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# The Bible Student

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## THE CHURCH OF THE THESSALONIANS

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The order of the books in the New Testament is not inspired, but we can appreciate the wisdom displayed in their arrangement. The same wisdom may be observed in the order of the Pauline epistles. The epistle to the Romans was not the first to be written, but we feel it rightly comes first in our bibles because it establishes the believer in the gospel of God. The epistles to the Thessalonians were the earliest from the apostle's pen, but we can understand they are last in order of Paul's collective epistles because of their fuller teaching concerning the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the intervening epistles the apostle unfolds precious truths concerning Christ and the church. Someone has said that there could be no rapture without a church to be caught away, and no church without the gospel.

Philippi was the first place in Europe to receive the gospel of the grace of God through the lips of Paul. The stripes which he and Silas received at Philippi could scarcely have been healed when they came to Thessalonica. There was no synagogue at Philippi, but at Thessalonica there was a synagogue of the Jews; and Paul, following his usual custom, went into the synagogue and for three successive sabbaths reasoned with them out of the O.T. scriptures that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead, and that this Jesus Whom I announce unto you is the Christ (Acts 17). That Jesus is the Christ is an important truth for all to confess (cp. 1 John 5:1); it was of pointed application to the Jews. The word 'opening' in Acts

17:3 is elsewhere used in Luke 24:32, 45, and, as in the case of Lydia (Acts 16:14), so also at Thessalonica, the Lord opened the hearts of many to give heed to the word spoken.

That his stay at Thessalonica was not limited to three weeks is evident from the fact that the saints in Philippi, about 100 miles away, sent more than once to minister to his needs (Phil. 4:16). That his ministry was not limited to the Jews is evident from the number of converts from the Gentiles (ch. 1:9). But his stay was cut short by the unbelieving Jews, who, like Paul himself before his conversion, had a zeal for God but not according to knowledge; and who brought the same charge against him as the Jews had brought against the Lord Himself (cp. Acts 17:7; John 19:12). 'We have no king but Caesar' is a strange pretence of loyalty for a Jew. How Paul's heart yearned over the Saints, after he was separated from them, his letter declares (ch. 2:17-3:10).

From the manner in which the apostle addressed the various communities to whom he wrote, it is evident that he had no prescribed form of address. His epistles to the Thessalonians are addressed to 'the church of the Thessalonians' (for the use of this expression, see also Col. 4:16): they are the only epistles addressed to a church 'in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. This form of address must have been a great comfort and cheer to those who were young in the faith, and suffering severe persecution. Other Thessalonians were in the world, in darkness, and in ignorance of God. These had been taken out of the world, they had been brought out of darkness into His own marvellous light, and had been placed in an unassailable position 'in God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ': a comforting reminder of their relationship to God as Father, of their vital union with Him, and of His protecting care. Thessalonica was now composed of three distinct classes of people: Jews, Gentiles, and the church of God.

There were three things which the apostle never failed to remember when giving thanks to God on their behalf: their work of faith, their labour of love, and their patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith, hope and love are the three great

principles of the Christian life (ch. 1:3; 5:8; Col. 1:4, 5; 1 Cor. 13:13). Their 'work of faith' looked back to the moment of their conversion, when they 'turned to God from idols'; and was manifest in their changed lives. Their 'labour of love' referred to the time then present, described in v. 9 as 'serving a living and true God'. 'Patience of hope' looked on to the future, described in v. 10 as 'waiting for His Son from heaven'. The hope of the Thessalonians was characterized by patience because of the trials through which they were passing. In his second epistle the apostle says 'The Lord direct your heart into the love of God, and into the patience of Christ' (3:5 R.V.). His patience is in exercise every day, as He sees the lawlessness of men, and the affliction of His own. It is a sweet thought that, while *HE* is waiting with patience at God's right hand, till His enemies are made the footstool of His feet, we are privileged to wait with Him, in a communion of heart and mind, as well as for Him.

Some Christians seem to be afraid of the scripture doctrine of election. Paul had not the slightest hesitation in telling these recent converts of his assurance of their election (v. 14; 2 Thess. 2:13, 14). Instead of shaking their faith, it was calculated to strengthen it. 'What a comfort it must have been to them, in the midst of such severe persecution, to be assured that they were beloved by God, and chosen of God.' Election shuts no one out: it does make sure that some will be blessed; for apart from the electing grace of God no one would be saved. The door of salvation is wide open, so that 'whosoever will' may come: but if men in general spurn the voice of God in the gospel, God will not be deprived of the joy of blessing someone. Whilst the rest of the Thessalonians remained in darkness and unbelief, many of them hostile to the gospel, God in His matchless sovereign grace takes up those who believe to show how rich is the blessing He is willing to bestow. In the ages to come He will display, to a wondering universe, the surpassing wealth of His grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

We may ask: how did Paul know they were elect of God? The answer is that he knew it by their belief of the truth, and by the change it had wrought in their lives (ch. 1:5-10: ch. 2:13).

He knew it by the same token as we may know the elect of God. When the gospel comes to a man's heart in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and he becomes an imitator of the Lord, and a model of Christian conduct to others, we can have no doubt that such a man is elect of God.

Again we may ask: why did the gospel come to them with such transforming power? Was it because Paul was mighty and eloquent in the scriptures? Was it because he used persuasive words of man's wisdom? Was it because of the methods he employed? It was because the Thessalonians knew 'what manner of men' Paul and his companions were among them for their sake. No one reading ch. 2:1-10 could be surprised that the gospel, which had transfigured the life of Paul, and such a transforming effect on those among whom he laboured. When we find that the gospel has little apparent effect today, it is easy to blame the hardness of men's hearts, or to say it is a sign of the times: may not one reason be because we so little measure up to the standard set by Paul and his companions?

Reception of the gospel in the early days of the church's history was almost invariably accompanied by persecution, and the church of the Thessalonians was no exception. It assailed them from the beginning, but it was accompanied by joy in the Holy Ghost. Reception of the word of God in many parts of the world today is a signal for persecution, often of a very bitter and violent character. Persecution is to be expected (Matt. 5:10-12; John 15:20; 2 Tim. 3:12). "That a body of people should have abandoned their false gods, and be filled with the knowledge of the one true God, in a joy which no sufferings could chill, could not but strike minds so acute, speculative and communicative as the Greek. The sound of it rang out like a trumpet's in all directions' (W. Kelly), and was echoing still, so that the apostle heard about it wherever he went. There was no need for him to speak of the triumphs of the gospel in Thessalonica. As the faith of the saints in Rome was spoken of throughout the whole world (Rom. 1:8), so the faith of the Thessalonians was spread abroad.

Attention has often been called to the order of the words

in ch. 1:9, and to the contrast in Romans 1:18-32. In the latter scripture we have the solemn picture of those who knew God, changing the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. In the former passage we have those who knew not God, turning to God from idols. It was not that they turned from idolatry to God. They were attracted to God as revealed in the gospel, and in turning to Him their idols were necessarily left behind. The same principle was seen in Abraham, when the 'God of glory appeared to him' (cp. Acts 7:2 and Joshua 24:2). Idols are false and lifeless. 'The Lord is the true God. *HE* is a living God, and King of eternity' (Jer. 10:10). 'What a privilege to serve Him'. To serve Him is a labour of love.

What of the future? 'To wait for His Son from heaven, Whom He raised from among the dead, Jesus, our Deliverer from the coming wrath' (ch. 1:10). In this verse we have the Deity of Christ, and His unique relationship with the Father (His Son); His Name, which also sets forth His character as Saviour (Jesus); His resurrection from among the dead; His ascension in heaven; His coming again.

The 'wrath to come' refers not so much to eternal punishment in the lake of fire as to the awful judgments that will fall upon the world when the present day of grace is ended. It will include the Great Tribulation, which will not only be 'the time of Jacob's trouble' (Jer. 30:7), but 'the hour of temptation' which shall come upon all the world (Rev. 3:10). We believe that the day of wrath is near, that the storm clouds of Divine judgment are already gathering. How blessed to know that, before the vials of God's wrath are poured out upon the earth (Rev. 16), before a trumpet is sounded (Rev. 7), before a seal is opened (Rev. 6), we shall be gone: our Deliverer will have come! He will deliver us from the wrath to come by removing us from the scene where the wrath will fall. 'For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us that, whether we wake or sleep we should live together with Him' (1 Thess. 5:9, 10). Here is a glad truth, not to puzzle our brains but to warm our hearts.