

February 7, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Introduction to Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Thessalonica occupied the same site as present-day Salonica in Greece. It was a large, seaport city and one of the most important cities in the Roman province of Macedonia. The church in Thessalonica was founded during Paul's second missionary journey. In Acts chapter 17 we have the details of how that church was brought into existence. Following their imprisonment in Philippi, Paul and Silas journeyed to Thessalonica. As usual, Paul went first to the Jewish synagogues, and for three straight Sabbaths, preached Christ to the Jews. *'...explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.* Acts 17:3-4

There were a few Jews who believed but they were outnumbered by the throngs of devout Greeks who believed. These were called 'devout' Greeks, or 'God-fearers' which was a Jewish term for Gentiles who attached themselves in varying degrees to Jewish life and worship without as yet becoming full converts. Conversion meant circumcision, and for Greeks, any mutilation of the human body was blasphemous. And so the message of Paul, the gospel of Jesus Christ, was incredibly attractive because it had the best elements of Judaism, which they admired, but none of its narrow nationalism or any of its ritual requirements. So Thessalonica was fertile soil for the gospel.

But opposition arose immediately, led by the unbelieving Jews: *But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.* Acts 17:5 However, failing to find Paul and Silas, they grabbed hold of Jason and some of the brothers and brought them before the magistrate; and their accusations actually show just how powerful the ministry of the gospel had become: *These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.* Acts 17:6-7 The Romans were for the most part a tolerant people, governing conquered peoples with justice and fairness. But the one thing they would not tolerate was public disorder, and they dealt with that very harshly. Public disorder in their eyes was one step away from rebellion. It was not unusual for those accused of rioting to be beaten and thrown into prison for a long time, and if the offense were serious enough, to be put to death.

But in Thessalonica, the magistrate saw through the Jew's accusations, and Jason and the brothers were only given a hefty fine and decided it was best that Paul and Silas leave the city lest they get caught up in the controversy. In fact they sent Paul and Silas away, the Scripture records, by night, and they went to Berea. From Berea they made their way eventually to Athens, and there in Athens, just before he went to Corinth to begin what turned out to be an 18-month ministry there, he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to check on the well-being of the church there. When Timothy brought back his report to Paul, Paul was moved to write this letter.

As you read this letter you realize that Paul was obviously pleased by the good report Timothy brought back of the condition of the church there. First of all he wrote to **commend them on their gospel-minded stance:** *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.* 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

And that work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope was manifested in **the testimony of their lives** among those who were persecuting them and also among the other churches in the region: *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.* 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7 The church was founded in the midst of persecution and it flourished even under persecution.

Their work of faith and labor of love was also displayed in **the spread of the gospel**: *For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.* 1 Thessalonians 1:8 The gospel was Paul's deepest passion and for him, the mark of a healthy church was a church massively engaged in the gospel. I believe this thrilled Paul's soul. To see a church wholly given over to the gospel and making an impact in their world all out of proportion to their numbers.

And then in chapter 2 we see **Paul defending his ministry**. Apparently Paul's enemies had committed themselves to spreading slanderous rumors about his life, his motives and ministry and they were relentless in their efforts. They accused him of making money out of his converts, not really caring for them and promoting his own ministry at their expense. He concludes chapter two with his encouragement to persevere under persecution and suffering and his certainty that they won't succumb either to the pressure or to the evil propaganda. He wrote to encourage them to know the power and triumph of God in their afflictions and not to be moved from their faith by them.

He was writing also **to establish them in holiness**. He was very much aware that they were converted pagans, living in the midst of a idol-worshipping culture that combined the worship of wood and stone and metal gods with overtones of erotic sexuality. Temple prostitutes were involved in many of these pagan religions and sexual license was characteristic of most of them. Paul was all too aware of the massive pull of their former life and the influence of family and friends and neighbors, and the great temptation to get sucked back into that godless lifestyle and so he writes in chapter 3 to establish them in holiness: *and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,* so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness *before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.* 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 Live as those who have been saved from this evil age – don't get seduced back to your old lifestyle – live as the redeemed of God – holy and blameless. *'For this is the will of God, your sanctification...'* 1 Thessalonians 4:3a Paul writes in chapter 4.

Paul also wrote to correct some wrong ideas about the Lord's second coming. They needed to understand that the return of Christ was no grounds for idleness. There were those who reasoned that if the Lord was returning soon, they didn't need to work and their testimony among the watching pagans was poor. In the second letter to the Thessalonians, written only a few months after the first, Paul reminded them that when he was with them he taught that if a man won't work, don't feed him, let him starve. Waiting for the Lord's return is not star-gazing – it isn't idleness – it doesn't mean that those who don't work can sponge off those who do. There were others that needed to learn from the doctrine of Christ's return the truth about their loved ones and Paul also addresses that in this fourth chapter. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

And finally Paul wrote to help establish the church there in order and discipline and to live in unity and peace with one another, and ends this letter with a series of commands: *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.* 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

This is a short little letter but it is packed with some great themes of the Gospel. And as we open this letter to see what was on Paul's heart we are going to develop those themes more fully. But there are two themes that run large through this letter and dominate Paul's burden for the Thessalonians. The first is the **second coming of Christ** – there is a reference to that in each chapter of this epistle. And running side by side with that is the theme of Christian living. These two themes run throughout this letter, and the next, to give us a sense of Paul's burden for the Thessalonians, which I have used as a banner over the whole thing: **Living in the light of Christ's return**. Our entire Christian life should be lived in view of our Lord's imminent return.

There are five things defined in this letter in terms of Christ's return. First of all **the character of the Christian life** is defined in terms of His return in chapter one: *For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.* 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10. Do you get the emphasis here? You turned to God from idols and now your life is all about **waiting for His Son's return**. This is not your final destination. Don't get attached to this life – don't get seduced by this world – you are here – **waiting** for Christ to come again. It is a waiting that echoes the cry of the early church – **Maranatha – even so come Lord Jesus!** Paul makes it clear that it is not an idle sort of passing-the-time kind of waiting, but rather it is **a waiting full of expectancy**, with our eyes on heaven, and our hearts free from earthly entanglements, and busily engaged in His work on earth. What we do here on earth should be done in the light of Christ's coming and the knowledge that we will meet Him face to face at His coming.

It is a waiting full of the gospel. We read those verses in chapter one that noted that the gospel had **sounded forth** from the Thessalonians. The Thessalonians weren't lounging about eating bon bons and watching television. They were energized to sound forth the gospel. In the Septuagint, this word is used of coming forth out of the earth and of the fruit of a man's body or lips, and I believe that Paul's intent was to indicate that what spontaneously springs from a life lived waiting in expectancy of Christ's return is the gospel. Our lives are full of the gospel and it is the gospel that spills out as a result and people are won to Christ as we are here waiting. We are compelled to share the living hope we have with our friends, our relatives, our co-workers. Our hearts are drawn to those people and places that have never heard the good news of the gospel. **We are compelled to sell all, to suffer all, to endure all for the sake of the gospel because we are waiting for His coming.**

The character of the Christian life is defined in terms of Christ's return and so is **the conduct of the Christian life**. In chapter two we read: *we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.* 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 Here is the thought of Christ's return linked with the theme of Christian living. And in chapter 3: *and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.* Again we see this theme repeated. **Expectation affects conduct in every sphere.** If we are truly looking for Christ to return, that expectation will affect how we live.

Paul defines this walk as a **walk worthy of God** – *walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.* 1 Thessalonians 2:11b He says in chapter four that we are to **walk so as to please God** – *Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.* 1 Thessalonians 4:1 And this worthy, pleasing walk is **an honest walk**: *so that you may walk properly [honestly] before outsiders and be dependent on no one.* 1 Thessalonians 4:12 Christian conduct is defined in terms of our walk – is your walk worthy of God, pleasing to God, and honest before the world?

Our conduct is also defined in terms of our **work** in chapter four again: *and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you,* How we conduct ourselves in the workplace ought to glorify God. Those around us ought to catch a glimpse of Christ as we work among them. And finally Paul says that our conduct is also defined in terms of **watching**: *So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake [watch] and be sober.* 1 Thessalonians 5:6

The comfort of the Christian life is defined in terms of Christ's return. The word translated comfort appears at least eight times, and is variously translated as encourage, exhort or comfort. The word is **parakaleo** and literally means to call alongside. Just as the Holy Spirit is called the **Paraklete** – or **Comfortor** – the One who comes alongside to comfort, encourage and exhort – this word has the same kind of thought. Evidently Paul was very concerned that the Thessalonians were comforted or encouraged in their faith. And we need that comfort and encouragement – especially when dark clouds come into our lives.

In chapter four Paul writes to comfort those who had lost loved one in death: *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* 1 Thessalonians 4:13 He wasn't saying, as some take it, that we grieve less than those who have no hope. Paul wasn't contrasting the degree of sorrow, but the quality of sorrow. He was contrasting the sorrow of the lost with the hope and comfort that the Christian has.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17

And then he says: *Therefore encourage [comfort] one another with these words.* 1 Thessalonians 4:18 Our comfort in this life is altogether wrapped up with the coming of Christ. That is our great hope and comfort. The death and resurrection of Christ is the foundation and hope of our salvation and His soon return is our hope and comfort. So death for Christians is not first and foremost a sorrowful affair – it is rather a celebration of a life lived in the light of Christ's return. For a man to die without Christ is sorrowful and tragic and filled with hopelessness. It is the conscious torment of a lost soul, the contemplation of an eternity in hell, without hope, without God, without light, without any prospect of release. For a man to die without Christ is to perish irretrievably. But for a man to die in Christ is like stretching out in the eternal arms of God, resting in Christ in eternal peace with the certain assurance of the resurrection in life.

The completeness of the Christian life is defined in the light of Christ's return. The three common elements to the life of all men, life, death and judgment are all defined in terms of Christ's return in this letter. We live our lives in the expectation of Christ's coming; as Christians we die in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection; and we face the coming judgment with the solid assurance that the wrath of God has been satisfied in the death of Christ and is no longer on our heads, and we will spend a joyful eternity with Christ in heaven. We are saved, we are sealed and we are secure.

Finally, the crown of the Christian life is defined in the light of Christ's return. *For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy.* 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 What is your highest hope or joy? What would you consider a crowing achievement in life? What is it that you could boast of in the end? Paul says that our crown of boasting is the souls we introduce to Christ. All the greatest achievements of man pale in comparison to this. All our money, all our time, all our talents and abilities are only valuable as they are put to work to this end – to bring the lost to Christ – so that at His coming we can stand before the Lord and not say, '**See my sea shells**' but '**Here Lord, are the souls reaped through Your gospel**'.

Only one life will soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last. Do we believe that? Do we honestly believe that? If we really believe that then why are so many of us living like the world lives? If we really believe that then why do we spend more time, give more money expend more energy on things that will, in the scope of eternity, soon be ashes, than we do to the things of God? If we really believe that, then why are so many in the church today so apathetic about His coming? Just ask yourselves, 'If Christ were to return to day, would we be those who welcome His return with joy and gladness, or would we be counted among those who are ashamed at His coming because we've given so little attention to His word and prayer and the gospel? O saints, let us be a people who live all the time in the light of Christ's return.

Our gracious God and Father,

Grant that we would live every moment of life in the light of the return of Your blessed Son. Don't let us drift – don't allow us to coast – don't let the temptations of this present world seduce us away from the everlasting pleasure of knowing Christ and the sweet assurance of His return. May we not be counted among those who have believed in vain, but rather among those who know the power of the gospel in our lives. Let our character and conduct be bounded by the knowledge and expectation of Your coming. May our comfort and completeness be defined by the glorious expectation of seeing You face to face. Don't allow us to work for the things that perish but for the eternal crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming. For those who do not have the assurance that they are saved, sealed and secure in Your everlasting arms, I pray that today would be the day of their salvation. You have the power to break through sin-hardened hearts and overcome all resistance to Your grace. Fill our souls with the delight of knowing You and spreading Your joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.