

1 Thessalonians – idols

Something more to celebrate...

Many of you may have seen or taken part in some form of VE Day celebration in your street on Friday? There were certainly plenty of bunting and flag displays and front garden tea parties going on in our road, complete with Glen Miller/Vera Lynn trumpet medleys from a certain house... In many places people really made an effort with festivities, despite the limitations.

It was good to celebrate the freedom and peace that the end of WW2 brought. But you could tell that people really needed something to focus on and have something special to enjoy as a relief from the endless weeks of “sameness”, as well as some form of socializing, albeit at a distance – in most places! In our street it was a great thing to be part of! But, it’s interesting to reflect that even in “normal life” (whatever that was!) we all need something to live for, a focus for our lives, things that give our lives meaning, satisfaction and happiness.

In Acts 17:26-28 Paul told the Athenians (who he visited shortly after the Thessalonians) that we have all been created to know **God** and live for **him** alone *“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’”*

I’ve recently been reading through 1 Thessalonians and one of the things Paul rejoices in when he writes to these new believers is that they have discovered the joy of knowing God and living solely for him. He’s heard how their new faith in God has led to radical change in their lives, a complete shift in focus and priority, which had *“become known everywhere”* (1 Thessalonians 1:8). What was it that marked out these believers? The fact that they had *“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”*.

Turning from ...

At that time those idols they once served would likely have been those made of *“gold or silver or stone – an image made by man’s design and skill”* that Paul goes on to describe in Acts 17:29 – idols that would have been bowed down to and given offerings in the hope of some benefit or favour. Paul spoke out there against the futility of serving idols with the same fervour as Habakkuk 2:18-19: *“Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trust in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’ Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is not breath in it”*

What a contrast these lifeless and deceitful idols were to the *“living and true God”*, to whom the Thessalonians now turned and served! It struck me forcefully how much other things in which I might place my hope and confidence, my sense of meaning,

satisfaction and happiness, pales into insignificance besides my almighty and faithful God! How is it that my heart is sometimes drawn to lesser things? We might feel a little more sophisticated today – our idols, at least in our Western culture, may not be carved images, but we have other kinds and we can treat them in exactly the same way that Habukkuk describes. We can “trust in” status, possessions, self-image, pleasure or affirmation, for example, to give meaning and purpose to our lives – maybe even good things that have become too much of a priority. Anything that takes God’s rightful first place in our heart is an idol. But anything other than God only leaves us feeling cheated and “teaches lies” when it appears to offer what we want or crave, however much it glitters in its appeal. The psalmist in Psalm 73:25 recognised this: *“Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.”*

- **Perhaps stop now and think ...** are there things I've subconsciously been relying on, trusting in that seem of little worth or help in these days? Have the current restrictions made me see something in a new light, something that had become too important to me?

The current changes to normal routines and challenges of all kinds can be unsettling but also loosen our grip on things we'd held too tight. God can use these things to draw hearts closer to him.

Turning to...

In these difficult times we can turn to God, taking time to meditate on *“the living and true God”* - all that he is and all that he has done for us. Remembering he is the living God who has given us a living Saviour draws our hearts to him in worship and away from other things we might be somehow worshipping. He has met our deepest need in forgiving the burden of our guilt through the Lord Jesus, he has lifted the condemnation that hung over us and given us the hope of heaven to look forward to. Because God is living we can know him, speak to him in prayer and he speaks to us through his living Word. He is altogether faithful and trustworthy in all his promises – guiding us, helping us and giving us all the grace, strength and wisdom we need to serve him in whatever situation we are currently in. Unsleeping, untiring, he watches over us all our days, comforting and caring for us in all our needs. He truly is *“my never-failing treasury, filled with boundless stores of grace”!*

May the Lord help us to resolve daily, to turn to God from whatever steals our hearts from him and delight in the joy and blessing of serving him. May we, like the Thessalonians, be an encouraging “model” to other believers as we live like this, and be a witness to unbelievers that *“the living and true God”* is the God worth serving!