

The Coming of the Lord

1 Thessalonians.

"Selections from the Writings and Ministry of G. V. Wigram."

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We may turn a little to the First Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians; well suited, the various parts of it, to give forth thoughts — blessed thoughts — about the coming of the Lord Jesus, and the rightful proper effect of the hope of that coming upon ourselves in these last hours.

"For from you sounded out the word of the Lord." In a remarkable way the hand of the artificer is often found upon his work. It was remarkable how, in the labours of the apostle, not only the very hope he had was communicated by him to these Thessalonians — must have been so, being part of the gospel he received — but it had the very effect upon them it had upon him, and all the country round about took notice of it.

"So that we need not to speak anything, for they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you." The sort of trouble the presence of Paul gave in the world, among men through whom he passed, was enlarged by the way these Thessalonians exhibited the power of the hope: and Paul could refer to what men saw in them as containing the very sum and substance of what his own doctrine was. There was where the power was of his own presenting truth.

"Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (Verse 3.) He could say this to them, "I know, with regard to truth, to service, to hope, your hearts are naked in the sight of God and our Father, and that you have fellowship with the Christ of God as those that have not forgotten their first love."

"Ye turned from idols to God, to serve the living and true God;" to serve Him! How often forgotten! Not to be busy, to do a great deal in His presence, but to accomplish what He desired to have accomplished, "the living and true God." Thus they waited for His Son from heaven. "Jesus," "who delivereth from the wrath to come." It was the hope of God's Son: that is heart and mind calculating on the ground of the Word of God, that His Son, this God's Son, was to come from heaven: and this peculiar truth connected with Him, that He is the One who saves us from the wrath to come.

But then, beloved, as to play of the affections, as to movement of the thoughts with regard to this hope, how much will turn upon what Christ has been — is known to be — to us individually! He is coming! *He* is coming! The world has got its plans — shutting out all thoughts of the needs-be of His coming.

Religion has very often a sort of spiritual millennium: it does not require the coming of the Lord. The child of God reads the Book; he finds that the next grand step God takes is the sending forth His Son, and that this Son, coming from heaven, as the One who saves us from the wrath to come, the One described in the last verse of 2 Cor. 5 as He whom God made sin for us — He who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

This One, by means of whom that which is the characteristic title of this epistle had come out to light — "church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" — He is coming back again. He who died, the just one for the unjust, that He might bring us to God: He who, knowing no sin, took the place of bearing the wrath of God due to our sins; He is coming! He has not only interposed as to that work, but has brought the knowledge of His work to bear upon us individually.

Having loved us, having washed us from our sins in His own blood, He is coming to receive us to Himself.

Some who turn to Him in their trials, their difficulties, their temptations, their sorrows, their joys — one quite understands how the coming of the Son from heaven does not move their hearts.

Oh! the power that gives the individual believer — the freshness of that hope just flows from knowledge of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the One living in heaven who knows us, whom we know, and who is coming back to give us the blessed taste of being for ever with Himself in the Father's house.

In 1 Thess. 1, it is Himself waited for, but the heart (if it is to be lively in hope, if it is to have joy and power in hope) must know Himself, must know the work He has done for God, but done for us individually as sons of God, so that He is the One who is the strength and joy of our portion, the One in connection with whom all our hopes glow forth.

1 Thess. 2, bringing out some exquisite beauties connected with that Lord, gives the counterpart of the wilderness in the presence of the Lord. It will not do for us to forget that, whatever the wilderness may have for us, there is the counterpart too in the presence of the Lord.

All the need down here — the groans that go up to God — all are precious to Him; and the counterpart of them will be found in that day when we come to the glory. Paul and the Thessalonians were brought to their very wits' end. See how his whole heart goes out to them. "Cost what it may, you must stand true to the mark. Cost what it might, I, as the servant of God, would have come to you." But why? "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?"

He had suffered great things to reach them: that was the one side of the page. Turn over to the other: "I shall stand there, and there will be joy to me in the presence of the Lord because of you. I see that in the flow of His grace into you through me down here, there is the witness of His own glory. I see in that the beauty of the Lord."

Many a heart Christ has dealt with, many a soul He has comforted and strengthened, will almost selfishly say, "I long to be out of this scene, I long to be where all sorrow will be over." Nay, I long for the hour to come — I shall behold Himself in His glory in that day.

Many are startled at these verses as though it were a wrong thing to say there is this large heart in Christ. — He has His eye upon His people, and a part of His plan is that Paul should be there in glory with the Thessalonians, and they part of his crown of rejoicing in that day.

If Christ was his hope, the meeting then and there of those Thessalonians, of many whom he had laboured with was a joy; and the largeness of heart of the blessed Lord Jesus prepared it, and revealed the truth of it to the heart of His servant, that he might have his strength formed by the counterpart of the glory when the glory came.

It is one of the touches that make the scene a home scene to my heart — to think I can stand there and recognise not only the Lord, but His servant in His joy — all that power of the blessed Lord that first flowed from Himself, finding vent through such a man as Paul, and those Thessalonians standing round him there!

"Are ye not our hope, our joy, our crown of rejoicing?" He repeats it, showing the deliberation of the saying, "For ye are our glory and joy." Oh, but Himself! — that is the first thought!

What has He been to you, this Christ, this Son of God, this Saviour? Do you know Him individually? Have you no character to give Him? Have you no thoughts you could express from that which you have known about Him? What do you know about Him? He is no dead Christ — He that brings a poor sinner off the wild common of nature into the flock of God: what do you know of Him? Have you no cause to cleave to Him? Have you no want of Him? Have you no good thought about the love He bears to you, about that heart of His? Have you no calculations upon Him that, as He has delivered, so He will? Have you no thoughts about that gracious preparation of all and each of His people by Himself for that day?

Would you like your work to turn up there and find the counterpart of it in His presence at His coming? Each of us has works as individuals. What is the other side of the medal? Will it shine when Christ comes? Can you connect gladly His coming with it, and your being there in glory with Him? You will find the counterpart of that glory in works down here.

I pass on to 1 Thess. 3. There we find the intense love of the apostle to these Thessalonians and that which proves it. He expressed a desire to have come to them himself. He would have himself come once and again to them, but he could not. He sent Timothy. Observe the words with which the chapter ends: "The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another" — there is the addressing them — the mind thrown forward — "to the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."

I connect those remarkable verses — 1 Thess. 3: 12, 13 with 1 Thess. 2: 19, 20. They would appear as the counterpart of the labours and the sorrows of the apostle in the glory. Hence his intense desire that before God, even our Father, when the Lord comes with all His saints, not only the fruit of his labours should appear inside the Lord's presence, but that, the character of God being practically on them, at the coming of the Lord they might be found unblameable in holiness. Oh, how little human hearts can take in thoughts of the love of that Christ Jesus!

What I desire to show is that the truth given to Paul was the part Christ had given to Him, with the people He had taken up, at God's hand from before the creation of the world, to bring us to glory. "The glory which thou gavest me I have given unto them, that they may be one, even as we are one." Hence John speaks, "Already are we the sons of God." Though not yet made manifest, we shall be like Him when He appears. They were to purify themselves. Not only that. In Revelation 1 it is a separate thought in the heart of John. It was not only the love of Christ that took notice of their misery and applied His life's blood that there should be no spot or stain, but He made them kings and priests unto God and His Father, Himself sharing that royal priesthood of His people and making them know it then and there, and here bringing them forth in the glory in that day when He comes with His saints.

I spoke, beloved, of how the hope in the heart of an individual believer would be bright or not bright according as they had the first love fresh in the heart, and saw in the person of the Christ the One whose love poured forth to them when they were dead in trespasses and sins, and who proved Himself in all truth the One who knew all about them and knew how to meet them.

Now, in 1 Thess. 4, another thing is brought out. I desire to rest in detail upon it, because it gives in a remarkable way the place of a parenthesis in which the Lord comes, with the plans of God in connection with, His appearing; then, secondly, in that parenthesis He unfolds certain glories very much passed over by the saints of God, and a glory calculated to endear the coming of the Lord to their hearts, a glory that connects itself to the simple mind with the state of man blessed by God.

From verses 15 to 18 is a parenthesis. That left out the passage would read thus, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

"But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For ourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." (Read 1 Thess. 5: 1-8.) There he evidently passes to the appearing of the Lord, and to the state of the earth. Men of the earth do not look for Him, and they will be saying in that day, "Peace and safety," just when sudden destruction is breaking upon them. Then the Lord will come upon them; and they find, as we know from the second epistle, how, though they deny God in government, He will have the place of government on earth in connection with Jerusalem, and the Lord, with the breath of His mouth, will put aside all evil.

Then in the parenthesis we find the Lord introducing what He comes for. There are things connected with His coming, beautiful and touching things. Some in ignorance were mourning as though deceased Thessalonian Christians had lost the chance of being taken up: surprised, so to speak, about it. He seems to me to be guarding the words He uses. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." "Jesus" is the name of the man. So those "that sleep in Jesus." But when He speaks, not of death, nor of disappointment produced by the want of intelligence, but of the power to be put forth, he says, "The dead in Christ shall rise first," not "them that sleep in Jesus."

Jesus died; therefore it could be no strange thing to any believer to find himself in the power of resurrection, called to pass over that bit of road which Christ trod, "The light of His love the guide through the gloom." Here it is not a question of mourning over departed friends, or any ignorance. He says, "The dead in Christ" (the anointed man) "shall rise first." Now look at these five verses — the parenthesis. First of all, in verse 15, there is this distinct statement, "This we say unto you by the word of the Lord." Everything the apostle wrote had the full perfect sanction of God's authority. Here there appears to have been something brought to his mind; and much more fully in detail, in connection with that coming and that person of the Lord. "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not anticipate them that are asleep." There had some fallen asleep — Stephen; many others; and some here at Thessalonica. The word was realised to them, "absent from the body, present with the Lord." They had been waiting down here, they had gone up to heaven to wait there. He has been waiting; and, although there are with Him no bodies and no dust, they are waiting with Him still.

This ought not to be passed by in connection with "absent from the body, present with the Lord," for it shows in the most striking way not only the provisions of divine love, but the power of divine life. "Spirit, soul, and body" constitute a man. Yet when any one of God's saints dies, He remains the God of the living, for all live unto Him. Abraham lived before God. The apostle said that if to live was Christ to him, to die was gain . . . he would get into His own presence. If I stay here, Christ gains. If I am called to leave the body, I gain. But who is it that has power in that way to throw light on the intermediate state as it is called? Why the blessed Lord Himself. "Absent from the body, present with the Lord."

Well, now, a particular thing that follows after in the two verses is just this. The person of the Lord gets uncovered and brought out to light; but also He finds Himself in that day in a scene in which the great peculiarity of what He is for us comes out to light. He is the resurrection and the life. And why the resurrection? Life has been displayed by Him without question. Resurrection power was displayed by Him in raising Lazarus, and in a much more glorious way when He rose Himself from the dead. The graves were opened, and at once gave up the bodies. "Many bodies of the saints that slept arose and came out of the graves after his resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared unto many." What power wrought there? But, oh, what a little scene is that compared with the scene brought out here, when all the dead in Christ shall rise! Just remark how it is brought out: the scene in which

this double glory is brought to light. Himself, the Lord, shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, with the trump of God. He shall descend from heaven. Even when thoughts of the glory cross my mind, I look, as it were, to see where is the Lord. Till I get the thoughts of the Lord's place in it, the very thought of salvation would not be without trouble to me. Clouds part hither and thither, and the Lord, who loved us, and who took us up before the foundation of the world — the Lord, who laid down His life at Calvary for us — the Lord, whose love is stronger than death, who took His life again — the Lord, who sent the message of peace and blessing through Mary to His disciples — "Go tell my brethren I ascend to my Father and your Father, my God and your God" — the Lord, who has waited these 1800 years and more from the time He arose, because, looking forward in the stream of time, He saw us in the stream, whom He had to pick up and make partakers of the blessing — the Lord, that living person who first had to do with us, who has to do with us every day and all day long — the Lord, who has gone to prepare a place for us — the Lord, the eternal lover of our souls — that Lord is the first object in that scene, in that glory, of heaven! And He comes with a regulating voice, not merely a shout. It is not a question of life; it is not limited to the question of resurrection; but how many other things will fall under the word when He utters it? His voice was heard here in sorrow. His voice was heard in agony on the cross. His voice will be heard again in scenes about to be prepared for.

In the transfiguration we have these words to Peter, "This is my beloved Son, hear him:" yes, in that to which this scene leads there is no voice can regulate everything save the voice of the beloved Son of God coming the second time from off the throne of God to receive His people and to take them home with Himself.

None other ever could be in the sense in which He was, because He could say — He did say — "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father also." "In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." God Himself presented in a man down here; and the whole mind of God connected with the sent One about to be interpreted by the death of Christ upon the cross, and the resurrection after! He knows the word, and speaks it as having the mind of heaven. There is a difference between the mind of God, or the mind of heaven, and an utterance given by an angel. An elder could put in "He is worthy;" "for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed to thyself." (Rev. 5). An angel does not speak of redemption. Strength to do God's will is connected with that order in creation. Then comes the trump of God. He gives the signal in the trump "Himself." Then mark what immediately follows — the virtue and glory of Him that is the resurrection and the life. He searches the dust of the earth, and all those who sleep through Him in the earth (buried no matter where or in what time — no matter what puny spite had shown itself in the deaths to which they are subjected), the dead rise first, blessed without question. Blessed for Stephen, blessed for Paul, blessed for Peter and others. But, oh, what will the heart find of blessing in thinking of those names we are among, the worthies of the New Testament, compared with the blessedness of that One man, who, coming forth from God, will sweep with His power through the grave, and bring up all that, sleep through Jesus, and in resurrection bodies like the Lord!

Remember that the finishing touch, so to speak, to His redemption-work for the individual is connected not only with the body as we have it shown us in Philippians — it is applied to the principle of His people's walk down here. Paul was subjected to death daily. It was strength made perfect in weakness. The whole course of the apostle was a conformity to this same Christ. Whence? According to His virtue as the risen One.

"Caught up." I feel there is something there connected with the Lord Himself. That is, He is coming forth habited in the glory of resurrection, and just in the way most fitted to display His own power. The bodies dead in the grave are all gleaned up in a moment — expression of the virtue He

applies. There is no power in us to mount up. We are caught up in a moment, to meet the Lord in the air. He fills us up with life.

Suppose I pass by a field early in the spring, and note its soil prepared and the seed cast in. Then, if I find on my way back the corn ready for cutting, I should ask, "What mighty power was it that laid hold of the wheat to make it develop so rapidly?" There are His saints who are waiting for Him, who have said, "No, I will cut off that thing, for it will not shine when Christ comes. And that other thing which looks so ugly to nature, I will wear it."

Divine power might lay hold of the germs of life in an acorn, and draw it forth an oak tree. All the life in us is developed, and we are filled up with life, perfectly fit for the Lord Himself and for His own presence. He is coming in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and He is coming to people in that state. This lights up His coming — bodies slumbering, saints waiting, the world not knowing them. He puts forth His mighty power, and we are "caught up together with them in the clouds." "Together!" This is an expression of the Lord's delight in fellowship. No separation then. And those who are waiting for Him, the living ones who remain unto the coming of the Lord, are caught up with those that slept, together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. And He adds, "Therefore comfort one another with these words," referring to the sorrow in the hearts of some who had not their hearts centred in that heart of Christ.

Let me appeal to your souls individually. What do you think of Christ? What is that day to you? What is the Lord to you? I believe in pressing the responsibility of the divine nature one upon another, the only way to do it really is to show the certain power in connection with the life given to us and the certain truth revealed, so that the responsibility may be met by those who know how to lay hold of the grace set before them in Christ. No earnest person, by reading in the letter, could get that which the knowledge of the Lord Himself will give. It was just that with the apostle Paul. He knew Christ, the eternal lover of his soul. He knew what his first love was. and he had no idea of dropping a curtain on that first interview of Christ with himself, and getting occupied with a house and home down here, or with outward circumstances and service.

Oh, what a tale will steal out in that day when we see what the Lord's love has been to us! I know His distinct love to me; I know His determination that nothing but His blood shall be known as the atonement for my sin; His determination that no false prop shall suit me. I know His arm as an arm that may be leaned upon. And well He knows how in the days of His solitude, of His service, and sorrow down here, His Father's love was enough for Him; and He knows how His own individual love for the child of God is enough for the path, were it multiplied with sorrows ten thousand times more.

There is such a thing as being raised; and if others have not known His love, if they have not known these waters of divine life flowing to His poor feeblest ones down here, have not our hearts tasted it and known it, and known it well? And have you not known this among other tokens of His love, that when He comes to display Himself in connection with that glory of resurrection, He will have you knowing it beforehand, as a scene so dear to His own heart?

The last chapter brings in the exhortation in the latter part of it. Here we find how in a dark world until the Lord appears there is to be complete practical separation to Himself. "Abstain from all appearance of evil. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and may your whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." It was Christ's love (2 Cor. 5) that led Him not only to die for all, but that they which live should not henceforth live to themselves, but to Him who died for them and rose again. It was the consciousness of that love that made the Apostle Paul speak in that self-same chapter, of how the love of Christ constrained him. He

could leave the right hand and go to the left, he could take up one thing and lay aside another, because the love of Christ constrained him.

Now allow me, beloved, to make a remark here. You are quite free to judge, and say it is a mistake; but my conviction is that the children of God have a great deal too much looked at outward service, and not at the life they have. There were Paul and Peter, chosen vessels. There are evangelists and teachers, meant by God to be continued for the building up of His saints; but what is the relative number of such compared with the number of God's children? There are a certain number of faces before me. Blessed be God, by far the greater part bear the token that they are the Lord's. How many would the Lord recognise as teachers and evangelists of His own making — persons He sends out for any special work? We know that the speaking of the gospel requires no proof of gift in everyone who does it: all that were scattered abroad upon the persecution of Stephen went everywhere evangelising the word. But I believe the greater part of the lives of the saints are hidden lives, spent in domestic service, in the care of children, in duties of the house, beside sick-beds. But they all, having the life of Christ, connect themselves with the service of Christ in this our day; and if they remember His love, they will get an interest in all His interests, and a share in the labours of those whom He is putting forward in work. Have you no share in their labours if you have been praying for them? Let me ask you, do you never feel any ambition to have a share in their labours? I have known when I could do nothing but in prayer — particularly praying as to the service in a particular place, going on praying for that servant in that place, that visit, and the assurance the Lord gave as to it. So that when that person wrote, "I found there was the dark cloud on my mind, not on my path," I could say, "I knew it. I knew He had given you a happy and a blessed path." It is blessed when the saints can thus identify themselves with a work. One poor woman said to me, "I don't know who you are, but I have a share in your labours; I have been upholding your testimony here while you have been here." What was the effect upon the heart? "What! you have been praying about me, praying about my work here? It is your work and my work when you have been praying for me."

There is not a servant or a child in any house, but, knowing the Lord, that servant or that child might be a sworn witness for the Lord in the house, and even in going through the menial duties of the house might have the life of God marked and owned in his ways and doings — perhaps very little opportunity of speaking. I remember a very touching instance of that kind in a Chinese boy, who was in service in the house of one of the C-'s in Demerara. He had hold of the New Testament, and read it carefully. He was very apt to bring the Testament down, in a gracious way, to bear on the people of the house. One day his mistress said, "Oh, what a poor thing I am." "Ma'am! I thought you were one of Christ's people. I thought you were a member of Christ." It searched her heart, whether she were not too much on "my leanness, my leanness," instead of in the scene of triumph in Him.

I believe there are marks of how the Lord has given. There are differences. But saying nothing, being nobody in the house, there is the freshness of Christ's life, and just the showing out of the motive working there. It was the great peculiarity of the apostle Paul, the power of the life in him. He never forgot his first love, nor what he had discovered in Christ. It was in the power of that faith of the Son of God he lived. Will you complain of the jealousy of the Lord's love? Would anyone like to be like Lot? It was not worth God's while to keep any calendar of that man's doings. It was no use keeping that man straight. He would just pick him up out of Sodom at the last. His works must all be burnt, What a difference from Abraham! "The God of Abraham:" "Abraham, the friend of God." What a blessed thing was God saying to Abraham, I have loved you, I have brought you forth, and there is a certain path you are to walk in before me and be perfect." And has the Lord Jesus washed us from our sins in His blood? Has He really blessed us so? Is the Lord jealous of our walk, jealous that the life He has put in us

should be abounding? Are we saying, "No, I have nothing to seek for myself; I have only to gather that which Christ gathered." Yes, beloved, He is jealous, and be sure He desires a present practical Nazariteship about us. "Like master, like servant." Doing God's will because He has left us here to carry on His service, everything else to be laid aside. And can we not say, and say it heartily, may our "whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ?" Faithful is He that called you, who also will do it.

It is a very small part of the subject, beloved friends, I have been able to look at this evening. The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians takes the other side, the display of God in a world of wickedness; but the happy side has been before us — thoughts of heaven. The First-born among many brethren, whose lips have so often spoken our names there on high, whose hand has so often been stretched forth to help us in the hour of need and trial — He is the One who is coming for us from the throne to receive us home to Himself.