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### Personal Study through the Bible-09 (1 Thessalonians 1-2)

Throughout church history there have been several calls to get believers back into serious study of the content of the Bible for the purpose of understanding and applying God's message for themselves to the great issues of their lives and their generation. However, this often leads to confusion because of the lack of agreement among Christian scholars concerning the rudimentary principles of biblical interpretation. This lack of consensus among scholars has caused the lay Christian, the non-scholar, to despair of his ability to make sense of the Bible. Many simply give up and settle for the notion that they will just have to trust some pastor regarding what to believe about God and Bible doctrine. This series is designed to aid the believer in *personally* understanding the Word of God for himself. It is not that difficult for the believer once he gains a few metaphysical skills for reality as such.

Last evening at FBC I mentioned the need to understand that there are three levels to Scripture—and all of reality. There is basic level of understanding that anyone can get just by reading the Bible, just as one gets from reading a book or the daily newspaper. Consider your understanding of 1 Thessalonians 1 on this level: just by reading it you can see Paul's appreciation of the Thessalonians, their virtues of faith, hope, and love, and how they were living a life of *servicing* God, having left a life of serving idols. By reading for yourself Acts 17:1-10, you can see the background of how Paul came to Thessalonica, reasoned with the Jews in the synagogues about Jesus being the Messiah, and having been rejected, he went to the Gentiles where some believed, and how they became the Thessalonian believers to which these letters are addressed. Just by reading Acts 17:1-10 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, any believer can see the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to transform lives. These Thessalonians were serving idols, but when they believed in Jesus Christ, it totally changed their lives. The effects of regeneration are indubitable. This first level is a basic level of grasping reality of several fronts.

The second level is a bit more challenging. On the second level, one understands the original languages and can see with more precision how Paul lays out his thoughts. In the Greek text, for example, there are 18 paragraphs, or thought units: 1:1; 1:2-10; 2:1-12; 2:13-16; 2:17-20; 3:1-5; 3:6-10; 3:11-13; 4:1-2; 4:3-8; 4:9-12, 4:13-18; 5:1-11; 5:12-22; 5:23-24; 5:25; 5:26-27; 5:28. The average believer does not see this when he reads his English Bible. Furthermore, there are certain nuances of Greek words that enhance one's understanding of what Paul is saying. However, in virtually all cases there is no Greek or Hebrew word that is going to change the basic structure of what the believer learns by reading the Bible for himself. Take 1 Thessalonians 1, for example, what Greek word could ever change the basic truths concerning the Thessalonians receiving Christ as their Savior and how the power of the Holy Spirit gave them the virtues of love, joy, hope, and a Christ-centeredness as reflected by them eagerly awaiting to be with Him? While it is true that there are certain things an English reader will not be able to get without understanding the original languages, he still gains many blessings from having a basic understanding of the Bible's message, a biblical literacy if you will. If there is a

question about a word or phrase, it is the pastor's job to shed light from his expertise in the original languages, theology, and philosophy. For example, he can point out that the word for "hope" has the idea of confidence instead of modern connotations that hope has today, like uncertainty or just wishful thinking. However, I think even by reading the English and seeing the activity of the Thessalonians, one can see intuitively that they certainly had more than an "I hope so" attitude. Theirs was no attitude of wishful thinking.

Then there is the third level, the level beyond the original languages. This is the realm of ultimate reality, the realm of metaphysics. This gets into the structure of God as *Esse*, the Being who gives being to all beings, and the precise structure of man as per our studies in philosophical psychology. This does require some expertise these days mostly due to the influences of anti-intellectualism. However, one could reasonably argue that these truths are pretty much apparent even from reading the English text and really thinking about what they say about the reality of God and man. The problem is only a problem because of modern influences on the mind. The structure of God as *Esse* or Pure Act and the nature of man is clearly laid out in the Bible, as we have noted in the past. There is nothing on this metaphysical level that is going to contradict the basic structure of level 1. Levels two and three only enhance one's understanding of level one.

The great controversies and confusion about what the Bible means is, for the most part, on levels 2 and 3. This is the area in which scholars disagree. But just because scholars disagree about in-depth biblical issues, should in no way rob you of those grand truths on level one. Furthermore, by being grounded in the basic structure on the first level, a believer will very likely see where many scholars err, like Calvinists who deny what passages clearly say on several occasions, namely that Christ died for all and that God desires that all be saved. Furthermore, by having basic understanding of the Bible, you will be able to get more out of a sermon that deals with exegetical or philosophical issues as you see them tie into the basic structure of reality. Apart from this basic Bible literacy, one just has to sit there and believe about God what a pastor tells him to believe about Him. This is frightening! It is also very unchristian.

Let's get back to our 1 Thessalonians study. Before we move into the second chapter of Thessalonians in our next lesson, I would like to go over again some basic background information. I want you to read Acts 17:1-10 again. What was Paul doing in verse 3? The word "explaining" is *διανοίγων* = *dianoigon* = *dia* = *through* + *noigon* = *mind*. It emphasizes the mind, reasoning, giving reasons as per our logic and our philosophical studies. Immediately we can see how the 2<sup>nd</sup> level study of the original languages brings more depth to the concept of "explaining," and how the 3<sup>rd</sup> level would even go deeper, for example the laws of logic, Modus Ponens, Modus Tollens, which I am sure Paul used, though he did not use these terms. However, note how neither the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> level contradicts the first level of "explaining." They just add more depth. So the believer who is biblically literate is even more established in the Word when the Christian scholar explains the original languages and metaphysics.

Now that I have, at least attempted to make the point of understanding the basic structure and core reality truths by personally interacting with the English Bible as a foundation for deeper and broader development of those truths through the original languages and philosophical realism, I feel the need to make a couple of points to qualify a few things. It is obvious that

believers can become confused by reading their English bibles. However, the problem is not with the English Bible as much as it is with modern frameworks, which are filled with false concepts. The original languages do help, to a point. But, like I pointed out last evening, the meaning is not in the word but what the word is pointing to. You *cannot* look up a Greek or Hebrew word, get the meaning of the term, and automatically import that meaning in any context. The same Greek and Hebrews words can mean entirely different things in different contexts because they are pointing to different realities. Take the word God, *theos*, it is vastly used throughout the Word of God to refer to the true God. However, the same word, yes, the identical word *theos* is also used of Satan, and even with the definite article (ὁ θεός – the G/god, there is no distinction in the Greek between uppercase and lower case, in the original manuscripts all letters were capitals): 2 Corinthians 4:4 *in whose case the god (ὁ θεός) of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* This is the same with any Greek, Hebrew, and English word. The meaning is not in the word but the metaphysical reality the word is pointing to. It all depends upon what metaphysical reality the word is pointing to. Let me illustrate this with the English: what does the word “bank” mean? Or the word “bark?” Do those words carry meanings that you can put in any context? Of course not. The “bank” where you put your money is a bit different than the bank by the river where you fish. The “bark” of a dog and the “bark” on the tree have absolutely nothing in common. This is true of all language. Language is about the metaphysical realities that they point to; words do not intrinsically carry meanings wherever they are placed. That’s a platonic concept, and it is manifestly false in our world and in the world of the Bible. Furthermore, with the destruction of metaphysical realities, modern philosophy of language views words as expressing, more or less, personal subjective realities, certainly not metaphysical realities as such. See how important metaphysics is?

In getting back to the issue of the three levels of understanding of the Bible (the basic structure of thought and concepts as they are laid out in the English, the original languages, and the metaphysical realities) the problem is not with the English text. The problem is with modern man’s understanding of metaphysical realities. This is more of a problem than not understanding the original languages, because even those with the original languages are often guilty of violating logic and reality in the method they use in exegesis, or rather eisegesis (reading *into* the text). The philosophical and metaphysical realities are far more important than the original languages. What is encouraging is that on an intuitive level, or at least on some level, you already understand aspects of what the English Bible says. For example, take the word “love” in 1 Thess. 1:3, “the labor of love.” While it is true that an average believer is going to be somewhat mixed up on what love is, he still possesses a basic metaphysical concept of love due to the fact that he is an intellectual being made in the image of God and is in contact with reality, which contains the metaphysical reality of love. He may not know all of the nuances that can be brought out in the original languages or, even more importantly, in philosophical psychology. But even on the first level, he has a basic concept of love that basically comports, in some ways, with the realities in his life and for which he uses the word for in references to things he likes, treasures, and values. It is the job of the pastor to help the believer move into the realities of these concepts through the original languages and philosophical psychology. However, we are still talking about the metaphysical reality conveyed by the English term “love” or the Greek term “agape” or the Hebrew term “ahab.” I know that a lot of this needs to be ferreted out and explicated more. My main point is that everything revolves around the metaphysical realities that

are conveyed by arbitrary signs we know as words, be they English or Greek. The issue is always the reality and not the word. We need the proper sign to help show us the way, but it is the reality that we are after. Reading the Bible on your own will bring you into that reality, a reality that has many levels that we can explore as we grow in God's grace.

Let's note a few more things about 1 Thessalonians. Read verses 1-2 again. Note how Paul includes Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy in the greeting. The absence of "apostle" is very significant. He could have thrown around his apostolic authority and lifted himself up above Silas and Timothy. But he didn't. Paul joins his helpers' names to his own in the address. This tells us a lot about his capacity for others. Note his gratitude in verse 2. This is very unusual in the first century. While secular Greek letters/epistles sometimes include in their introduction a prayer to some god, very seldom do you find a prayer of thanksgiving. Paul regularly does this throughout his letters/epistles. However, in 1 Thessalonians this theme of gratitude is longer than most and goes beyond mere introduction. Paul uses the theme of thanksgiving throughout the first two chapters of this letter. Paul had enormous capacity for joy and thanksgiving, especially when he reflected on how these believers responded to the grace of God and how it totally transformed their lives. This appreciation fills the first two chapters of Thessalonians. After reading 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2, read 2:13-20 on Paul's thanksgiving for these believers. It is not required that you know the details of the meaning of love, thanksgiving, joy, exultation, from the original languages or the metaphysics of it all before coming into contact with the basic reality of these concepts. This is where we must start: the basics of these metaphysical realities. Then we can move on to further clarification and proper development that the languages and metaphysics can provide. They are invaluable, but they never replace a basic understanding of the text.

Consider a couple of applications. First, consider the sufferings of Paul and the Thessalonians. We have seen how they were mistreated in Acts 17. However, who suffered more Paul or the Thessalonians? Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica (Acts 17:10). However, the church that he planted remained there. Paul was harassed while in Thessalonica, but the Thessalonians would have been harassed daily by friends, family members, and business associates. They would have been ridiculed and even accused of being traitors, Acts 17:6-7. It is one thing to be persecuted and run out of the city like Paul, it is another to have to endure, day by day, scorn by fellow countrymen. The fact that they continued to rejoice in the Lord and love the Word of God in spite of these persecutions motivated Paul to pour out his gratitude for them in the first two chapters of Thessalonians. Anyone can grasp this by reading this in their native language. *This* understanding does not depend upon knowing Greek or metaphysics as such.

Consider how blessed we are at FBC. We are free to come and learn about God and Reality and encourage fellow Christians without fear of reprisal from government or the discomfort of being hassled by our neighbors or being thought of as traitors by Americans. We still have the freedom to gather with fellow believers in Jesus Christ and continue to advance in 'Ehyeh. Let's never forget this privilege that we have—all courtesy of those who have fought and died for our freedom, both Christ as well as men and women in the military. We are so blessed ☺

All because of Christ,

*Pastor Don Hargrove*