

Synthetic Bible Studies

Containing an outline study of every book of the Bible
with suggestions for Sermons, Addresses and
Bible Expositions

By

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LESSON THIRTEEN

I THESSALONIANS

The first Epistle to the Thessalonians was probably the earliest that Paul wrote.

You will need to look back at the seventeenth chapter of the Acts in order to get the history of the church at Thessalonica. There you will learn that it was founded by Paul in company with Silas and Timothy, and probably Luke, on the second missionary journey of the first named. They had crossed over into Macedonia from Troas, first visiting Philippi, where Paul and Silas had been imprisoned, and then came down to Thessalonica.

They were permitted to remain there but three Sabbath days when persecution drove them down to Berea. Driven out of Berea subsequently, Paul entered Athens and then later, Corinth. Here Timothy, who had evidently returned to Thessalonica for the purpose, brought to Paul a report of the situation there, whereupon the apostle addressed this Epistle or letter, to them.

I. Salutation, 1:1

Whose names are associated with that of Paul therein? This, not because either of them is to be regarded as associated with him jointly in the production of the letter, of which he alone is to be considered the inspired author, but because they were equally known to the church at Thessalonica, and hence united with him in the greeting. You will notice that phrase "**the 'church' of the Thessalonians.**" Is it used in the case of any other body of Christians to which

Paul has addressed himself? How shall we explain this peculiarity? Some think it was the only church worthy of the name, and indeed, as a matter of fact, Paul has very little to condemn or criticize in this church as compared with the others.

II. Thanksgiving and Testimony, 1:2-10

This gives us in a few words (v. 3), a very complete and satisfactory picture of the spiritual condition of the church.

- can you name the triad of graces of which it speaks?
- and what further in that verse shows their absolute genuineness?
- what conviction touching the standing of these Christians does this spiritual fruitage awaken in Paul's mind (v. 4)?

And yet, after all, may this conviction have come to him only after seeing these fruits, or may it have been borne in on his soul from the very beginning of his ministry among them? Do Christian workers now-a-days, missionaries and evangelists, ever have such a conviction in advance about any people or place? Compare Acts 18:10.

- what explains this rich spiritual fruitage in Thessalonica (v. 5)?
- what is there in that same verse which suggests that the character of Paul and his fellow-workers had much to do, from the human side, with this unwonted spiritual power?

Following this thanksgiving, I know no better word to characterize the conclusion of this first chapter than that of Paul's testimony to the church (vv. 6-10). A testimony which, in a way, carries out the allusion to the triad of graces in verse 3.

He testifies:

- to their obedience (v. 6),
- their spiritual joy in the midst of affliction (same verse),
- their consistency as disciples (v. 7), and
- their missionary spirit (vv. 8-10).

I am not sure that this last: reference to the way in which the Gospel sounded out from them applies so much to a direct agency in missionary work as to an indirect. Perhaps it was the report of their Christian life and character carried by travelers and others to distant parts, that constituted this missionary work they did, and yet in a vital sense it was they who did it.

- what is there in verse 9 to indicate that this church was composed chiefly of Gentile Christians?
- what in verse 10 indicates that Paul in his preaching there laid stress on the second coming of CHRIST?

III. Character of Paul as a Christian Worker, 2:1-6

Under the head of "Thanksgiving" we saw that the power of the Spirit accompanying Paul's ministry in Thessalonica was accounted for in a measure by the "**manner of man**" he was among

them, i. e., by his own character and life as a Christian witness.

And now at the second chapter of the Epistle he describes that character and life. He does this not in any spirit of boasting or self-glorying, of course, but as a further testimony to the reality of the Gospel he preached, and for the glory of the grace of GOD. They had known him to be a very bold and courageous man even in the physical sense (vv. 1,2); very faithful and impartial in his teaching, with his thought not so much on gaining favor with them as on pleasing GOD who had committed the Gospel to him (vv. 3-6); very kind and affectionate nevertheless (vv. 7, 8); very unselfish and disinterested, working with his own hands for his temporal support as at Corinth, lest he should prejudice them against the salvation he proclaimed (v. 9); and finally, very holy and consistent throughout, so that they could not lay a finger on anything he said or did while among them not in accordance with the standard he held up. It was for these reasons doubtless, that his Gospel so recommended itself to them, and he was able to say what he does about its reception in verses 13-16, which please examine.

IV. Origin of the Epistle, 2:17-3:13

The circumstances under which Paul came to write this letter, already outlined, are given in his own words in that part of it we are not to consider. He desired to visit them again (v. 17); but was hindered by Satan (v. 18), doubtless through the instrumentality of the bitter persecution stirred up against him. He had, therefore, sent Timothy (from Berea) to comfort and establish them in his stead (3:1-5); who now had returned to him (at Corinth doubtless, Acts 18:1-5), with a good report of their condition (3:6-10). This only made him pray the more earnestly that he might get to see them, and that in the meantime their love and holiness might abound and grow (vv. 11-13).

V. Sins Rebuked, 4:1-12

The church at Thessalonica was not entirely "**without rebuke**," however, as the opening of the fourth chapter shows.

Moreover, at first sight, the need of the rebuke seems to be of the gravest character, the grossest sins of the flesh being involved (vv. 1-8). How is it possible that Christians, and especially those as highly commended as these, could be guilty of such things? There is no apology to be made for them, but there is an explanation. The church was chiefly composed, not of Jewish, but Gentile Christians (Acts 17:4; I Thessalonians 1:9), who, prior to their conversion, had been living in heathenism, as were their forefathers for centuries, and in the commission of these sins without realizing them to be such.

Indeed, the grossest licentiousness was, and is still, connected with certain forms of pagan worship. We can readily understand, therefore, why it was difficult for them to see the blackness of such crimes, and why they were slow to renounce them. Had they been Jewish rather than Gentile believers such acts would not have been charged against them, because of their knowledge of their true character as learned from the Holy Scriptures. These the Jews possessed, but the Gentiles had no acquaintance with them. It is a relief to note that the apostolic admonition in this case was sufficient, since in the following Epistle to this same people no mention is necessary to be made of the sin of fornication.

A rebuke, or at least an exhortation, touching brotherly love follows (vv. 9, 10), and especially one concerning idleness (vv. 11, 12). Some have thought the idleness to be accounted for by a misunderstanding as to what Paul had taught about the second coming of CHRIST. If that event were near, and the glory of the kingdom soon to be participated in, why labor so assiduously as before? Perhaps it was expected day by day, and if so, one can easily understand how those who were lacking in spiritual balance, should throw off their usual restraint and become less regardful of the proprieties and necessities of the present life.

At all events, notice for its practical value, that their idleness led to "busybodyness" as it always does. Notice also the two very practical reasons for renouncing that sin, first that they might "**walk honestly toward them that are without,**" and secondly, that they "**might have need of nothing.**"

"**Them that are without**" are, of course, their non-Christian neighbors, and it was vital they should not fall into their debt without the prospect of liquidating it. It was equally vital that their neglect of occupation should not lead them into beggary.

VI. Doctrinal Error Corrected, 4:13-5:11

We now touch upon that part of the Epistle which suggests the strongest reason for its writing.

We have seen that in Paul's preaching at Thessalonica he had laid much stress on the second coming of CHRIST, leaving the impression on the church that the event was imminent, and that they who were ready to receive CHRIST when He came should enter into His glory with Him. But in the meantime, as the weeks, and perhaps months, rolled by, some of their number died, died without seeing CHRIST or partaking of that promised glory.

They who remained sorrowed greatly on this account, feeling perhaps that theirs would be a great advantage over the dead saints when CHRIST came. Paul proceeds to set them right on this subject, in the course of which he outlines the great and blessed hope of the church in its "rapture" at CHRIST's coming, as we meet with it in no other part of the New Testament.

Analyzing 4:13-5:11, in detail, he first exhorts the bereaved not to "**sorrow as those that had no hope.**" Sorrow was permitted, but not the sorrow of the world. He next expresses the ground on which such sorrow may be removed. The departed saints will come back again to this earth when JESUS comes. We have the same reason for believing this as for believing in the death and resurrection of JESUS.

Moreover, the further good news he is about to reveal to them, he has received as a special revelation from the Lord. No one else was told this, and no one else reveals it but Paul, namely: That we which are alive and remain on the earth in the flesh when CHRIST comes shall not precede, that is, go before, or have any advantage in the matter of time over the dead saints. The Lord Himself shall descend from Heaven with a shout, and the dead, not all the dead, but they who have died in the faith of CHRIST, shall rise first. Their bodies will be raised from their graves and re-united to their souls in a glorified condition. Then we Christians who are alive and remain upon the earth at that time shall be "**caught up**" together with them in the clouds to meet

the Lord in the air.

This is what is called the "rapture." It is an experience for the whole church or body of CHRIST not unlike that which came to Enoch presumably (Hebrews 11), or Elijah. How glorious! No wonder that in the closing verse of the fourth chapter we should be exhorted to comfort one another with these words.

Chapter 5, in continuation of the subject, speaks of the time of this event, only to rebuke that disposition on the part of some to fix dates and times for CHRIST's coming. So far as the situation in the world is concerned He will come "**as a thief**," when He is least expected, like the flood in Noah's time (Matthew 24), with the consequences spoken of in verse 3. But true Christians will not be "overtaken" in that way. Their duty and their attitude is one of watching (v. 6). They have no fear in the prospect of that day (vv.9-11).

VII. Concluding Exhortations

The Epistle concludes with various exhortations, for example, for a proper regard for their spiritual rulers and guides (vv. 12, 13); for mutual carefulness of one another (vv. 14,15); for the spirit of prayer and rejoicing, etc., (vv. 16-18).

They are exhorted to "**quench not the Spirit**," i. e., the HOLY SPIRIT, and the direction in which they were tempted to thus thwart His purposes in and through them is indicated in the next verse, "**Despise not prophesyings**."

Prophesying was one of the gifts much less esteemed than some others, as we saw in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, and yet in the economy and for the upbuilding of the church it was, perhaps, the most important of all. It was synonymous with preaching and testifying, and could be exercised by the feeblest members of the church if endued with the HOLY SPIRIT. To be sure, there might be erroneous teaching and false testimony, hence the admonitions which follow to "**prove all things**" holding fast that which is good, but abstaining from every form of error.

The benediction follows the greeting and the charge (vv. 23-28). (For questions see close of next lesson).

~ end of Lesson 13 ~
