

# 1 THESSALONIANS

## 1 THESSALONIANS 1-2:16 — REMINISCENT

For the story of the founding of this church by Paul, examine ~~417L~~ Acts 17. We call the first section of the epistle the reminiscent part, because the apostle is referring to what had taken place in Thessalonica at that time.

It opens with the usual salutation 1:1, in which Silas and Timothy are named with Paul, not as co-writers, but co-workers with him when in that city, and so known to the church.

The thanksgiving follows, vv. 2-4, in which is mentioned a triad of graces (v. 3) that had been produced in these young Christians, testifying assuredly to their election of God (v. 4).

Next comes a testimony to the church of the deepest interest (vv. 5-10). Through receiving the Word of God in the Holy Ghost, they had become imitators of Paul and of the Lord (v. 6) to such an extent that all the saints throughout Greece were reaping a blessing from their lives (v. 7). Travelers passing from them to other parts, were carrying the news of what God had done for them, so that Paul's own witness was made unnecessary (v. 8). It was an evidence of his ministry among them as the result of which they had "turned to God from idols" (a "work of faith"); "to serve the living and true God" (a "labor of love"); and to wait for His Son from heaven" ("patience of hope"). The explanation of it all is found in verse 5.

The testimony to the church leads to a testimony about himself (2:1-16), not for his own praise, but the magnifying of the grace of God in him. In verse 5 of the previous chapter, he had shown that the wonderful result of the gospel among them was explained by the power of the Holy Ghost, with which it had been preached; and this power, in turn, was explained by the "manner of men we were among you for your sake." Again, in verse 9, he referred to the "manner of entering in we had unto you," while in chapter 2, he expatiates upon it. In other words, "the manner of man" he had been was expressed:

(1) by courage and devotion (compare verses 1-2 with the story in ~~440~~ Acts 16);

(2) by faithfulness and impartiality. His preaching had not been of deceit (error), uncleanness, guile, flattery, covetousness, or vainglory. The gospel had been committed to him by God, as a sacred trust; and since to God he must give account of his stewardship, he ministered it not to please men but God, "which trieth our hearts" (vv. 3-6).

(3) by kindness and affection. His gentleness was like that of a mother nursing her children (see RV). His affection was shown in the self-denying labor of tent-making in which he engaged to earn his living, that he might "not be chargeable" to them for his support (vv. 7-9).

(4) in holiness and consistency of life (vv. 10-12). No wonder therefore that they received his message as the "Word of God" and not the word of men (v. 13); nor that it should have effectually wrought in them as it did "in the churches of God in Judea" (vv. 14-16).

## QUESTIONS

1. Have you read ~~440~~ Acts 16-17 in connection with this lesson?
2. Why is this lesson called "Reminiscent"?
3. Why are Silas and Timothy named?
4. What triad of graces was seen in these young Christians?
5. How do you explain 1:7?
6. What is the theme of chapter 2?
7. How was Paul's Christian character exhibited among the Thessalonians?
8. What was the result?

## 1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-3:13 — PERSONAL AND CONGRATULATORY

### PAUL'S DESIRE TO REVISIT THE CHURCH (2:17-19)

Satan hindered in the execution of this desire in ways indicated in ~~440~~ Acts 17, specifically, by stirring up opposition on the part of the Jews. Observe

the teaching here as to the personality of Satan, his hatred of the true church, and the power he has to use agents in opposition to it. Paul's desire to visit the church is explained by his interest in the saints (v. 19). Observe here the reference to the Second coming of Christ, and the teaching of Paul that he would then meet his converts, and know and rejoice over them in the Lord's presence. What an answer to the question so often raised, Shall we recognize each other in the future life?

### **TIMOTHY'S MISSION TO THE CHURCH (3:1-5)**

Refer to ~~Acts~~ Acts 17 and observe the circumstances under which Paul was left at Athens. Driven out of Thessalonica and Berea, by persecution, the brethren had sent him there. Observe the reason why Timothy was returned to Thessalonica; to establish and comfort the young saints (v. 2). Their affliction arising out of their faith was great, and though they had been warned to it (v. 4), yet they might have succumbed under it, and Paul's labor on their behalf would in that sense have been "in vain" (v. 5).

### **TIMOTHY'S REPORT OF THE CHURCH (3:6-10)**

Their faith was firm, their love warm, their remembrance of Paul keen, and he was comforted. This was life for him, to know that his children in the faith stood "fast in the Lord" (v. 8).

### **PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH (3:11-13)**

That he might see them again and that their love might increase toward one another, and toward all. But all this would be fulfilled in permanent perfection only at the Coming of Christ (v. 13).

## **QUESTIONS**

1. What are the four main points of the lesson?
2. How did Satan hinder Paul?
3. What light does this lesson throw on the question of future recognition of believers?
4. Why did Timothy return to Thessalonica?
5. What was the nature of his report to Paul leading to the writing of this letter?

## 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-5:12 — HORTATORY AND INSTRUCTIVE

Timothy reported some things that called for exhortation and instruction. In the first place, fornication was indulged in by some who had no proper understanding of its sinfulness (4:1-8). This inconsistency is probably explained by the circumstance that the church was composed of Gentiles chiefly, rather than Jews. (See ~~4470E~~ Acts 17 and compare such passages in the epistle as 1:9.) Paganism, out of which they came, knew not the meaning of "sin," and as for "fornication" it may be said to have been part of their religion, just as the grossest licentiousness is now connected with certain forms of heathen worship. Under these circumstances these young Christians may have been slow to apprehend their duty in the premises and the real meaning of "sanctification." This exhortation had its effect, however, for in Paul's second epistle to the church he does not mention the offense.

In the second place, the imminency of our Lord's return which had taken hold of this church, had reacted in some cases in the direction of idleness (vv. 9-12). If He were coming so soon, why such carefulness as to physical necessities? The answer is practically that of John Wesley, that if one knew He would come tomorrow, the duties of today should be performed just the same. "Study (or be ambitious) to be quiet," attend to your business, work for two reasons: that you may be enabled to pay your honest debts, especially to the world's people with whom you deal; and that you yourselves may have your physical necessities supplied (v. 12).

### **THE DEAD AND THE LIVING SAINTS AT CHRIST'S COMING**

But the chief difficulty in the church was doctrinal, arising also out of a misapprehension about the Lord's Second Coming. The difficulty concerned the relation of the dead to the living saints at His coming (vv. 13-18). There was a fear that the departed would be at some disadvantage in the matter of time when that event took place. But Paul teaches

- (1) that the dead saints will return with Christ (v. 14);
- (2) that their bodies shall be raised first (vv. 15-16); and

**(3)** that the translation of the living saints shall then follow (vv. 17-18). In other words, something like that which took place in the lives of Enoch and Elijah in earlier dispensations, will take place in the life of the whole church, i.e., the true body of Christ in the present dispensation. Paul taught this "by the word of the Lord" (v. 15), which means not any word which our Lord spake on the subject while on earth, but a special revelation vouchsafed to Paul after He had arisen from the dead.

The subject is continued into chapter 5 where the first three verses treat the condition of the world when Christ comes, and the next eight are an exhortation to the church. The world will be taken unawares, but the church should not be so taken (vv. 4-5). To guard against this the church should be wide awake concerning this doctrine and the hope of His coming (vv. 6-8). The reason for this is that while "wrath" awaits the world in that day, "salvation" in the fullest sense awaits the church (v. 9). Whether we are "awake," i.e., alive on the earth when He comes, or "asleep" and come with Him, we shall "live together with Him" as the close of the preceding chapter indicated.

## QUESTIONS

1. What three subjects called for exhortation and instruction?
2. How do we explain the presence of "fornication" in this church?
3. What reason is there to believe that Paul's words were heeded?
4. What probably led to idleness?
5. How does Paul meet the situation?
6. What was the doctrinal difficulty in this church?
7. What three things does Paul teach about the second coming of Christ for the church?
8. What shows that the world will be unprepared for His coming?

## 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28 — CONCLUSION

This is a brief lesson, but the text is sufficiently distinct from the foregoing to warrant separate treatment. It is hortatory and instructive as that was, but exhortation prevails.

"Them which labor among you" (v. 12) are doubtless the elders of the church Paul had set over them. "To know them" is the same as "to esteem them" (v. 13). But this esteem is associated with a joint responsibility with them for the proper discipline of the church (vv. 14-15). "The feeble-minded" has reference not to intellectual but spiritual defectiveness — not strong in the qualities of faith and hope and courage.

Joy should be perpetual (v. 16) because it does not depend on outward circumstances, but an inward condition. Prayer should be "without ceasing" (v. 17), not in the sense that nothing else was to be done, but that this should be the habit. The true believer talks with God more continually and intimately than with any human being however near and dear. "Thanksgiving" always accompanies prayer (v. 18) "This is the will of God... concerning you," may mean the experience which calls for it. Note that we are not commanded to be thankful for everything, but in everything. Of course, only the true believer is here in mind, as indicated by the expression "in Christ Jesus." (See our lessons in Ephesians and Colossians.)

The next four verses have a close relationship. "Prophesying" (v. 20), as we judge from 1 Corinthians 14, was apt to be despised in comparison with other spiritual gifts; but to despise it in the sense that its proper exercise was restricted would be to "quench the Spirit" (v. 19) and thus "limit the Holy One of Israel." To be sure, there was a danger of false teaching coming in by that channel, but the remedy is in verse 21, especially in view of the general caution in verse 22, which should read "avoid every form of error."

The prayer of verse 23 is beautiful and convincingly determining that man is a trinity. Some think that Paul is here again expressing his conviction or hope of an imminent return of our Lord, and praying for their "spirit and soul and body" to be kept entire, intact, i.e., without death until then, though the next verse rather raises a question as to that.

Note the authority and importance attaching to an inspired letter of this kind (v. 27).