

Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians

I Thessalonians

Loves Introduction (*I Thessalonians, Chapter 1*)

Paul sends this letter to the church of the Thessalonians *which is in God and the Lord Jesus Christ*. God was the very atmosphere in which the Church lived and moved and had its being. Just as the air is in us and we are in the air and cannot live without it, so the true Church is in God and God is in the true Church and there is no true life for the Church without God. Further, the God in whom the Church lives is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; and therefore the Church does not shiver in icy fear of a God who is a tyrant but basks in the sunshine of a God who is love.

In this opening chapter we see Paul at his best. In a short time he was going to deal out warning and rebuke; but he begins with unmixed praise. Even when he rebuked, it was never his aim to discourage but always to uplift. In every man there is something fine, and often the best way to rid him of the lower things is to praise the higher things. The best way to rid them of their faults is to praise his virtues so that they will flower all the more; every man reacts better to encouragement than he does to rebuke.

Paul, like a good psychologist and with true Christian tact, begins with praise even when he means to move on to rebuke.

In verse 3 Paul picks out three great ingredients of the Christian life.

1. There is *work which is inspired by faith*. Nothing tells us more about a man than the way in which he works. He may work in fear of punishment; for hope of gain; from a grim sense of duty; or he may work inspired by faith. His faith is that this is his task given him by God and that he is working in the last analysis not for men but for God.
2. There is *the labor which is prompted by love*. Bernard Newman tells how once he stayed at a peasant's house. All the while he was there, the daughter was stitching away at a dress. "Don't you ever get tired of that eternal sewing?" he asked. She said,

“No! You see this is my wedding dress.” Work done for love always has a glory.

3. There is *the endurance which is founded on hope*. Alexander the Great was setting out on his campaigns, he divided all his possessions among his friends. Someone said, “But you aren’t keeping anything for yourself.” “Oh yes, I am, I have kept my hopes.” A man can endure anything so long as he has hope, for then he is walking not to the night, but to the dawn.

In verse 4 Paul speaks of the Thessalonians as brothers beloved by God. The phrase was a phrase the Jews applied only to supremely great men like Moses and Solomon, and to the nation of Israel itself. Now the greatest privilege of the greatest men of God’s chosen people has been extended to the humblest of the Gentiles.

Verse 8 speaks of the faith of the Thessalonians sounding forth like a *roll of thunder*. When all prudence would have dictated a way of life that would escape notice and so avoid danger and persecution, the Christians outwardly proclaimed their faith. They were never ashamed to show they were Christ’s and they sought to serve Him.

In verses 9 and 10 two words are used which are characteristic of the Christian life. The Thessalonians *served* God and *waited* for the coming of Christ. The Christian is called to serve in the world and to wait for glory. The loyal service and the patient waiting were the necessary preludes to the glory of heaven.

How do we correct someone else’s “fault?” Do we get right to the point or do we “sugar coat it?” When we do our everyday work, what is our “motivation?” What is our Christian life based on? Do we follow the old adage *if I can’t say anything good about someone, I won’t say anything?* Are we afraid to “thunder” out our Christian (Episcopalian) faith? Do we look at those of other Christian faiths as “*beloved by God*” as Paul did to the “Gentiles?”

Paul On His Defense (*I Thess. 2:1-12*)

Beneath the surface of this passage runs the slanders which Paul's opponents at Thessalonica attached to him.

1. Verse 2 refers to the imprisonment and abuse that he had received at Philippi (*Acts 16:16-40*). There were those in Thessalonica who said that this man Paul had a police record, that he was nothing less than a criminal on the run from justice and that obviously no one should listen to a man like that.
2. Verse 3 has at least three charges behind it:
 - a. It was being said that Paul's preaching came from sheer delusion. An original man will always run the risk of being called mad. Festus thought that Paul was mad in later days (*Acts 26:24*). There was a time when Jesus' friends came and tried to take him home because they thought that he was mad (*Mark 3:21*). The Christian standards can be so different from the standards of the world that he who follows them with a burning enthusiasm can appear to others to be off his head.
 - b. It was being said that Paul's preaching sprang from impure motives. The word used for *impurity* (*akatharsia*) often has to do with sexual impurity. There was (still is) a Christian custom which the heathen often and deliberately misinterpreted; that was the kiss of peace (*1 Thessalonians 5:26*). When the Christians spoke of the Love Feast and the kiss of peace it was not difficult for an evil mind to read into these phrases what was never there. The trouble often is that a mind itself nasty, will see nastiness everywhere.
 - c. It was being said that Paul's preaching was aimed at deluding others. The propagandists of Hitler's Germany discovered that if a lie is repeated often enough, it will in the end be accepted as the truth. That was the charge which was leveled at Paul.
3. Verse 4 indicates that Paul was accused of seeking to please men rather than to please God. No doubt that came from the

fact that he preached the liberty of the gospel and the freedom of grace as against the slavery of legalism. There are always people who do not think that they are being religious unless they are being unhappy; and any man who preaches a gospel of joy will find his slanderers, which is exactly what happened to Jesus.

4. Verse 5 and verse 9 both indicate that there were those who said that Paul was in this business of preaching the gospel for what he could get out of it. The word used for *flattery kolakeia*) always describes the flatter whose motive is gain. The trouble in the early Church was that there were people who did attempt to cash in on their Christianity. (*The Didache, The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles – Chapters 11 and 12*) Even the Early Church knew the problem of those who traded on charity.
5. Verse 6 indicates that Paul was accused of seeking personal prestige. It is the preacher's constant danger that he should seek to display himself and not the message. In *Thessalonians 1:5* there is a suggestive thing. Paul does not say, "I came to you." He says "*Our gospel* came to you." He was lost in his message.
6. Verse 7 indicates that Paul was charged with being something of a dictator. His gentleness was that of a wise father. His was the love which knew how to be firm – "tough love." To him Christian love was no easy sentimental thing; he knew that men needed discipline, not for their punishment but for the good of their souls.

Do these allegations exist today? Have you had any of these (6) "allegations" said of you? How did you respond to/answer them?

The Sins of the Jews (*1 Thess. 2:13-16*)

To the Thessalonians the Christian faith had brought not peace but trouble. Their new-found loyalty had involved them in persecution. Paul's method of encouraging them is very interesting. It is in effect to say to them, "*Brothers, we are*

treading where the saints have trod.” Their persecution was a badge of honor which entitled them to rank with the picked regiments of the army of Christ.

But the great interest of this passage (verses 15 and 16) is where Paul lines up a kind of catalogue of the errors and the sins of the Jews.

1. They killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets. When God’s messengers came to them, they eliminated them. One of the grim things about the gospel narrative is the intensity with which the leaders of the Jews sought to get rid of Jesus before he could do any more damage. But no man ever rendered a message inoperative by slaying the messenger who brought it. A man may refuse to listen to the message of Jesus Christ, but he cannot eliminate it from the structure of the universe.
2. They persecuted the Christians. Even though they themselves refused to accept the message of Christ, they might have allowed others to listen to it and, if they wished, to accept it.
3. They did not try to please God. The Church’s trouble has often been that it has clung to a man-made religion instead of a God-given faith. The question men have too often asked is, “What do I think?” instead of “What does God say?” It is not our logic that matters; it is God’s revelation.
4. They were up against all men. In the ancient world, the Jews were, in fact, accused of “hatred of the human race.” Their sin was the sin of arrogance. They regarded themselves as the Chosen People, as indeed they were. But they regarded themselves as chosen for *privilege* and never dreamed that they were chosen for *service*. Their aim was that someday the world should serve them, not that at all times they should serve the world.
5. They wished to keep the offer of God’s love exclusively to themselves and did not wish the Gentiles to have any share in his grace. There is something fundamentally wrong with a religion which shuts a man off from his fellowmen. If a man really loves God, that love must run over into love for his

fellowmen. So instead of hording the privileges for himself, he will passionately want to share them.

How do we look at our “faith”/religion? Have we endured “persecution?” How do we look other’s faith? Do we compare “ours” to “theirs?” Do we “look down upon” them for their beliefs and perhaps even “persecute” them? Do they do that to us?

Our Glory And Our Joy (*I Thess. 2:17-20*)

First Thessalonians has been called “a classic of friendship,” and here is a passage where Paul’s deep affection for his friends breathes through his words. Across the centuries we can still feel the throb of love in these sentences.

Paul uses two interesting pictures in this passage.

1. He speaks of Satan *blocking his way* when he desired to come to Thessalonica. The word he uses (*egkeptein*) is the technical word for putting up a road-block calculated to stop an expedition on the march. It is Satan’s work to throw obstacles into the Christian’s way – and it is our work to surmount them.
2. He speaks of the Thessalonians being his *crown*. In Greek, there are two words for *crown*. The one is *diadema* which is used almost exclusively for the royal crown. The other is *stephanos* which is used almost exclusively for the victor’s crown in some contest, and especially for the athlete’s crown of victory in the games. It is *stephanos* that Paul uses here. The only prize in life he truly valued was to see the converts living well in their faith.

Nothing that we can do can bring us credit in the sight of God; but in the end, the stars in a man’s crown will be those whom he led nearer to Jesus Christ.

How is our “Christian Love” for others – Episcopalians; other faiths? Have we earned any “crowns” for ourselves? Do we see the “crowns” of those of other faiths and do we respect them?

The Pastor And His Flock (1 Thess. 3:1-10)

In this passage there is the very essence of the spirit of the pastor.

1. There is *affection*. We can never affect or win people unless we begin, quite simply, by liking them. The man who begins by despising men or by disliking them can never go on to save them.
2. There is *anxiety*. When a man has put the best of himself into anything, when he has launched anything from a one-liner to a pamphlet, he is anxious until he knows how the work of his hands and his brain will weather the storms. If that is true of things, it is even truer of people. When a parent has trained a child with love and sacrifice, he is anxious when that child is launched out on the difficulties and dangers of life in the world. When a teacher has taught a child and puts something of himself into that teaching he is anxious to see how that training will stand the test of life. When a minister has received a young person into the church after years of training in Sunday School and Bible Class and First Communicants' Class, in confirmation class, he is anxious to know how he will fulfill the duties and the obligations of Church membership. Supremely it is so with Jesus Christ. He staked so much on men and loved them with such a sacrificial love that he anxiously watches and waits to see how they will use that love. A man must stand in awe and humility when he remembers how in earth and in heaven there are those who are bearing Him on the hearts and watching how He fares.
3. There is *help*. When Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica, it was not nearly so much to inspect the Church there, as it was to help it. It should be the great aim of every parent, teacher, preacher, minister, not so much to criticize and condemn those in his charge but to save them from their faults and mistakes. The Christian attitude to the sinner and struggler must never be that of condemnation but always that of help.
4. There is *joy*. Paul was glad that his converts were standing fast. He had the joy of one who had created something which would

stand the tests of time. There is no joy like that of the parent who can point to a child who has done well.

5. There is *prayer*. Paul carried his people on his heart to God's mercy seat. We will never know from how much sin we have been saved, and how much temptation we have conquered, all because someone prayed for us. No man can ever tell what grace flowed from the prayers of others. When we can serve people no other way, when, like Paul, we are unwillingly separated from them, there is one thing we can still do – we can pray for them.

How many of these Christian attributes can we find in our own lives? Which one(s) of these can we improve on? How can we effect improvement?

All Is Of God (*I Thess. 3:11-13*)

It is in this simple passage that the instinctive turn of Paul's mind is best seen. For him everything was of God.

1. He prays to God to open a way for him whereby he may come to Thessalonica. It was to God that he turned for guidance in the ordinary day to day problems of life. One of the great mistakes of life is to turn to God only in the overpowering emergencies and shattering crises.
2. He prays to God that he will enable the Thessalonians to fulfill the law of love in their daily lives. We often wonder why the Christian life is so difficult, especially in the ordinary everyday relationships. The answer may very well be that we are trying to live it by ourselves. It may well be that our failure to live the Christian life well is due to our trying to live it without the help of God – which is an impossible assignment.
3. Paul prays to God for the ultimate safety. At this time his mind was full of thoughts of the Second Coming of Christ, when men would stand before the judgment seat of God. It was his prayer that God would so preserve his people in righteousness that on that day they would not be ashamed. The only way to prepare to meet God is to live daily with Him.

How much do we rely on God to accomplish our goals? How much do we put on ourselves to accomplish our goals? Which side of the above “coin” do we place the greatest value? How can we balance the two?

The Summons To Purity (*1 Thess. 4:1-8*)

It may seem strange that Paul should go to such lengths to inculcate sexual purity in a Christian congregation: Thessalonians were new to the Christian congregation; in their society, chastity was an unknown virtue; in their time, marriage vows were disregarded and divorce was disastrously easy.

Amongst the Jews, marriage was theoretically held in the highest esteem but in reality divorce was tragically easy. The Deuteronomic law laid it down that a man could divorce his wife if he found “some uncleanness: or “some matter of shame” in her.

In Rome for the first five hundred and twenty years of the Republic, there had not been a single divorce; but now under the Empire, as it has been put, divorce was a matter of caprice.

In Greece, immorality had always been quite blatant. Long ago Demosthenes had written; “We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.”

It was to men and women who had come out of a society like this, that Paul wrote this paragraph. What may seem to many the merest commonplace of Christian living was to them startlingly new. One thing Christianity did was to lay down a completely new code in regard to the relationship of men and women; it is the champion of purity and the guardian of the home. This cannot be affirmed too plainly in our own day and age which again has seen a pronounced shift in standards of sexual behavior.

The new morality is only the old immorality brought up-to-date. There is an urgent necessity in Britain, as there was in Thessalonica,

to place before men and women the uncompromising demands of Christian morality, “for God did not call us to impurity but to consecration.”

Has our society slipped back to the “old ways?” Have our religious laws slipped back to the “old laws?” What can we do about it.

The Necessity Of The Day’s Work (*I Thess. 4:9-12*)

This passage begins with praise, but it ends in warning; and with the warning we come to the immediate situation begin the letter. Paul urged the Thessalonians to keep calm, to mind their own business and to go on working with their hands. The preaching of the Second Coming had produced an odd and awkward situation in Thessalonica. Many of the Thessalonians had given up their daily work and were standing about in excited groups, upsetting themselves and everyone else, while they waited for the Second Coming to arrive. Ordinary life had been disrupted; the problem of making a living had been abandoned; and Paul’s advice was pre-eminently practical.

1. He told them, in effect, that the best way in which Jesus Christ could come upon them was that He should find them quietly, efficiently and diligently doing their daily job. The thought that Christ will someday come, that life as we know it will end, is not a reason for stopping work; it is a reason for working all the harder and more faithfully. It is not hysterical and useless waiting but quiet and useful work which will be a man’s passport to the Kingdom.
2. He told them that, whatever happened, they must commend Christianity to the outsider by the diligence and the beauty of their lives. To go on as they were, allowing their so-called Christianity to turn them into useless citizens, was simply to bring Christianity in discredit. Paul here touched on a tremendous truth. A try is known by its fruits; and a religion is known by the kind of men it produces. When we show that our

Christianity makes us better workmen, truer friends, kinder men and women, then we are really preaching.

3. He told them that they must aim at independence and never become spongers on charity. The effect of their conduct was that others had to support them. There is a certain paradox in Christianity. It is the Christian's duty to help others. There are many, who through no fault of their own cannot attain that independence; but it is also the Christian's duty to help himself.

Do we “work as if everything depends on us” and pray “as if everything depends on God” for ourselves? How about for our “neighbor?”

Concerning Those Who Are Asleep (*I Thess. 4:13-18*)

The idea of the Second Coming had brought another problem to the people of Thessalonica. They were expecting it very soon; they fully expected to be alive when it came, but were worried about those Christians who had died. They were not sure that those who had died would share the glory of that day which was soon to come. Paul's answer is that there will be one glory for those who have died and those who survive.

He tells them that they must not sorrow as those who have no hope.

In the face of death, the pagan world stood in despair.

Paul lays down a great principle. The man who has lived and died in Christ is still in Christ even in death and will rise in him. Between Christ and the man who loves him there is a relationship which nether can break, a relationship which overpasses death.

Because Christ died and rose again, so the man who is one with Christ will rise again.

The picture Paul draws of the day when Christ will come is poetry, an attempt to describe what is indescribable. We are not meant to take with insensitive literalism what is a seer's vision. It is not the details which are important. What is important is that in life and in death the Christian is in Christ and that is a union which nothing can break.

How often do we “focus” upon the literalism of what we read in scripture, and not the “message” that is behind it? Is that not why we are here in this “discussion?”

Like A Thief In The Night (*I Thess. 5:1-11*)

We shall not fully understand the New Testament pictures of the Second Coming unless we remember they have an Old Testament background. In the Old Testament, the concept of the Day of the Lord is very common, and all the pictures and apparatus which belong to the Day of the Lord have been attached to the Second Coming. To the Jew all time was divided into two ages. 1) The present age which was wholly and incurably bad. 2) The age to come which would be the golden age of God. In between there was the Day of the Lord which would be a terrible day. It would be a day in which one world was shattered and another was born. It would come suddenly and unexpectedly; it would involve a cosmic upheaval in which the universe was shaken to its very foundations; and it would be a time of judgment.

Very naturally the New Testament writers identified the Day of the Lord with the day of the Second Coming of Jesus. We will do well to remember that these are what we might call stock pictures. They are not meant to be taken literally. They are pictorial visions of what would happen when God broke into time.

Naturally men were anxious to know when that day would come. Jesus himself had bluntly said that no man – not even He – knew when that day or hour would be. But that did not stop people from speculating even as we still do. To these speculations Paul has two things to say

- He repeats that the coming of the day will come like a thief in the night. But he also insists that that is no reason why a man should be caught unawares. It is only the man who lives in the dark and whose deeds are evil who will be caught unprepared.

The Christian lives in the light and no matter when that day comes, if he is watchful it will find him ready.

- No man knows when God's call will come for him and there are certain things that cannot be left until the last moment. It is too late to make the house secure when the storm has hit. If a call comes suddenly it need not find us unprepared. The man who has lived all his life with Christ is never unprepared to enter his presence.

What is our "picture" of the Second Coming? Are we looking forward to it, or are we afraid of it? Are we prepared?

Advice To A Church (*I Thess. 5:12-22*)

Paul comes to an end with a chain of jewels of good advice. He sets them out in the most summary way but everyone is such that every Christian should meditate on them.

- Respect your leaders and the reason is the work that they are doing. It is not a question of personal prestige; it is the task which makes a man great and it is the service he is doing which is his badge of honor.
- Live at Peace. It is impossible that the gospel of love should be preached in an atmosphere poisoned by hate.
- Notice and help those who need special care and attention. The word used for lazy really means "Warn the quitters." In every community there is the faint-hearted brother who instinctively fears the worst, but in every community there should be Christian who, being brave, help others to be brave.
- Don't take revenge. Even if a man seeks our evil, we must conquer him by seeking his good
- Three marks of a genuine Church.
 - It is a happy Church
 - It is a praying Church
 - It is a thankful Church

- Do not despise spiritual gifts. The prophets were really the equivalent of our modern preachers. It was they who brought the message of God to the congregation.
- The constant duty of the Christian is to use Christ as a touchstone by which to test all things; and even when it is hard he must keep on doing the right thing and hold himself up from every kind of evil

When a church lives up to Paul's advice it will shine like a light in a dark place; it will have joy within itself and power to win others.

Do we find Paul's "jewels" in our own lives? In our own Church? If some are lacking, what can we do to "polish" these "jewels?"

The Grace Of Christ Be With You (*I Thess. 5:23-28*)

At the end of his letter, Paul commends his friends to God in body, soul and spirit. But there is one beautiful saying here. "Brothers, pray for us." It is a wonderful thing that the great saint should feel that he was strengthened by the prayers of the humblest Christians. For Paul prayer was a golden chain in which he prayed for others and others prayed for him.

Let us all, always keep all in our prayers. Hope that they too will keep us in their prayers.