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A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:1=10

53. THE BOOK OF 1 THESSALONIANS

Some years ago an archaeological team was digging in an ancient part of the Greek city of Thessaloniki also called Salonika or Thessalonica, a port city in Macedonia northeastern Greece. As the archaeologists excavated, they uncovered a cemetery dating back to the first century A.D. Among the pagan tombstones, they found one inscribed in Greek with the words “*No Hope.*” This was the attitude of the Greek world. Iscillus said, “*When a man dies there is no resurrection.*” Theocrates wrote, “*There is hope for those who are alive, but those who have died are without hope.*” Another philosopher said, “*When once our brief life sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep.*” A tombstone from ancient Greece reads “*I was not, I became, I am not, I care not.*” So into a society which breathed “*No hope,*” Paul’s first letter to the Christians in that city is “*the hope of the believer.*”

Here were believers who were facing a time of great upheaval and persecution. The world was coming apart at the seams yet Paul’s first message to them was “*There is hope. God is in control and Jesus Christ is coming again.*” Now where was this church located ? Well do you recall that it was on Paul’s second missionary journey that

Europe was reached with the gospel ? (Acts 15:36-18:22) Paul responded to the Macedonian Call. (Acts 16:9) A church was formed in in Philippi, and then Paul moved on a 100 miles down the road to the strategic city of Thessalonica. Here Paul took his message first of all to the Jewish synagogue and for three Sabbaths he preached the Lord Jesus, showing them that Jesus Christ was the fulfilment of everything the Old Testament said about the Messiah. Many believed a church was formed. It was composed of Jews, Greeks and well-heeled ladies. (Acts 17:4) But do you know something ? *The Devil hates the gospel.* The Devil stirred up the unbelieving Jews and they in turn stirred up others and there was a real uproar. The believers thought it best for Paul and his party to leave which they did going first to Berea. Paul then left his associates Berea and went alone to Athens. When Timothy joined Paul at Athens the apostle promptly sent him back to Thessalonica to encourage the new church. (3:1-3)

The men finally met together at Corinth (Acts 18:5) Timothy reported on the healthy state of the infant church in Thessalonica and it was from Corinth about the year A.D. 50 that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. Second Thessalonians was written just a few months later. I want you to notice from the opening verses some things about this church.

1. GEOGRAPHICALLY it was in Thessalonica:

Have you booked your holiday yet ? *Do you fancy being neck deep in Greece ?* Well, you can visit Thessalonica

today, only the travel guide will call it Thessloniki, or Salonica. It's an important industrial city second only to Athens in population. In Paul's day it was quite a city. It was a place of renown a city with a reputation. It boasted a splendid harbour. It lay along a road called The Egnatian Road a great military highway which connected Rome with the east. Thus, east and west poured into the city. The shops and markets were well stocked with all sorts of consumer products, you name it, they had it. *It had the ambience of a fashionable luxury resort.* It was called the crown jewel of Macedonia. Its setting was picturesque. Its economy was stable. Its population around 200,000 and into this busy, bustling city the trail blazing Paul ventured on his second missionary journey. This master strategist was concerned to get a foothold in this city for he saw it as a springboard for evangelising the rest of Europe. 1.

2. CIRCUMSTANTIALLY it was in Persecution:

Do you see what Paul says in (1:6) ? Do you recall what Paul's enemies said ? “ *these that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.* ” (17:6) Now Paul was not turning the world upside down, the devil had already done that for them. What Paul was doing, in the power of the Spirit was turning them right side up and making them what they ought to be. Listen, this infant church knew what it was to be *criticised, pressurised and ostracised.* (1:6) Do you know why we don't suffer for Christ today ? We have become respectable. That's why we don't suffer persecution. But when the *Preaching of the Cross* is our lips and *the Principle of the Cross* is in our lives we

will become unpopular. When we preach the kind of message and live the kind of life that brings man down from his self-made pedestal and lays him in the gutter before a Sovereign God we'll not be to popular. (Jn 15:19-20)

3. SPIRITUALLY it was in God:

Where was this church ? Well, look at (1:1) Isn't that a wonderful place for any church to be ? My we are in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ and don't let anyone tell you that a Christian can be lost once he is in Christ. We cannot lose our salvation. I mean, how can I get out of the Christ I am in ? The question is, who put us in Christ ? Now if you put yourself in Christ, then you can take yourself out, but as you read the Word, you know that you did not put yourself in Christ.

*He saw me ruined in the fall
And loved me not withstanding all,
He saved me from my lost estate
His lovingkindness, oh how great*

4. DOCTRINALLY it was in Confusion:

Now remember they were not that long saved maybe a year. They didn't know a lot. So Paul is writing to establish these believers in the faith. He reminds them of the importance of moral purity. (4:1-8) He condemns a sluggard lifestyle. (4:9-12) He seeks to diffuse tensions within the flock. (5:12-15) He tries to encourage respect for the leadership. (5:12-13) And Paul corrects a wrong

understanding of prophetic events. (4:13-5:11) Indeed the keynote of this letter is prophecy. Indeed the 2 letters to the Thessalonians are devoted to the Second Coming. The first letter deals with His Coming to the Air, the second letter deals with His Coming to the Earth. But each chapter in both letters ends with a reference to the Coming of the Lord. It seems that in this first letter Paul relates the Blessed Hope to a practical aspect of Christian living.

(1) The Blessed Hope Relates to our SALVATION Ch 1:1-10

Indeed John Phillips says the coming of Christ is a saving truth. Do you see how Paul defines the Christian life in terms of Christ's return ? “ *Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven.* ” (1:9-10) I mean is the Lord's coming not an integral part of the doctrine of salvation ? Are preachers not right in using prophecy to give a sense of urgency to the gospel message ? Paul did. We would think it out of place to start by teaching new converts prophetic truth but not Paul. With only a limited time at his disposal in his stay in Thessalonica Paul placed heavy emphasis on the truth of the Lord's return for saint and sinner alike. You'll notice in (Ch 1) for example that,

(a) The ELEMENTS of the Christian Life were Here:

Look at (1:3) “ *Faith, hope, and love.* ” Now those three words occur many times in the New Testament Paul says “ *now abideth faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love.* ” (1 Cor 13:13) Three words

which are the basic ingredients of the Christian life. For these words summarise what the Christian life is all about. You see, all of us live in our lives in three dimensions. We have a *past, a present and a future*. Some of you here, can recall where you were last night and what you were doing that's your **past**. But you have a **present**. You are aware of people around and the preacher in the pulpit. But you also have a **future**. Some of are wondering what you're going to do later. You see we live life in three dimensions. Now these words show us how the Lord impacts our life in three tenses.

1. FAITH: That looks to the PAST:

My past sins are forgiven through faith in Christ.

2. LOVE: That looks to the PRESENT:

Because my sins are forgiven I am free to love the way I ought to in the present.

3. HOPE: That looks to the FUTURE:

For if you know the Lord has forgiven your sins and you are able in the present to love, then you can look to the future with hope for one of these days the Lord is coming to take you home. Faith, hope, love. Now of course you cannot see faith, hope and love and so the Lord shows us what these spiritual commodities produce in the life. (a) But,

(b) The EVIDENCES of the Christian life were Here:

Look again at (1:3) You can see work, labour and patience. Three qualities marked the Thessalonian

believers, their work of faith, their labour of love and their patience of hope. Do you see how these qualities are explained in (1:9-10) ? “ *Your work of faith,* ” “ *Ye turned to God from idols,* ” “ *Your labour of love,* ” “ *To serve the living and true God,* ” “ *And patience of hope,* ” “ *And to wait His Son from heaven.* ” You see, these Christians had,

1. **A Faith That Received:**

In (1:4) we have the Divine Side of salvation. In (1:6) we have the Human Side of salvation. You see, the gospel came to them through the ministry of Paul and his associates and the Holy Spirit used the Word with great power and the Thessalonians responded by receiving both the messengers and the message. My do you know something ? They never lost their eagerness for the Word. Have you come this with an eagerness for the Word of God ? Or has something or someone dulled your spiritual senses and you’ve lost your appetite for God’s Word ? Maybe you used to come with expectancy, an open Bible, a note pad but I wonder has the eagerness gone ?

2. **A Love that Served:**

For Paul talks about their “ *labour of love,* ” (1:3) You see, they practised the gospel: These Thessalonian believers had become model Christians. All of Greece was influenced in one way or another by this young church. I wonder what kind of reputation do we have in this town, province and further afield ? Notice also they proclaimed the gospel: (1:8) You see, while waiting for the trumpet of Christ to sound (4:16) these Thessalonians were

sounding out the trumpet for Christ. My we have got to get the gospel out, for we are talking about something that changes lives, rescues souls from hell and brings them to heaven. 1. 2.

3. **A Hope that Waited:**

They were operating with their eyes on the horizon. Do you see that word “ *wait,* ” ? It means “ *to look forward to with patience, and confidence, expectantly.* ” Do you remember what Horatius Bonar used to say as he went to bed at night ? He would look out into the darkness of the night and he would exclaim “ *Perhaps tonight Lord, perhaps tonight.* ” Then as he drew the curtains in the morning and looked out at the dawn of a new day he would say, “ *Perhaps today Lord, perhaps today.* ” Do you feel like that ? (1)

(2) **The Blessed Hope Relates to our SERVICE** **Ch 2:1-20**

Do you see how Paul ends the second chapter ? (2:19-20) Why was Paul able to minister faithfully and lovingly to these saints ? Because he saw them in the light of Christ’s coming. The coming of Christ threw a shadow over everything Paul did. Now if (Ch 1) gives us a picture of an ideal church (Ch 2) gives us a picture of an ideal servant. In (Ch 1) Paul has told us how the gospel came to Thessalonica now he tells us how he ministered to these young converts. He gives us four pictures of the ideal servant. Firstly he talks about,

(a) THE FAITHFUL STEWARD: (2:1-6)

Here Paul states that *his manner* (2:1-2) *his message* (2:3) *his motive* (2:5) and *his method* (2:3) were all approved by God. What a tremendous privilege to “ *be put in trust with the gospel.* ” (2:4) Now what exactly is a steward ? Well, a steward is a person who owns nothing but possesses and uses everything that belongs to his master. Do you recall that Joseph was a steward in the household of Potiphar ? (Gen 39:4) That is he managed his master’s affairs and used all his master’s goods to promote his master’s welfare. Now says Paul the gospel is a treasure that has been entrusted to us. My do we realize that the moment we receive the gospel we enter into a tremendous responsibility ? The gospel is ours to pass on to others. We must not whittle it down or hide under a bushel we must not bury it but invest it that it will multiply and produce “ *spiritual dividends,* ” to God’s glory. Is this not what Paul says “ *It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.* ” (1 Cor 4:2)

He may not be popular in “ *the eyes of men,* ” but he dare not be unfaithful in “ *the eyes of God.* ” That’s why Paul says in (2:4) The believer who plays to the grandstand and the preacher who plays to the crowd will lose God’s reward. “ *Not as pleasing men but God.* ” (2:4) In all your work for the Lord preaching, singing, testifying, visiting is this your goal and mine ? Pleasing God. (a)

(b) THE HELPFUL MOTHER: 2:7-8

You know when Paul came to this city there were some

who attacked his motives. “ *He ran away,* ” they sneered “ *and hasn’t been seen or heard of since. He’s in it for what he can get out of it. He does not care about you, he’s more concerned about his own skin than your welfare.* ” But how wrong they were, for Paul was like a loving mother who cared for her children. Look at (2:7) The word “ *nurse,* ” here means nursing mother. The word “ *cherish,* ” means “ *to warm.* ” It’s used of the way a mother bird covers her young. (Deut 22:6) It’s the picture of the mother warming the little birds in the nest. (Eph 5:28) Did you ever see a mother with her brand new baby ? Nourishing it, cuddling it, kissing it, hugging it. Is there anything sweeter in all the world than the tenderness of a mother with her children ? You say, “ *It’s not easy to be a nursing mother,* ” indeed it’s not. (2:8)

Even Moses felt the burden of caring for God’s people. “ *Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant ? Wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight ? That thou layest the burden of all this people on me ?* ” (Num 11:11) A mother’s care. Tell me, as young believers mature in this church, encounter problems, experience difficulties do you show patience toward them ? Do you care for them ?

(c) THE DUTIFUL FATHER: 2:9-16

Do you see what he says in (2:11) ? Paul considered himself a “ *spiritual father,* ” to the believers at Thessalonica, just as he did toward the saints at Corinth. Do you recall what he says to them ? “ *Though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ yet have ye not many fathers for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the*

gospel.” (1 Cor 4:15) But then a father not only begets children he cares for them. Do you see here the fatherly ministry of Paul ? There was *his work* for them, (2:9) *his walk* before them (2:10) and *his words* to them.

(2:11-12) Isn't it interesting that Paul not only provided public ministry but personal teaching ? I mean he dealt with these believers personally. He says “ *we exhorted,*” encouraged you to go on with the Lord. “ *We comforted,*” for we were aware of the difficult circumstances. “ *We charged,*” testified to you out of my own experience.

(Ps 34:1) Paul says, “ *I looked upon you with the interested eye of a father.*” Do you recall the first steps of your little one ? And you see that Daddy there teaching his child to walk and if he fails, he picks him up. Well, Paul says “ *I ministered to you that ye would walk worthy of God.*” (2:12) My do we not see here a model for ministry ?

(d) THE WONDERFUL BROTHER: 2:17-10

How Paul loved to call these saints “ *brethren.*” (2:17) Back in Thessalonica there were those who were saying “ *Paul is in this game for money, sure if he cared for you that much why did he leave ?*” But with Paul it was not out of sight out of mind for he says in (2:17) Do you see that word “ *taken,*” ? That's where we get our English word orphan. Paul felt that he had been orphaned from them (2:11,17) and he made every effort to return but he sensed the devil's hindrance. (2:19) Rather than looking back and give into remorse he looked ahead and rejoiced. For he says (2:19) ? Now Paul did not say that he would receive a crown, though this is suggested. He said that the

saints would be his crown when he met them at the Judgment Seat. Can you see the sight that thrilled Paul ? His converts by the side of the Saviour in glory. I am sure that Paul would have agreed with the sentiments of Samuel Rutherford (1600-1660) as he lay in prison in Aberdeen thinking of his congregation in Anwoth.

**Fair Anwoth on the Solway
To me thou still art dear
Even from the verge of heaven
I drop for thee a tear
O if one soul from Anwoth
Meet me at God's right hand
My heaven shall be two heavens
In Immanuel's land**

When that great day comes will you have souls to present to the Saviour ? Or will you lose out ? (1) (2)

(3) The Blessed Hope Relates to our STABILITY 3:1-4:12

Do you see how the chapter concludes ? (3:12-13) The key word in this chapter is “ *establish,*” (3:2-3 8, 13) In (3:2) it contains the idea of strengthening, “ *to comfort,*” means to help them positively for the battle that faced them .So Paul chose to be left alone in Athens so that Timothy could return to Thessalonica and establish the saints. Why ? What was Paul concerned about ? Their faith. (3:2,5,6,7,10) Its by faith that we appropriate all that is ours in Christ, but this faith has to grow, develop and mature. (Mk 4:40 Matt 6:30 Lk 7:9) My unless

you have a growing faith you're not going to be able to cope with the pressures, troubles and trials that inevitably come in the life of a believer. You see, there is

(a) *THE PRESSURE OF TRIALS: 3:1-13*

Why do bad things happen to God's people ? You see, sometimes a Christian says, " *Well now I am saved, this is wonderful, everything is going to be a bed of roses.*" My don't kid yourself for roses have thorns and those thorns along the Christian pathway can frequently be sharp. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, " *In the world ye shall a vacation.*" No, " *in the world ye shall tribulation.*" (Jn 16:33) Look if you will at (3:3-4) Paul says these sufferings are " *appointed.*" It means they are unalterable. He says we were destined for them. When trials come they are not accidents that just happen, they are by divine appointment. Nothing is happening to us by chance or coincidence, all is part of the outworking of God's plan for us. Somehow, in the economy of God suffering is part of His plan. (Acts 9:16) Suffering is one of those things that God uses in your life to put your faith to the test. You see, you will never know what kind of faith you have unless that faith is put to the test. (Gen 12:1 Gen 22:1-3)

So Paul says, " *I want you to know that you're destined for these things.*" But my God does not send these trials to destroy your faith, but to develop your faith *for faith is like a muscle it grows stronger with use.* (a)

(b) *THE PRESSURE OF TEMPTATIONS: 4:1-8*

These Christian's who lived in Thessalonica now modern Greece, felt the same kind of pressures and drives as we do. This large city filled with culture and art, business and commerce, was also filled with immorality. Demosthenes wrote these words, " *We keep prostitutes for pleasure, we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body, we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.*" You see, this was a sex saturated society, and into this sex crazed world came Paul's teaching " *walk in holiness.*" (4:1,12) Do you see how Paul puts it in (4:3) ? The word " *sanctify,*" means " *set apart for a purpose.*" Now because we know we have been set apart by God, and because we know that the Lord Jesus is coming we want to keep our lives clean to day. That is *Practical Sanctification.* (Jn 17:17 Heb 12:14) Someone has said, " *It is one thing for sin to live in us, it is another thing for us live in sin.*"

" *For this is the will of God even your sanctification,*" (4:3) Then Paul spells this out. It means (1) You abstain from fornication, sexual impurity: (2) You know how to handle your physical drive (3) You don't cheat your brother and (4) You live under the control of the Holy Spirit: (4:8) The Spirit of God teaches us the Word and helps us to recall the promises of God in times of temptation. (Jn 14:26) And as we walk in the Spirit we get victory over the lusts of the flesh. (Gal 5:16) Tell me, are you passionate about being pure ? Is your constant cry, " *Lord make me as holy as it is possible for a saved sinner to be.*" (a) (b)

(c) *THE PRESSURE OF TENSIONS: 4:9-12*

For so often tensions within the assembly puts pressure on our stability. One of the problems in the Thessalonian church was that some people had misunderstood the promise of Christ's return, quit their job and had become "*parasites*," who lived off the other Christians. Was that not a strain within the fellowship ? No wonder Paul exhorts them that we were to increase in love "*more and more*." (4:10-12) (1) (2) (3)

(4) The Blessed Hope Relates to our SORROW 4:13-5:11

Sorrow had come to the lives of these saints and they were wondering whether their dead fellow Christians would be left behind at the return of Christ. What would happen to them ? Would they miss out when the Saviour came ? So Paul talks here about,

(a) THE CHURCH AND THE TRANSLATION: 4:13-18

The translation of living believers is called the Rapture of the church. Actually, the English word "*rapture*," is derived from the Latin *rapere* meaning to seize or to snatch and it corresponds to the Greek verb that Paul uses here (*harpazo*) when he talks about being "*caught up*." Now please don't confuse the Rapture with the Revelation. The Rapture can take place at any time, but the Revelation of the Lord, when He comes in power and great glory, will occur some seven years after the Rapture. *Now how does the coming of Christ relate to our sorrow ?* Well it speaks of a **Return**: "*For the Lord Himself,*"

(4:16) It speaks of a **Resurrection**: "*the dead in Christ shall rise first*." Is this not thrilling ? Our holy happy dead shall rise again. It speaks of a **Rapture**: "*We which are alive*," It speaks of a **Reunion**: "*Caught up together with them*," It speaks of a **Rendezvous**: "*To meet the Lord*," we have walked with Christ by faith here on earth but in the air we shall see Him as He is. (1 Jn 3:2) "*Face to face with Christ my Saviour,*" (a)

(b) THE CHURCH AND THE TRIBULATION: 5:1-11

There are few if any prophetic questions more vigorously debated than the question, "*Will the church go through the Tribulation ?*" By the church we mean "*The called out ones*," and by the tribulation we mean that time when God will judge the world and punish the nations, that time when God's wrath will be unleashed on planet earth. Now the "*day of the Lord*," (5:2) is also called "*the time of Jacob's trouble*," (Jer 30:7) "*the tribulation*," that is so vividly described in (Rev Ch 6-18) So "*The day of the Lord*," is a time of judgment when God will enter into judgment with this world over the rejection of His Son and it's a time of blessing when the world shall enjoy the personal reign of the Lord Jesus during the Millennium. So this is an extended period of time when God will judge the world and punish the nations. (Is 13:6-22 Joel 2:30-32)

Now how are we as believers related to the day of the Lord ? Well, look at (5:4-5) What does Paul mean when he says "*But ye*," The best explanation is this. We'll

not be here. My when the “ *day of the Lord*,” comes we’ll be in glory. “ *But ye brethren*,” in other words we belong to a different day. The day of God’s grace. Tell me, why should a child of God’s grace, someone who is saved by grace, kept by grace, who has all the wonderful promises of God, be forced to go through a period of judgment upon a Christ rejecting world. We belong to the day, they belong to the night. Indeed did you notice how Paul distinguishes between “ *us*,” and “ *them*.” He speaks of “ *ye, we and us*.” He is describing the believer and then he speaks of “ *they and them*,” which describes those left behind at the Rapture to face the coming wrath. Do you see his conclusion in (5:9) “ *For God hath not appointed us to wrath*” It was not escapism but a sound knowledge of Scripture which prompted Horatius Bonar to sing

*I see the last dark bloody sunset
I see the dread Avenger’s form
I see the Armageddon’s onset
But I shall be above the storm*

(5) The Blessed Hope Relates to Our Sanctification 5:12-28

Do you see how the book ends in (5:23) ? Again the word “ *sanctify*,” means “ *set apart from sin unto God*.” A little girl heard her Mummy and a friend talk about the coming of the Lord. Later in the day the Mummy went upstairs to her daughters room and found her standing by the window. The little one said, “ *Mummy I heard you say that say that Jesus was coming back. I am looking for Him*

for I want to be the first to see Him. So I took a bath and put on my clean clothes and am ready.” My are you ready ? Let’s take a test and see. I want you to see how practical holiness reflects in,

(a) IN THE AREA OF LEADERSHIP: 5:12-13

Do you see the word “ *esteem*,” ? (5:12-13) It means hold them in the highest regard. Do you do that ?

(b) IN THE AREA OF MEMBERSHIP: 5:14-15

What did Paul want the members to be ? *Practical* (5:15) *Patient* (14) and *Placid* (5:15)

(c) IN THE AREA OF WORSHIP: 5:16-28

For here the *Spirit of Praise* ought to be evident: (5:16-18) the *Word of God* ought to be central (5:19-22) the *Lives of Believers* ought to be pure: (5:23-25) and the *Fellowship of Saints* ought to be sincere. (5:26-28) My is it time for us to take a spiritual bath ? To get ready for His coming. My The sand glass of prophecy is running out, the coming of the Lord draweth nigh and yet strangely enough never has such looseness in Christian living prevailed. How do we reconcile this with the Hope of His return ? Is it that much of our belief in the Coming of the Lord is superficial ? Has it touched your mind but not your heart ? Do you know those words inscribed on the wall in Moira “ *The Coming of the Lord draweth night*.” Do you believe that ? What difference will that make to you today and in the days ahead ?

