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THE MESSAGE OF FIRST THESSALONIANS

by Ray C. Stedman

The first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is also the first letter the apostle wrote. It was written to a struggling, yet vigorous church that was only a few months old, made up of Christians who had just come to Christ under Paul's ministry. This is a delightfully revealing letter, showing the heart of the apostle toward these new Christians, and also showing the struggles that were present in the early church.

We sometimes get very distorted conceptions of these early Christians; there's a tendency to regard them as always triumphant, always waging the battle with vigor, and always winning great victories in Christ's name. But they also had very severe problems, some of which are reflected in this letter. It was written about 50 A.D., and may well be the first part of our New Testament to be written. Most scholars feel that the gospels were written about this same time or shortly afterward, though some hold that the gospel of Matthew, and perhaps of Mark, appeared about 43 or 45 A.D. At any rate, this letter is at least one of the earliest Christian writings.

The account of Paul's founding of this church is recorded in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. After he and Silas were thrown into prison in Philippi because of their preaching of the Gospel, an earthquake shook down the prison doors and freed the prisoners. Paul was then freed by the Roman magistrates, and he left Philippi and went to Thessalonica. Many of the places where Paul preached have crumbled into ruin, but Thessalonica is still a thriving, bustling

metropolis. It was then the capital of Macedonia, but it is now in Greece proper, and is called Thessalonike.

From the account in Acts, we learn that Paul had only been there about three weeks when persecution began and he had to leave the city for his own safety. He went down to Athens and from there he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how these Christians were doing. He was very disturbed about them; he felt that perhaps the persecution they were undergoing would drive them from their faith.

He went on to Corinth where he founded a church after several months of difficult labor. After some time, Timothy returned to him at Corinth, bringing word of how the Thessalonians were doing, and of some of the problems they were facing. As we read this little letter through, we can recognize them as the kind of problems that we also face.

For one thing, wherever the Apostle Paul went, he was hounded by a group of Jews who spread the rumor that because he was not one of the original twelve, he was not a genuine apostle. This was not only a problem for Paul, but also for the Thessalonians. Furthermore, the pagans of Thessalonica were severely persecuting the Christians -- threatening them, and taking away their property -- so these early Christians, perhaps only three or four weeks old in the Lord, were called upon to endure hard things for the cause of Christ.

In that city, as in all the Greek cities, sexual promiscuity was common -- was even regarded

as a religious right -- and to live a life of chastity was to be regarded as a freak. Therefore, as is the case today, there was great pressure upon these new Christians to fall into line with the common sex practices of their day.

Then the major problem of this church was that the second coming of Jesus Christ was greatly misunderstood. The apostle had evidently told them something, but they were confused about this, which produced another grave problem. Some of them were expecting Christ to come back so imminently that they had actually stopped working and were waiting for him to come. Since they weren't earning a living, somebody had to take care of them, and they were leeches on the rest of the congregation. Also, there were tensions developing between the congregation and the church leaders which needed some admonition to settle, and finally, there were those who were somewhat indifferent to the Holy Spirit's work among them, and to the truth of God as it was being proclaimed in the Scriptures.

Do those problems sound familiar? We can consider ourselves in very similar circumstances as this church at Thessalonica. The letter itself divides simply into two major divisions. In the first three chapters the apostle is just unloading his heart to them concerning his relationship to them, and this is followed by a very practical section with advice on how to behave in the midst of the pressures in which we live.

In this first section Paul pours his heart out for these early Christians. He is afraid they might have misunderstood his leaving Thessalonica, as though he had abandoned them to persecution, so he reminds them that he had just come through a terrible time of persecution himself in Philippi, and that his own heart was deeply concerned for them. The key to this is in the very beginning:

We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope ... {1 Th 2-3a RSV}

Those three things marked these Thessalonian believers -- their work of faith, their labor of love, and their endurance in hope. These are detailed more clearly farther down, in the latter part of verse nine, where we read, "how you

turned to God from idols" {1 Th 1:9b RSV}-- that was the work of faith; they turned to God from these pagan idols they were worshipping, and "to serve a living and true God" {1 Th 1:9c RSV} -- that was their labor of love; they became an available instrument for the love of God, and third, "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come." {1 Th 1:10 RSV}. And there is the expression of the patience, waiting in hope for his Son from heaven.

Now interestingly enough, those three things also form a little outline, built right into the text, to guide you in understanding the first three chapters. The work of faith, the labor of love, and the patience of hope -- chapter one, chapter two, chapter three.

We might say of these early Christians, "they dropped out, tuned in, and turned on." They dropped out of the stream of society, the world in which they lived, (not out of contact with it: in fact, they spread the Gospel through the whole area); they dropped out of the attitudes, the power structures, and the values of the world in which they lived. And they tuned in to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and received the word.

Here the apostle is reminding us that the word he spoke was not the word of men: it came "not only in word," he said, "but also in power and in the Holy Spirit." {1 Th 1:5b RSV}. And they turned on, as they waited with expectation for the coming of the Son of God. They had a reason for living, they had a purpose, and they had a hope in the midst of the hopelessness around them.

An archaeological excavation team, working in this very city of Thessalonica, has turned up an ancient, first-century graveyard. And there among the pagan tombstones they found one which was inscribed in Greek with these words: "No Hope." But here, in a church in the midst of that city, there were those who had found the endurance based on hope; they were looking for the coming of the Son of God. That is what keeps the heart calm in the midst of perils and persecutions. That is what makes it possible to watch the world apparently coming apart at the seams and maintain quietness; God is in control, and he knows what he's doing. And thus Paul

encourages these Thessalonians with these words.

Chapter two is a wonderful description of the labor of love -- not their labor, this time -- but Paul's, and here you have a marvelous description of his ministry (Chapter 2:9-12):

For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God. {1 Th 2:9 RSV}

... for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. {1 Th 2:11-12 RSV}

And they did that, for he says (verse 14):

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; {1 Th 2:14a RSV}

This is the service, the labor of love.

Chapter three is an account of how Paul sent Timothy to them, and Timothy brought back word of the persecution they were undergoing, and yet of their steadfastness in the midst of it. And there is a wonderful description of the patience of hope, permitting them to endure difficulties with joy.

Chapters four and five, the practical section of this letter, are divided into four brief sections which take up the problems that were confronting this church. The first exhortation the apostle gives is to live cleanly in the midst of a sex-saturated society. These words have great importance to us who have to live in the same kind of society today, and he begins by reminding them that he had taught them how to live (verse 1):

Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. {1 Th 4:1 RSV}

He had not taught them, as many people think Christianity teaches, that they ought to live a good, clean life. Buddhism teaches that. And most other faiths teach that you ought to live a moral life. But that alone is not what Christianity says; it teaches you how to live a good, clean life! And Paul reminds them that he had taught them "how to please God."

Now, what is it that pleases God? What one quality of life is essential to please God? Faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. A life of expectation that the God who lives in you will manifest his life through you is the kind of life that pleases God. It isn't a life of your efforts, struggling to live up to a standard that you've imposed upon yourself, or someone else has imposed upon you. It is a life in which you are constantly dependent upon the one who indwells you, to keep you able to do and to be what you ought to be.

This kind of life results, then, in a purity that is practiced. If Christians are practicing impurity, that is a clear revelation that they are not practicing a life of faith. But purity practiced is the sign of the principle perceived. Paul says,

For this is the will of God, [even] your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality; [that is the will of God]that each of you know how to take a wife for himself [possess his vessel, literally, or possess his body] in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. {1 Th 4:3-8 RSV}

It is very clear, isn't it? We are told how to live cleanly.

The second problem he takes up is the matter of living honestly, in verses 9 through 12 of chapter four. They are to show love toward one another, and the practical manifestation of that is for every man to get busy and work with

his hands and not have to depend upon somebody else for support; rather,

... to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands...so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody. {1 Th 4:11-12 RSV}

That's practical, isn't it?

Now in verse 13, we come to the major problem this book addresses -- the misunderstanding about the coming of the Lord. These Thessalonian Christians had gotten the idea that when Jesus Christ returned to earth the second time to begin his millennial kingdom, those who were alive when he came back (and they were expecting him within their lifetime) would enter with him into this kingdom. But they were deeply troubled that those who had died in the meantime would somehow miss the benefits and the blessings of the millennium.

Now this probably arose because of a misunderstanding of the doctrine of resurrection. They were thinking in terms of one resurrection, a single event which would come at the end of the millennium, when the dead would be raised -- the good and the bad alike -- to stand before the judgment seat of God. And there are passages, of course, that do speak of a resurrection to come at the end of the millennium. But Paul points out that the resurrection does not proceed as a single event, but that groups of believers are resurrected at various times. Notice his argument:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, [that is, who have died] that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. {1 Th 4:13-14 RSV}

In other words, these who have died are going to be raised again; and they'll come back with Jesus when he comes to establish his millennial reign.

Well, this presents another problem. How is it that they are going to come back with him bodily when their bodies have been placed in the grave? What reassurance can they have on this?

"Ah," says the apostle, "let me give you a revelation from the Lord":

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord [this is an authoritative revelation] that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, [the presence of the Lord] shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. {1 Th 4:13-18 RSV}

In other words, there is an aspect of the Lord's coming, before his coming to establish the millennium reign. He is coming for his people, he is coming to gather those who are his to be with him, in his presence (parousia in Greek), before his return to establish the kingdom. The 'coming of the Lord' here does not refer to the 'second coming' of Christ. And at the time of this parousia the dead in Christ will be raised, so that we all will be with him when he's ready to establish his kingdom. So you see how this answered their problem? They need not grieve over those who have died; they'll actually precede those who are alive when the Lord comes for his own.

Now between that parousia the Lord's coming to establish the kingdom, we learn from other passages of Scripture that there will probably be about a seven year period. In the meantime the great tribulation occurs, and Paul now goes on to speak of this as he continues in the next chapter. He says to them,

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. {1 Th 5:1-2 RSV}

Nobody can set a date for this event. It's going to come suddenly, quickly, and when the Lord comes in the parousia two great chains of events will be initiated. The Lord will begin one series of events in which all believers will be

caught up to be with him, and at the same time, he will begin another series of events on earth known as the great tribulation, or in the Old Testament, "the day of the Lord."

Now there are two "days" we need to distinguish in Scripture: the day of the Lord, and the day of Christ. They both begin at exactly the same time, but they concern two distinct bodies of people. The day of Christ concerns believers, while the day of the Lord refers to what is happening to unbelievers during this time. And it is my personal conviction that when the Lord comes for his own, and the dead in Christ rise -- when we who are alive are caught up with them to be with the Lord -- that we don't leave this planet at all. We stay here with the Lord, visibly directing the events of the tribulation period as they break out in great judgmental sequences upon the ones who are living as mortals upon the earth -- the scenes that are vividly portrayed in the book of Revelation.

Now the apostle says to them that no one knows when this is going to happen:

When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. {1 Th 5:3-4 RSV}

It will surprise the people of the world like a thief, but it needn't surprise you like a thief, because you are looking forward to it -- you ought to be expecting it.

For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. {1 Th 5:5 RSV}

Therefore, what should be the practical result? Well, don't go to sleep as others do, but keep awake and be sober. Don't act as though everything is going to go on as usual, but be aware of what God is doing and act accordingly. Remember these signs that Jesus gave that indicate the close approach of these events; these ought to make us aware that it is time to give ourselves more than we ever have before to the work of God. Paul says,

... keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But, since we belong to the day,

let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. {1 Th 5:6b-8 RSV}

Now he's not talking about salvation from hell: he's speaking here of the salvation which is to come; that is, salvation from the wrath of God during the time of the judgment. He goes right on to say,

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep [whether we live until the coming of the Lord, or die beforehand] we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. {1 Th 5:9-11 RSV}

How completely he answered their problem! They did not need to be discouraged, or frightened, or distressed, but they could go on about their business, confident that God was in charge of affairs. And although times were difficult, they could busy themselves about the work of the Lord, knowing that they were only investing themselves in a certain future.

The last section speaks not only of living confidently, but of living peacefully in the midst of these conditions:

But we beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. {1 Th 5:12-13a RSV}

There was some friction that was developing towards some of the church leaders, and Paul says, remember that these men are concerned about your soul's welfare, and although they may have to speak rather sharply at times, it's not because they want to hurt you, but to help you. Therefore, remember that and live at peace with them, and esteem them, and love them because they are concerned about you.

And furthermore,

Be at peace among yourselves, {1 Th 5:13b RSV}

and he gives some practical exhortations as to how to do that:

... admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. {1 Th 5:14b RSV}

And most important,

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. {1 Th 5:15 RSV}

That is probably one of the most frequently broken commands in Scripture. When somebody does something to us, what do we say? "Wait 'til I get even with you!" "I'm going to pay back if it's the last thing I do!" And yet, this is the very attitude which the Scriptures denounce as worldly thinking, outside of the grace and truth and love of Jesus Christ.

Then there are these beautiful verses,

Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. {1 Th 5:16-18 RSV}

And after various other admonitions, his final prayer for them is beautiful:

May the God of peace himself [dwelling in you] sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. {1 Th 5:23 RSV}

What a wonderful letter this is! And all of this was addressed to new Christians, yet the apostle expected them to lay hold of these truths. In order to grow, there must be, as Jesus said, a constant hungering and thirsting after more; "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied," {Matt 5:6 RSV}. And it is this that the world is waiting to see, especially in these last days.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, in many ways we recognize the days in which we live as very similar to the days in which this letter was written; yet from our vantage point of twenty centuries away, we can see that although their hopes burned brightly for the coming of the Lord, then, they were a long way from the goal. But how much more surely are these promises true for us; how much more certain can we be that we are in the days in which our Lord is moving world events to presage his coming! Lord, help us to walk in the light of this, as we've been exhorted and admonished by the Apostle Paul, earnestly and soberly, intelligently giving ourselves to first things first. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.