

First Epistle to the Thessalonians

Expository Notes by H. Smith.

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In the different epistles, God has made rich provision of spiritual food suitable for every stage of christian growth. The Thessalonian Epistles were written to the young in the faith. Thus we do not find unfolding of the counsels of God, or of the Mystery of the Church, as in the Ephesians and Colossians. In the First Epistle we have the great practical features of Christianity — faith, love, and hope — which should mark the youngest as well as the oldest. Moreover, the Apostle comforts them in their trials, and removes a difficulty that had arisen as to the Christian's hope — the coming of the Lord *for* His saints.

The Apostle dwells in 1 Thess. 1 on the practical fruits of the gospel received in the power of the Spirit; in 1 Thess. 2 on God's special care for the lambs of His flock, in leading them through every trial; in 1 Thess. 3 on how God uses the trials by the way for strengthening of faith, love, and holiness; in 1 Thess. 4 on the walk pleasing to God, in view of the coming of the Lord for His saints; in 1 Thess. 5 on exhortations as to the conduct consistent with walking in the light of the day of the Lord, as well as general exhortations and warnings as to dangers that beset the christian path.

1. The Fruits of the Gospel (1 Thess. 1).

In the parable of the Sower (Mark 5: 20), the Lord instructed His disciples that where the good seed fell upon good ground fruit would result. In this opening chapter some of the beautiful fruit of the Gospel manifests itself in the changed lives of young converts. To understand the Epistle it is necessary to recall the gospel preached to these Thessalonians, as recorded in Acts 17: 19. From this we gather that, during the Apostle's visit to Thessalonica, he preached to both Jews and Gentiles. Four things marked his preaching. (1) He presented to them Jesus, the Saviour; not merely doctrines, but a living Person (the Saviour). (2) He alleged that this Person (Jesus) had died and risen again. (3) He not only preached the facts of death and resurrection, but the necessity of these great facts. Christ "*must needs* have suffered, and risen again from the dead." (4) He fell back on Scripture as his sole and sufficient authority. As a result of this preaching "some" of the Jews, and "a great multitude" of the Gentiles, believed. Moreover they proved the reality of their faith by publicly identifying themselves with the Lord's servants, for we read, they "consorted with Paul and Silas." They did not keep their faith to themselves. They made no attempt to escape reproach by remaining secret disciples! They believed in Jesus, and boldly confessed their faith. The result was they had at once to face persecution. The Jews who believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows and set the whole city in an uproar. Envy led to the first murder, when Cain killed his brother: and envy led to the greatest murder

when the Jews crucified their Messiah. Pilate "knew that for envy they had delivered Him." If men moved by envy will commit murder, we need not be surprised that respectable Jews stooped to use lewd base fellows to carry out their ends. Thus we learn the character of the seed sown, the fruits produced, and the opposition called forth. The Apostle writes his Epistle to encourage these young converts in persecution, and delights to dwell upon the beautiful fruit of the gospel so manifested.

The Apostle associates with himself those who had laboured with him. In his salutation he views these believers relative to God the Father, and to Jesus Christ as Lord, rather than as members of the Body of which Christ is the Head. He encourages them by assuring them that he constantly gives thanks to God for them, and remembers them in his prayers. Moreover he recognises the fruits of the Spirit in them. In calling attention to these happy christian qualities, the Apostle is not flattering them, but gladly recognising in them the evidence of a real work of God. He notes their work, labour, and endurance; but not as marks of true conversion. Men of the world are often famed for great philanthropic works, immense toil, and much perseverance in carrying out their works. In the case of the Thessalonians the Apostle can link with these other qualities essentially christian: *viz.*, "work of *faith*, labour of *love*, and patience of *hope*": the three great elements of christian life that bring the soul into relation with Divine Persons, thus giving the marks of a truly converted soul. As evidence of reality, the writer of the Hebrews Epistle, refers to these three qualities. He had been speaking solemnly of those who made a profession of Christianity, but afterwards apostatised. But, of these Christians he can say, "Beloved we are persuaded better things of you, and *things that accompany salvation*," *viz* "labour of love"; "the full assurance of hope" and "faith and patience" (Heb. 6: 9-12).

Moreover, the reality of their "faith," "love," and "hope," is proved by these beautiful qualities being "in *our Lord Jesus Christ*." Faith, love, and hope, each require an object. In Christianity that supreme object is a living Person — the Lord Jesus Christ. Every true activity in the christian life is the outcome of faith which draws all its strength, wisdom, and needed grace, from One who is unseen, and therefore only available for faith. True christian toil springs from love for our Lord Jesus Christ and is not carried out as a legal duty. The endurance is not dull resignation to stern necessity, but sustained by hope that waits for our Lord Jesus Christ. Further, the life of faith, love, and hope, is lived "in the sight of God our Father." It is a life of holy fear lived before God, and not simply before man to obtain a religious place, or before the saints to gain a reputation for devotedness. These young believers became "ensamples to all that believe," and their faith to God was spread abroad; but their witness before man was the outcome of a life lived before God. They consciously lived and walked "before our God and Father." "We may indeed zealously contend for a *name*; but the question before God is as to power and full fruits of grace in the measure of that which has been received; and if the soul does not come up to that, it is a dreadful thing for it to be resting on a religious reputation, while the works are not perfect before God" (J.N.D.).

Further, these evidences of a work of God in their souls assured the Apostle that they were beloved of God and the subjects of His electing grace. Not only has grace met all our responsibilities, but, by the sovereign mercy of God believers were elected, before the foundation of the world, to obtain salvation with eternal glory (2 Tim. 2: 10). If we are elected to eternal glory, we are set apart by the work of the Spirit from this present world. No position of dignity and honour which this world can offer, will have any attraction on realising that. These beautiful fruits had been produced in lives by the gospel that came to them not "in word only, but also in power" by the preaching in the Holy Ghost. Thus there was much assurance. Alas! there may be much correct gospel preaching, but too often "in word only." The power and work of the Holy Spirit are wanting. What will give power to the preaching and leave the Holy Spirit free to work is *the consistent life of the preacher*. So the Apostle can say, "Ye

know what manner of men we were among you for your sake." His life confirmed his preaching and thus became part of the testimony that he bore with his lips.

The result of testimony in power manifests itself in two ways. (1) It led those who received the testimony, not only into the blessing of salvation, but to imitate the Apostle, and therefore the Lord (N. Tn.). Being blessed they became representatives of the One by whom they were saved. (2) This testimony in power aroused the hatred of those by whom it was rejected. This malice expressed itself in persecuting the believers. Nevertheless these believers were sustained in joy by the Holy Spirit. The devil may stir up persecution, but the power of the Spirit is greater than all the power of the enemy. Stephen, full of the Holy Ghost, is sustained in triumph in the midst of his martyr sufferings. The martyr whose sufferings only call forth praise to the Lord renders an arresting testimony to the power of God before the world! Thus the joy of these young persecuted converts became an ensample to believers and a testimony to the world around, for, in every place, their faith towards God had become a matter of wonder. Their testimony had a threefold character. (a) the word of the Lord was sounded out from them. (b) their changed manner of life proved the reality of their conversion, and was a witness to the truth of their preaching, for they gave up all their old idolatrous practices, and turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. Scripture, not only recognises the actual images of the heathen as idols, but also anything that comes in as *an object* between the soul and God: e.g., "Little children keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5: 21). How often the believer's life and service may be hindered by allowing some earthly pursuit, which in itself may be harmless, to become an object between the soul and God. (3) They turned from the world, and its delusions, to wait for the Son of God from heaven. All their expectations were in Him. Being converted they did not vainly attempt to put the world right, and make it better and brighter. To deal with the evil, and bring in the blessing, they quietly waited for God's Son from heaven. They did so in peace and calmness, knowing that Jesus had delivered them from wrath through His death, and that God had declared His satisfaction with the work of Christ and the believer's justification from sins and judgment, by raising Christ from the dead.

GOD'S CARE FOR HIS LAMBS.

(Expository Notes by Hamilton Smith). 1 Thessalonians 2.

In touching language, "He shall feed His flock like shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm and carry them in His bosom" (Isa. 40: 11), the prophet Isaiah likens God's people to a flock that God delights to feed. Moreover, the lambs of the flock, that might be especially liable to be scattered by the enemy, He gathers with his arms of power, and cherishes in his heart of love. Thessalonians, Ch. 2, presents this special care for the lambs. We see the gracious and gentle way that God takes with these young converts, in order that they may walk worthy of the One who has called them unto His Kingdom and glory (12). The wolf may seek to scatter the lambs, but the great Shepherd of the sheep will gather them with His protecting arm. The enemy may seek to encompass their fall, but the Shepherd will carry them, and bring them home to glory at last. The first twelve verses set forth this loving care, expressed through the Apostle. The latter part of the chapter brings before us the blessed results of this care as seen in the christian characteristics displayed in these young believers.

(a) The grace of the Apostle to sinners (1-5).

To remind the Thessalonian believers of the grace of God on their behalf, the Apostle first speaks of his entrance among them as sinners (1-5); then of his gentleness with them as young converts, even

as a nurse cherisheth her children (6-9); and lastly, of his faithfulness to them, even as a father deals with his children (10-12). (Vv. 1, 2) Whether religious Jews, or idolatrous Gentiles, they were sinners needing a Saviour, and as such the Apostle came to them with all boldness. This was the more striking, seeing that the Apostle and his companions, came from Philippi, where, as the result of proclaiming the gospel, they had suffered persecution and insults. Their sufferings had raised no resentment, or made the servants more reticent in publicly proclaiming the truth, as natural prudence might have done. On the contrary, the Apostle can say, "After that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated . . . we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God." It was not, however, the boldness of nature which often degenerates into the aggressiveness of the flesh; it was boldness in our God. Thus the servant followed in the steps of his Master, who, when His enemies took up stones to stone Him, quietly passed on dispensing grace. No violence of man could draw forth any resentment from Him or wither His grace. Moreover, the Apostle's preaching was with "much earnest striving" (N.Tn.). It was not with fleshly contention, that only provokes the flesh, but with earnest longing that strives to win the soul. (Vv. 3-5) Furthermore, if the Apostle came to them with *outward boldness*, it was accompanied with *inward purity*. If the manner was bold, the motive was pure. There was nothing either in the preacher or the preaching that deceived men. It was not with "deceit" that Paul preached. Nor was his preaching with "uncleanness" that panders to the lusts of men; nor in "guile" that hides the truth. His motive being pure there was nothing in the preaching that sought to please man as man, or that sought the approval of man by "flattering words." Nor did the Apostle use his preaching to gain anything from man, thus making the preaching a pretext for covetousness. On the contrary, the Gospel that Paul preached, instead of deceiving, opened men's eyes to their true condition, rebuked them for their sins, told them the truth, even if that truth was neither pleasing nor flattering to the flesh. Moreover, while the gospel brings infinite blessing to man, it is not a means for extracting gain from man, or for making a living. Further, the Apostle can speak with such integrity of conscience, that he can call God, who trieth the hearts, to witness to the truth of what he said.

(b) *The loving care of the Apostle for young converts (6-12).*

If vv. 3-5, tell us of the purity of motive with which the Apostle preached to sinners, the verses that follow speak of the affection of heart that moved him in caring for young converts. (Vv. 6-9) It was not selfishness, that sought personal gain, that moved the Apostle, but rather the mind of Christ that, forgetting self, served others in love. He was not energised by self that seeks the applause of others, or one's own glory. He sought no glory from men, and would take nothing from saints, even if he had the right so to do. He was moved by love that sought only the good of others — love that was not requiring from them but imparting to them; that was gentle among them even as a nurse cherisheth her children; that was ready to give even his life for them; that, laboured night and day in order to serve them, without being a charge to them! (Vv. 10, 11) Moreover, if the Apostle was gentle as a nurse, he also faithfully charged them as "a father doth his own children." To charge others, however, calls for a faithful and holy walk, and such indeed was the Apostle's walk that he can call them to witness, and God also, that he lived among these believers, piously, holily and unblameably. (V. 12) Living such a life he could, with spiritual power, exhort, comfort, and charge others that they, too, should walk worthy of God, who has called us unto His kingdom and glory. The world esteems it an honour to be associated with those who are high in the kingdoms of this world and its glory; but how far greater the privilege to be associated with those who are called to God's kingdom and glory. Far greater honour to be found with those who are going to sit on thrones judging in the kingdom of Christ, even if down here they were but ignorant and unlearned fishermen, than to be associated with the greatest potentate of this passing world. Poor the Lord's people may be, but, "Hath not God chosen the poor of this world

rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love Him?" (James 2: 5). God would have us to look beyond this world and all its empty honours, and remember the high dignity that He has conferred upon us in calling us "unto His Kingdom and glory," and, as we pass through this scene to walk and behave in consistency with our position as heirs of the coming glory.

(c) *The fruit of the Apostle's care (13-20).*

In the latter part of the chapter we see the beautiful fruits of this ministry of grace, in gentleness and faithfulness. It set this company of believers in the path of *faith* (13-16); brought them into the circle of *love* (17-18); and gave them the sure and certain *hope* of the coming glory (19, 20). (V. 13) First, the Apostle can thank God that the faith of these believers was established on the solid foundation of the word of God. Faith is in Christ; but our authority for believing in Christ is, not the word of a teacher, however gifted, but, "the word of God." The evidence of the divine authority of the word is that *it works effectually in those that believe*. The word of God reaches the conscience as no mere word of man can do; it turns the soul to God from idols and produces the great principles of Christianity, "faith," "love," and "hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (Vv. 14-16) Moreover the word of God effectually working in these young believers, led them whole-heartedly to identify themselves with the people of God. They became followers of the assemblies of God, which in Judaea were in Christ Jesus. Not only did they share with them in the privileges in Christ Jesus, but they became their companions in suffering for Christ. The Thessalonian believers suffered from their own countrymen, even as the assemblies in Judaea suffered from the Jews. But even so, the opposition of the heathen Gentiles was fermented by the deadly hatred of the Jews. The Jewish nation had not only rejected the prophets and killed their own Messiah, and thus rejected every proffer of grace to themselves, but they filled up their cup of guilt by seeking to stop the grace of God going out to the Gentile. This effort to stop the grace of God being preached to the Gentile rose to its height in their persecution of Paul, the Apostle of the Gentile. They "please not God," and "are contrary to all men," thus bringing wrath upon themselves to the uttermost. (V. 17) Secondly, if on the one hand in taking the path of faith these young converts had to taste a little suffering from their countrymen, on the other hand they enjoyed the love and communion in the new circle into which Christianity had brought them. They were bound together with the Lord's people "in *heart*." Truly, for a time, saints may be bereft of one another's company by circumstances, and "separated for a little moment", but, says the Apostle, "not in heart." We are linked together with bonds that are as eternal as the love that binds us. (V. 18) The practical expression of this communion of saints will involve conflict, for the one great end of Satan will be to hinder its expression. So the Apostle can say, "we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us." Could not the Lord have thwarted Satan's efforts? Doubtless He could, and does when in accordance with His ways. Shortly He will tread Satan under foot, though at the present He may use Satan as an instrument wherewith to try His people. Had the Lord hindered Satan the saints might have missed the blessing that resulted from the trial of their faith. (Vv. 19, 20) Finally we learn that the love circle on earth with its trials prepares for "the presence of the Lord Jesus at His coming." This leads the Apostle to refer to "our hope." Thus the blessed effect of the Apostle's ministry was to bring these Gentile believers into a new circle marked by faith in the word of God (13); love to one another (17), and "hope" in the coming of the Lord Jesus. The Lord is the true gathering centre of His people, the One that calls out our affections to Himself and thus unites our hearts with one another. In His presence, at His coming, we shall enjoy communion with one another in our common joy in the Lord, where no power of Satan can intrude.

FURTHER NOTES ON THESSALONIANS. (Dr. T Oliver)

Apropos of the helpful exposition of 1 Thess. 1 in No. 1 of the Quarterly, there has come to hand the following notes by a correspondent, well versed in New Testament Greek, which will stimulate fresh exercise!

The original text suggests that there were several local companies, manifold in character (secular and religious), also a synagogue (Acts 19: 32, 39). The Church in Thessalonica was constituted in (*en*) God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (The little prep. *en* has wonderful power of expression). Their origin and destiny as well as sphere of relationship are in contrast to what related to Jewish and Pagan gatherings. Their reaction was expressed in *toil* (more than mere labour) of love, *work* of faith and *patience* (enduring constancy, J. N. D.) of hope. That involves perseverance as well as patience! These attributes were not "in" but "of" (*tou*) our Lord Jesus Christ! (The genitive case indicates origin, character and power). What a contrast was presented in the grace, peace and love compared with the worldly equivalents in that large city! All God's work, election and conversion, was in the power of the Holy Spirit, the living active holy agent, and in much greater assurance (*plerophoria*). Elsewhere we have correlatives in the "much full assurance" of understanding (Col. 2: 2) of hope (Heb. 6: 11) of faith (Heb. 10: 22). The Holy Spirit is the effective power and subjectively the certain full assurance of the believers. A kindred word is *plerophoreo* (2 Tim. 4: 5). "Most surely believed" (Luke 1: 1); "fully persuaded" (Rom. 4: 21; Rom. 14: 5); also "full measure of the ministry" (2 Tim. 4: 5, 17). *Pleroma* = full measure or "all the fulness," etc. So from the fulness of God is poured Pentecostal abundance (whether in 7 or 12 baskets: the full corn in the ear!) into the hearts of men and women, as in the Acts, *e.g.*, Stephen, Paul, Peter, etc., so to the Thessalonians! They became not merely "followers" but "imitators" (*mimetes*; cognate *mimos* — an actor: "copyists," although always translated "followers" in N.T.). They had copied the ways of the Lord, as actors study their characters. "The old craftsmen apprentices lived with their masters and so became like them." They also became imitators of the churches of God in Judaea (1 Thess. 2: 14). They received the word which was the ground of their imitation in spite of afflictions but accompanied with spiritual joy. In consequence, they became ensamples (patterns) of what they sampled (1 Thess. 1: 7). From them was "rung out" the word of the Lord: very different from the sound of a dying swan song! Here is joy and triumph, since sounding distinctly! As the range of the sound increased, the field of testimony enlarged (1 Thess. 1: 8). The threefolds of verses 3, 9 and 10 synchronise with these of verse 5. *Eisodos*, entrance (1 Thess. 1: 9) is the same word as in Acts 13: 24, translated "His coming in A.V. and "the face of his entry" by J. N. D. (See also 1 Thess. 2: 1; Heb 10: 19; 2 Peter 1: 11). Love carried by the gospel leaps every barrier of the thick barbed wire fortifications of Paganism. The power and assurance are penetrating and effectual. They had remarkable conversions: — turned (verb in aorist) to God (His doing) from idols. There was a complete change of masters. Behind the idol there was the demon (man's false foe). They were no longer under a death-dealing enemy but in the service of the true (or real) and living God! They were constituted to wait (not a timeless participle as "delivered") — sustained in expectation of the Coming One, now alive for evermore Whom death and the grave could not hold. The idols and the world (the sphere of wrath) cannot deliver since themselves fettered! Thus He can and will deliver His own.

OMICRON.