

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 9 July 2017

No. T0997

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Paul's City Epistles: 1 Thessalonians

The Apostle Paul never did things by halves. He was totally, absolutely, fully committed to whatever he was convinced was right. With these things in mind, we shall be looking today at the first of the two Epistles, or Letters, he wrote to the Christians at Thessalonica.

A few general comments, including comparisons between The First and The Second Epistles

- 1 Thessalonians emphasises the heavenly aspect of Christian truth;
- 2 Thessalonians emphasises the earthly aspect of Christian truth.

The First Epistle is corrective. The Thessalonians were in a dilemma concerning the coming of the Lord. They had wrong ideas about dead Christians. The Second Epistle was written to them because they had wrong ideas about living Christians.

The First Epistle highlights, in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, what Christian scholars call the "Parousia" - the second coming of Christ into the air, what we commonly call "The Rapture" That will be the moment when the Lord Jesus takes to be with Himself all those whom the Bible classifies as "in Christ." That is, as far as we are concerned, all those who have trusted Him as Saviour, and confessed Him as their Lord. In the same way, 2 Thessalonians 1:7 emphasises the "Apocalupsis" - the Coming of Christ to the earth at His Appearing in power and great glory. He will then initiate and commence His kingdom reign (see Matthew 24:30).

By way of contrast, the Jews had an earthly hope, whereas Christians have a heavenly hope.

A general outline of The First Epistle

There can be little doubt that the First Epistle to the Thessalonians is the earliest Pauline Epistle. It was written shortly after a brief visit, probably covering three weekends and the time in between. Read Acts 16 and Acts 17, which indicate that he spent a minimum of 16 days with them, up to a maximum of 27 days (see Acts 17:2).

The major reason which prompted Paul to write the letter was that the Thessalonians were in a dilemma concerning them that "sleep", using the verb "to sleep" in the New Testament sense of the death of a Christian.

While Paul had been with them, he had emphasised that Jesus is coming again, for all who have believed that He died for their sins, and had been raised again for their justification. They had believed that truth, and rejoiced in it. Of course, in the short time he had been with them, there had been little opportunity to give them as thorough a basic teaching as he might have wished. It is apparent, moreover, that he had heard disturbing tidings from Thessalonica that some of those who had so recently received Christ Jesus as Lord had since then died, as we read in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. This had caused consternation amongst the new converts, who had got the impression that they would all still be alive when Jesus comes again. We can understand that Paul would want to deal thoroughly with that apparent problem when he wrote to them in detail in the Epistles he addressed specifically to them. As with all Scripture, we now get the gain of things that were written then to deal specifically with very important, if local problems, at the time they were written. Hence, this was the follow up to what he had taught them when he was with them.

What was his approach? The antidote to their misconception was to give them an outline of basic doctrine, covering the past, present and future. The order he adopted was, first of all, thanksgiving for their progress so far. Then, he gave them credit, where due, for the way they had put it into practice. After that, he provided ministry to comfort and strengthen them for the future. Let us work through 1 Thessalonians chapter by chapter.

1. 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

For relatively "new" believers, the Thessalonians had made remarkable progress during and since Paul's brief stay.

- a. He records, in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, the fact that they now knew God as Father;
- b. Also in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, he was thankful that they acknowledged Jesus as Lord;
- c. He noted in 1 Thessalonians 1:7 the fact that they were good examples, indeed very good examples, to other Christians;
- d. They were deeply committed to the gospel (1 Thessalonians 1:8);
- e. Their lives commended the gospel they preached (1 Thessalonians 1:3, 9-10); and
- f. Lastly, wonderful fact, they were waiting for the Coming of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

Note, in particular, the statement in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, and the way, in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, that they are given the credit for putting it into practice:

- Their *"work of faith"* was that *"they turned to God from idols"*;
- Their *"labour of love"* was *"to serve the living and true God"*;
- Their *"patience of hope"* was *"to wait for His Son from heaven."*

2. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20

You know, there is nothing new about nurture groups. The jargon might have changed, but the principle is just the same. Paul had a good one going at Thessalonica - for young Christians. They were young in the sense that they had not been Christians very long; keen to learn, but definitely needing guidance. Note the following.

a. Nurture is provided by someone who cares

1 Thessalonians 2:7 tells us that Paul cared for them as a nursing mother. He cherished them - gently. Then, 1 Thessalonians 2:11 says that he had a fatherly concern that they might develop and mature. He had a genuine care for those being nurtured. 1 Thessalonians 2:2 says that he "agonised" for them. 1 Thessalonians 2:19 confirms that he looked on to the time when that development would reach its climax in their spiritual maturity.

b. True nurture doesn't pull its punches

We must avoid giving new converts the impression that they will have an easy time. In 2 Timothy 3:12, he warns the younger man that *"all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."* Of course, persecution does not deter or stumble true reality. It stimulates it. We do not actually covet persecution, as such, but we do need to recognise that persecution would refine us to the point where we would be much purer in our motives, and much more effective in our witness. The Apostle Peter also says so in 1 Peter 1:7.

On the other hand, perhaps we are less effective in witness than we might be because we are relatively lukewarm in so many ways. If no real persecution arises, it might just be because we do not 'live godly in Christ Jesus'.

c. Nurture needs to be provided by a skilled craftsman

Paul was able to say, "Look at my example, do it this way." He was a model, a pattern. In Acts 20:20 he says, *"I have shewed you ... and taught you."* Can I feel free to say to other, less experienced Christians than myself, "If you want to know how to go on, watch me, look at my life, take that as your model"? 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2 tell us what the model servant is, whereas 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6 highlight what the model servant is not. In particular, we must avoid being deceitful, unreal, or seeking cheap popularity.

d. On the positive side, we must do it all as unto the Lord

1 Thessalonians 2:4 reminds us that we are entrusted with the gospel, in all its aspects. It is a trust; a stewardship. We are to do it all as unto the Lord. 1 Thessalonians 2:5-6 ask what use do we make of our stewardship before our Master? We do not seek the glory of men. 1 Thessalonians 2:6 causes us to query whether we are perhaps a little too conscious of the impression our service makes on our fellow Christians? We serve the Lord, as Paul reminds us in Colossians 3:24.

e. Back to the Thessalonians (those being nurtured)

The Apostle's words in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 are to them the word of God. They were to strengthen and comfort them for any persecution which lay ahead, and would come along because they accepted and obeyed the word of God. At the same time, he warns them, in 1 Thessalonians 2:18, that if there is a work of God going on, Satan will undoubtedly oppose it.

However, Paul finds it right to teach these young believers that wrath, that is, judgment, lies ahead for those who oppose God. He states in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 that this is true of the world at large. In 1 Thessalonians 2:16 he emphasises that it will be true for the ungodly in God's earthly people Israel. Then, in 1 Thessalonians 2:18 he encourages them to understand that Satan himself will not escape the righteous judgment of God.

As to the Thessalonian Christians themselves, the end is secure and happy. 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 tell us we shall all enjoy spiritual blessing and joy along the road to glory. 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 also state that a suitable reward awaits the believers when the trials and tribulations of this world are over.

The dignity of the Christian path is highlighted in 1 Thessalonians 2:12 with the exhortation that it is our privilege to "*walk worthy of God.*"

3. 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Let us now consider basic questions arising from a general reading of 1 Thessalonians 3.

- a. If there was an Apostle like Paul alive today, am I the sort of Christian to whom he would be free to delegate such a responsibility as he gave to Timothy? Timothy was asked to visit the Thessalonians to see how they were getting on, and to bring back a fair report to the Apostle. Trace through Timothy's background and history in chronological sequence from Acts 14:6-7 to Hebrews 13:23. Find out what sort of Christian Timothy was, and what there was about him that led Paul to entrust him with such an important task.
- b. If such a delegate came from such an Apostle to my local meeting/group/church, what sort of report would he take back about me? Am I making progress in my own soul? Am I doing all that I can to promote the progress of others?
- c. Do I live, and serve in the light of the coming of the Lord?

4. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-18

- 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 emphasises the need for purity in the lives of Christians.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:9-2 speak of the love that is or certainly should be characteristic of all Christians in their relationship with others.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 tell us plainly what will happen at the Coming of the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Let us concentrate on the last few verses, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. These verses help us to understand that The Rapture and The Appearing are different in character and that there is a gap of time between the two. Paul wrote what helped the Thessalonians to understand the things they needed to know.

a. 1 Thessalonians 4:13

Do not worry about those Christians who have already died. They have not missed the Coming of the Lord for them.

b. 1 Thessalonians 4:14

All who believe that Jesus died and rose again will be with the Lord Jesus Christ when He comes to reign at His Appearing. Note the emphasis. We shall be with Him when He Appears - the verse says so. The question is - how can this be? How can all who believe that He died and rose again be with Him when He Appears in power and great glory? The answer to this important question is given in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17.

c. 1 Thessalonians 4:15

Paul tells us by the word of the Lord that Christians who have died will not miss the Coming of the Lord. They will all be included as much as us who are still alive.

d. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

Before Christ comes publicly (at His Appearing) to take control of the government of the world, He will come privately (at The Rapture) to take to be with Himself all who have believed that He died for their sins and rose again.

NB. These Christian believers are in two classes or categories.

i. Dead Christians

Christians who have died before The Rapture will be raised from the dead at that very moment and given new bodies.

ii. Living Christians

Christians who are still alive at The Rapture will be 'caught up' (i.e. raptured) together with them. The 'them' are those who will have previously died but will by then have been raised, to meet the Lord in the air. That is, all Christians, whether previously dead or still alive when Christ comes at The Rapture, will be taken to be with the Lord. From then on, we shall all be with the Lord for ever. So, when Christ Appears at a later date, we shall be with Him as verse 14 says.

e. 1 Thessalonians 4:18

In the light of what Paul has plainly taught them, there is no reason at all to be dismayed. When Jesus comes again, some believers will indeed have died. Jesus will raise them from the dead and give them new bodies, like His own body of glory, suitable for living with Him in heaven. Those who are still alive when Jesus comes again will be taken up to be with and like their Saviour, the Lord Jesus Himself, and their bodies will each be changed into one like unto His own glorious body. *"And so shall we ever be with the Lord."* No wonder Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:18, *"Comfort ye one another with these words"*

f. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-28

There are two major aspects to the coming Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We read in Isaiah 32:1 that *"a king shall reign in righteousness."* This truth is emphasised in many Scriptures. Fundamentally, this will mean that He will exercise balanced justice, and that this will have two sides. First, He will dispense wonderful blessing, previously never experienced in this world, although we get glimpses of it in the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus while He lived here in this world. The other aspect is that in that Kingdom on earth He will apply summary justice, as, how and where necessary. This was only seen very occasionally when He lived here, but it was sufficient to demonstrate that He has the necessary power and the judgment to apply when He comes again to reign over the earth for a full term of one thousand years (read Revelation 20:1-6).

This can be clearly summarised by saying that in the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, there will a balance between blessing for the willing subjects, but necessary judgment will be applied to the disobedient. To emphasise the point, there will be a blessed aspect to the Kingdom, termed in the Bible 'The Day of Christ', but there will also be a judicial aspect where necessary, called in scripture "The Day of the Lord."

As to the layout of 1 Thessalonians 5:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10 direct us to "The Day of the Lord" and its implications.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:11-22 spell out the practical issues resulting from "The Day of the Lord", the present effect of knowing what will happen in the future.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28 give us a general benediction and appropriate doxologies.

To the Christian, the revelation of what God is going to do in the future always prompts praise in the heart and from the lips of the Christian. It also prompts willing service in the light of His Coming. I trust and pray that it might have the same effect on you and me, while we wait for the coming again of our Lord and Saviour. May God grant that it might be so.

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