



Advent 3

THE NEW SHOFAR

The only true faith is one lived out

Our lives are to be sacrifices of praise to God

Are we pleasing God in all we do, in how we are living?

It is worth reading **chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians** as a background to our present reading. Paul is teaching the Church there how...*you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.* He urges them to focus on living in *holiness* as they await the return of the Son of Man. This was written around 50 A.D. and it was a difficult time for the Christians. They were still seen as being a sect within Judaism and there was a great deal of pressure being applied to force them to adopt fully the religious ways of the Jews.

They were encouraged to *stand firm* in the faith they had received. This meant testing new teachings and applying scrutiny to those who came as prophets and teachers in the name of Jesus. The only message they were to follow was the one revealed to them by the Holy Spirit – through Paul and the apostles.

He offers a short summary of the Lord's expectations of them: *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* That is a great Advent daily discipline, a way to assess our faithfulness to the Gospel. He is not saying Christians must be *happy* always. The word *joy* applies to the impact faith in Christ should have on them, the effect service in the Reign of God on earth has in their lives. Being baptised into Christ, they now look at the world around them with transformed minds and hearts. They are *joy-filled* because of their faith in the resurrection of Christ. That defines them from womb to tomb. It is *in Christ Jesus* they know they are already victorious in whatever comes their way. In Christ they are conquerors.

Note how Paul insists the only way to experience this joy is through *praying always*. "Always"? It is hard enough falling to our knees each day and sending off a prayer or two to heaven. Essential but not always easy to do. But "always"? What Paul has in mind here is prayer as a way of life, a way of imitating Jesus in all we do, in the way we are living among others. It is a lifestyle – living *in Christ* – a lifestyle arising out of a regular, set time of daily prayer. If we cannot manage this, we will never know the *joy* of which Paul writes, the victory Christ wins for us. True prayer grows out of a habit of praying daily, from time spent with God in Christ Jesus.

Produced by Bishop Michael Hough for the Disciples of Christ -

anathoth.hough@gmail.com - www.houghongod.com

Paul lived what he believed and was a true Light to those in darkness

This is the background for John's story about the Baptist...*He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.* ⁸ *He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.* To give witness to the Light, the Baptist must have himself been a man living in the Light. Where those around him saw threats, doom and wickedness, their own failures; where they doubted the love and mercy of God, John could see the hand of the God of their fathers at work in human history. Only as a son of the Light, he could offer Light to those who came to him searching for God.

And how appropriate is the way he understood his ministry – a *voice crying out in the wilderness*. That is where John was living – the wilderness. For him it was a place but also a metaphor describing life at a distance from God. It was life without heavenly guidance, a world where men and women control reality, where there is little need for God as we are all self-made men and women. For the Hebrew people it was the place of evil spirits, forces opposed to God. It was a spiritual battleground through which one had to pass to reach the Promised Land. And John's heart was prepared for encountering the Messiah, preparations made through prayer, discipline and service. While others around him could not read the signs of the times and so missed the arrival of Christ in their midst, John was prepared and in the wilderness he experienced the arrival of God's Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

Where is our "wilderness" our experience of darkness?

The difficulty with our reading from John's Gospel is the way it make sense only to those who can appreciate the *wilderness experience* of searching for God in times when a divine absence seems more real than a divine presence. Only those who yearn for God will find *God-present* around them and within them. John understood the need to *prepare a way for the Lord* and found he could only do that by going off into the desert, through constant prayer, fasting and the service of God's people. Only then could he conquer the "wilderness" and find Light in "darkness". It was his "wilderness" experiences that would eventually enable him to defy Herod, preach the Truth from God and go to his death in anticipation of being held in divine hands.

But you shall be named the priests of Yahweh

This is a kind of vocational prophesy from Isaiah. His idea of priesthood here is one of sacrifice. He is looking forward to the time when God's people will gather around the Messiah (Christ) and turn their lives into *acceptable offerings to God*. This is a phrase worth pondering and a goal worth pursuing: *is the way I live out each day; are the things I do, the things I avoid doing acceptable to God? Do these things give praise to God? Does the way I live and act among others offer them Light? How can I make them more acceptable?* Here the prophet would be very much in agreement with the Apostle Paul: Faith is a lifestyle, a way of living in the world or it is not faith.

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