

# JAMES DENNEY

THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE:  
THE EPISTLES TO THE  
THESSALONIANS

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Epistles to the Thessalonians**

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# **James Denney**

## **The Expositor's Bible: The Epistles to the Thessalonians**

### **THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS**

#### **I**

#### ***THE CHURCH OF THE THESSALONIANS***

"Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: and Paul, as his custom was, went in unto them, and for three sabbath days reasoned with them from the scriptures, opening and alleging, that it behoved the Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom, *said he*, I proclaim unto you, is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few. But the Jews, being moved with jealousy, took unto them certain vile fellows of the rabble, and gathering a crowd, set the city on an uproar; and assaulting the house of Jason, they sought to bring them forth to the people. And when they found them not, they dragged Jason and certain brethren before the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; whom Jason hath received: and these all act contrary to the decrees of Cæsar, saying that there is another king, *one* Jesus. And they troubled the multitude and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go." – Acts xvii. 1-9 (R.V.).

"Paul, and Silvanus, and Timothy, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace." – 1 Thess. i. 1 (R.V.).

THESSALONICA, now called Saloniki, was in the first century of our era a large and flourishing city. It was situated at the north-eastern corner of the Thermaic gulf, on the line of the great Egnatian road, which formed the main connection by land between Italy and the East. It was an important commercial centre, with a mixed population of Greeks, Romans, and Jews. The Jews, who at the present day amount to some twenty thousand, were numerous enough to have a synagogue of their own; and we can infer from the Book of Acts (xvii. 4) that it was frequented by many of the better spirits among the Gentiles also. Unconsciously, and as the event too often proved, unwillingly, the Dispersion was preparing the way of the Lord.

To this city the Apostle Paul came, attended by Silas and Timothy, in the course of his second missionary journey. He had just left Philippi, dearest to his heart of all his churches; for there, more than anywhere else, the sufferings of Christ had abounded in him, and his consolations also had been abundant in Christ. He came to Thessalonica with the marks of the lictors' rods upon his body; but to him they were the marks of Jesus; not warnings to change his path, but tokens that the Lord was taking him into fellowship with Himself, and binding him more strictly to His service. He came with the memory of his converts' kindness warm upon his heart; conscious that, amid whatever disappointments, a welcome awaited the gospel, which admitted its messenger into the joy of his

Lord. We need not wonder, then, that the Apostle kept to his custom, and in spite of the malignity of the Jews, made his way, when Sabbath came, to the synagogue of Thessalonica.

His evangelistic ministry is very briefly described by St. Luke. For three Sabbath days he addressed himself to his fellow-countrymen. He took the Scriptures into his hand, that is, of course, the Old Testament Scriptures, – and opening the mysterious casket, as the picturesque words in Acts describe his method, he brought out and set before his auditors, as its inmost and essential secret, the wonderful idea that the Christ whom they all expected, the Messiah of God, must die and rise again from the dead. That was not what ordinary Jewish readers found in the law, the prophets, or the psalms; but, once persuaded that this interpretation was true, it was not difficult to believe that the Jesus whom Paul preached was the Christ for whom they all hoped. Luke tells us that some were persuaded; but they cannot have been many: his account agrees with the representation of the Epistle (i. 9) that the church at Thessalonica was mainly Gentile. Of the "chief women not a few," who were among the first converts, we know nothing; the exhortations in both Epistles make it plain that what Paul left at Thessalonica was what we should call a working-class congregation. The jealousy of the Jews, who resorted to the device which had already proved successful at Philippi, compelled Paul and his friends to leave the city prematurely. The mission, indeed, had probably lasted longer than most readers infer from Acts xvii. Paul had had time to make his character and conduct impressive to the church, and to deal with each one of them as a father with his own children (ii. 11); he had wrought night and day with his own hands for a livelihood (2 Thess. iii. 8); he had twice received help from the Philippians (Phil. iv. 15, 16). But although this implies a stay of some duration, much remained to be done; and the natural anxiety of the Apostle, as he thought of his inexperienced disciples, was intensified by the reflection that he had left them exposed to the malignity of his and their enemies. What means that malignity employed – what violence and what calumny – the Epistle itself enables us to see; meantime, it is sufficient to say that the pressure of these things upon the Apostle's spirit was the occasion of his writing this letter. He had tried in vain to get back to Thessalonica; he had condemned himself to solitude in a strange city that he might send Timothy to them; he must hear whether they stand fast in their Christian calling. On his return from this mission Timothy joined Paul in Corinth with a report, cheering on the whole, yet not without its graver side, concerning the Thessalonian believers; and the first Epistle is the apostolic message in these circumstances. It is, in all probability, the earliest of the New Testament writings; it is certainly the earliest extant of Paul's: if we except the decree in Acts xv., it is the earliest piece of Christian writing in existence.<sup>1</sup>

The names mentioned in the address are all well known – Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. The three are united in the greeting, and are sometimes, apparently, included in the "we" or "us" of the Epistle; but they are not joint authors of it. It is the Epistle of Paul, who includes them in the salutation out of courtesy, as in the First to the Corinthians he includes Sosthenes, and in Galatians "all the brethren that are with me"; a courtesy the more binding on this occasion that Silas and Timothy had shared with him his missionary work in Thessalonica. In First and Second Thessalonians only, of all his letters, the Apostle adds nothing to his name to indicate the character in which he writes; he neither calls himself an apostle, nor a servant of Jesus Christ. The Thessalonians knew him simply for what he was; his apostolic dignity was yet unassailed by false brethren; the simple name was enough. Silas comes before Timothy as an older man, and a fellow-labourer of longer standing. In the Book of Acts he is described as a prophet, and as one of the chief men among the brethren; he had been associated with Paul all through this journey; and though we know very little of him, the fact that he was chosen one of the bearers of the apostolic decree, and that he afterwards attached himself to Paul, justifies the inference that he heartily sympathised with the evangelising of the heathen. Timothy was apparently one of Paul's own converts. Carefully instructed in childhood by a pious

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<sup>1</sup> The date cannot be precisely assigned, but it is not later than 54 A.D., and cannot be so early as 52. Most scholars say 54. It was written in Corinth.

mother and grandmother, he had been won to the faith of Christ during the first tour of the Apostle in Asia Minor. He was naturally timid, but kept the faith in spite of the persecutions which then awaited it; and when Paul returned, he found that the steadfastness and other graces of his spiritual son had won an honourable name in the local churches. He determined to take him with him, apparently in the character of an evangelist; but before he was ordained by the presbyters, Paul circumcised him, remembering his Jewish descent on the mother's side, and desirous of facilitating his access to the synagogue, in which the work of gospel preaching usually began. Of all the Apostle's assistants he was the most faithful and affectionate. He had the true pastoral spirit, devoid of selfishness, and caring naturally and unfeignedly for the souls of men (Phil. ii. 20 f.). Such were the three who sent their Christian greetings in this Epistle.

The greetings are addressed "to the church of (the) Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." No such address had ever been written or read before, for the community to which it was directed was a new thing in the world. The word translated "church" was certainly familiar enough to all who knew Greek: it was the name given to the citizens of a Greek town assembled for public business; it is the name given in the Greek Bible either to the children of Israel as the congregation of Jehovah, or to any gathering of them for a special purpose; but here it obtains a new significance. The church of the Thessalonians is a church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the common relation of its members to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ which constitutes them a church in the sense of the Apostle: in contradistinction from all other associations or societies, they form a Christian community. The Jews who met from Sabbath to Sabbath in the synagogue were a church; they were one in the acknowledgment of the Living God, and in their observance of His law; God, as revealed in the Old Testament and in the polity of Israel, was the element or atmosphere of their spiritual life. The citizens of Thessalonica, who met in the theatre to discuss their political interests, were a "church"; they were one in recognising the same constitution and the same ends of civic life; it was in that constitution, in the pursuit of those ends, that they found the atmosphere in which they lived. Paul in this Epistle greets a community distinct from either of these. It is not civic, but religious; though religious, it is neither pagan nor Jewish; it is an original creation, new in its bond of union, in the law by which it lives, in the objects at which it aims; a church in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This newness and originality of Christianity could not fail to impress those who first received it. The gospel made an immeasurable difference to them, a difference almost equally great whether they had been Jews or heathen before; and they were intensely conscious of the gulf which separated their new life from the old. In another epistle Paul describes the condition of Gentiles not yet evangelised. Once, he says, you were apart from Christ, without God, in the world. The world – the great system of things and interests separated from God – was the sphere and element of their life. The gospel found them there, and translated them. When they received it, they ceased to be in the world; they were no longer apart from Christ, and without God: they were in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing could be more revolutionary in those days than to become a Christian: old things passed away; all things became new; all things were determined by the new relation to God and His Son. The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian was as unmistakable and as clear to the Christian mind as the difference between the shipwrecked sailor who has reached the shore and him who is still fighting a hopeless fight with wind and waves. In a country which has long been Christian, that difference tends, to sense at least, and to imagination, to disappear. We are not vividly impressed with the distinction between those who claim to be Christians and those who do not; we do not see a radical unlikeness, and we are sometimes disposed to deny it. We may even feel that we are bound to deny it, were it only in justice to God. He has made all men for Himself; He is the Father of all; He is near to all, even when they are blind to Him; the pressure of His hand is felt and in a measure responded to by all, even when they do not recognise it; to say that any one is

ἄθεος, or χωρὶς Χριστοῦ, or that he is *not* in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ, seems really to deny both God and man.

Yet what is at issue here is really a question of fact; and among those who have been in contact with the facts, among those, above all, who have had experience of the critical fact – who once were not Christians and now are – there will not be two opinions about it. The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian, though historical accidents have made it less visible, or rather, less conspicuous than it once was, is still as real and as vast as ever. The higher nature of man, intellectual and spiritual, must always have an element in which it lives, an atmosphere surrounding it, principles to guide it, ends to stimulate its action; and it may find all these in either of two places. It may find them in the world – that is, in that sphere of things from which God, so far as man's will and intent goes, is excluded; or it may find them in God Himself and in His Son. It is no objection to this division to say that God cannot be excluded from His own world, that He is always at work there whether acknowledged or not; for the acknowledgment is the essential point; without it, though God is near to man, man is still far from God. Nothing could be a more hopeless symptom in character than the benevolent neutrality which evades this truth; it takes away every motive to evangelise the non-Christian, or to work out the originality and distinctiveness of the Christian life itself. Now, as in the apostolic age, there are persons who are Christians and persons who are not; and, however alike their lives may be on the surface, they are radically apart. Their centre is different; the element in which they move is different; the nutriment of thought, the fountain of motives, the standard of purity are different; they are related to each other as life in God, and life without God; life in Christ, and life apart from Christ; and in proportion to their sincerity is their mutual antagonism.

In Thessalonica the Christian life was original enough to have formed a new society. In those days, and in the Roman Empire, there was not much room for the social instincts to expand. Unions of all kinds were suspected by the governments, and discouraged, as probable centres of political disaffection. Local self-government ceased to be interesting when all important interests were withdrawn from its control; and even had it been otherwise, there was no part in it possible for that great mass of population from which the Church was so largely recruited, namely, the slaves. Any power that could bring men together, that could touch them deeply, and give them a common interest that engaged their hearts and bound them to each other, met the greatest want of the time, and was sure of a welcome. Such a power was the gospel preached by Paul. It formed little communities of men and women wherever it was proclaimed; communities in which there was no law but that of love, in which heart opened to heart as nowhere else in all the world, in which there was fervour and hope and freedom and brotherly kindness, and all that makes life good and dear. We feel this very strongly in reading the New Testament, and it is one of the points on which, unhappily, we have drifted away from the primitive model. The Christian congregation is not now, in point of fact, the type of a sociable community. Too often it is oppressed with constraint and formality. Take any particular member of any particular congregation; and his social circle, the company of friends in which he expands most freely and happily, will possibly have no connection with those he sits beside in the church. The power of the faith to bring men into real unity with each other is not lessened; we see this wherever the gospel breaks ground in a heathen country, or wherever the frigidity of the church drives two or three fervent souls to form a secret society of their own, but the temperature of faith itself is lowered; we are not really living, with any intensity of life, in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we were, we would be drawn closer to each other; our hearts would touch and overflow; the place where we meet in the name of Jesus would be the most radiant and sociable place we know.

Nothing could better illustrate the reality of that new character which Christianity confers than the fact that men can be addressed as Christians. Nothing, either, could better illustrate the confusion of mind that exists in this matter, or the insincerity of much profession, than the fact that so many members of churches would hesitate before taking the liberty so to address a brother. We have all



written letters, and on all sorts of occasions; we have addressed men as lawyers, or doctors, or men of business; we have sent or accepted invitations to gatherings where nothing would have astonished us more than the unaffected naming of the name of God; did we ever write to anybody because he was a Christian, and because we were Christians? Of all the relations in which we stand to others, is that which is established by "our common Christianity," by our common life in Jesus Christ, the only one which is so crazy and precarious that it can never be really used for anything? Here we see the Apostle look back from Corinth to Thessalonica, and his one interest in the poor people whom he remembers so affectionately is that they are Christians. The one thing in which he wishes to help them is their Christian life. He does not care much whether they are well or ill off in respect of this world's goods; but he is anxious to supply what is lacking in their faith (iii. 10). How real a thing the Christian life was to him! what a substantial interest, whether in himself or in others, engrossing all his thought, absorbing all his love and devotion. To many of us it is the one topic for silence; to him it was the one theme of thought and speech. He wrote about it, as he spoke about it, as though there were no other interest for man; and letters like those of Thomas Erskine show that still, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh. The full soul overflows, unaffected, unforced; Christian fellowship, as soon as Christian life is real, is restored to its true place.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy wish the church of the Thessalonians grace and peace. This is the greeting in all the Apostle's letters; it is not varied except by the addition of "mercy" in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus. In form it seems to combine the salutations current among the Greeks and the Jews (χαίρειν and שלום), but in import it has all the originality of the Christian faith. In the second Epistle it runs, "Grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Grace is the love of God, spontaneous, beautiful, unearned, at work in Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinful men; peace is the effect and fruit in man of the reception of grace. It is easy to narrow unduly the significance of peace; those expositors do so who suppose in this passage a reference to the persecution which the Thessalonian Christians had to bear, and understand the Apostle to wish them deliverance from it. The Apostle has something far more comprehensive in his mind. The peace, which Christ is; the peace with God which we have when we are reconciled to Him by the death of His Son; the soul-health which comes when grace makes our hearts to their very depths right with God, and frightens away care and fear; this "perfect soundness" spiritually is all summed up in the word. It carries in it the fulness of the blessing of Christ. The order of the words is significant; there is no peace without grace; and there is no grace apart from fellowship with God in Christ. The history of the Church has been written by some who practically put Paul in Christ's place; and by others who imagine that the doctrine of the person of Christ only attained by slow degrees, and in the post-apostolic age, its traditional importance; but here, in the oldest extant monument of the Christian faith, and in the very first line of it, the Church is defined as existing in the Lord Jesus Christ; and in that single expression, in which the Son stands side by side with the Father, as the life of all believing souls, we have the final refutation of such perverse thoughts. By the grace of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Christian is what he is; he lives and moves and has his being there; apart from Christ, he is not. Here, then, is our hope. Conscious of our own sins, and of the shortcomings of the Christian community of which we are members, let us have recourse to Him whose grace is sufficient for us. Let us abide in Christ, and in all things grow up into Him. God alone is good; Christ alone is the Pattern and the Inspiration of the Christian character; only in the Father and the Son can the new life and the new fellowship come to their perfection.

FOOTNOTE

## II

### *THE THANKSGIVING*

"We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith and labour of love and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father; knowing, brethren beloved of God, your election." – 1 Thess. i. 2-4. (R.V.).

THE salutation in St. Paul's epistles is regularly followed by the thanksgiving. Once only, in the Epistle to the Galatians, is it omitted; the amazement and indignation with which the Apostle has heard that his converts are forsaking his gospel for another which is not a gospel at all, carries him out of himself for a moment. But in his earliest letter it stands in its proper place; before he thinks of congratulating, teaching, exhorting, admonishing, he gives God thanks for the tokens of His grace in the Thessalonians. He would not be writing to these people at all if they were not Christians; they would never have been Christians but for the free goodness of God; and before he says one word directly to them, he acknowledges that goodness with a grateful heart.

In this case the thanksgiving is particularly fervent. It has no drawback. There is no profane person at Thessalonica, like him who defiled the church at Corinth at a later period; we give thanks, says the Apostle, for you all. It is, as far as the nature of the case permits, uninterrupted. As often as Paul prays, he makes mention of them and gives thanks; he remembers without ceasing their new-born graces. We ought not to extenuate the force of such words, as if they were mere exaggerations, the idle extravagances of a man who habitually said more than he meant. Paul's life was concentrated and intense, to a degree of which we have probably little conception. He lived for Christ, and for the churches of Christ; it was literal truth, not extravagance, when he said, "This one thing I do": the life of these churches, their interests, their necessities, their dangers, God's goodness to them, his own duty to serve them, all these constituted together the one dear concernment of his life; they were ever with him in God's sight, and therefore in his intercessions and thanksgivings to God. Other men's minds might surge with various interests; new ambitions or affections might displace old ones; fickleness or disappointments might change their whole career; but it was not so with him. His thoughts and affections never changed their object, for the same conditions appealed constantly to the same susceptibility; if he grieved over the unbelief of the Jews, he had unceasing (ἀδιάλειπτον) pain in his heart; if he gave thanks for the Thessalonians, he remembered without ceasing (ἀδιαλείπτως) the graces with which they had been adorned by God.

Nor were these continual thanksgivings vague or formal; the Apostle recalls, in each particular case, the special manifestations of Christian character which inspire his gratitude. Sometimes, as in 1st Corinthians, they are less spiritual – gifts, rather than graces; utterance and knowledge, without charity; sometimes, as here, they are eminently spiritual – faith, love, and hope. The conjunction of these three in the earliest of Paul's letters is worthy of remark. They occur again in the well-known passage in 1 Cor. xiii., where, though they share in the distinction of being eternal, and not, like knowledge and eloquence, transitory in their nature, love is exalted to an eminence above the other two. They occur a third time in one of the later epistles – that to the Colossians – and in the same order as here. That, says Lightfoot on the passage, is the natural order. "Faith rests on the past; love works in the present; hope looks to the future." Whether this distribution of the graces is accurate or not, it suggests the truth that they cover and fill up the whole Christian life. They are the sum and substance of it, whether it looks back, or looks round, or looks forward. The germ of all perfection is implanted in the soul which is the dwelling-place of "these three."

Though none of them can really exist, in its Christian quality, without the others, any of them may preponderate at a given time. It is not quite fanciful to point out that each in its turn seems to

have bulked most largely in the experience of the Apostle himself. His earliest epistles – the two to the Thessalonians – are pre-eminently epistles of hope. They look to the future; the doctrinal interest uppermost in them is that of the second coming of the Lord, and the final rest of the Church. The epistles of the next period – Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians – are as distinctly epistles of faith. They deal largely with faith as the power which unites the soul to God in Christ, and brings into it the virtue of the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus. Later still, there are the epistles of which Colossians and Ephesians are the type. The great thought in these is that of the unity wrought by love; Christ is the head of the Church; the Church is the body of Christ; the building up of the body in love, by the mutual help of the members, and their common dependence on the Head, preoccupies the apostolic writer. All this may have been more or less accidental, due to circumstances which had nothing to do with the spiritual life of Paul; but it has the look of being natural too. Hope prevails first – the new world of things unseen and eternal outweighs the old; it is the stage at which religion is least free from the influence of sense and imagination. Then comes the reign of faith; the inward gains upon the outward; the mystical union of the soul to Christ, in which His spiritual life is appropriated, is more or less sufficient to itself; it is the stage, if it be a stage at all, at which religion becomes independent of imagination and sense. Finally, love reigns. The solidarity of all Christian interests is strongly felt; the life flows out again, in all manner of Christian service, on those by whom it is surrounded; the Christian moves and has his being in the body of which he is a member. All this, I repeat, can be only comparatively true; but the character and sequence of the Apostle's writings speak for its truth so far.

But it is not simply faith, love, and hope that are in question here: "we remember," says the Apostle, "your *work* of faith and *labour* of love and *patience* of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." We call faith, love, and hope the Christian graces; and we are apt to forget that the associations of heathen mythology, thus introduced, are disturbing rather than enlightening. The three Graces of the Greeks are ideally beautiful figures; but their beauty is æsthetic, not spiritual. They are lovely as a group of statuary is lovely; but though "by (their) gift come unto men all pleasant things and sweet, and the wisdom of a man and his beauty, and the splendour of his fame," their nature is utterly unlike that of the three powers of the Christian character; no one would dream of ascribing to them work, and labour and patience. Yet the mere fact that "Graces" has been used as a common name for both has diffused the idea that the Christian graces also are to be viewed mainly as the adornments of character, its unsought, unstudied beauties, set on it by God to subdue and charm the world. That is quite wrong; the *Greek* Graces are essentially beauties; they confer on men all that wins admiration – personal comeliness, victory in the games, a happy mood; but the *Christian* graces are essentially powers; they are new virtues and forces which God has implanted in the soul that it may be able to do His work in the world. The heathen Graces are lovely to look at, and that is all; but the Christian graces are not subjects for æsthetic contemplation; they are here to work, to toil, to endure. If they have a beauty of their own – and surely they have – it is a beauty not in form or colour, not appealing to the eye or the imagination, but only to the spirit which has seen and loved Christ, and loves His likeness in whatever guise.

Let us look at the Apostle's words more closely: he speaks of a work of faith; to take it exactly, of something which faith has done. Faith is a conviction with regard to things unseen, that makes them present and real. Faith in God as revealed in Christ, and in His death for sin, makes reconciliation real; it gives the believer peace with God. But it is not shut up in the realm of things inward and unseen. If it were, a man might say what he pleased about it, and there would be no check upon his words. Wherever it exists, it works; he who is interested can see what it has done. Apparently the Apostle has some particular work of faith in his mind in this passage; some thing which the Thessalonians had actually done, because they believed but what it is we cannot tell. Certainly not faith itself; certainly not love, as some think, referring to Gal. v. 6; if a conjecture may be hazarded, possibly some act of courage or fidelity under persecution, similar to those adduced in Heb. xi. That famous chapter

contains a catalogue of the works which faith wrought; and serves as a commentary, therefore, on this expression. Surely we ought to notice that the great Apostle, whose name has been the strength and shield of all who preach justification by faith alone, the very first time he mentions this grace in his epistles, mentions it as a power which leaves its witness in work.

It is so, also, with love: "we remember," he writes, "your labour of love." The difference between ἔργον (work) and κόπος (labour) is that between effect and effort. The Apostle recalls something which the faith of the Thessalonians did; he recalls also the wearisome toil in which their love spent itself. Love is not so capable of abuse in religion, or, at least, it has not been so rankly abused, as faith. Men are much more apt to demand the proof of it. It has an inward side as much as faith, but it is not an emotion which exhausts itself in its own transports. Merely as emotion, indeed, it is apt to be undervalued. In the Church of to-day emotion needs rather to be stimulated than repressed. The passion of the New Testament startles us when we chance to feel it. For one man among us who is using up the powers of his soul in barren ecstasies, there are thousands who have never been moved by Christ's love to a single tear or a single heart throb. They must learn to love before they can labour. They must be kindled by that fire which burned in Christ's heart, and which He came to cast upon the earth, before they can do anything in His service. But if the love of Christ has really met that answer in love for which it waits, the time for service has come. Love in the Christian will attest itself as it attested itself in Christ. It will prescribe and point out the path of labour. The word employed in this passage is one often used by the Apostle to describe his own laborious life. Love set him, and will set every one in whose heart it truly burns, upon incessant, unwearied efforts for others' good. Paul was ready to spend and be spent at its bidding, however small the result might be. He toiled with his hands, he toiled with his brain, he toiled with his ardent, eager, passionate heart, he toiled in his continual intercessions with God, and all these toils made up his *labour* of love. "A labour of love," in current language, is a piece of work done so willingly that no payment is expected for it. But a labour of love is not what the Apostle is speaking of; it is *laboriousness*, as love's characteristic. Let Christian men and women ask themselves whether their love can be so characterised. We have all been tired in our time, one may presume; we have toiled in business, or in some ambitious course, or in the perfecting of some accomplishment, or even in the mastery of some game or the pursuit of some amusement, till we were utterly wearied: how many of us have so toiled in love? How many of us have been wearied and worn with some labour to which we set ourselves for God's sake? This is what the Apostle has in view in this passage; and, strange as it may appear, it is one of the things for which he gives God thanks. But is he not right? Is it not a thing to evoke gratitude and joy, that God counts us worthy to be fellow-labourers with Him in the manifold works which love imposes?

The church at Thessalonica was not old; its first members could only count their Christian age by months. Yet love is so native to the Christian life, that they found at once a career for it; demands were made upon their sympathy and their strength which were met at once, though never suspected before. "What are we to do," we sometimes ask, "if we would work the works of God?" If we have love enough in our hearts, it will answer all its own questions. It is the fulfilling of the law just because it shows us plainly where service is needed, and puts us upon rendering it at any cost of pain or toil. It is not too much to say that the very word chosen by the Apostle to characterise love – this word κόπος – is peculiarly appropriate, because it brings out, not the issue, but only the cost, of work. With the result desired, or without it; with faint hope, or with hope most sure, love labours, toils, spends and is spent over its task: this is the very seal of its genuine Christian character.

The third grace remains: "your patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." The second coming of Christ was an element in apostolic teaching which, whether exceptionally prominent or not, had made an exceptional impression at Thessalonica. It will more naturally be studied at another place; here it is sufficient to say that it was the great object of Christian hope. Christians not only believed Christ would come again; they not only expected Him to come; they were eager for His coming. "How long, O Lord?" they cried in their distress. "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly," was their prayer.

It is matter of notoriety that hope in this sense does not hold its ancient place in the heart of the Church. It holds a much lower place. Christian men hope for this or that; they hope that threatening symptoms in the Church or in society may pass away, and better things appear; they hope that when the worst comes to the worst, it will not be so bad as the pessimists anticipate. Such impotent and ineffective hope is of no kindred to the hope of the gospel. So far from being a power of God in the soul, a victorious grace, it is a sure token that God is absent. Instead of inspiring, it discourages; it leads to numberless self-deceptions; men *hope* their lives are right with God, when they ought to search them and see; they *hope* things will turn out well, when they ought to be taking security of them. All this, where our relations to God are concerned, is a degradation of the very word. The Christian hope is laid up in heaven. The object of it is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not precarious, but certain; it is not ineffective, but a great and energetic power. Anything else is not hope at all.

The operation of the true hope is manifold. It is a sanctifying grace, as appears from 1 John iii. 3: "Every one that hath this hope set on Him, purifieth himself, even as He is pure." But here the Apostle characterises it by its patience. The two virtues are so inseparable that Paul sometimes uses them as equivalent; twice in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus, he says faith, love, and patience, instead of faith, love, and hope. But what is patience? The word is one of the great words of the New Testament. The corresponding verb is usually rendered endurance, as in Christ's saying, "He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved." Patience is more than resignation or meek submission; it is hope in the shade, but hope nevertheless; the brave steadfastness which bears up under all burdens because the Lord is at hand. The Thessalonians had much affliction in their early days as Christians; they were tried, too, as we all are, by inward discouragements – that persistence and vitality of sin that break the spirit and beget despair; but they saw close at hand the glory of the Lord; and in the patience of hope they held out, and fought the good fight to the last. It is truly significant that in the Pastoral Epistles patience has taken the place of hope in the trinity of graces. It is as if Paul had discovered, by prolonged experience, that it was in the form of patience that hope was to be mainly effective in the Christian life. The Thessalonians, some of them, were abusing the great hope; it was working mischief in their lives, because it was misapplied; in this single word Paul hints at the truth which abundant experience had taught him, that all the energy of hope must be transformed into brave patience if we would stand in our place at the last. Remembering their work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope, in the presence of our God and Father, the Apostle gives thanks to God always for them all. Happy is the man whose joys are such that he can gratefully dwell on them in that presence: happy are those also who give others cause to thank God on their behalf.

The ground of the thanksgiving is finally comprehended in one short and striking phrase: "Knowing, brethren beloved of God, your election." The doctrine of election has often been taught as if the one thing that could never be known about anybody was whether he was or was not elect. The assumed impossibility does not square with New Testament ways of speaking. Paul knew the elect, he says here; at least he knew the Thessalonians were elect. In the same way he writes to the Ephesians: "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world; ... in love He foreordained us to adoption as sons." Chose whom before the foundation of the world? Foreordained whom? Himself, and those whom he addressed. If the Church has learned the doctrine of election from anybody, it has been from Paul; but to him it had a basis in experience, and apparently he felt differently about it from many theologians. He knew when the people he spoke to were elect; how, he tells in what follows.

### III

## *THE SIGNS OF ELECTION*

"How that our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and *in* much assurance; even as ye know what manner of men we showed ourselves toward you for your sake. And ye became imitators of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost; so that ye became an ensample to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you hath sounded forth the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith to God-ward is gone forth; so that we need not to speak anything." – 1 Thess. i. 5-8 (R.V.).

THE Revised Version renders the ὅτι, with which ver. 5 begins, "how that," the Authorised Version, "for." In the first case, the Apostle is made to explain in what election consists; in the other, he explains how it is that he knows the Thessalonians to be among the elect. There is hardly room to doubt that it is this last which he intends to do. Election does not consist in the things which he proceeds to enlarge upon, though these may be in some sense its effects or tokens; and there is something like unanimity among scholars in favour of the rendering "for," or "because." What, then, are the grounds of the statement, that Paul knows the election of the Thessalonians? They are twofold; lying partly in his own experience, and that of his fellow-labourers, while they preached the gospel in Thessalonica; and partly in the reception which the Thessalonians gave to their message.

I. The tokens in the preacher that his hearers are elect: "Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance." That was the consciousness of the preachers themselves, but they could appeal to those who had heard them: "even as ye know what manner of men we showed ourselves toward you for your sake."

The self-consciousness of the preacher, we see from these words, is a legitimate though a perilous study. Every one has been told that there is no relation whatever between his own consciousness when preaching, and the effect of what is preached; but has anybody ever quite believed this? If there were no relation whatever between the preacher's consciousness and his conscience; if he did not know that many a time neglect of prayer or duty had separated him from God, and made him useless as an evangelist, it would be easier to believe it; but as our life is, the preacher may know quite well that it is no proof of God's good will to men that *he* is sent to preach to them; or, on the other hand, he may have a humble but sure trust that when he stands up to speak, God is with him for good to his hearers. Thus it was with Paul at Thessalonica.

The heartiness with which he speaks here justifies the inference that he had had experiences of an opposite and disappointing kind. Twice in Asia (Acts xvi. 6 f.) he had been forbidden by the Spirit to preach at all; he could not argue that the people so passed by were specially favoured of God. Often, especially in his intercourse with the Jews, he must have spoken, like Isaiah, with the depressing consciousness that it was all in vain; that the sole issue would be to blind their eyes and harden their hearts and seal them up in impenitence. In Corinth, just before writing this letter, he had come forward with unusual trepidation – in weakness and fear and much trembling; and though there also the Holy Spirit and a divine power brought home the gospel to men's hearts, he seems to have been so far from that inward assurance which he enjoyed at Thessalonica, that the Lord appeared to him in a vision by night to reveal the existence of an election of grace even in Corinth. "Fear not: I have much people in this city." In Thessalonica he had no such sinking of heart. He came thither, as he hoped to go to Rome, in the fulness of the blessing of Christ (Rom. xv. 29). He knew in himself that God had given it to him to be a true minister of His grace; he was full of power by the Spirit of the Lord. That is why he says so confidently, "Knowing your election."

The Apostle explains himself more precisely when he writes, "not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance." The gospel must come in word at least; but what a profanation it is to preach it only in word. Not preachers only, but all Christians, have to be on their guard, lest familiarity rob the great words of the gospel of their reality, and they themselves sink into that worst atheism which is for ever handling holy things without feeling them. How easy is it to speak of God, Christ, redemption, atonement, sanctification, heaven, hell, and to be less impressed and less impressive than if we were speaking of the merest trivialities of every-day life. It is hard to believe that an apostle could have seen such a possibility even from afar; yet the contrast of "word" and "power" leaves no room to doubt that such is his meaning. Words alone are worthless. No matter how brilliant, how eloquent, how imposing they may be, they cannot do the work of an evangelist. The call to this requires "power."

No definition of power is given; we can only see that it is that which achieves spiritual results, and that the preacher is conscious of possessing it. It is not his own, certainly: it works through the very consciousness of his own want of power; "when I am weak, then am I strong." But it gives him hope and confidence in his work. Paul knew that it needed a stupendous force to make bad men good; the forces to be overcome were so enormous. All the sin of the world was arrayed against the gospel; all the dead weight of men's indifference, all their pride, all their shame, all their self-satisfaction, all their cherished wisdom. But he came to Thessalonica *strong* in the Lord, confident that his message would subdue those who listened to it; and therefore, he argued, the Thessalonians were the objects of God's electing grace.

"Power" stands side by side with the "Holy Ghost." In a sense, the Holy Ghost is the source of all spiritual virtues, and therefore of the very power of which we have been speaking; but the words are probably used here with some narrower meaning. The predominant use of the name in the New Testament bids us think of that divine fervour which the spirit kindles in the soul – that ardour of the new life which Christ Himself speaks of as fire. Paul came to Thessalonica aglow with Christian passion. He took that as a good omen in his work, a sign that God meant well to the Thessalonians. By nature men do not care passionately for each other as he cared for those to whom he preached in that city. They are not on fire with love, seeking each other's good in spiritual things; consumed with fervent longing that the bad should cease from their badness, and come to enjoy the pardon, the purity, and the company of Christ. Even in the heart of apostles – for though they were apostles they were men – the fire may sometimes have burned low, and a mission have been, by comparison, languid and spiritless; but at least on this occasion the evangelists were all on fire; and it assured them that God had a people waiting for them in the unknown city.

If "power" and the "Holy Ghost" are in some degree to be judged only by their effects, there can be no question that "much assurance," on the other hand, is an inner experience, belonging strictly to the self-consciousness of the preacher. It means a full and strong conviction of the truth of the gospel. We can only understand this by contrast with its opposite; "much assurance" is the counterpart of misgiving or doubt. We can hardly imagine an apostle in doubt about the gospel – not quite certain that Christ had risen from the dead; wondering whether, after all, His death had abolished sin. Yet these truths, which are the sum and substance of the gospel, seem, at times, too great for belief; they do not coalesce with the other contents of our mind; they do not weave easily into one piece with the warp and woof of our common thoughts; there is no common measure for them and the rest of our experience, and the shadow of unreality falls upon them. They are so great that it needs a certain greatness to answer to them, a certain boldness of faith to which even a true Christian may feel momentarily unequal; and while he is unequal, he cannot do the work of an evangelist. Doubt paralyses; God cannot work through a man in whose soul there are misgivings about the truth. At least, His working will be limited to the sphere of what is certain for him through whom He works; and if we would be effective ministers of the word, we must speak only what we are sure of, and seek the full assurance of the whole truth. No doubt such assurance has conditions. Unfaithfulness

of one kind or another is, as our Lord teaches (John vii. 17), the source of uncertainty as to the truth of His word; and prayer, repentance, and obedience due, the way to certainty again. But Paul had never been more confident of the truth and power of his gospel than when he came to Thessalonica. He had seen it proved in Philippi, in conversions so dissimilar as those of Lydia and the jailor. He had felt it in his own heart, in the songs which God had given him in the night while he suffered for Christ's sake. He came among those whom he addresses confident that it was God's instrument to save all who believed. This is his last personal reason for believing the Thessalonians to be elect.

Strictly speaking, all this refers rather to the delivery of the message than to the messengers, to the preaching than to the preachers; but the Apostle applies it to the latter also. "Ye know," he writes, "what manner of men we showed ourselves toward you for your sakes." I venture to think<sup>2</sup> that the word rendered "we showed ourselves" has really the passive sense – "what God enabled us to be"; it is God's good will to the Thessalonians which is in view, and the Apostle infers that good will from the character which God enabled him and his friends to sustain for their sakes. Who could deny that God had chosen them, when He had sent them Paul and Silas and Timothy; not mere talkers, cold and spiritless, and dubious of their message; but men strong in spiritual force, in holy fervour, and in their grasp of the gospel? If that did not go to show that the Thessalonians were elect, what could?

II. The self-consciousness of the preachers, however, significant as it was, was no conclusive evidence. It only became such when their inspiration was caught by those who listened to them; and this was the case at Thessalonica. "Ye became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost." This peculiar expression implies that the signs of God's election were to be seen in the evangelists, and eminently in the Lord. Paul shrinks from making himself and his companions types of the elect, without more ado; they are such only because they are like Him, of whom it is written "Behold my servant whom I uphold; Mine elect, in whom My soul delighteth." He speaks here in the same strain as in 1 Cor. xi. 1: "Brethren, be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ." They who have become like the Lord are marked out as the chosen of God.

But the Apostle does not rest in this generality. The imitation in question consisted in this – that the Thessalonians received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost. It is, of course, in the last part of the sentence that the point of comparison is found. In a sense it is true that the Lord Himself received the word which He spoke to men. "I do nothing of Myself," He says; "but as the Father hath taught Me, I speak these things" (John viii. 28). But such a reference is irrelevant here. The significant point is that the acceptance of the gospel by the Thessalonians brought them into fellowship with the Lord, and with those who continued His work, in that which is the distinction and criterion of the new Christian life – much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost. That is a summary of the life of Christ, the Apostle of the Father (John xvii. 18). It is more obviously a summary of the life of Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ. The acceptance of the gospel meant much affliction for him: "I will show him how great things he must suffer for My name's sake." It meant also a new and supernatural joy, a joy arising from, and sustained by, the Holy Spirit, a joy triumphant in and over all sufferings. This combination of affliction and spiritual joy, this original, paradoxical experience, is the token of election. Where the children of God live, as Christ and His apostles lived, in the midst of a world at war with God and His cause, they will suffer; but suffering will not break their spirit, or embitter them, or lead them to desert God; it will be accompanied with spiritual exaltation, keeping them sweet, and humble, and joyful, through it all. Paul knew the Thessalonians were elect, because he saw that new power in them, to rejoice in tribulations, which can only be seen in those who have the spirit of God.

This test, obviously, can only be applied when the gospel is a suffering cause. But if the profession of the Christian faith, and the leading of a Christian life entail no affliction, what shall

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<sup>2</sup> With Godet and P. Schmidt; against Ellicott.



we say? If we read the New Testament aright, we shall say that there is a mistake somewhere. There is always a cross; there is always something to bear or to overcome for righteousness' sake; and the spirit in which it is met tells whether God is with us or not. Not every age is, like the apostolic, an age of open persecution, of spoiling of goods, of bonds, and scourging, and death; but the imitation of Christ in His truth and faithfulness will surely be resented somehow; and it is the seal of election when men rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. Only the true children of God can do that. Their joy is in some sense a present recompense for their sufferings; but for suffering they could not know it. "I never knew," said Rutherford, "by my nine years' preaching, so much of Christ's love as He hath taught me in Aberdeen, by six months' imprisonment." It is a joy that never fails those who face affliction that they may be true to Christ. Think of the Christian boys in Uganda, in 1885, who were bound alive to a scaffolding and slowly burned to death. "The spirit of the martyrs at once entered into these lads, and together they raised their voices and praised Jesus in the fire, singing till their shrivelled tongues refused to form the sound: —

"Daily, daily sing to Jesus,  
Sing my soul, His praises due;  
All He does deserves our praises,  
And our deep devotion too.

"For in deep humiliation,  
He for us did live below;  
Died on Calvary's cross of torture,  
Rose to save our souls from woe."<sup>3</sup>

Who can doubt that these three are among the chosen of God? And who can think of such scenes, and such a spirit, and recall without misgiving the querulous, fretful, aggrieved tone of his own life, when things have not gone with him exactly as he could have wished?

The Thessalonians were so conspicuously Christian, so unmistakably exhibited the new Divine type of character, that they became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Their conversion called the attention of all men to the gospel, like a clear and far-resounding trumpet blast. Thessalonica was a place of much coming and going on all sides; and the success of the evangelists there, being carried abroad in various ways, advertised their work, and so far prepared for their coming. Paul would naturally have spoken of it when he went to a new city, but found it unnecessary; the news had preceded him; in every place their faith to God-ward had gone forth. So far as we learn, it was the most impressive incident which had yet occurred in the progress of the gospel. A work of grace so characteristic, so thorough, and so unmistakable, was a token of God's goodness, not only to those who were immediately the subjects of it, but to all who heard, and by hearing had their interest awakened in the evangelists and their message.

This whole subject has a side for preachers, and a side for hearers of the gospel. The preacher's peril is the peril of coming to men in word only; saying things which he does not feel, and which others, therefore, will not feel; uttering truths, it may be, but truths which have never done anything for him — enlightened, quickened, or sanctified him — and which he cannot hope, as they come from his lips, will do anything for others; or worse still, uttering things of which he cannot even be confident that they are true. Nothing could be less a sign of God's grace to men than to abandon them to such a preacher, instead of sending them one full of power, and of the Holy Ghost, and of assurance. But whatever the preacher may be, there is something left to the hearer. There were people with whom even Paul, full of power and of the Holy Ghost, could not prevail. There were people who hardened

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<sup>3</sup> *Life of Bishop Hannington.*

their hearts against Christ; and let the preacher be ever so unworthy of the gospel, the virtue is in it, and not in him. He may not do anything to commend it to men; but does it need his commendation? Can we make bad preaching an excuse for refusing to become imitators of the Lord? It may condemn the preacher, but it can never excuse us. Look steadily at the seal which God sets upon His own – the union of affliction with spiritual joy – and follow Christ in the life which is marked by this character as not human only, but Divine. That is the way prescribed to us here to make our election sure.

#### FOOTNOTES

## IV *CONVERSION*

"For they themselves report concerning us what manner of entering in we had unto you; and how ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivereth us from the wrath to come." – 1 Thess. i. 9, 10 (R.V.).

THESE verses show what an impression had been made in other places by the success of the gospel at Thessalonica. Wherever Paul went, he heard it spoken about. In every place men were familiar with all its circumstances; they had heard of the power and assurance of the missionaries, and of the conversion of their hearers from heathenism to Christianity. It is this conversion which is the subject before us. It has two parts or stages. There is first, the conversion from idols to the one living and true God; and then the distinctively Christian stage of waiting for the Son of God from heaven. Let us look at these in order.

The Apostle, so far as we can make out, judged the religions of heathenism with great severity. He knew that God never left Himself without a witness in the world, but God's testimony to Himself had been perverted or ignored. Ever since the creation of the world, His everlasting power and divinity might be seen by the things He had made; His law was written on conscience; rain from heaven and fruitful seasons proved His good and faithful providence; yet men were practically ignorant of Him. They were not willing, in fact, to retain Him in their knowledge; they were not obedient; they were not thankful; when they professed religion at all, they made gods after their own image, and worshipped them. They bowed before idols; and an idol, says Paul, is nothing in the world. In the whole system of pagan religion the Apostle saw nothing but ignorance and sin; it was the outcome, in part, of man's enmity to God; in part, of God's judicial abandonment of men; in part, of the activity of evil spirits; it was a path on which no progress could be made; instead of pursuing it farther, those who wished really to make spiritual advance must abandon it altogether.

It is possible to state a better case than this for the religion of the ancient world; but the Apostle was in close and continuous contact with the facts, and it will take a great deal of theorising to reverse the verdict of a conscience like his on the whole question. Those who wish to put the best face upon the matter, and to rate the spiritual worth of paganism as high as may be, lay stress on the ideal character of the so-called idols, and ask whether the mere conception of Zeus, or Apollo, or Athene, is not a spiritual achievement of a high order. Let it be ever so high, and still, from the Apostle's ground, Zeus, Apollo, and Athene are dead idols. They have no life but that which is conferred upon them by their worshippers. They can never assert themselves in action, bestowing life or salvation on those who honour them. They can never be what the Living God was to every man of Jewish birth – Creator, Judge, King, and Saviour; a personal and moral power to whom men are accountable at every moment, for every free act.

"Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God." We cannot over-estimate the greatness of this change. Until we understand the unity of God, we can have no true idea of His character, and therefore no true idea of our own relation to Him. It was the plurality of deities, as much as anything, which made heathenism morally worthless. Where there is a multitude of gods, the real power in the world, the final reality, is not found in any of them; but in a fate of some sort which lies behind them all. There can be no moral relation of man to this blank necessity; nor, while it exists, any stable relation of man to his so-called gods. No Greek or Roman could take in the idea of "serving" a God. The attendants or priests in a temple were in an official sense the deity's ministers; but the thought which is expressed in this passage, of serving a living and true God by a life of obedience to His will, a thought which is so natural and inevitable to either a Jew or a Christian,

that without it we could not so much as conceive religion – that thought was quite beyond a pagan's comprehension. There was no room for it in his religion; his conception of the gods did not admit of it. If life was to be a moral service rendered to God, it must be to a God quite different from any to whom he was introduced by his ancestral worship. That is the final condemnation of heathenism; the final proof of its falsehood as a religion.

There is something as deep and strong as it is simple in the words, to serve the living and true God. Philosophers have defined God as the *ens realissimum*, the most real of beings, the absolute reality; and it is this, with the added idea of personality, that is conveyed by the description "living and true." But does God sustain this character in the minds even of those who habitually worship Him? Is it not the case that the things which are nearest to our hand seem to be possessed of most life and reality, while God is by comparison very unreal, a remote inference from something which is immediately certain? If that is so, it will be very difficult for us to serve Him. The law of our life will not be found in His will, but in our own desires, or in the customs of our society; our motive will not be His praise, but some end which is fully attained apart from Him. "My meat," said Jesus, "is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work"; and He could say so because God who sent Him was to Him the living and true God, the first and last and sole reality, whose will embraced and covered all His life. Do we think of God so? Are the existence of God and the claim of God upon our obedience the permanent element in our minds, the unchanging background of all our thoughts and purposes? This is the fundamental thing in a truly religious life.

But the Apostle goes on from what is merely theistic, to what is distinctively Christian. "Ye turned to God from idols ... to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead."

This is a very summary description of the issue of Christian conversion. Judging by the analogy of other places, especially in St. Paul, we should have expected some mention of faith. In Acts xx., *e. g.*, where he characterises his preaching, he names as its main elements, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. But here faith has been displaced by hope; the Thessalonians are represented not as trusting in Christ, but as waiting for Him. Of course, such hope implies faith. They only waited for Him because they believed He had redeemed them, and would save them at the great day. If faith and hope differ in that the one seems to look mainly to the past and the other to the future, they agree in that both are concerned with the revelation of the unseen.

Everything in this revelation goes back to the resurrection and rests upon it. It is mentioned here, in the first instance, exactly as in Rom. i. 4, as the *argumentum palmarium* for the Divine Sonship of Jesus. There are many proofs of that essential doctrine, but not all can be brought forward in all circumstances. Perhaps the most convincing at the present time is that which is drawn from the solitary perfection of Christ's character; the more truly and fully we get the impression of that character, as it is reflected in the Gospels, the surer we are that it is not a fancy picture, but drawn from life; and that He whose likeness it is, stands alone among the sons of men. But this kind of argument it takes years, not perhaps of study, but of obedience and devotion, to appreciate; and when the apostles went forth to preach the gospel they needed a more summary process of conviction. This they found in Christ's resurrection; that was an event standing alone in the world's history. There had been nothing like it before; there has been nothing like it since. But the men who were assured of it by many infallible proofs, did not presume to disbelieve it because of its singularity; amazing as it was, they could not but feel that it became one so unique in goodness and greatness as Jesus; it was not possible, they saw after the event, that He should be holden by the power of death; the resurrection only exhibited Him in His true dignity; it declared Him the Son of God, and set Him on His throne. Accordingly in all their preaching they put the resurrection in the forefront. It was a revelation of life. It extended the horizon of man's existence. It brought into view realms of being that had hitherto been hidden in darkness. It magnified to infinity the significance of everything in our short life in this world, because it connected everything immediately with an endless life beyond. And as this life in the unseen had been revealed in Christ, all the apostles had to tell about it centred

in Him. The risen Christ was King, Judge, and Saviour; the Christian's present duty was to love, trust, obey, and wait for Him.

This waiting includes everything. "Ye come behind in no gift," Paul says to the Corinthians, "waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." That attitude of expectation is the bloom, as it were, of the Christian character. Without it, there is something lacking; the Christian who does not look upward and onward wants one mark of perfection. This is, in all probability, the point on which we should find ourselves most from home, in the atmosphere of the primitive Church. Not unbelievers only, but disciples as well, have practically ceased to think of the Second Advent. The society which devotes itself to reviving interest in the truth uses Scripture in a fashion which makes it impossible to take much interest in its proceedings; yet a truth so clearly a part of Scripture teaching cannot be neglected without loss. The door of the unseen world closed behind Christ as He ascended from Olivet, but not for ever. It will open again; and this same Jesus shall so come in like manner as the apostles beheld Him go. He has gone to prepare a place for those who love Him and keep His word; but "if I go," He says, "and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and take you to Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." That is the final hope of the Christian faith. It is for the fulfilment of this promise that the Church waits. The Second Coming of Christ and His Resurrection stand and fall together; and it will not long be possible for those who look askance at His return to receive in all its fulness the revelation of life which He made when He rose again from the dead. This world is too much with us; and it needs not languor, but strenuous effort on the part of faith and hope, to make the unseen world as real. Let us see that we come not behind in a grace so essential to the very being of Christianity.

The last words of the verse describe the character in which the Son of God is expected by Christians to appear – Jesus, our deliverer<sup>4</sup> from the wrath to come (τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς ἐρχομένης). There is, then, according to apostolic teaching, a coming wrath – a wrath impending over the world, and actually on its way towards it. It is called the wrath to come, in distinction from anything of the same nature of which we have experience here. We all know the penal consequences which sin brings in its train even in this world. Remorse, unavailing sorrow, shame, fear, the sight of injury which we have done to those we love and which we cannot undo, incapacity for service, – all these are part and parcel of the fruit which sin bears. But they are not the wrath to come. They do not exhaust the judgment of God upon evil. Instead of discrediting it, they bear witness to it; they are, so to speak, its forerunners; the lurid clouds that appear here and there in the sky, but are finally lost in the dense mass of the thunderstorm. When the Apostle preached the gospel, he preached the wrath to come; without it, there would have been a missing link in the circle of Christian ideas. "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ," he says. Why? Because in it the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness which is God's gift and acceptable in God's sight. But why is such a revelation of righteousness necessary? Because the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. The gospel is a revelation made to the world in view of a given situation, and the most prominent and threatening element in that situation is the impending wrath of God. The apostles do not prove it; they declare it. The proof of it is left to conscience, and to the Spirit of God reinforcing and quickening conscience; if anything can be added to this, it is the gospel itself; for if there were no such thing as the wrath of God, the gospel would be gratuitous. We may, if we please, evade the truth; we may pick and choose for ourselves among the elements of New Testament teaching, and reject all that is distasteful; we may take our stand upon pride, and decline to be threatened even by God; but we cannot be honest, and at the same time deny that Christ and His apostles warn us of wrath to come.

Of course we must not misconceive the character of this wrath. We must not import into our thoughts of it all that we can borrow from our experience of man's anger – hastiness, unreason,

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<sup>4</sup> The present participle here is simply equivalent to a substantive.

intemperate rage. The wrath of God is no arbitrary, passionate outburst; it is not, as wrath so often is with us, a fury of selfish resentment. "Evil shall not dwell with Thee," says the Psalmist; and in that simple word we have the root of the matter. The wrath of God is, as it were, the instinct of self-preservation in the Divine nature; it is the eternal repulsion, by the Holy One, of all evil. Evil shall *not* dwell with Him. That may be doubted or denied while the day of grace lasts, and God's forbearance is giving space to the sinful for repentance; but a day is coming when it will no more be possible to doubt it – the day which the Apostle calls the day of wrath. It will then be plain to all the world that God's wrath is no empty name, but the most terrible of all powers – a consuming fire in which everything opposed to His holiness is burnt up. And while we take care not to think of this wrath after the pattern of our own sinful passions, let us take care, on the other hand, not to make it an unreal thing, without analogy in human life. If we go upon the ground of Scripture and of our own experience, it has the same degree and the same kind of reality as the love of God, or His compassion, or His forbearance. In whatever way we lawfully think of one side of the Divine nature, we must at the same time think of the other. If there is a passion of Divine love, there is a passion of Divine wrath as well. Nothing is meant in either case unworthy of the Divine nature; what is conveyed by the word passion is the truth that God's repulsion of evil is as intense as the ardour with which He delights in good. To deny that is to deny that He is good.

The apostolic preacher, who had announced the wrath to come, and awakened guilty consciences to see their danger, preached Jesus as the deliverer from it. This is the real meaning of the words in the text; and neither "Jesus which delivered," as in the Authorised Version, nor, in any rigorous sense, "Jesus which delivereth," as in the Revised. It is the character of Jesus that is in view, and neither the past nor the present of His action. Every one who reads the words must feel, How brief! how much remains to be explained! how much Paul must have had to say about how the deliverance is effected! As the passage stands, it recalls vividly the end of the second Psalm: "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and ye perish in the way, for His wrath will soon be kindled. Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him." To have the Son a friend, to be identified with Jesus – so much we see at once – secures deliverance in the day of wrath. Other Scriptures supply the missing links. The atonement for sin made by Christ's death; faith which unites the soul to the Saviour, and brings into it the virtue of His cross and resurrection; the Holy Spirit who dwells in believers, sanctifying them, and making them fit to dwell with God in the light, – all these come into view elsewhere, and in spite of the brevity of this notice had their place, beyond doubt, in Paul's teaching at Thessalonica.<sup>5</sup>

Not that all could be explained at once: that was unnecessary. But from imminent danger there must be an instantaneous escape; and it is sufficient to say that it is found in Jesus Christ. "Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him." The risen Son is enthroned in power; He is Judge of all; He died for all; He is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him. To commit everything definitely to Him; to leave Him to undertake for us; to put on Him the responsibility of our past and our future, as He invites us to do; to put ourselves for good and all at His side, – this is to find deliverance from the wrath to come. It leaves much unexplained that we may come to understand afterwards, and much, perhaps, that we shall never understand; but it guarantees itself, adventure though it be; Christ never disappoints any who thus put their trust in Him.

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<sup>5</sup> Much has been made, by writers who wish to trace the spiritual development of St. Paul, of the absence from his earliest epistles of explicit teaching on the atonement and on justification by faith. But we have to remember that the Epistles to the Thessalonians, like most of his writings, were incidental; their topics were provided, and limited, by special circumstances. The doctrinal matter in 1 Thessalonians was not even the principal thing; the *λοιπὸν* in iv. 1 shows that by the end of chapter iii. the Apostle has done what he intended to do when he began; even the paragraphs on the Parousia are casual and supplementary. But if we consider that Paul had now been preaching for perhaps seventeen years, and that within a few months he delivered to the Corinthians (1 Cor. xv. 1-4) the one gospel known alike to him and to the twelve, – the gospel which had for its fundamental article "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures," – we shall see how unreal it is to exclude this doctrine from his evangelistic work at Thessalonica. No doubt there, as at Corinth, he delivered this "first of all." – See also chap. v. 10.

This description in outline of conversion from paganism to the gospel should revive the elementary Christian virtues in our hearts. Have we seen how high a thing it is to serve a living and true God? Or is it not so, that even among Christians, a *godly* man – one who lives in the presence of God, and is conscious of his responsibility to Him – is the rarest of all types? Are we waiting for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead? Or are there not many who hardly so much as form the idea of His return, and to whom the attitude of waiting for Him would seem strained and unnatural? In plain words, what the New Testament calls Hope is in many Christians dead: the world to come and all that is involved in it – the searching judgment, the impending wrath, the glory of Christ – have slipped from our grasp. Yet it was this hope which more than anything gave its peculiar colour to the primitive Christianity, its unworldliness, its moral intensity, its command of the future even in this life. If there were nothing else to establish it, would not its spiritual fruits be sufficient?

#### FOOTNOTES

## V *APOLOGIA PRO VITA SUA*

"For yourselves, brethren, know our entering in unto you, that it hath not been found vain: but having suffered before, and been shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we waxed bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God in much conflict. For our exhortation *is* not of error, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile: but even as we have been approved of God to be intrusted with the gospel, so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God which proveth our hearts. For neither at any time were we found using words of flattery, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness, God is witness; nor seeking glory of men, neither from you, nor from others, when we might have been burdensome, as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle in the midst of you, as when a nurse cherisheth her own children: even so, being affectionately desirous of you, we were well pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were become very dear to us. For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: working night and day, that we might not burden any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God. Ye are witnesses, and God *also*, how holily and righteously and unblameably we behaved ourselves toward you that believe: as ye know how we *dealt* with each one of you, as a father with his own children, exhorting you, and encouraging *you*, and testifying, to the end that ye should walk worthily of God, who calleth you into His own kingdom and glory." – 1 Thess. ii. 1-12 (R.V.).

OUR first impression, as we read these verses, is that they contain little that is new. They simply expand the statement of ch. i., ver. 5: "Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; even as ye know what manner of men we showed ourselves toward you for your sake." But if their substance is the same, their tone is very different. It is obvious at a glance that the Apostle has a definite purpose in view in appealing so pointedly as he does here to facts with which his readers were familiar. The truth is, he is standing upon his defence. Unless it were so, he would not think of writing, as he does in ver. 5, that he had never had recourse to flattery, nor sought to make gain out of his apostleship; nor as he does in ver. 10, that God knows the entire purity of his life among them. Although he does not name them, it is quite plain that he was already suffering from those enemies who never ceased to vex him while he lived. As we learn afterwards, these enemies were the Jews. When they had opportunity, they used open violence; they roused the Gentile mob against him; they had him scourged and stoned. When his body was out of their reach, they assailed him through his character and affections. They crept into the churches which his love and zeal had gathered here and there, and scattered injurious suspicions against him among his disciples. He was not, they hinted, all that he seemed to be. They could tell stories about his early days, and advised those who did not know him so well to be on their guard. Evangelising paid him quite as well as harder work, and his paltry ambition was gratified by lording it over his ignorant converts. Such messengers of Satan had apparently made their appearance in Thessalonica since Paul left, and this chapter is his reply to their insinuations.

There is something exquisitely painful in the situation thus created. It would have been like a sword piercing the Apostle's heart, had his enemies succeeded in their attempt to breed distrust in the Thessalonians toward him. He could not have borne to think that those whom he loved so utterly should entertain the faintest suspicion of the integrity of his love. But happily he is spared that pain. He writes, indeed, as one who has felt the indignity of the charges brought against him, but with the frankness and heartiness of a man who is confident that his defence will be well received. From



baseless insinuations he can appeal to facts which are well known to all. From the false character in which he has been dressed by his adversaries he can appeal to the true, in which he lived and moved familiarly among them.

The first point in his favour is found in the circumstances under which he had preached the gospel in Thessalonica. Had he been an insincere man, with bye ends of his own to serve, he would never have faced the career of an apostle. He had been scourged and put in the stocks at Philippi; and when he left that city for Thessalonica, he brought his troubles with him. Here also he had much conflict; he was beset on every hand with difficulties; it was only in the strength of God that he had courage to preach at all. You yourselves, he says, know that; and how, in spite of that, our coming to you was not vain, but full of power; surely it needs no more to prove the disinterestedness of our mission.

From this point onward, the apology falls into two parts, a negative and a positive: the Apostle tells us what his gospel and the proclamation of it are not; and then he tells us what, at Thessalonica, it had been.

In the first place, it is not of error. It does not rest on mistakes, or imaginations, or cunningly devised fables; in the fullest sense it is the truth. It would have taken the heart out of the Apostle, and made him incapable of braving anything for its sake, had he been in doubt of this. If the gospel were a device of man, then men might take liberties with it, handle it deceitfully, make their own account out of it; but resting as it does on facts and truth, it demands honest dealing in all its ministers. Paul claims here a character in agreement with the dispensation which he serves: can a minister of the truth, he asks, be other than a true man?

In the next place, it is not of uncleanness; that is, it is not prompted by any impure motive. The force of the word here must be determined by the context; and we see that the impure motives specially laid to the charge of Paul were avarice and ambition; or, to use the words of the Apostle himself, covetousness, and the seeking of honour from men. The first of these is so manifestly inconsistent with any degree of spirituality that Paul writes instinctively "*a cloke* of covetousness"; he did not make his apostolic labour a veil, under cover of which he could gratify his love of gain. It is impossible to exaggerate the subtle and clinging character of this vice. It owes its strength to the fact that it can be so easily clogged. We seek money, so we tell ourselves, not because we are covetous, but because it is a power for all good purposes. Piety, charity, humanity, refinement, art, science – it can minister to them all; but when we obtain it, it is too easily hoarded, or spent in indulgence, display, and conformity to the world. The pursuit of wealth, except in an utterly materialised society, is always clogged by some ideal end to which it is to minister; but how few there are in whose hands wealth is merely an instrument for the furtherance of such ends. In many men the desire for it is naked selfishness, an idolatry as undisguised as that of Israel at Sinai. Yet all men feel how bad and mean it is to have the heart set on money. All men see how base and incongruous it is to make godliness a source of gain. All men see the peculiar ugliness of a character which associates piety and avarice – of a Balaam, for instance, a Gehazi, or an Ananias. It is not ministers of the gospel only, but all to whom the credit of the gospel is entrusted, who have to be on their guard here. Our enemies are entitled to question our sincerity when we can be shown to be lovers of money. At Thessalonica, as elsewhere, Paul had been at pains to make such calumny impossible. Although entitled to claim support from the Church in accordance with the law of Christ that they who preach the gospel should live by the gospel, he had wrought night and day with his own hands that he might not burden any of them. As a precaution, this self-denial was vain; there can be no security against malice; but it gave him a triumphant vindication when the charge of covetousness was actually made.

The other impure motive contemplated is ambition. Some modern students of Paul's character – devil's advocates, no doubt – hint at this as his most obvious fault. It was necessary for him, we are told, to be first; to be the leader of a party; to have a following of his own. But he disclaims ambition as explicitly as avarice. He never sought glory from men, at Thessalonica or elsewhere. He

used none of the arts which obtain it. As apostles of Christ – he includes his friends – they had, indeed, a rank of their own; the greatness of the Prince whom they represented was reflected on them as His ambassadors; they might have "stood upon their dignity,"<sup>6</sup> had they chosen to do so. Their very self-denial in the matter of money formed a new temptation for them here. They might well feel that their disinterested service of the Thessalonians entitled them to a spiritual pre-eminence; and indeed there is no pride like that which bases on ascetic austerities the claim to direct with authority the life and conduct of others. Paul escaped this snare. He did not compensate himself for renouncing gain, with any lordship over souls. In all things he was the servant of those to whom he preached.

And as his motives were pure, so were the means he used. His exhortation was not in guile. He did not manipulate his message; he was never found using words of flattery. The gospel was not his own to do what he pleased with: it was God's; God had approved him so far as to entrust it to him; yet every moment, in the discharge of his trust, that same God was proving his heart still, so that false dealing was impossible. He did not make his message other than it was; he did not hide any part of the counsel of God; he did not inveigle the Thessalonians by any false pretences into responsibilities which would not have been accepted could they have been foreseen.

All these denials – not of error, not of uncleanness, not of guile; not pleasing men, not using words of flattery, not cloaking over covetousness – all these denials presuppose the contrary affirmations. Paul does not indulge in boasting but on compulsion; he would never have sought to justify himself, unless he had first been accused. And now, over against this picture, drawn by his enemies, let us look at the true likeness which is held up before God and man.

Instead of selfishness there is love, and nothing but love. We are all familiar with the great passage in the epistle to the Philippians where the Apostle depicts the mind which was in Christ Jesus. The contrast in that passage between the disposition which grasps at eminence and that which makes itself of no reputation, between ὑπαγμός and κένωσις, is reproduced here. Paul had learned of Christ; and instead of seeking in his apostolic work opportunities for self-exaltation, he shrank from no service imposed by love. "We were gentle in the midst of you, as when a nurse cherisheth her own children." "Her own" is to be emphasised. The tenderness of the Apostle was that of a mother warming her babe at her breast. Most of the ancient authorities, the R.V. tells us in the margin, read "We were *babes* (νήπιοι) in the midst of you." If this were correct, the thought would be that Paul stooped to the level of these infant disciples, speaking to them, as it were, in the language of childhood, and accommodating himself to their immaturity. But though this is appropriate enough, the word νήπιοι is not proper to express it.<sup>7</sup> Gentleness is really what is meant. But his love went further than this in its yearning over the Thessalonians. He had been accused of seeking gain and glory when he came among them; but his sole desire had been not to get but to give. As his stay was prolonged, the disciples became very dear to their teachers; "we were well pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls." That is the true standard of pastoral care. The Apostle lived up to it always. "Now we live," he writes in the next chapter, "if ye stand fast in the Lord." "Ye are in our hearts," he cries to the Corinthians, "to live together and to die together." He not only kept back from them nothing of the whole purpose of God; he kept back no part of himself. His daily toil, his toil by night, his prayers, his preaching, his spiritual ardour, his very soul, were theirs. They knew his labour and travail; they were witnesses, and God also, how holily and righteously and unblamably he had behaved toward them.

As the Apostle recalls these recent memories, he dwells for a moment on another aspect of his love. It had not only the tender fondness of a mother's, but the educative wisdom of a father's. One by one he dealt with the disciples – which is not the way to gain glory – exhorting, encouraging, bearing solemn testimony to the truth of God. And his end in all this, as they knew, was ideal and spiritual, an

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<sup>6</sup> So Alford renders δυνάμενοι ἐν βάρει εἶναι.

<sup>7</sup> νήπιος always includes the idea of being undeveloped, unripe, and has often a shade of censure in Paul.

end as remote as possible from any worldly interest of his own; that they might walk worthily of God who was calling them into His own kingdom and glory. How far from the rewards and distinctions of the present must that man's mind be who sees, as Paul saw steadily, the things that are invisible. If he who is blind to the golden crown above his head grasps the muck rake tightly and clutches eagerly all it brings within his reach, surely he whose eye is set upon the crown must be superior alike to the gain and the glory of the world. That, at least, is the claim which the Apostle makes here. Nothing could be more incongruous than that a man to whom the visible world was transitory and unreal, and the invisible kingdom of God real and eternal, should be eager for money and applause, and forget the high calling with which he himself was calling men in Christ. So far the apology of the Apostle.

The practical application of this passage is different, according as we look at it in detail, or as a whole. It exhibits to us, in the charges brought against Paul, those vices which even bad men can see to be rankly inconsistent with the Christian character. Covetousness is the foremost. No matter how we cloke it – and we always cloke it somehow – it is incurably un-Christian. Christ had no money. He never wished to have any. The one perfect life that has been lived in this world is the life of Him who owned nothing, and who left nothing but the clothes he wore. Whoever names the name of Christ, and professes to follow Him, must learn of Him indifference to gain. The mere suspicion of avarice will discredit, and ought to discredit, the most pious pretensions. The second vice I have spoken of as ambition. It is the desire to use others for one's own exaltation, to make them the stepping stones on which we rise to eminence, the ministers of our vanity, the sphere for the display of our own abilities as leaders, masters, organisers, preachers. To put ourselves in that relation to others is to do an essentially un-Christian thing. A minister whose congregation is the theatre on which he displays his talents or his eloquence is not a Christian. A clever man, to whom the men and women with whom he meets in society are merely specimens of human nature on whom he can make shrewd observations, sharpening his wits on them as on a grindstone, is not a Christian. A man of business, who looks at the labourers whom he employs as only so many instruments for rearing the fabric of his prosperity, is not a Christian. Everybody in the world knows that; and such men, if they profess Christianity, give a handle to slander, and bring disgrace on the religion which they wear merely as a blind. True Christianity is love, and the nature of love is not to take but to give. There is no limit to the Christian's beneficence; he counts nothing his own; he gives his very soul with every separate gift. He is as tender as the mother to her infant; as wise, as manly, as earnest as the father with his growing boy.

Looked at as a whole this passage warns us against slander. It must needs be that slander is spoken and believed; but woe to the man or woman by whom it is either believed or spoken! None are good enough to escape it. Christ was slandered; they called Him a glutton and a drunkard, and said He was in league with the devil. Paul was slandered; they said he was a very smart man, who looked well to his own interest, and made dupes of simple people. The deliberate wickedness of such falsehoods is diabolical, but it is not so very rare. Numbers of people who would not invent such stories are glad to hear them. They are not very particular whether they are true or false; it pleases them to think that an evangelist, eminent in profession, gets a royalty on hymn-books; or that a priest, famous for devotion, was really no better than he should have been; or that a preacher, whose words regenerated a whole church, sometimes despised his audience, and talked nonsense impromptu. To sympathise with detraction is to have the spirit of the devil, not of Christ. Be on your guard against such sympathy; you are human, and therefore need to. Never give utterance to a suspicious thought. Never repeat what would discredit a man, if you have only heard it and are not sure it is true; even if you are sure of its truth, be afraid of yourself if it gives you any pleasure to think of it. Love thinketh no evil; love rejoiceth not in iniquity.

FOOTNOTES

## VI

### *IMPEACHMENT OF THE JEWS*

"And for this cause we also thank God without ceasing, that, when ye received from us the word of the message, *even the word* of God, ye accepted *it not as* the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God, which also worketh in you that believe. For ye, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judæa in Christ Jesus; for ye also suffered the same things of your own countrymen, even as they did of the Jews; who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drave out us, and please not God, and are contrary to all men; forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved; to fill up their sins alway: but the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost." – 1 Thess. ii. 13-16 (R.V.).

THESE verses complete the treatment of the subject with which this chapter opens. The Apostle has drawn a moving picture of his life and labours in Thessalonica; he has pointed to it as his sufficient vindication from all the charges laid against him. Before carrying the war into the enemies' camp, and depicting the traditions and the spirit of his traducers, he lingers again for a moment on the happy results of his work. In spite of persecution and calumny, he has cause to thank God without ceasing when he remembers the reception of the gospel by the Thessalonians.

When the message was brought to them, they accepted it, he says, not as the word of men, but as what it was in truth, the word of God. It is in this character that the gospel always presents itself. A word of men cannot address men with authority; it must submit itself to criticism; it must vindicate itself on grounds which man's understanding approves. Now, the gospel is not irrational; it is its own demand that the Christian shall be ready to answer every one who demands a rational account of the hope that is in him. But neither does it, on the other hand, come to us soliciting our approval; submitting itself, as a system of ideas, to our scrutiny, and courting approbation. It speaks with authority. It *commands* repentance; it preaches forgiveness on the ground of Christ's death – a supreme gift of God which may be accepted or rejected, but is not proposed for discussion; it exhibits the law of Christ's life as the law which is binding upon every human being, and calls upon all men to follow him. Its decisive appeal is made to the conscience and the will; and to respond to it is to give up will and conscience to God. When the Apostle says, "Ye received it as, what it is in truth, the word of God," he betrays, if one may use the word, the consciousness of his own inspiration. Nothing is commoner now than to speak of the theology of Paul as if it were a private possession of the Apostle, a scheme of thought that he had framed for himself, to explain his own experience. Such a scheme of thought, we are told, has no right whatever to impose itself on us; it has only a historical and biographical interest; it has no necessary connexion with truth. The first result of this line of thought, in almost every case, is the rejection of the very heart of the apostolic gospel; the doctrine of the atonement is no longer the greatest truth of revelation, but a rickety bridge on which Paul imagined he had crossed from Pharisaism to Christianity. Certainly this modern analysis of the epistles does not reflect the Apostle's own way of looking at what he called "My gospel." To him it was no device of man, but unequivocally Divine; in very truth, the word of God. His theology certainly came to him in the way of his experience; his mind had been engaged with it, and was engaged with it continually; but he was conscious that, with all this freedom, it rested at bottom on the truth of God; and when he preached it – for his theology was the sum of the Divine truth he held, and he *did* preach it – he did not submit it to men as a theme for discussion. He put it above discussion. He pronounced a solemn and reiterated anathema on either man or angel who should put anything else in its stead. He published it, not for criticism, as though it had been his own device; but, as the word of God, for the obedience of faith. The tone of this passage recalls the word of our Lord, "Whoso shall not

receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein." There are difficulties enough connected with the gospel, but they are not of a kind that disappear while we stand and look at them, or even stand and think about them; unquestioning surrender solves many, and introduces us to experiences which enable us to bear the rest with patience.

The word of God, in other words the gospel, proved its Divine character in the Thessalonians *after* it was received. "It also worketh," says Paul, "in you that believe." The last words are not superfluous. The word preached, we read of an earlier generation, did not profit, not being mixed with faith in them that heard. Faith conditions its efficacy. Gospel truth is an active force when it is within the heart; but it can do nothing for us while doubt, pride, or unacknowledged reserve, keep it outside. If we have really welcomed the Divine message, it will not be inoperative; it will work within us all that is characteristic of New Testament life – love, joy, peace, hope, patience. These are the proofs of its truth. Here, then, is the source of all graces: if the word of Christ dwell in us richly; if the truth of the gospel, deep, manifold, inexhaustible, yet ever the same, possess our hearts, – the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose.

The particular gospel grace which the Apostle has here in view is patience. He proves that the word of God is at work in the Thessalonians by pointing to the fact that they have suffered for His sake. "Had you been still of the world, the world would have loved its own; but as it is, you have become imitators of the Christian churches in Judæa, and have suffered the same things at the hands of your countrymen as they from theirs." Of all places in the world, Judæa was that in which the gospel and its adherents had suffered most severely. Jerusalem itself was the focus of hostility. No one knew better than Paul, the zealous persecutor of heresy, what it had cost from the very beginning to be true to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Scourging, imprisonment, exile, death by the sword or by stoning, had rewarded such fidelity. We do not know to what extremity the enemies of the gospel had gone in Thessalonica; but the distress of the Christians must have been great when the Apostle could make this comparison even in passing. He has already told them (ch. i. 6) that much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost, is the very badge of God's elect; and here he combines the same stern necessity with the operation of the Divine word in their hearts. Do not let us overlook this. The work of God's word (or if you prefer it, the effect of receiving the gospel), is in the first instance to produce a new character, a character not only distinct from that of the unconverted, but antagonistic to it, and more directly and inevitably antagonistic, the more thoroughly it is wrought out; so that in proportion as God's word is operative in us, we come into collision with the world which rejects it. To suffer, therefore, is to the Apostle the seal of faith; it warrants the genuineness of a Christian profession. It is not a sign that God has forgotten His people, but a sign that He is with them; and that they are being brought by Him into fellowship with primitive churches, with apostles and prophets, with the Incarnate Son Himself. And hence the whole situation of the Thessalonians, suffering included, comes under that heartfelt expression of thanks to God with which the passage opens. It is not a subject for condolence, but for gratitude, that they have been counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name.

And now the Apostle turns from the persecuted to the persecutors. There is nothing in his epistles elsewhere that can be compared with this passionate outburst. Paul was proud with no common pride of his Jewish descent; it was better in his eyes than any patent of nobility. His heart swelled as he thought of the nation to which the adoption pertained, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose were the fathers, and of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came. Apostle of the Gentiles though he was, he had great sorrow and unceasing pain in his heart, when he remembered the antagonism of the Jews to the gospel; he could have wished himself anathema from Christ for their sakes. He was confident, too, that in some glorious future they would yet submit to the Messiah, so that all Israel should be saved. The turning of the heathen to God would provoke them to jealousy; and the Divine calling with which the nation had been called in Abraham would reach its predestined goal. Such is the tone, and

such the anticipation, with which, not very long afterwards, Paul writes in the epistle to the Romans. Here he looks at his countrymen with other eyes. They are identified, in his experience, with a fierce resistance to the gospel, and with cruel persecutions of the Church of Christ. Only in the character of bitter enemies has he been in contact with them in recent years. They have hunted him from city to city in Asia and in Europe; they have raised the populace against his converts; they have sought to poison the minds of his disciples against him. He knows that this policy is that with which his countrymen as a whole have identified themselves; and as he looks steadily at it, he sees that in doing so they have only acted in consistency with all their past history. The messengers whom God sends to demand the fruit of His vineyard have always been treated with violence and despite. The crowning sin of the race is put in the forefront; they slew the Lord, Jesus; but before the Lord came, they had slain His prophets; and after He had gone, they expelled His apostles. God had put them in a position of privilege, but only for a time; they were the depositaries, or trustees, of the knowledge of God as the Saviour of men; and now, when the time had come for that knowledge to be diffused throughout all the world, they clung proudly and stubbornly to the old position. They pleased not God and were contrary to all men, in forbidding the apostles to preach salvation to the heathen. There is an echo, all through this passage, of the words of Stephen: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost." There are sentences in heathen authors, who repaid the contempt and hatred of the Jews with haughty disdain, that have been compared with this terrible impeachment by the Apostle; but in reality, they are quite unlike. What we have here is not a burst of temper, though there is undoubtedly strong feeling in it; it is the vehement condemnation, by a man in thorough sympathy with the mind and spirit of God, of the principles on which the Jews as a nation had acted at every period of their history.

What is the relation of God to such a situation as is here described? The Jews, Paul says, did all this "to fill up their sins at all times." He does not mean that that was their intention; neither does he speak ironically; but speaking as he often does from that Divine standpoint at which all results are intended and purposed results, not outside of, but within, the counsel of God, he signifies that this Divine end was being secured by their wickedness. The cup of their iniquity was filling all the time. Every generation did something to raise the level within. The men who bade Amos begone, and eat his bread at home, raised it a little; the men who sought Hosea's life in the sanctuary, raised it further; so did those who put Jeremiah in the dungeon, and those who murdered Zechariah between the temple and the altar. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, the cup was full to the brim. When those whom He left behind to be His witnesses, and to preach repentance and remission of sins to an men, beginning at Jerusalem, were expelled or put to death, it ran over. God could bear no more. Side by side with the cup of iniquity the cup of judgment had been filling also; and they overflowed together. Even when Paul wrote he could say, "The wrath is come upon them to the very end."<sup>8</sup>

It is not easy to explain the precise force of these words. They seem to point definitely<sup>9</sup> to some event, or some act of God, in which His wrath had been unmistakably made manifest. To suppose that the fall of Jerusalem is meant is to deny that Paul wrote the words. All that is certain is that the Apostle saw in the signs of the times some infallible token that the nation's day of grace had come to an end. Perhaps some excess of a Roman procurator, now forgotten; perhaps one of those famines that desolated Judæa in that unhappy age; perhaps the recent edict of Claudius, expelling all Jews from Rome, and betraying the temper of the supreme power; perhaps the coming shadow of an awful doom, obscure in outline, but none the less inevitable, gave shape to the expression. The Jews had failed, in their day, to recognise the things that belonged to their peace; and now they were hid from their eyes. They had disregarded every presage of the coming storm; and at length the clouds

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<sup>8</sup> Weiss renders εἰς τέλος "im höchsten Masse."

<sup>9</sup> Observe the aorist ἔφθασεν.

that could not be charmed away had accumulated over their heads, and the fire of God was ready to leap out.

This striking passage embodies certain truths to which we do well to give heed. It shows us that there is such a thing as a national character. In the providential government of God a nation is not an aggregate of individuals, each one of whom stands apart from the rest; it is a corporation with a unity, life and spirit of its own. Within that unity there may be a conflict of forces, a struggle of good with evil, of higher with lower tendencies, just as there is in the individual soul; but there will be a preponderance on one side or the other; and that side to which the balance leans will prevail more and more. In the vast spirit of the nation, as in the spirit of each man or woman, through the slow succession of generations as in the swift succession of years, character gradually assumes more fixed and definite form. There is a process of development, interrupted perhaps and retarded by such conflicts as I have referred to, but bringing out all the more decisively and irreversibly the inmost spirit of the whole. There is nothing which the proud and the weak more dread than inconsistency; there is nothing, therefore, which is so fatally certain to happen as what has happened already. The Jews resented from the first the intrusion of God's word into their lives; they had ambitions and ideas of their own, and in its corporate action the nation was uniformly hostile to the prophets. It beat one and killed another and stoned a third; it was of a different spirit from them, and from Him who sent them; and the longer it lived, the more like itself, the more unlike God, it became. It was the climax of its sin, yet only the climax – for it had previously taken every step that led to that eminence in evil – when it slew the Lord Jesus. And when it was ripe for judgment, judgment fell upon it as a whole.

It is not easy to speak impartially about our own country and its character; yet such a character there undoubtedly is, just as there is such a unity as the British nation. Many observers tell us that the character has degenerated into a mere instinct for trade; and that it has begotten a vast unscrupulousness in dealing with the weak. Nobody will deny that there is a protesting conscience in the nation, a voice which pleads in God's name for justice, as the prophets pled in Israel; but the question is not whether such a voice is audible, but whether in the corporate acts of the nation it is obeyed. The state ought to be a Christian state. The nation ought to be conscious of a spiritual vocation, and to be animated with the spirit of Christ. In its dealings with other powers, in its relations to savage or half-civilised peoples, in its care for the weak among its own citizens, it should acknowledge the laws of justice and of mercy. We have reason to thank God that in all these matters Christian sentiment is beginning to tell. The opium trade with China, the liquor trade with the natives of Africa, the labour trade in the South Seas, the dwellings of the poor, the public-house system with its deliberate fostering of drunkenness, all these are matters in regard to which the nation was in danger of settling into permanent hostility to God, and in which there is now hope of better things. The wrath which is the due and inevitable accompaniment of such hostility, when persisted in, has not come on us to the very end; God has given us opportunity to rectify what is amiss, and to deal with all our interests in the spirit of the New Testament. Let no one be backward or indifferent when so great a work is in hand. The heritage of sin accumulates if it is not put away by well doing; and with sin, judgment. It is for us to learn by the word of God and the examples of history that the nation and kingdom that will not serve Him shall perish.

Finally, this passage shows us the last and worst form which sin can assume, in the words "forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they should be saved." Nothing is so completely ungodly, so utterly unlike God and opposed to Him, as that spirit which grudges others the good things which it prizes for itself. When the Jewish nation set itself relentlessly to prohibit the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles – when the word was passed round the synagogues from head quarters that this renegade Paul, who was summoning the pagans to become the people of God, was to be thwarted by fraud or violence – God's patience was exhausted. Such selfish pride was the very negation of His love; the *ne plus ultra* of evil. Yet nothing is more easy and natural than for men who have occupied a position of privilege to indulge this temper. An imperial nation, which boasts of its freedom, grudges

such freedom to others; it seems to lose the very consciousness of being free, unless there is a subject people over which it can tyrannise. In many relations of minor consequence, political and social, we have cause to make this reflection. Do not think that what is good for you, is anything else than good for your neighbour. If you are a better man because you have a comfortable home, leisure, education, interest in public affairs, a place in the church, so would he be. Above all, if the gospel of Christ is to you the pearl above all price, take care how you grudge that to any human soul. This is not an unnecessary caution. The criticism of missionary methods, which may be legitimate enough, is interrupted too often by the suggestion that such and such a race is not fit for the gospel. Nobody who knows what the gospel is will ever make such a suggestion; but we have all heard it made, and we see from this passage what it means. It is the mark of a heart which is deeply estranged from God, and ignorant of the Golden Rule which embodies both gospel and law. Let us rather be imitators of the great man who first entered into the spirit of Christ, and discovered the open secret of His life and death, – the mystery of redemption – that the heathen should be heirs with God's ancient people, and of the same body, and partakers of the same promises. "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them."



## VII *ABSENCE AND LONGING*

"But we, brethren, being bereaved of you for a short season, in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more exceedingly to see your face with great desire: because we would fain have come unto you, I Paul once and again; and Satan hindered us. For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of glorying? Are not even ye, before our Lord Jesus at His coming? For ye are our glory and our joy. Wherefore when we could not longer forbear, we thought it good to be left behind at Athens alone; and sent Timothy, our brother and God's minister in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith; that no man be moved by these afflictions; for yourselves know that hereunto we are appointed. For verily, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we are to suffer affliction; even as it came to pass, and ye know. For this cause I also, when I could no longer forbear, sent that I might know your faith, lest by any means the tempter had tempted you, and our labour should be in vain." – 1 Thess. ii. 17-iii. 5 (R.V.).

THE Apostle has said all that he means to say of the opposition of the Jews to the gospel, and in the verses before us turns to his own relations to the Thessalonians. He had been compelled to leave their city against his will; they themselves had escorted him by night to Berea. He cannot find words strong enough to describe the pain of separation. It was a bereavement, although he hoped it would only last for a short time. His heart was with them as truly as if he were still bodily present in Thessalonica. His strongest desire was to look upon their faces once more.

Here we ought to notice again the power of the gospel to create new relations and the corresponding affections. A few months before Paul had not known a single soul in Thessalonica; if he had been only a travelling tent-maker, he might have stayed there as long as he did, and then moved on with as little emotion as troubles a modern gipsy when he shifts his camp; but coming as a Christian evangelist, he finds or rather makes brothers, and feels his enforced parting from them like a bereavement. Months after, his heart is sore for those whom he has left behind. This is one of the ways in which the gospel enriches life; hearts that would otherwise be empty and isolated are brought by it into living contact with a great circle whose nature and needs are like their own; and capacities, that would otherwise have been unsuspected, have free course for development. No one knows what is in him; and, in particular, no one knows of what love, of what expansion of heart he is capable, till Christ has made real to him those relations to others by which his duties are determined, and all his powers of thought and feeling called forth. Only the Christian man can ever tell what it is to love with all his heart and soul and strength and mind.

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