

## The Epistles to the Thessalonians.

THE epistle and the spoken address have a common origin. Long before Christianity, rhetorical schools had been in the habit of throwing ideas into the form of epistles. There is an obvious similarity between hearers and readers. The rhetorical style in argument led to the use of the epistle for other ends than those of private correspondence. Often it is a great problem to decide whether a particular piece of writing is a speech or a genuine letter. We have that problem in the case of *Hebrews*. Often, it looks as if the epistolary form is little more than a literary device. That is the case with *2 Peter*. Also, it is a common thing for messages to be written in the form of letters, when there is no desire or intention to deliver them by word of mouth. It was a common practice among Greek historians to write speeches and put them in the mouths of their heroes, even though they were never delivered as speeches. It was not a case of what the author did say, but what it would have been suitable for him to say. The funeral oration of Pericles in the history of *Thucydides* is a case in point. So that we see that the soil was prepared for the New Testament. Christians did not originate the idea of the epistle as distinct from the private letter, an epistle which was meant for a crowd and had something of the nature of a manifesto. There is a difference between a letter and an epistle. A letter is personal, unstudied, spontaneous, as are *Philemon* and *3 John*. An epistle is deliberate, studied, a discussion for a large audience.

The bringing of the gospel from Asia to Europe was one of the momentous events in the history of Christianity. We are told that Paul was called to it by a divine revelation. And during all the time that Paul was working in Europe, he knew that the Spirit of God was behind his working. It meant many changes. It meant a passage from a civilisation which was predominantly Jewish to a civilisation which was predominantly Greek. It meant a change from the enthusiastic religious atmosphere of Asia Minor to the law and order of Rome. Macedonia, where Paul went first, was a promising starting place for the work of the gospel. In Greece proper, the old moral and political energy had decayed and the great mass of people were lethargic. But in Macedonia, the old national vigour was preserved. The people were well organised, but were comparatively independent and free.

Thessalonica was a city on the great Ignatian Way, which was the main high road between the East and the West, right across the north of the Greek Peninsula. There were many Jews in the city. They had a synagogue there. It was a free city, its freedom having been conferred upon it for taking the side of Octavius in the second Civil War. It was a seaport and a prosperous commercial town. Most of the inhabitants were well-to-do traders, although, of course, many of them were labourers. Women had a better social standing in Macedonia than in the rest of the civilised world, and women took a leading part in the founding of the Christian Church here. They did that, of course, in many other places as well, but not so easily. The city had a reputation for licentiousness, and the evil life of the people would be only intensified by the pagan religion practised there, which regarded sexual immorality as a means of divine worship. The Temples were centres of prostitution, as they are still in some districts of India. All this gives a colouring to the epistles.

After Paul left Thessalonica, he went to Athens. When Timothy, who was in the company of Paul, got to Athens months after, Paul sent him back to Thessalonica. He had wanted to go back himself, for he had been left a considerable time. He had tried on two definite occasions, but had been prevented, probably due to a return of the physical malady from which he was suffering. He calls it the "messenger of Satan." During Timothy's absence, Paul went on from Athens to Corinth, where soon he was joined by Timothy and Silvanus. Timothy brought a good report from Thessalonica. The faith of the converts had stood the test of persecution which they had suffered at the hands of the Jews, their love was manifesting itself in kindly deeds of charity to the other Christians in Macedonia, they were regularly attending public worship, they were edifying and comforting each other, trying to do the will of Christ, and they were all eagerly looking forward to seeing Paul again. But, at the same time, they were being hard pressed. They were a new Church in a heathen country. They were tempted to fall back into their old impurities. Some of the poorer members were abusing the charity of the rich. Some had given up work and were living in idleness. Some were growing morally slack, and had given up looking for the coming of Christ. The Church was getting disorderly and was opposing those whom Paul had left in charge. Some were beginning to misuse their spiritual gifts, and were thinking less of the edification of the Church than they were of themselves. Some had lost their friends by death and were afraid that they would not share in the glory of Christ at His appearing.

On the receipt of this news, Paul wrote off in great haste. At the beginning of his letter he couples Timothy and Silvanus with himself, but he soon forgets about them. Timothy probably acted as his scribe. Paul never wrote letters such as these. No man ever could have done. They were dictated, with Paul walking round the room. The sentences are broken off in the middle. He keeps going off from his point at a tangent as some new thought strikes him.

It is a perfectly friendly letter, natural, unforced, honest, simple, dealing with concrete things. It is the letter of a pastor to his people, the pouring out of his heart in thanksgiving over their faithfulness, answering their questions, advising them, warning them, admonishing them. It is a real letter, dealing with real problems. There is nothing artificial in it. It is not a sermon or a theological treatise. It is not a text-book of doctrine, not the building up of a system of thought. It is a letter which came from Paul white-hot, expressing exactly what he felt at the moment. It is tremendously important for the understanding of the man Paul, the difficulties of the early Christians, their trials and fears, but it has little bearing upon our thought and life. Its problems are not problems for us. But they are very much the same as those which occur on the mission field. And it will be a missionary who eventually is the leading interpreter of this letter.

In the letter, Paul tells the Church that he hopes soon to see them again, as soon, that is, as circumstances permit. He expresses his sheer delight at the good news he has heard about their spiritual life, and he defends himself and his conduct as a teacher against the attacks made upon him by the Jews. And it was Jews here who were doing that attacking, orthodox Jews, not Judaising Christians, as was the case in Galatia. We need to notice that Paul was having to defend himself personally against attack all his life. And he was always ready to do it, because he looked upon himself and his gospel as so closely bound up together. He tells them that he wishes, in his letter, to make up a little what he feels to be lacking in the faith of his converts. And he tries generally to tighten the bonds which unite him to the Church, and to sever more effectively the link between the Christians and their old heathenism.

So far as doctrine is concerned, and the epistle deals little with that, the most important section is that in which Paul deals with the second coming of Christ. The problem was this. All the early Christians looked for the second coming in their own day, within a very few years at the outside. The cause of the restlessness of some of the Christians at Thessalonica was the belief that the coming of the Lord was imminent. This doctrine,

unless carefully guarded, can be very unsettling. It has proved to be so in the history of the Church times without number. Why should we work when the end is near? That is how men have felt, and it is a natural feeling. And in this first letter to the Thessalonians there is a connection between the plea that the Christians should live quietly and work steadily, and the subject of the second coming. Paul makes two points.

First, what is going to happen to those who die before the Advent? Deaths had already taken place, and this had perturbed the Christians. Were the dead converts to have no place in the Kingdom? Some had perhaps been killed in the persecutions—were they to be robbed of their reward? The note that Paul had given to these people was hope, hope in a glorious future with Christ, a future which is really near at hand. Were the dead to be debarred from that hope? In answer to that, Paul tells the Christians not to be perturbed. The dead are safe in the hands of God, and they will have first place in the assembling of the saints at the coming of Christ (iv., 15-17).

Second, when is Christ to come? With regard to that, Paul says that nobody knows. There are many things not yet revealed to the saints and that is one of them. He simply does not know when the second coming will be. But it will be soon, he is certain of that. Soon to himself, I mean, not soon to us. But he tells the Christians that they must be always on guard, waiting as good soldiers for the coming. And by watching and waiting, Paul does not mean gazing at the stars and calculating times; he means getting on with the work of Christ and living the Christian life bravely.

So much for the first epistle. It is a real, personal letter, full of life and love and tenderness, invaluable for the study of the character of Paul and early Christianity, but not a dogmatic treatise, and not throwing much light on our needs to-day.

What of the second letter?

Paul is still with Timothy and Silvanus at Corinth. He writes not very long after the despatch of the first letter. He has heard of the mischief done by the misunderstanding of what he had to say about the second coming. False teaching had been given in his name, so much so that he even considers whether his name has not been forged to a letter setting forth views which are not his (ii. 2).

His aim in this second letter is to clear up misconception, and to bring the Church to a calm and sober mind. He emphasises at some length what he has already told them, reminding them of the lessons he had tried to impress upon them when he was in Thessalonica. He refuses to be dragged into sidetracks to discuss novel theories and difficulties. The situation

is very much the same as it was when he wrote the first letter, except in one particular. Apparently he had satisfied the Church about the state of the dead Christians. But some members are becoming filled with pride and are cherishing wild dreams and hopes about the state of those then living. And some are more restless and idle than ever in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. That is the state of affairs which calls forth the second letter.

There have been many grave objections raised by scholars against the authenticity of this letter. But I do not think that there is need to go into them. The arguments are technical, and would not appeal much to the ordinary reader.

In much the same language as in the first letter, Paul expresses his gratitude for the spiritual growth of the Christians in Thessalonica, and endeavours to establish them in their faith by the thought of the justice of God which would confirm the saints and which would be made especially manifest at the coming of Christ. He also asks for their prayers and urges them to regulate their social life on a sane and Christian basis. But the burden of the letter is to clear away the difficulty caused concerning the second coming.

The Thessalonians are too excited about it, and Paul tells them to keep a sober mind and not lose their heads. Some of them said that the Lord had already come, and went so far as to suggest that Paul had written to that effect. Deceivers were going about, leading the Church astray. For their guidance, Paul gives them a token whereby they can judge when the Lord's coming is near. Before He comes there is to be a supreme manifestation of evil, leading (1st) to a great apostasy in the Church, and (2nd) to the revelation of the Man of Sin, a being of Satanic proportions, in whom all the sin of humanity will be gathered together. This person is the great antagonist of Christ, and although he does not use the name "Antichrist," yet Paul prepares the way for the later conception which would be used by John. Meanwhile, the Antichrist is not to appear yet, for there is a withholding influence that delays his coming and keeps in check the power of evil. When, however, the Man of Sin appears, it is to be but the signal of the judgment of the sinners and the appearance of the Lord.

What are we to make of all this? It seems to be obscurity piled up on obscurity. I do not profess to be able to interpret it. And it has no bearing upon modern life. Paul is speaking of the expectations of the first century, not those of the twentieth.

One thing is certain. The restraining influence is a power for good. Paul probably meant the Roman Empire, the one

force of law and order at the time. He looked with more friendly eye at the Empire than did some other Christians.

Also it is certain that the idea of the Man of Sin has a history behind it. Paul did not bring it out of his own brain, nor did he derive it by direct revelation. He built this up on teaching that had been given before. We cannot go into the history in detail, but these are the salient features, and they alone need trouble us.

(1) There is the common Oriental conception of a struggle between God and the power of evil, in which struggle the evil power is bound up for a period, but is released for a final conflict with God before the end of the world. You find that idea coming out in the Apocalypse of John.

(2) There was the Jewish conception of a concerted attack upon Israel by her foes, led by Satan, which would be frustrated by the Messiah. We have that idea in Ezekiel xxxviii.

(3) Our Lord had foretold the rising of lawlessness, the concerted attack made upon the powers of righteousness by the forces of evil.

(4) A new point had been given to all this by the attempt of Caligula in A.D. 39 or 40 to erect a statue in honour of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem.

That history helps us to see Paul's idea in a clearer light. But much is still obscure. What is plain is that Paul looked for a wholesale manifestation of the powers of evil before the coming of Christ. The whole thing is bound up together. And it means little to us.

The significance of these letters is not doctrinal, but personal. They give us insight into the movement of early thought and also into the man Paul, his love and patience and manliness.

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