

F.B. Hole

**Comments on  
the 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle to the  
Thessalonians**

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# Comments on the 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle to the Thessalonians

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## Introduction

IT SEEMS TO be generally admitted that this was the first of all Paul's inspired epistles to be written. If any desire confirmation of this they will do well to read the third chapter of the Epistle and then compare it with Acts 17. The Epistle was written just after Timothy had returned from his visit to Thessalonica, paid while Paul was at Athens; and hence when he wrote it the Apostle's labours at Corinth had barely begun and he had not even visited Ephesus. In any event read the early verses of Acts 17 for the historic details there found give much point to various details in the Epistle.

The fact that the Thessalonians were believers of not many months standing — just young converts — imparts a peculiar interest to this epistle. It is most encouraging to see how many things are true of even the youngest believers in Christ, and also how much grace and devotedness may mark them if their simplicity be unspoiled.

Paul's labours at Thessalonica were very brief; at the end of about three weeks they were cut short by a riot. Very solid work was done however, as this first chapter bears witness. We

may take it as certain that intense Satanic opposition is always a sign that a real work of God is proceeding. The rioters called Paul and his friends, "These that have turned the world upside down," and this designation was not far from the truth. The truth was that the world itself was completely upside down, and the labours of Paul and others were setting men right side up before God. The world itself was left in its upside down condition, but many in Thessalonica were converted out of the world and set in right relations with God. These converts became the church, or assembly, of the Thessalonians.

## **Chapter 1**

THEY WERE NOT formally incorporated as "a church." Had some ceremony been usual the sudden and violent ending of Paul's work in their midst would have precluded it. No, they became the church, that is, the "called-out-ones," of God by the very act of God in calling them out of the world through the Gospel. The Apostle can own them, young converts though they were, as an assembly of God, gathered in the happy knowledge of God as Father, and in subjection to Jesus as their Lord. To know the Father is the characteristic feature of the babe in

Christ, according to 1 John 2:13. To acknowledge Jesus as Lord is the way into salvation, according to Romans 10:9-10.

Paul looked back with much thankfulness to his brief sojourn in their midst, and now absent from them he remembered them continually in prayer. From verse 3 to the end of the chapter he recounts that which he had seen in them of the working of the power of God, and thus there is furnished for us a striking picture of the wonderful effects produced in character and in life when men are soundly converted.

It is worthy of note that the first place is given to the character that was produced IN them, a character summed up in three words, faith, hope, love. Character however can only be discerned by us as it expresses itself in our actions and ways, hence their work and labour and patience (or endurance) are referred to. Their "work of faith" was evident to all, in keeping with that which James writes in his epistle, "I will shew thee my faith by my works." Note that both here and in James 2 the works spoken of are the works of faith, whereas in Romans 4, a chapter erroneously supposed by many to be in conflict with James, the works spoken of are "the works of the law" — an entirely different thing.

If faith comes to light in its works, love is expressed in labour. It is characteristic of love to labour unsparingly for the good of its object, as we all know. Hope too, expresses itself in patient endurance. Only when men become hopeless do they readily give up: they endure as long as hope is like a star shining before their eyes.

These things were clear and distinct in the Thessalonian believers, and led Paul to the confident conclusion that they were amongst the elect of God. It was not that, when he stood up in the synagogue at Thessalonica those three Sabbath days, he could have put a mark on the back of each who would believe before he began to preach, as having private access to the Lamb's book of life and knowing in advance the names of those who were chosen of God. Paul's knowledge was arrived at from the opposite direction. Knowing the powerful way in which the Gospel reached them and the results produced in them by the Spirit of God he had no doubt in his conclusion that they were chosen of God.

In this connection notice the opening words of the Apostle in his first epistle to the Corinthians. In their case he can only thank God that grace had visited them by Christ and that they

were a gifted people. The possession of gift does not however of necessity mean that its possessor is a true believer, as witness the case of Judas Iscariot. Hence the searching words of warning he utters in the latter part of his ninth and the opening of his tenth chapter. To them he spoke of being "a castaway," because of the element of doubt there was in his mind as to some of them, in spite of their gifts. The Thessalonians were in happy contrast to this.

There are "things that accompany salvation" (Heb. 6:9), and the "labour of love" is specified directly after as one of them. In our passage three things are mentioned and the labour of love is one of them. No gifts may be manifested, but if these things are present we can be sure that salvation is possessed, and that the people in question are the elect of God.

If verse 3 gives us the fruit produced in these believers and verse 4 the Apostle's confidence on beholding this fruit, verse 5 indicated the way in which the fruit was produced. Firstly, the Gospel reached them in word: it was boldly preached by Paul. Secondly, his preaching was supported by his devoted and holy life. Thirdly, and largely as a consequence, the Gospel came in power and in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit wrought mightily

through the Word. The Apostle alludes in much detail to what manner of man he was amongst them in his second chapter.

The Gospel also came to them "in much assurance." This is very significant when we turn back to Acts 17 and note that the particular form that Paul's preaching took in their city was that of reasoning with them out of the Scriptures; showing them that when the true Christ of God appeared He must die and rise again, and that these predictions had been so perfectly fulfilled in Jesus that the conclusion was irresistible — Jesus is the Christ! In other words, amongst these people he had very specially based his gospel proclamation and appeal upon THE WORD OF GOD; hence the MUCH ASSURANCE in the converts.

Let us take good note of this. If an Apostle, able himself to give forth inspired utterances, appealed to the Scriptures with such solid and lasting result, we, who have only the Scripture to appeal to, may well make it the basis of all we preach. "Preach the Word," is the great word for us. There is no assurance outside it. The preacher may persuade us that things are as he states, upon the strength of his personal assurances. The converts may tell us that they have every assurance because of the

happy feelings that they experience. But there is as little real assurance in the one as in the other. We can only really be assured of anything as we have the Word of God for it.

In verses 6-8 we find what the Gospel made of these who received it. We saw in the first place the three-fold character it produced in them. Now we see the three-fold character it stamped UPON them. They had been made into "followers ... of the Lord," "ensamples [or patterns] to all that believe," and they "sounded out," like trumpeters or heralds, thus advertizing the Word of the Lord.

Paul himself was a pattern man (see, 1 Tim. 1:16), hence he could rightly ask believers to follow him. Even so, it was only because of the fact that he followed Christ; so that it was indeed the Lord whom they followed. In this connection it is recorded that, though they now followed with joy begotten of the Holy Spirit, they had first known the power of the Word piercing into the conscience and producing repentance toward God with its accompanying affliction of heart. It is ever thus. The deeper the work of repentance the brighter the joy and the more sincere the discipleship of the convert. Let those who preach the Word aim at a deep work in heart and conscience rather

than at showy and superficial results and they will not fail of their reward in the day of Christ.

Following the Lord comes first; it was because of their discipleship that they became examples to their fellow-believers in surrounding provinces. Paul could point to them and say, "That is the kind of thing that the grace of God produces where it is received as the fruit of a deep work of repentance towards God." This is indicated by the words, "so that," at the beginning of verse 7. The little word "for" which opens verse 8 shows us that what follows is also connected with this matter. Their evangelistic fervour also made them an example to others. They not only received the Word to their own blessing but they sounded it forth to others, so much so that their faith in God became notorious not only in the nearer districts but further afield. The whole work of God was so effectually advertized by its wonderful effects in these people that there was no need for the Apostle himself to say a word.

Nothing so effectually advertizes the Gospel as the transformed lives of those who have received it. This fact has been often noted by careful observers, but here we find that Scripture itself recognizes it. Conversely nothing so effectually stultifies

the proclamation of the Gospel as breakdown and sin on the part of those who profess to have believed it. In the light of this, and of the sad conditions prevailing in the Christianized nations, can we wonder that the evangelist in these lands finds himself confronted by hard and difficult conditions today? May God give help to each one of us so that our lives may tell in favour of the Gospel and not against it.

In the closing verses we find a third thing. Not now the character wrought in them, nor the features stamped upon them, but that which was being done BY them. Their conversion was in view of service to God and patient waiting for Christ.

"Ye turned to God from idols." Here we have a Scriptural definition of conversion, which is not only a turning, but a turning to God and consequently from idols. Idols are not only the ugly images venerated and feared by the heathen, but also anything, whether elegant or ugly, which usurps in the heart of man that place of supremacy and dominance which belongs of right to God alone. Idols are before the face of every fallen sinner, charming his heart, and God is behind his back. Conversion takes place and lo, God is before his face and idols are behind his back!

Converted to God our lives are to be now spent in His service. Has it ever occurred to you what an extraordinary favour it is, and what a tribute to the power of the Gospel, that we should be permitted to serve Him at all? An earnest worker in a slum district notices very definite signs of repentance in one of the worst occupants of a thieves' kitchen one Sunday evening. He very greatly rejoices, though with trembling. Yes, but how would he feel if early on Monday morning the poor thing arrived on his doorstep and with many tears avowed her thankfulness for the blessing received and announced her desire to express her gratitude by entering his service — cooking his meals and dusting his house? Stamped upon her he sees disease, dirt, degradation and, until yesterday, drink. What would he say? What would you say?

We have not overdrawn the picture. What we were morally and spiritually just answered to the case supposed. And yet we have been brought into the service of the thrice-holy God as redeemed and born again. But then how mighty must be the moral renovation which the Gospel effects! And even so, remembering that we still have the flesh in us and are consequently very liable to sin, how great a favour it is that we

should be taken into the high and holy service of God. We are actually permitted to serve His interests, His purposes and plans made before the world began. If we realized this there would be no desire to shirk His work. We should eagerly and joyfully run to fulfil it.

While we serve we wait. We are saved in hope of the fulness of blessing which is yet to be introduced. We are not left to await death, which is our departure to be with Christ, but to await His coming for us. We await God's Son from the heavens. This is as far as the Apostle goes for the moment: when we reach 1 Thess. 4 we shall find disclosed what is involved in this statement.

However we will not anticipate; for the moment we will only note that it is God's Son who is coming, that He is coming from the heavens where now He is seated, and that His name is Jesus, whom we know as our Deliverer from the coming wrath. The verb is not in the past tense — "delivered" — as in our Authorised Version. It is rather, "Jesus, who delivers us" or "Jesus, our Deliverer." The point is that Jesus who is coming from heaven will deliver us from the wrath that is coming.

Again and again in both Testaments the word wrath is used to denote the heavy judgments of God which are coming upon this earth. We do not for one moment deny that in several New Testament passages the meaning of the word is enlarged to take in the penal judgment of God which stretches out into and embraces eternity. Still the main use of the word is as we have indicated, as may be seen if the book of Revelation be attentively read. Men and nations are heaping up to themselves wrath against the day of wrath, and the opened eye can see that day of wrath approaching with silent and stealthy tread.

What a joy it is for the believer to know that though wrath is coming Jesus also is coming, and coming as Deliverer! Before wrath swoops like an eagle upon its prey Jesus will come and we shall be delivered out of the very spot where the wrath is going to fall. For the details of this wonderful event we must wait. Meanwhile we can rejoice that the event itself is a glorious certainty and fast approaching.

## **Chapter 2**

IN HIS FIRST chapter the Apostle had alluded to "what manner of men" he and his fellow-workers were among the Thessa-

lonians when they first arrived amongst them with the Gospel, and intimated that the power which had accompanied the message was largely connected with the unblameable character of the messengers. He returns to this subject at the opening of chapter 2.

Paul and his friends found at Thessalonica a door opened of the Lord, and they consequently gained a most effectual entrance into their midst. This was the more striking as they had just come from suffering and shameful treatment at Philippi as recorded in Acts 16. However far from being cowed by this they had such confidence in God that again they boldly spoke forth the Word. The power of it was such that some even of the Jews believed, "and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few" (Acts 17:4). Thus did God grant to His faithful servants a time of much encouragement after severe suffering and before they were plunged into further troubles in Thessalonica itself. We must remember of course that the violence at Philippi did not mean that but little was accomplished in that city. On the contrary, Paul's Philippian converts were among the brightest trophies of grace.

The Apostle puts it on record in verse 2 that he preached the gospel "with much contention." By contention we must not understand heated argument. The expression is literally, "in much agony," or "conflict." The New Translation renders it, "with much earnest striving." Paul preached in an agony of spiritual conflict that the truth might be effectual in his hearers! No "take it or leave it" gospel was his! He was not the mere theologian or Christian philosopher contented with the truth correctly stated in his lectures; nor was he the dreamy mystic wrapped up in himself and in his own impressions and experiences. He was a man with a message, and burning with zeal, and in agony of mind to effectually convey it to others.

What amazing power this must have given him! He may have been weak as to bodily presence and contemptible as to his powers of utterance — "rude in speech" as he elsewhere says — yet the inward agony of spirit with which he spoke must have made his "rude" words like a whirlwind. Multitudes were converted under them, and still greater multitudes were lashed into fury against him! Where do we see power like this today? We hear Gospel addresses that may be characterized as good, clear, sound, striking, intelligent, eloquent, sweet. But they do

not achieve much either in conversions or in stirring up the powers of darkness. Yet the need is as great and the energy of the Holy Spirit is the same. The difference lies in the character and calibre of the messengers.

In verses 3 to 6 we are given a glimpse of what Paul and his helpers were NOT, and thereby we may learn the things that are to be studiously avoided by every servant of God. First of all every element of deceit and unreality must be put away. It has been very rightly said that,

*"Thou must be true thyself,  
If thou the truth would'st teach."*

Not only so but all thought of pleasing men must be banished. Any service we have had committed to us, however small it be, has been given of God and not by man. Hence to God we are responsible and He tries not only our words and acts but also our hearts. Paul was put in trust with the Gospel in an altogether exceptional measure, but the three words, "PUT IN TRUST" may well be written upon all our hearts. We must never forget that we are trustees.

If we bear it in mind we shall of course avoid the use of flattering words, and the cloak of covetousness, and the seeking of glory from men, of which verses 5 and 6 speak. These three things are exceedingly common in the world. Men naturally seek their own things and hence are ruled by covetousness, though they may disguise it under some kind of cloak. Glory from man is also very dear to the human heart; and, whether they pursue possessions or glory, they find flattering words a useful weapon, for by them they can often curry favour with the influential. All these things were utterly refused by Paul. As a servant of God, with God for his Judge and God for his Witness, they were altogether beneath him.

The positive characteristics of Paul's ministry come before us in verses 7 to 12, and it is worthy of note that he begins by comparing himself to a nursing mother and ends by comparing himself to a father. We may find it difficult to imagine how this exceedingly forcible man could have been gentle, "as a nurse would cherish her own children," but so it was. Physical force is usually brutal. Spiritual force is gentle. There was plenty of the former to be seen in Thessalonica when "the Jews which believed not, took to them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort

... and set all the city on an uproar," yet it all ended in nothing. Paul's gentleness, on the contrary, left lasting results. It was the gentleness begotten of an ardent love for these young converts. He cherished them; that is, he kept them warm, and how could he do this except his own love was warm. It was so warm that he was ready to impart to them not the Gospel only but also his own soul or life. He would have laid down his life for them.

However he was not called upon to do that. What he did was to labour with his own hands by night as well as by day in order that, being self-supporting, he might not be any charge upon them. He refers to this again in his second epistle, and from Acts 20:34 we glean the astonishing information that he not only met his own needs in this way but also the needs of those that were with him. Elsewhere he speaks of "night and day praying exceedingly," and we know how abundant were his labours in the gospel.

Under these circumstances we may well marvel that this extraordinary man could find any time for his tent-making, but somehow the thing was done and thus he made the Gospel of Christ without charge, although the Lord had ordained as a general rule that those who preach the Gospel should live of

the Gospel. It is very evident that manual labour is honourable in the sight of God.

To all this the Thessalonians were witnesses. Himself marked by holiness and practical righteousness he had been able to charge them that they should follow in his steps and walk in a way that was worthy of God — the God who had called them that they should be under His authority and enter into His glory.

What has occupied us thus far has been the manner of life that characterized Paul and his fellow-labourers: with verse 13 we turn again to that which marked their converts in Thessalonica. Receiving the Word of God through channels such as these men were, they received it as the Word of God. This verse plainly indicates that the Word of God may be received as the word of men, and that it is not one whit less the Word of God if it be so received. If you happened to get hold of a camera with a defective lens you would find the subjects of your films strangely, and often grotesquely, distorted. You must not however blame the objects which you photographed. The objects were all right though your subjects proved all wrong. We must learn to distinguish between the objective and the subjective, as

the Apostle does here. The objective Word of God was presented to the Thessalonians and the subjective impression made in them was according to truth. Had they received it as the word of men its effect upon them would have been but transitory. Receiving it as the Word of God it operated in them powerfully and produced in them just those effects that had been seen when first the Gospel had been preached in Judaea. Though tested by persecution they stood firm.

Acts 17 shows us how quickly the storm of persecution burst in Thessalonica. The house of Jason was assaulted and Jason himself and certain other brethren haled before the magistrates; the instigators of the riotous behaviour being Jews. The Apostle here shows them that they had only been called upon to suffer like things to the earlier converts in Judaea, and that the Jewish instigators of their troubles were true to type. This leads him to sum up the indictment which now was laid against them.

Of old God's great controversy with the Jews was on account of their persistent idolatry. Of this the Old Testament prophets are full. The New Testament adds the even greater charge that they "killed the Lord Jesus." Added to this they drove out the Apostle by their persecutions and, as far as in them lay, forbade

the going forth of the Gospel to the Gentiles. They refused to enter the door of salvation themselves and as far as possible they hindered others doing so. How striking is the description of this unhappy people, "They please not God, and are contrary to all men."!

It is pretty evident that the nations generally are contrary to the Jew. Verses 15 and 16 of our chapter shows us the reason why. They themselves are contrary and nationally they lie under the Divine displeasure, hence nothing is right with them, though of course God is still saving out them "a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5). Earlier they had been under trial. Even after the death of Christ an offer of mercy had been made to them consequent upon the coming of the Holy Spirit, as recorded in Acts 3:17-26. Their official answer was given by the martyrdom of Stephen and by the persecution of Paul who was raised up directly after Stephen's death to carry the light of salvation to the Gentiles. They would have slain Paul also had not God intervened in His providence to prevent it. (See, Acts 9:23 and 29). As a consequence the wrath long withheld had been definitely loosed against them. They will not have paid as a nation, the last farthing, till the great tribulation has rolled

over their heads. But nothing now can stay God's dealings against them in wrath.

Against this dark background how beautiful is the picture which verses 17 to 20 present. The Apostle, who was hurried out of their midst under cover of night, was filled with ardent longings towards them. As his spiritual children, begotten of the Gospel, he looked upon them as his hope, and joy and crown of rejoicing. The links that bound them to him were of the tenderest, most spiritual nature. If he looked on, he anticipated having them as his glory and joy at the coming of the Lord. Looking back he recognized how Satan had worked to keep them sundered on earth, as to bodily presence.

This passage plainly indicates that Satan is permitted to harass and hinder the servants of the Lord; yet comparing the story with the history recorded in Acts it is very evident that God knows well how to over-rule Satan's hindering work for good. Satan hindered Paul from returning just then to Thessalonica, but God led him to Corinth; and He had much people in that city!

Notice also how happily Paul looked forward to reunion with his beloved Thessalonian converts in heaven. His words would have been meaningless had he not expected to know them each and all in that day. The saints of God will know one another when they meet at the coming of Christ and in His presence.

### **Chapter 3**

BUT IF PAUL had been hindered from coming personally — very likely by the violence of the persecution raised against him by Satan — he had sent Timothy to comfort and encourage them. Here again, in opening chapter 3, we see in Paul the marks of a true father in Christ. He was at Athens, a peculiarly hard and difficult city, a place where more urgently than in most he felt the need of the support and encouragement afforded by like-minded fellow-labourers, yet would he sacrifice himself and be left alone in order that Timothy might shepherd the souls of these young believers, and establish them just when Satan was aiming at their overthrow by means of afflictions. The trial of their faith had not come as a surprise for he had forewarned them about it, even though his stay amongst them had been so short

From this let us learn that it is not right nor wise to hide from the youngest convert that tribulation from the world is the normal lot of the Christian while on earth. There are abundant joys in Christianity, but not of a worldly order. In the world we are to have tribulation, so let us not misrepresent the case, thinking thereby to get more converts. Let the truth be faced and we shall thereby not lose one true convert, though plenty of make-believe ones may be checked — to their own good and our good also. As to tribulation, we all of us have to say in our turn, "it came to pass, and ye know."

In raising persecution against believers Satan is always aiming at their faith. He would weaken it and destroy it if possible. Notice how, as a consequence, faith is emphasized by Paul in this passage. He sent Timothy to comfort "concerning your faith." He sent to "know your faith." Timothy returned and brought "good tidings of your faith," and as a consequence he was comforted "by your faith." Faith is the eye of the soul. It gives spiritual vision. Paul knew that, as long as the unseen things of faith were real to them, the persecution would only produce spiritual enrichment and invigoration, just as a cold shower which would be hurtful to an invalid is invigorating to

a man in full health. Faith is a vital link between the soul and God and if it be weakened, everything about the believer is weakened. Satan knows this right well.

When faith is maintained in the hearts of believers they "stand fast in the Lord," and this was a great joy to the apostle. It comforted him in all his afflictions. So deeply did he feel about the Thessalonians, exposed as they were to such trials so soon after their conversion, that until he knew how they had been sustained in them he was like a man at the point of death. The good news he got through Timothy brought him back to life. This is the figure he uses when he says, "Now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord."

Though faith was so brightly maintained in these Christians, yet there was need that it be perfected, as verse 10 shows. Something was lacking as to it in this sense — that as yet they were unacquainted with the whole circle of truth that had been revealed. What they did see by faith, they saw very clearly; but they did not as yet see all there was to see. The apostle earnestly longed to meet them again and bring before them those parts of God's truth which as yet they knew not. In this Epistle

he reveals to them something of which as yet they were in ignorance, as we shall see when considering 1 Thess. 4.

While as yet he was hindered, his desire was that they should increase and abound in love one toward another. God alone is the Object of faith. He is also the Object of love, but love to Him can best be practically expressed by love to those born of Him, as we are reminded in John's Epistle. Moreover the Christian should be an overflowing fountain of love toward all men. The Thessalonians were this, and it explains how they became such effectual advertisements of the gospel, as we saw when considering 1 Thess. 1. Only they were to increase more and more.

Thus would they be established unblameable in holiness in view of the coming of the Lord. Holiness and love are evidently closely connected. As love is operative in our hearts towards God and his people, so we hate what He hates and are preserved unblameable before Him. The grand goal before us is the coming of the Lord Jesus with all His saints. Mark that preposition "with." When He comes in His glory we are to be with Him. How we reach His presence above, so as to come forth from heaven in His company when He appears, is not yet

plainly indicated in the Epistle; but this verse alone should have assured the Thessalonians, and should assure us, that when He comes not one will be missing. It will be with ALL His saints.

## **Chapter 4**

AS WE OPEN the fourth chapter of this epistle we find the Apostle turning to exhortation and instruction. The earlier chapters had been largely occupied with reminiscences both as regards the work of God, wrought in the Thessalonians, and also the behaviour and service of Paul and his fellow-workers in their midst. Now the Apostle addresses himself to the present needs of his much-loved converts.

In the first chapter he had been able to say about them much that was highly commendatory, but this did not mean that there were no dangers and difficulties confronting them, nor that they were beyond the need of further advancement in the things of God. On the contrary they were as yet but babes. There was much they had yet to learn as to the truth and much they needed to know as regards the will of God for them. A great

word for them, and for all of us, is that with which verse 1 closes — "more and more."

In the first place they were to abound more and more in all those practical details of life and behaviour which are pleasing to God. During his short stay in their midst Paul had succeeded in conveying to them an outline of the walk that pleases God though of course there was much to be filled in as to detail. It is one thing however to know and quite another to do, and we are set here to please God in all our activities and ways. The will of God is our sanctification, that is, that we should be set apart from all that defiles in order that we may be wholly for God, and the Apostle had given them definite commandments as from the Lord in keeping with this.

Do we pay sufficient attention to the commandments of the Lord Jesus and of His Apostles which we find so plentifully in the New Testament? We fear that the answer to this question is that we do not. There are indeed some believers who have a rooted objection to the idea that any commandment has application to a Christian. The very word they will have none of. It has, they feel, so exclusive a connection with the law of Moses that to bring any kind of commandment to bear upon a Chris-

tian is to at once put him under law; and we Christians are, as they rightly remind us, "not under law but under grace."

In this however they are mistaken. Under grace we have been brought into the kingdom of God. The Divine authority has been established in our hearts, if indeed we have been truly converted; and though love is the ruling force in that blessed kingdom yet love has its commandments no less than law. The law issued its commands without furnishing either the motive or the power that would ensure obedience. Only love can furnish the compelling force that is needed. Still the commands of love are there. "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:3). Under law men were given commandments on the keeping of which depended their life and position before God. Under grace the believer's life and position are assured in Christ, and the commandments he receives are to shape and direct that new life in a way that will be pleasing to God.

In the New Testament we have, thank God, many plain commandments of the Lord covering all the major matters of life and service. There are however many minor matters as to which the Lord has not issued any definite instructions. (A

comparison of three verses, viz., 1 Corinthians 7:6 and 25; 1 Corinthians 14:37, might be helpful at this point). These omissions are not by oversight but of set purpose. It is evidently the Lord's purpose to leave many things to the prayerful exercises of His saints; they must search the Scriptures to discover what pleases Him and judge by analogies drawn from His dealings of past days. This is in order that they may be spiritually developed and have "their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." As to such matters each of us must seek to ascertain God's will and be fully persuaded in our minds.

This we fully admit; but let us not therefore overlook the plain commandments of the Lord where He has spoken. Some Christians are, we fear, rather apt to practice self-deception in this matter. They seem much exercised about a certain point. They seek light. They pray very piously. Yet all the while if they opened their Bibles there would stare them in the face a plain commandment from the Lord upon the very point in question. Somehow they manage to ignore it. In that case all their prayers and exercises are of but little worth, and indeed savour of hypocrisy.

We have enlarged a little upon this point because of its importance. Turning again to our Scripture we notice that having stated that God's will for His people is, in a general way, their sanctification, the Apostle specifies one sin which is the deadly enemy of any such thing. Thus particular sin was exceedingly common among the Gentile nations, so common that it was thought nothing of at all, and it was only when the light of Christianity was shed upon it that the real evil of it became manifest. Amongst the Christianized nations of today it is looked upon with far less abhorrence than it was fifty years ago; a definite witness this to how far they have turned aside from even the outward profession of Christ Verses 3 to 7 are all concerned with this particular sin. Let us each carefully read these verses and take home to our hearts the Apostle's pungent words.

The word sanctification really occurs three times in these verses, but it has been translated "holiness" in verse 7, where it is put in contrast with uncleanness. To sanctification we have been called and if we ignore this we shall find serious consequences in three directions.

In the first place we have to reckon with the Lord, who will deal with us in His righteous government of His saints. If another has been wronged He will constitute Himself the Avenger of their cause. Secondly there is God to be reckoned with. It may seem as if the wrongdoer is merely despising or disregarding the rights of a man, but in reality he is disregarding the rights of God. Thirdly, there is the Spirit of God to be considered, and He is the Holy Spirit — the word for holy coming from the same root as the words for sanctification in the verses above. The Spirit being given, He sets us apart for God.

With verse 9 Paul turns from this sin which so often masquerades falsely under the name of love, to brotherly love, which is the real article as found among the people of God. As to this he gladly acknowledges there was no need of his exhortations for they had been taught of God to do it. It was the very instinct of the divine life in their souls. The only thing he has to say to them is that they should "increase more and more." Here again we meet with these words. There is to be more and more happy obedience to the commands of the Lord, and more and more brotherly love amongst the people of God. LOVE and OBEDI-

ENCE — these are the things! And more and more of them!  
How happy shall we be if thus we are characterized!

It is very significant how we pass from brotherly love to the very homely instructions of verses 11 and 12. Before now brotherly love has been known to degenerate into unbrotherly interference with one's brethren. Well, here we have the wholesome corrective. "Seek earnestly to be quiet, and mind your own affairs and work with your own hands," as one translation renders it.

The Apostle now (verse 13) approaches the matter which was apparently the main reason for the writing of the epistle. They were at that moment in a good deal of sorrow and difficulty as to certain of their number who had died. They were well aware that the Lord Jesus was coming again, indeed they were expecting Him very soon, and this made these unexpected deaths very mysterious to their minds. They felt that in some way or other these dear brethren of theirs would be losers. The Saviour would come and the glory would shine without them! It was a very real grief to them, but it was a grief founded upon ignorance and it only needed the light of the truth to dispel it for ever.

"I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren," says the Apostle, and he forthwith instructs them in the very details which they needed to know, perfecting in that particular matter that which was lacking in their faith.

The first thing he assures them is that God will bring these departed saints with Jesus when He comes again. In the last verse of chapter 3 he had spoken of "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with ALL His saints" and here he fortifies this assurance. The "all" includes those who "sleep in Jesus" for it is as certain that such will be brought with Christ as that Jesus Himself died and rose again. The death and resurrection of Christ are to faith the standard of absolute truth and reality and certainty. All parts of the truth are equally certain and the Apostle desired them to realize this.

This most definite assurance, comforting as it must have been, would not solve the difficulty existing to their minds as to how it was to be accomplished. How were these departed saints to be found in Christ's glory so as to come with Him at His advent? In what way would this great change be accomplished? This question is answered in the succeeding verses, and the Apostle prefaces his explanation with the words, "This we say

to you by the word of the Lord." By this he indicated that he was conveying to them something as a direct and fresh revelation from the Lord, and not merely restating something that had been previously revealed. The item of truth which he makes known to them was just that which they needed to complete their understanding of the coming of the Lord.

When the Lord comes the saints will be divided into two classes — (1) "we which are alive and remain" (2) "them which are asleep." Evidently the Thessalonians to begin with had not contemplated the possibility of there being this second class at all. Even later they probably imagined that the first class would form the majority and the second the minority; and hence there would be the tendency to treat the second class as a negligible factor. Verse 15 corrects this tendency. The fact was, as the Apostle assures them, that the saints in class one would not "prevent" — that is, "go before" or "have precedence over" — those in class two. If there was to be any precedence given at all it would be accorded to class two as verse 16 shows, for there it is stated that "the dead in Christ shall rise first."

Verses 16 and 17 then speak of the coming of the Lord Jesus for His saints. They reveal to us just how He is going to gather

them to Himself so that subsequently He may come with all of them as the last verse of chapter 3 stated. Unless the distinction between the coming for and the coming with is seen no clear view of the Lord's coming is possible.

How emphatic is that statement: — "The Lord Himself shall descend." In that supreme hour He will not act by proxy but come Himself! He will descend with an assembling shout. Myriads of angels will serve, for the archangel's voice will be heard. The hosts of God will be on the move, for the trumpets of God shall sound. Yet all these will be subsidiary to the mighty action of the Lord Himself. Verse 16 gives us His sudden descent from heaven into the air, and the exertion of His power, the utterance of the voice that wakes the dead.

The last clause of verse 16 and verse 17 give us the response that will be at once found in the saints. The first effect of His power will be seen in the resurrection of the dead saints. Then they, with those of us who are alive and remain until that hour, will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and so be for ever with Him. How simple it all is; and, thank God, as certain of accomplishment as simple.

We notice of course that this Scripture does not give us all the details connected with this blessed hope. We might wish to enquire for instance in just what condition the dead in Christ are raised? This we find answered very fully in 1 Corinthians 15. That chapter also informs us of the change that must take place as to the bodies of all saints who are alive when He comes. We must be changed into a spiritual and incorruptible condition ere we are "caught up." That chapter also tells us that all will take place "in a moment in the twinkling of an eye," which assures us that though the dead in Christ shall rise first, the precedence they are granted will be a matter of but just a moment.

In verse 17 observe the word "together." The Thessalonians sorrowed and so often do we. Being taught of God to love one another their hearts were torn when death snatched some from their midst. We too know what these wrenches are. We do not sorrow as those who have no hope, nor did they. The life-giving voice of the Son of God is going to reunite us. We shall meet Him, but not in ones or twos or in isolated detachments. We shall be caught up TOGETHER.

*"What a chorus, what a meeting,  
With the family complete!"*

Notice also that we are going to meet the Lord. The word used here only occurs thrice elsewhere in the New Testament, viz., in Matthew 25:1 and 6, and Acts 28:15. In each case it has the meaning of "going forth and returning with." When the brethren from Rome "met" Paul that was exactly what happened. They went forth as far as Appii Forum and having met him they joined his company and returned with him to Rome. Just so shall we all meet our Lord in the air. Joining His company — never to part from Him — we shall subsequently return with Him when He is manifested to the world in His glory.

Are not "these words" enough to comfort all our hearts; enough indeed to fill them with abiding joy?

## **Chapter 5**

THE FIRST AND second verses of chapter 5 stand in very direct contrast to 1 Thess. 4:13, 15. As to the coming of the Lord Jesus for His saints — that which is commonly spoken of as "the rapture" — they had been ignorant, and consequently they were in needless difficulty and sorrow, and the Apostle wrote to them "by the word of the Lord" to enlighten them. But as to

"the times and the seasons" they were not at all ignorant and there was no need for Paul to write to them on that subject.

We must not fail to notice the distinction which is thus made between these two parts of prophetic truth. It is possible to be quite ignorant as to the rapture while being well informed as to the times and the seasons. Plainly then they are two different things, quite distinct from each other. Were the rapture an essential part of the times and seasons, then to be wholly ignorant of it would mean partial ignorance as to them. The Thessalonians however were quite ignorant as to it, while being so well instructed as to them that the apostle could say you "know perfectly" and "have no need that I write to you."

The times and seasons have to do with the earth and not heaven, as Genesis 1:14 shows us. The term is used in Thessalonians to indicate not the various divisions of earth's history as regulated by the heavenly bodies but those larger divisions, each characterized by its own special features as regulated by God's moral government of the earth. In the past fresh seasons have been introduced by such events as the flood, the redemption of Israel from Egypt and the giving of the law, the overthrow of David's line of kings and the passing of dominion into

Gentile hands. Another season yet to come is to be introduced by the Lord Jesus assuming His great power that He may reign. That will be "the day of the Lord."

The rapture of the saints is however disconnected from these earthly seasons. It is not just an item on the programme of earthly happenings. It will be the Lord calling up His saints to heaven for the enjoyment of their heavenly portion. The church — composed of all the called-out saints of the present dispensation — is heavenly in its calling and destiny. It does not belong to the earth, which is the reason why its translation from earth to heaven is not included in the programme of earthly events. There is no hint consequently of the rapture in Old Testament Scripture. A right understanding of this matter furnishes us with a key that unlocks much dispensational truth, which otherwise must remain closed to our minds.

The day when the Lord shall have His rights and dominate the whole situation is certainly coming. Its arrival will be unexpected, sudden, inevitable, and unerring in its effects. It will come, as all God's dealings have come, in the most appropriate time and manner possible, and it will mean destruction for the ungodly. Just when men are saying "Peace and Safety" then the

judgment will fall. Conditions amongst the nations are such that peace is an urgent necessity. Modern teachings, both scientific and religious, are such that men feel increasingly secure from supernatural happenings. In the minds of the people God has been reduced to a nonentity by the popular doctrine of evolution; so they fear nothing from that quarter. To their minds the only danger that threatens is from man. Man, wonderful man, has sought out many inventions, but unfortunately his marvellous discoveries in chemistry coupled with researches in other directions are capable of being turned to the most diabolical uses. Now if only peace can be maintained amongst men safety is assured.

When men congratulate themselves on having achieved this desirable end then God will assert Himself and the day of the Lord arrive. The world will be overtaken by it like those who are asleep in the dark; but not thus is it going to be with believers. Today the world is asleep in the dark, today the believer is a child of light, and in the light.

The contrast between the believer and the world, as given to us in verses 4 to 8, is very striking, and we do well to ponder it. The world is in darkness. The world is asleep. The world is

even "drunken," intoxicated with influences that are from beneath. This was never more apparent than it is today when multiplied means of inter-communication spread new ideas and influences with great rapidity. Think of the potency with which the one word "evolution" has drugged the minds of men! No opiate for the body ever yet discovered can compare with it!

The believer is not in darkness nor is he of the darkness. He is a child of light and of the day. He has been begotten, so to speak, of the light which reached him in the Gospel, and he partakes of the character of that which gave him birth. Hence, though he is in the world, which is in darkness, he is not in darkness himself; rather light divine surrounds his going. He is a child of the coming day and hence he knows where he is going and what is coming.

Upon this is based the exhortation to shake off anything like sleep that we may watch and be sober. As a means to this sober watching we are to be characterized by faith, love and hope. These virtues, if in active exercise, will be to us like breastplate and helmet, protecting both heart and head in this day of conflict. Though children of light we are surrounded by the dark-

ness of the world and ugly blows may fall upon us, struck from out the darkness.

The hope which is ours is the "hope of salvation." The Christian is never spoken of in Scripture as hoping for forgiveness of sins, but he is as hoping for salvation, for salvation is a word of large meaning, embracing the final deliverance which shall reach us at the coming of the Lord. For that we hope; that is, we await it with expectation. It is certain to arrive in its due season for there is no element of uncertainty in hopes which are founded on God and His word.

The Christ-rejecting world is appointed to wrath when the vials of His judgment will be out-poured on earth. Details as to this solemn time we find in the book of Revelation. We however have been appointed to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ. God's appointments are always kept to time. They never fail. Wrath for the world and salvation for the saints are alike sure.

That salvation is going to reach us by our Lord Jesus Christ acting as described in 1 Thess. 4:16-17. His people shall be taken by Him out of the place where the judgment is going to

fall, just as of old God removed Enoch before death reached him or the flood came. In more places than one the Old Testament bears witness to the way in which God shelters his people from judgment. He may do it by safely housing them and carrying them through it, as once he did with Noah, and as He will do with a godly remnant of His people Israel when soon His judgments are abroad in the earth. He may do it by removing them from the very scene of Judgment, so that they never see it, as with Enoch in the past and the church in the future. But He always does it.

When we thus "obtain salvation," it will reach us righteously for the One who will bring it to us has died for us, as we are reminded in verse 10. The object He had before Him in dying for us was that we might "live together with Him." How full of comfort and edification is this wonderful truth.

From 1 Thess. 4:13, to 1 Thess. 5:11 is one long paragraph, and the close of it brings us back to where it started. Jesus died for us that He might have us with Him. He will put the finishing touches to His design when He raptures the saints into His presence whether they are awake on earth or sleeping in their graves.

Let us all ponder the words that "we should live together with Him," so that their sweetness may deeply penetrate our souls. He died that we might live. But not only is life before us, but life together with Christ. We noticed the word "together" at the end of chapter 4. It was delightful to discover that in the resurrection day we should be united with all the saints — and reunited with those we knew on earth — in order to meet the Lord. It is more delightful still to know that as one united company we shall for eternity enjoy life together with Him. All that life means, its pursuits and joys, we are to share with Him. We shall have His life so that we may be capacitated to share His life in that day. Even today we may share His thoughts, His joys, though not in the wonderful fulness of this glad tomorrow.

With verse 12 the closing exhortations begin. There were evidently no officially appointed elders at Thessalonica. Hence the apostle's desire that they should know — in sense of recognizing — those in their midst who were qualified as such and doing the work of elders. They were not only to know them but to listen to their admonitions and esteem them in love. The carnal mind, which is by nature insubordinate, would take advantage

of the absence of any official appointment to flout their spiritual authority; but thus it was not to be.

How clearly this shows that the thing of all importance is moral qualification and authority as given of God, and not official sanction and appointment, even when such can be ministered through an apostle. The latter without the former is but an empty husk. What is it when even the official appointment has nothing apostolic about it? And Scripture is quite silent as to apostolic powers and authority being transmitted from generation to generation.

If the Lord raises up godly men with shepherd instincts to care for the spiritual welfare of His people we should thankfully recognize and profit by them, even though apostolic power to appoint them be lacking. This, we believe, is just our position today. Let us beware of spurning such spiritual guides. It is not difficult after all to discern between those who are but tiresome meddlers with other people's affairs and those who care lovingly for our spiritual welfare in the fear of God.

In verses 14 to 22 we have a series of important exhortations couched in very brief terms. It is very evident that the church

of God is not intended to be a community wherein everyone may go as they please. It is rather a place where spiritual order under divine authority is maintained. This is as we should expect, remembering that it is God's house. Warning, comfort and support are to be administered as occasion arises. Patience is to be exercised. Good is to be pursued. Joy, prayer and thanksgiving are to be the happy occupations of the saints, and that abidingly.

Nothing is to quench the believer's joy for it is occasioned by that which is eternal. Prayer is to be unceasing for the need is continuous, and access to the throne of grace is never closed on God's side. Prayer, and that attitude of soul of which prayer is the expression, is to be habitual. As for thanksgiving it should be rendered to God "in everything," inasmuch as we know that "all things work together for good to them that love God." Moreover it is God's will that we should be a thankful people, so that He may "inhabit" our praises, according to the spirit of Psalm 22:3. These things are all intensely individual.

Verses 19 to 22 refer more to matters which concerned the assembly of God's saints, where the Spirit of God operated and made known the mind of God. There, in those early days, He

was accustomed sometimes to speak and act in supernatural ways, — see Acts 13:2; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11; 1 Timothy 4:1. He also, in a more general way, made His voice heard in the ministry of the prophets, as contemplated in 1 Corinthians 14. The Thessalonians were not to attempt to regulate the action of the Spirit in the assembly or they would quench His action. It is not for us to control the Spirit, but for Him to control us. Prophecyings were to be given their due place of importance and yet, seeing that such a thing as prophecy of a spurious sort was not unknown, everything they heard was to be "proved;" i.e., tested, for though they had not as yet the written New Testament, they had the Old Testament and the verbal instructions of the apostle. Having tested what they heard they were to "hold fast" all that was good and "abstain from" or "hold aloof from" evil in all its forms.

Reading the exhortations do we not feel that a very lofty standard is set before us? It is so indeed, and that it may be reached we need to be set apart for God; and God Himself, the God of peace, must be the Author of our sanctification. The Apostle's desire was that God might work to this end; the whole man,

spirit, soul and body being brought under His power. Thus they would be sanctified wholly.

In as far as we are really set apart for God, in spirit, in soul and in body we shall be preserved blameless. At the coming of the Lord Jesus we shall be removed altogether from the scene of defilement and we shall no longer have the flesh within us. But how cheering is verse 24! In spite of all the breakdowns and defections upon our side God has called us to this blameless condition in glory and He will not fail to achieve His purpose with us. He will do it!

To this end what is needed but that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ should be with us? With a benediction to this effect the epistle closes.

