upon our love for him. The Psalms remind us:

'As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us? As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.'²

God's love for us does not depend on our state of mind or adherence to a set of rules and regulations. Neither does it depend on whether we are fit and well or struggling or sick, on whether we are fat or thin, tall or short, young or old, nor on the colour of our skin, our job, financial position or our family.

God loves us so much that in John 3.16 we are told that he so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to die for us, to pay the penalty for our sins. And he does not wait until we are ready to repent of those sins, or even acknowledge that we

have committed them. As Paul reminded the Christians at Rome, 'You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'³

You are not alone

I know that this is hard to really understand. We are tempted to think, 'Yes, that's maybe true for most people, but not for me'. I empathise because I too have had some of life's ups and downs. My parents divorced when I was eight years old. In fact there have been in my family of two brothers and one sister, and my wife's family of one sister – including our parents – a total of 12 divorces. My sister died when she was 29, leaving two small children. One of my brothers was killed in a car accident 12 years ago. My Father and one of my brothers were both alcoholics, my father dying at 58 years old as a result, while both spent time in prison. My own business collapsed and it took ten years to pay off the debts. And as a result of doctrinal changes in our church I lost close friends of many years standing.

So I have some understanding of what the writer feels during this troubled period in her life. Through it all I've come to know that God loves me and I can confidently assure you that he loves you too.

There are no quick and easy answers in times of severe trial and difficulty. Sometimes we have to endure through the pain. Only in retrospect can we take a more balanced and calmer look at our trials, but even then we can ask the question, 'Why me?'

Don't be afraid to ask for help

We don't always know the answers. Life is not always fair, and, as Elijah had to learn, walking with God does not put you in an insulated bubble and guarantee you a life free from all trials and problems. Yes, even including the private hell of depression. So don't be afraid to get some professional help with that. And don't be afraid to ask for prayers and support.

I and my fellow trustees of this magazine have heard your cry for help, and we are asking God to help you. May I ask our readers to join with us, in praying for you and others of those who read our magazine who are struggling with discouragement and fear?

Before I finish, may I remind you of something else Paul wrote:

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‘So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn’t hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn’t gladly and freely do for us?’

And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God’s chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us – who was raised to life for us! – is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us.

Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture.’⁴

Endnotes:

1 I Kings 19:4-5

2 Psalm 103:11-14

3 Rom 5:6-8

4 Romans 8:31-35 (Message Bible)

In the footsteps of St. Paul

by
Bryony Wood

When I tell people I’m off to Greece on holiday they look wistfully and ask, ‘Whereabouts?’ ‘Thessalonica’. I say. Eyes glaze over.

It doesn’t sound as romantic as Samos or Crete and, unless you know the Bible you have probably never heard of it. If you do know your Bible you may recognize it as the name of one of those hard-to-pronounce epistles in the New Testament. But Thessalonica has become a very real place for me now, and visiting there has given those old letters new meaning. They were written to real people; probably not so different to the people I met on my rather unusual Greek holiday.

Thessalonica or Thessaloniki, as the Greeks call it, is the second largest city in Greece, about a six-hour drive north of Athens. It’s a sprawling mix of ancient and modern, seaside and mountaintop; all rolled into one buzzing, delightful metropolis that’s as Greek as Zorba and Mousakka. In fact, Thessalonica makes little effort to be anything else but pure Greek.

Memories are still recovering from events in history when this part of Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire under Turkish rule until 1912, then occupied by the Germans in the Second World War. Nowadays being truly Greek is still a matter of pride.

Nearly one million people live in what is one of the oldest cities in Europe which stretches some twelve kilometres, hugging the coast around the Gulf of

Thermaikos. Climate here brings interesting extremes, with cold snowy winters and baking hot summers, the locals regularly adjust their lifestyle to suit.

Sometime around the beginning of May, Thessalonians embrace the warmer days and switch to the summer working patterns with afternoon siestas and working, eating and socialising going well on into the night. The Greeks don’t do early to bed!

A very prosperous city

Thessalonica was founded by Cassander, King of Macedonia around 315 BC on the site of an ancient settlement going right back to 2300 BC. It was named after his wife, ‘Thessaloniki’ who was the sister of Alexander the Great. Coins excavated from that time indicate that the city was once very prosperous. Nowadays Thessalonica is still an important port and commercial centre and the tourist’s gateway to summer holiday destinations a steamy coach ride away in nearby Halkidiki. Yet buried among the glitzy shops and modern buildings, we can find traces of history that take us straight back to the birth of Christianity.

Biblical connections with Thessalonica began when St Paul first visited the city in AD 49, half way through his second missionary journey. The city, with its new group of believers, made a great impression on Paul and it was to the Thessalonians that he then wrote his first surviving letters. What we know as the

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first and second epistles to the Thessalonians were written by Paul on scrolls of papyrus within a few months of his visit. They were originally intended to be read aloud to encourage and teach the new Christian congregations in the area; and were written even before the four Gospels. Nowadays communications to and from Thessalonica are more likely to be on a postcard or email!

Paul's journey though into Macedonia was more than eventful. Recently however, I was fortunate to be able to retrace his footsteps, walking where he walked and seeing the same stunning scenery as he saw.

Although Paul originally travelled from Neapolis near Philippi, my journey started in Thessalonica; and with the help of a hire car, I took the motorway out of the city and travelled along the ancient route of the Via Egnatia towards Kavala some 170 Kilometres west. The Via Egnatia had been built by the Romans, taking people, armies and commerce to and from Rome, right across Macedonia and eventually to Constantinople. Although little is left now of the original roadway, its route is still followed by modern highways.

What Paul knew as Neapolis is now called 'Kavala', a modern city with an important port. A Byzantine fortress dominates the harbour, where Paul first stepped onto European soil bringing with him the message and name of Christ.¹

From there, Paul and his companions travelled some seventeen kilometres inland to Philippi.² This was a Roman city of grandeur and regional importance and named after Philip II of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. Its many buildings included: a large amphitheatre, various temples, administrative centres, workshops, markets, colonnades, a library and a bath-house all enclosed by a strong wall. Paul probably entered the city through the Neapolis Gate along the Via Egnatia. Remnants of this ancient road are still visible today, with its worn paving slabs now fringed by grass and wild flowers.

Paul's jail?

Today what was Biblical Philippi is inhabited only by lizards scuttling across sun-scorched stones. Catastrophic earthquakes in the seventh century, together with repeated invasions from foreign armies brought destruction and led to its gradual decline. Walking around the ruins it's not always easy to determine what you are looking at. Signs are scarce and it's left up to the visitor to explore freely. One particular corner of the site intrigued me though.

A Greek friend had pointed out the significance of a half-buried shelter open to the sky, surrounded by what was left of a thick wall. I clambered up, to look over into a small room to see what is commonly accepted as the ruins of the prison where Paul and Silas were kept in chains. This was where they sang praises while chained up, until God and the earthquake freed them!³ From here, across the modern road that dissects the ruined city is what remains of the forum and main section of the old city, including the market place where Paul and Silas were arrested and beaten before being thrown in to jail.⁴

Just outside Philippi is a small village now called Lydia. It's only a minute or two in the car but walking here would have taken Paul perhaps twenty or thirty minutes. It was here he went to find some people with whom he could share the Gospel. And there, outside the city walls,⁵ he met Lydia – a successful businesswoman. That day she heard his message, gave her heart to the Lord and was baptised in the Gangites River, which still flows through the village.

From Philippi and Lydia I drove back along the motorway version of the Via Egnatia following Paul's route, to the town of Amphipolis on the shore of Lake Volvi, approximately 55 kilometres to the southeast. Little is known of Paul's stay here although a wealth of monuments has been excavated from the early Christian period, a testimony to his ministry and significance to the people of this area. From here my next landmark was the village of Apollonia, 45 kilometres west, another stopover point for the biblical travellers on their way to Thessalonica.⁶

Preach the Gospel

A further sixty kilometres west is Thessalonica itself, and it was here that Paul sought out the Jewish community in order to preach the Gospel. Today there is little obvious sign of his visit to the casual tourist. The remains of the ancient city walls carve a historical route right through the concrete buildings that now cover the city. Because this is an area that has occasional earthquakes, buildings are usually no more than nine storeys high (with a few exceptions). One of the highest natural places over the city is the Trigonian Tower, built as part of the city walls in the Byzantine period. As you look down from this vantage point the city is breathtaking, spreading out below, tumbling down the hillside towards the distant bay.

Compared to Athens which has made much of its image around the pre-Christian cultures of the

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Ancient Greeks, Thessalonica however has a predominantly Christian heritage stemming from the first centuries after Christ and the Byzantine eras. Here, unlike Athens there are no ruined ancient temples or acropolis; but a large number of Orthodox churches, from splendid cathedrals to small neighbourhood churches nestled alongside the business of city life. The Orthodox Church is a fundamental part of Greek life. Its religious and secular traditions still influence society, particularly the older generations with its icons and priests well respected.

The vast majority of people in this city live in apartments built above shops and offices, flocking out periodically into the parks and pavements to meet family and friends. In this place it's no crime to sit and chat in a café over one cup of coffee for hours! I love this place! Its buzz, its life and laughter. By day or night, I feel safe here, walking along the wide seafront, aware that as a rare non-Greek tourist I stand out and warrant the stares from the locals.

I think that if Paul came back today, he'd still recognise the spirit of this city, albeit a much bigger place now. He'd recognise the rhythm of 'traditional religion' now, as it was then, although obviously in a different guise. But a living true faith of a spirit-filled believer? I'm not so sure. There are one or two charismatic fellowships, worshipping outside the confines of the Orthodox Church and some recognised Evangelical churches. But not many. Amazingly, one 'church' recently recognised by the religious authorities as being officially accepted, is the one which still worships the Greek god Zeus and the other pagan Olympic gods! Political or religious 'correctness' it seems, has arrived in Greece. Paul would be turning in his grave!

Forgotten history

As an outsider it's not always possible to get the complete picture of any place. But I was surprised that the city seems to make so little of its historical New Testament connections. Like Philippi and Ephesus, Thessalonica played an important role in our spiritual heritage. Visiting it today helps you see it as a real place, inhabited by real people whose problems and feelings have probably changed very little since being visited by Paul and his friends nearly 2000 years ago.

'Thessalonica' is not an easy word to say, or spell and it is quite tricky to actually find on the map. But if I was a Thessalonian, I would be proud of Paul's visit here and the letters he wrote to my ancestors. I'd see my city as a living example that what happened in the Bible, happened to real people with all the ups and downs we experience today.

Paul left Thessalonica under a cloak of darkness, fleeing for his safety. I left soaring up over the city in an aeroplane. The airport is just outside the city and the plane takes off and climbs steeply over the bay. From here you can see the whole of Thessalonica spreading out below. It's a view Paul could never have imagined. Thessalonica has captured my heart and I know it won't be too long before I return.

Endnotes:

- 1 Acts 16:11
- 2 Acts 16:12
- 3 Acts 16:23-26
- 4 Acts 16:19-22
- 5 Acts 16:13-15
- 6 Acts 17:1

Church History Corner

By Paul Kroll

Persecution, penance and "the lapsed"

For the first 300 years of the church's history, believers faced many local and empire-wide persecutions of varying intensity. One of the most terrifying struck in A.D.250. This was the "Decian

Persecution," named after the Roman Emperor Decius Trajan (249-251), who instigated it.

Decius, a pagan, believed that the gods were unfavourable to Rome because the empire's citizens were not suitably worshipping them. The survival of

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the empire was in the balance, in his way of thinking. He considered Christians—and anyone else—who didn't worship the gods to be atheists and guilty of high treason.

Decius issued a decree commanding all people throughout the empire to sacrifice to the gods and to the emperor. Those complying would receive a *libelli*, a certificate attesting to this fact.

Decius certainly didn't want to turn Christians into martyrs, so comparatively few were actually killed. The goal was to force them to recant their faith and return them to the pagan fold. Arrest, exile, confiscation of property, threats and even torture were employed to force Christians to abandon their faith. The bishops and officers of the church were hit especially hard, with a number of martyrdoms in their ranks.

Many Christians steadfastly refused to go along with Decius' demands and confessed Christ even under brutal torture. They were given the honorary title "Confessor" by the church. However, multitudes of Christians did sacrifice to the gods and the emperor. Some bribed authorities to obtain fraudulent certificates stating they had sacrificed, when they had not. The Christians who complied with Decius' order were excommunicated from the church as apostates and collectively called the *lapsi*, or those who had lapsed from the faith.

The persecution under Decius was short-lived. He died in battle just two years after attaining office.¹ A decade later; Gallienus (260-268) was on the emperor's throne. Under his reign the church enjoyed the first of about 40 years of freedom from persecution.² Many of the lapsed Christians then wanted to be readmitted into fellowship with the church.

This situation created a great controversy. Should the lapsed be readmitted at all? Or, readmitted conditionally—after a time of penance and "proving" their loyalty to Christ and the church? Must the lapsed be rebaptized before being readmitted? What about those who had renounced their faith, but then reaffirmed it even while the Decian persecution was in progress?

Enter Novatian (c. 200-258), a prominent Roman presbyter and theologian. He insisted that no lapsed person should be readmitted to the church. Novatian contended that the lapsed had forfeited grace through a denial of Christ. The schismatic group he formed

posed another problem when certain of its members later wanted to be readmitted to the church.

Enter Cyprian (248-258), the respected bishop of Carthage. Cyprian and his supporters held that the lapsed should be received back into full fellowship and communion, but only after an interval of probation and penance. Cyprian also insisted that those individuals who had been baptized by priests of schismatic groups, like Novatian's, would have to be rebaptized by priests of the church.

Cyprian convened several North African church councils between the years 251 and 256 to decide the issues. On September 1, 256, the North African synod voted unanimously that any individuals baptized by heretical or schismatic groups would have to be rebaptized before being granted full fellowship with the church.

Enter the bishop of Rome, Stephen (254-257). He ordered that the lapsed or heretics should be accepted into the church *without* a second baptism. Cyprian resisted this order for some time, but finally yielded.

Such thorny and divisive questions of how to deal with the lapsed led to the establishment of "a rigorous and fixed system of penitential discipline," wrote Philip Schaff in his monumental 1910 *History of the Christian Church*, page 189. Thus, persons who had been excommunicated because they had lapsed, and were now seeking re-entry, became "penitents." They had to undertake a series of acts of penance before being readmitted.

The controversy over how to handle the lapsed had long-lasting repercussions for the church. As church historian Justo González points out in his *The Story of Christianity*, page 90,

"It was out of that concern that the entire penitential system developed. Much later, the Protestant Reformation was in large measure a protest against that system."

Endnotes:

1. Decius was succeeded as emperor by Gallus (251-253) and then Valerian (253-260). While there were changes in the level of persecution, and temporary easing at times, those were still years when it was not safe to be a Christian.
2. The 40 years of rest was followed by the last and most violent persecution, under Emperor Diocletian (284-305).

Faith in victory and in death

A study of Hebrews 11:23-40

It is easy to have faith when everything is going well. But faith is needed most when we face danger. The "faith chapter" continues with stories of how people remained faithful in life-threatening situations.

The author takes several episodes from the life of Moses. He starts with his parents, Amram and Jochebed: By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict (Heb. 11:23).

Moses' parents saw that God had a special purpose for this boy, and they risked their lives to keep him (Ex. 2:1-10). The lesson implied for the readers (who seem to be facing a threat of persecution) is that they should not be afraid of a government edict, either.

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin (Heb. 11:24-25). Moses turned down a privileged position, and chose instead to be part of the people of God. He gave up the easy life and suffered. If the readers have faith like Moses, they will be faithful, even if they are persecuted.

He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward (v. 26). The readers were also facing disgrace for the sake of Christ. Even if they might lose a lot of money, the choice should be clear, because God offers a far more valuable reward. It's in the future, but it's worth waiting for, even if we have to suffer for our allegiance to Christ.

By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible (v. 27). The first time Moses left Egypt, he was afraid (Ex. 2:14), but the author here is probably referring to the Exodus, when Moses had courage. (There are several parts of Hebrews 11 that are not in chronological order. The author is giving a motivational speech, not a history lesson, and he is selective about which events he reports, and in what order.) The point for the readers: Do not be afraid of the king—keep God in the picture. Moses saw God at the burning bush, but for us he is invisible.

The author presents two more examples from the Exodus: By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned (vv. 28-29). The Exodus is credited to the faith of all the people. The Egyptians had faith, too—they believed they could cross the seabed just like the Israelites did. But their faith was in vain, because it was not based on the promise of God. All the great moments of Israelite history came about through faith, so we should not be surprised if God calls on us to have faith in perilous circumstances, too.

Life in Canaan

The author now moves to the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and in doing this, he has skipped an important moment in Israelite history: Mt. Sinai. Hebrews says nothing about the role that Moses had in building the nation, because those situations were less relevant to the readers. The author is trying to get the readers to stop looking to Moses and his covenant; he is not going to praise it here. He emphasizes Moses' role as a fugitive, as a person who went out.

Then the people reach Canaan: By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient (vv. 30-31). Surprise! The heroes in Israelite history include a non-Israelite woman. She was saved by faith, in contrast to people who disobeyed (disobeyed God, that is, rather than the king of Jericho).

The author could go on, but he has already amassed enough evidence to illustrate his point, so now he wraps it up: And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets.... (v. 32).

The author does not dwell on the history of the people as a nation—he was more interested in illustrating people who were isolated and persecuted. But he mentions some blessings that came with faith. Through faith, these people conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised

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(v. 33). They gained Canaan, but they did not gain all that God had promised (v. 39).

The author skips to the end of the Scriptures for some final examples. Through faith, he says, some people shut the mouths of lions [Daniel 6], quenched the fury of the flames [Daniel 3], and escaped the edge of the sword [possibly the story in Esther]; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies (v. 34).

A great contrast

Then the author moves from triumph to tragedy: Women received back their dead, raised to life again. [But] there were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection (v. 35). In times of triumph, Elijah and Elisha brought people back to life (1 Kings 17:17-23; 2 Kings 4:17-35). But other equally great prophets were persecuted to death for that "better resurrection." The author's comments remind one of a story from the Jewish history book 1 Maccabees, chapter 7. Here we are told about seven brothers who were tortured by the Syrian ruler, while their mother reminded them that God would resurrect the faithful—a resurrection even better than Elijah and Elisha restoring people back to life.

History is full of people who refused to give up, even when threatened with death, and God wants his people to have faith like that—a faith that sees beyond the temporary treasures and temporary trials of this world, and seeks the heavenly country, the city built by God, the place of permanent reward.

Hebrews tells us what it may cost: Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them (vv.

36-38). If you are persecuted, the author says, you are in good company. The world does not deserve to have such honourable people in its midst, but God puts his people here anyway.

They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised (vv. 38-39). These trials were not punishments from God, nor evidence that God had taken away his protection. These people were strong in faith, and yet had troubles in this life. That's because the promise of God is not a better life in this world—it is life in a better world.

We will all die, but for those who die in the faith, the promises are guaranteed. The readers are worried about threats of persecution, so the author encourages them to keep their eyes on the eternal, not the temporary.

God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect (v. 40). God wants us to join the heroes, and we will be rewarded together; we will all be brought to the finish line if we keep the faith.

Questions for discussion

- In what circumstances would I choose pain over pleasures? (v. 25)
- Why was Rahab the only person in Jericho who put her life in God's hands? (v. 31)
- Who turned weakness into strength? (v. 34) Can I do that, too?
- In what way were the Old Testament heroes waiting for us? (v. 40)
- What New Testament heroes of faith are there? Who had victories, and who had tragedies?

Michael Morrison
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Lessons from Mark
A lesson about hope
Lesson 28 - Mark 5:21-43

When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."

Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering....

At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "I hate crowds. I hate the jostling, the noise, the sense of being herded in directions I might not want to go and the frustration of proceeding at miserably tedious speeds. It's no wonder that Jesus disciples' were a bit sarcastic when he once asked the crush of bodies knocking him around in a Judean crowd, "Who touched my clothes?"

As it happened, Jesus was in this crowd only because he was on his way to heal the feverish daughter of a synagogue ruler who pleaded that Jesus have mercy on his dying child. Mark likes to tell his stories about Jesus like sandwiches—one story sandwiched in the middle of another—kind of like Jesus was sandwiched in this crowd.

"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples asked, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

Yes, that's exactly what Jesus could ask. He could ask because he'd felt something quite different from the normal collisions of shoulders and elbows and sandals and hips and thighs. He'd felt that "power had gone out from him" (verse 30). He'd sensed that someone had touched his clothes with a definite

purpose in mind, a definite need, and that this person had done so believing that through this act God would give deliverance.

And indeed God had. Mark fills in the story for us, even though at the time the disciples were in the dark about what had happened. It seems that a woman had been suffering from debilitating menstrual haemorrhaging for 12 years.

This woman had spent everything on doctors to try to find a cure, and they had done nothing but make her problem worse. Now she was out of options, but that's when she heard that Jesus was coming to town. She decided that if she could just touch his clothes, she would be healed. So she bored her way through the sweaty bodies, came up behind Jesus, and touched his cloak. Instantly, the bleeding stopped and her suffering was over.

The mustard from Mark's sandwich of two stories begins to leak over onto both slices of bread at this point. Jairus, the synagogue ruler, was not afraid to walk right up to Jesus, fall at Jesus' feet, and plead for the daughter he loved. But the sick woman was different. She was just as determined and just as believing as Jairus in Jesus' power to save. But she was too afraid to approach this mysterious man of God head on. Unlike Jairus, she sneaked up behind Jesus, flicked a finger across the wrinkles of his robe and sunk back into the anonymity of the crowd.

But despite her fear, despite her low opinion of herself, maybe because of her status as a woman, but even more likely because of her status as unclean because of the purity laws about menstrual flow, Jesus noticed her. And he called her to him. And he called her daughter.

Meanwhile, Jairus' daughter died, and the messengers of this news told Jairus not to bother Jesus any more about it—after all, it was too late. But Jesus ignored them. He went straight to Jairus' house and despite the scorn and disbelief at his statement that the girl was not dead, but only sleeping, he took her by the hand and gave her back her life and Jairus back his daughter.

Jesus doesn't care who you are. He doesn't care if you're timid and shy, young or old, a leader or an outcast. He knows you, loves you, cares about your

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needs and fears and crises, and is ready to help. He listens to your up-front, head-on pleas and he senses hopeful hearts at the back of the line and behind the door. Your personality, your temperament, your status, nor even (especially) your sinful history can erect a barrier he can't bring down like the walls of Jericho.

What's your need? What's your crisis? What's your fear? Take it to Jesus. Take it to him in whatever way works for you. He loves you. He's on your side. And he's waiting.

Mike Fezell
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