

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of THESSALONIANS I

The two Thessalonian Epistles are among the earliest of the Apostle Paul's extant writings (many scholars regarding Galatians as the first epistle he wrote). Written shortly after his visit to Thessalonica in 50 AD they give an important insight into the nature and character of early Church life twenty years after the death and resurrection of Christ. One chief burden in the epistles, and one for which we must even be grateful today, is the apostolic teaching on the second coming of our Lord. This is so characteristic throughout that it is possible to speak of them as having as their theme, 'Christ our Hope' in the same way as we speak of Romans teaching us of 'Christ our Justification' and Corinthians as 'Christ our Sanctification'. Perhaps the most challenging aspect, especially of the first epistle, is the picture it presents of a tremendously vital and living fellowship making a far reaching impact upon the darkness of the ancient world.

I) I:I

In any study of a New Testament epistle, it is useful and indeed necessary to look at the background and the circumstances which surround its having been written. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians from Corinth, during his 18 month stay there (Acts 18). The letter was therefore sent to a young church, and to comparatively new believers, perhaps a year or so old spiritually. One of our purposes in studying it is to see how skilfully Paul teaches them and grounds them in the faith, interpreting their experience to them in the light of the gospel revelation. This is a very important exercise: without it, experience is liable to run to seed. In Acts 17 we have the record of Paul's visit to Thessalonica, and this should be read as a necessary introduction to the study of the epistle, for it helps us to understand at least in part why the apostolic preaching had such striking results there. We need, in fact, to go back further than Acts 17, to the events which took place prior to Paul's visit to Thessalonica, and to the strange and inexplicable experiences he had in Asia during the course of the earlier part of his second missionary journey, when he was forbidden to preach in Mysia and Bithynia, and his way was hedged in until he was brought down to the coast of the Aegean Sea where, in Troas, he received the vision of the man saying to him, 'Come over into Macedonia and help us'. The establishment of the Church in Thessalonica was due in that first instance to the fact that, at a time when a divine strategy of the first importance was being unfolded and fulfilled, here was a man sensitive enough to the voice and mind of the Spirit to recognise the leading of God, and willing enough to allow his own plans to be modified, altered and even cancelled, and obedient enough to follow His will, even when it meant walking in the dark. It is the stamp of this kind of obedience and abandonment to God that we see in the Church of the Thessalonians.

2) I:I

When we follow Paul across the straits of the Aegean Sea (Acts 16) with the Macedonian call ringing in his ears, we may well imagine him anticipating the most signal kind of welcome awaiting his arrival in Greece. And yet, as events proved, the very opposite seemed to be the case, for all that happened was an insignificant gathering by the riverside with a little group of women folk, and an encounter with a demon-possessed girl which led to serious trouble, for Paul and his companion Silas were imprisoned because of it. The fact that divine intervention came to deliver them in no wise alters or minimises the fact that right from the moment Paul landed in Europe difficulties and disappointments beset his way, and obstacles and hindrances and seeming frustrations dogged his footsteps. Commentators are quick to point this out, and to relate it to the principle by which God works, viz. that He chooses the weak things of the world to confound the mighty and the foolish things to confound the wise. But what we must also see very clearly is the pattern of difficulty and hazard that marked the Apostle's way. It was a man with the marks of the cross upon him, in the form of great weals on his back from the stripes he received at Philippi, that went to preach the gospel to the Thessalonians. The Church in Thessalonica was born through the travail of the man who brought the message of the gospel there. The obstacles, the hindrances, the frustrations, the sufferings - these were the 'shape' of the crucible in which the instrument of blessing was forged and formed. As the poet has it, 'Out of the presses of pain, Cometh the soul's best wine'.

3) 1:1

The other determining factor in the creation of the striking vitality of the Christian fellowship in Thessalonica was of course the Apostle's ministry, and again Acts 17 (which is still the passage under consideration in this Note) provides us with sufficient material for us to ascertain both the method and the message he employed in the work of establishing the Church there. This is important in relation to the method and message he employs in the epistle itself in continuing to build up the fellowship of believers. Significantly, it is the same pattern in each instance. Paul's manner, we are told in Acts 17:2, was to reason with his hearers out of the Scriptures. This, we may gather, was the general, even invariable, practice wherever he went. There was nothing haphazard about it, and there were no particular gimmicks employed. What he did was to expound the Scriptures in the synagogue. Furthermore, that he should reason with them is indicative of his belief that his gospel has a reasoned and reasonable case, and that it makes its appeal first to the mind, not the emotions. His concern was to inform the minds of his hearers with the facts of the gospel and with the truth of the word of God, and get them to grasp it and understand it. Next, Paul's message to the Jews was a twofold one: firstly he proclaimed that the Messiah should suffer -i.e. he unfolded the prophetic Scriptures in the Old Testament, showing them to proclaim a suffering Messiah; and secondly, he asserted that 'this Jesus, whom we preach' was that Messiah - i.e. in His sufferings and death on the cross He fulfilled the Old Testament prophetic picture. We continue our consideration of this passage in Acts in the next Note.

4) I:I

The words Paul uses in Acts 17:3 for 'opening and alleging' are instructive as a commentary on his method and thoroughness in preaching. 'Opening' means 'unfolding and unraveling'; it is the word used of Lydia's conversion in Acts 16, when it is said that the Lord opened her heart, making plain all perplexities and leading her into an understanding of the truth. G. Campbell Morgan suggests that the Greek word has the force of unraveling something that has become tangled up, and uses the striking metaphor of the mess a ball of knitting wool gets into when a kitten has been playing with it, and the long patience needed to untangle it. Paul opened the Scriptures in such a way as to untangle people's confused thoughts and straighten out their minds and hearts. 'Alleging' has the meaning of 'setting things down side by side', and the idea is that the Apostle placed his arguments side by side in order, so that the conclusions that were to be drawn would appear clear and inevitable.

A further insight into the Apostle's preaching is afforded by the comment made by his enemies (Acts 17:7) 'that theirs is another king, one Jesus'. This is one of the clearest testimonies in Acts to this particular emphasis in apostolic preaching, and we should be grateful to them for this unmistakable indication that central and fundamental to the New Testament preaching of the gospel was the proclamation of the kingship of Christ, based on His sufferings and victory as Messiah. We may see from this that conversion, for Paul, was a bowing of the knee in surrender to the King. Small wonder that worlds were turned upside down wherever he went (Acts 17:6)!

5) 1:1

We are now able to turn to the text of the epistle, having explored the background and context of Paul's writing. And right at the beginning, in his very first words of greeting, the Apostle says something that is deeply significant in relation to his concern and intention to establish these young believers: he reminds them at the outset of the position in which grace has placed them. They are 'in God the Father, and in the Lord Jesus Christ'. This is a characteristic emphasis in Paul's epistles (cf Colossians. 1:2, Philippians 1:1, etc). The believer belongs to two worlds: on the one hand he is in Thessalonica, with all the hazards that this implies for him, surrounded by heathen pressures and all kinds of temptation; but on the other, he is in God and in Christ, and therefore has access to the limitless resources of the Godhead to enable him not only to stand in the evil day, but also to shine as a light in the darkness and despair of the world. No one should be under any illusion about how difficult it must have been to be a faithful and consistent Christian in such a situation as obtained in Thessalonica, but Paul is intent on reminding these believers of the wealth and glory of their position, and of their fundamental security. As the hymn puts it:

With salvation's walls surrounded
Thou mayest smile at all thy foes.

To remember day by day that this is our position, to take time at the outset of all our mundane duties that this is the truth about us if we are believers - we are in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ - must surely touch and transfigure all our way and enable us to live as sons and daughters of the King!

6) 1:2-3

It is instructive to place these verses alongside Luke's words in Acts 17:4, 'And some of them believed', for this in fact is what they explain and elucidate. Paul had presented a reasoned case for the gospel in Thessalonica, appealing to the minds of his hearers, and this had made them think, and think deeply. But when a man thinks seriously about the gospel, he realises that he cannot stop there; certain things must follow. For the appeal of the gospel is not to the mind only, but to the whole man, touching his conscience and stirring his heart, and presenting a challenge - and challenge it is! - at the centre of his being, to his will. And that central citadel and stronghold is assailed by the word of the gospel, which issues a summons to surrender. The man realises that if this appeal to his mind is valid and true, he will have to do something about it. It demands a response, and forces him to take sides (this is exactly what happened in Thessalonica - some believed, some reacted and rebelled; always this happens in the gospel. Christ is a divider of men). The response to be made is the capitulation of the will to Christ, 'giving in' to Him, and ceasing our resistance to His will. This is the meaning of faith. To 'believe' means to be captured and mastered by the gospel, nothing more or less than this. And in this, a man finds both forgiveness and new life, a life in which everything is different and old things are passed away. This is no mere theoretical notion; it expresses and demonstrates itself in tremendous new reality. And the way it does so is shown in 3 (which we shall look at in detail in the next Note). It was this that made the heart of Paul so happy about the Thessalonians, and reassured them that their faith was real. There was work in their faith, labour in their love, patience in their hope.

7) 1:3

Paul apparently has some particular work of faith in his mind here, so the scholars think, something the Thessalonians had actually done because they believed. This is very important: it did not leave them the same as before. Faith left its mark on their lives in definite action (this is the emphasis made in Hebrews 11 - by faith the heroes of old waxed mighty for God). 'Labour' refers to effort spent. Paul not only recalled something which the faith of the Thessalonians did, but also, to quote Denney, 'the wearisome toil in which their love spent itself'. It is the cost of the work that is in Paul's mind. We must learn to love before we can labour. Love is the great motivating force in the work of the kingdom - love to Christ more than love for men, though in loving Him we shall love them also, for His sake. 'Patience' is the endurance that characterised their lives and which was inspired by the hope of the coming of the Lord. This doctrine of the coming of Christ was imbedded in their hearts, and it served to impart an endurance and steadfastness to their lives that was quite unmistakeable. Such are the evidences of a real work of grace, and they should prompt some sober and earnest reflection in the hearts of all who name the name of Christ.

8) 1:4-5

The true reading in 4 should be, 'Knowing, brethren beloved of God, your election'. The phrase may be taken as referring both to what has already been said and to what follows. It is certainly true that the qualities mentioned in 3 are an evidence of electing grace having been at work, but it is as true to say that the Apostle's assurance about their election came from the fact that when he and his companions visited Thessalonica they were attended by the most striking and unmistakable manifestations of the Spirit of God. This, it seems, is the force and point of what he says in 5. Paul, sensitive to the presence of the Spirit as he was, knew that it was no ordinary liberty that he had experienced in preaching among them: unction from on high, and that to an unusual degree, had set a manifest seal upon his work, in such a way that he was conscious that God was having His way in the hearts of his hearers ('in much assurance'). This is a tremendous experience too little known, alas, in the Church today, but greatly to be desired and coveted by all who preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. What is said at the end of 5 makes it clear that this quality of preaching and ministry was integrally related to what the apostles were and the kind of lives they lived. They were men in whom Christ had His sovereign sway (cf 2:1-10, especially 10), and by whom He was able to 'get through' to men. What they were, as Denney puts it, can be seen from what the Thessalonians became, for like begets like in the spiritual life, and they in turn became life-giving and fruit-bearing all around Macedonia (see 7,8). It is one of the deepest truths in Christian service that what we are finally determines the quality of all we do in the gospel. The unmistakable stamp of quality was upon all Paul's work because of what he himself was for the sake of those to whom he preached.

9) 1:4-5

The 'assurance' of which Paul speaks in 5 can be taken in two ways. On the one hand, it refers, as was suggested in the previous Note, to the consciousness he had that the unction of God was upon his preaching and that He was having His way in those who heard it. On the other hand, however, it can be understood in the sense of being sure of the message he preached. The Apostle had a full and strong conviction of the truth of the gospel he preached. There was no misgiving or doubt in his mind concerning it. As Denney says, we can hardly imagine an apostle in doubt about the gospel - not quite certain that Christ had risen from the dead, and wondering whether, after all, his death had abolished sin. He adds, 'God cannot work through a man in whose soul there are misgivings about the truth'. This note of authority is so often missing in preaching today. We have so many problems and doubts. It was said of C.H. Spurgeon that his abiding legacy was his faith in the converting power of the gospel. It is because we bring such complicated minds and hearts to the gospel that we are seemingly incapable of seeing and believing the true and unmistakeable word of life. Thomas a Kempis says, in 'The Imitation of Christ', 'He to whom the eternal Word has spoken is delivered from a world of unnecessary conceptions'. The blind man who was healed by Jesus said, 'One thing I know: whereas I was blind, now I can see'. Some of this honest-to-goodness, down-to-earth realism would not come amiss in the pulpit or college today!

10) 1:6-8

We now turn in more detail to what the Thessalonians became through hearing and receiving the Word, and how they became this. We think there is an integral connection between the affliction with which they received the gospel on the one hand, and the joy they experienced and the impact their testimony made on the other. This is but one more expression of the fundamental principle that if we suffer we shall reign, and that death produces life. It was out of the crucible of suffering that Paul's unction in preaching to them came, and it was a similar process of tribulation that brought forth the Thessalonians into spiritual joy and fruitfulness in witness. This should encourage some burdened, battling soul today. Think what the crucible is for, think of the joy that is set before you, and endure (Hebrews 12:2)! The word 'ensamples' in 7 translates a Greek word originally meaning 'the mark of a stroke or blow' before it finally came to mean 'pattern' or 'example', and there is a useful association of ideas in the first meaning. The quality of the Thessalonians' testimony was such that they could be said to have 'left their mark' wherever they made contact, and 'struck a blow' for the gospel. The metaphor changes in 8 with the words 'sounded out', which Leon Morris says might describe the clarion call of a trumpet or a roll of thunder. What Paul means is that their conversions drew attention to the gospel like a trumpet sound or a thunder clap, and their inspiration was caught by those who listened to them (8b). Indeed, the news of what had happened to them was so striking that it travelled ahead of the Apostle in his journeyings, so that every new town he visited heard of them before he came to them, making it unnecessary for him to give them an account of the astonishing work. O for such impact in the testimony of the Church today!

11) 1:9-10

These verses really come first in sequence, so far as Christian experience is concerned. We have discussed the effects in the Thessalonians' lives of believing the gospel (3, 4), but 9, 10 deal with the prior cause of these effects, and speak of the actual response of faith itself to the preaching and message of the Apostle. Again we should set these words alongside Acts 17:4, 'And some of them believed', as describing what it meant and involved for them to believe and as indicating the response that Paul's preaching produced. Indeed, in the truest and deepest sense and in general accord with the basic teaching of Scripture - it was the preaching of the gospel that created this response of faith. It is true that it says here, 'ye turned to God', but it can never be said that of their own free will they turned, as if 'turning to God' were something they did. Rather, they were wrought upon by the gospel. It is significant that conversion, which literally means 'a turning about' is almost always spoken of in Scripture in the passive voice. It is not something a man does, but something that is done to him, by God. It is God who converts the soul, and the soul is converted by His grace. Faith in Christ is not ultimately something that we exercise, but something that is given us by God (cf Ephesians 2:8, Philippians 1:29). It is, as the Shorter Catechism puts it, 'a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation, as He is offered to us in the gospel'. Thus, prior to, and behind, the Thessalonians' turning to God was His turning to them in electing grace and love. He, the sovereign Lord, had purposed a work of grace in Thessalonica, and it is this that ultimately explains the strange constraint that was upon Paul in Mysia and Bithynia, and the vision at Troas. 'I want My Word preached there', said God, 'for I have much people in this city'. And through the foolishness of preaching He called them to Himself, and they 'turned to God'.

12) 1:9-10

We should note how deeply theological Paul's description of the Thessalonians' conversion is here. It is a very comprehensive statement, covering the past ('Turned to God from idols'), present ('to serve the living and true God'), and future ('to wait for His Son from heaven'), and may be studied in detail in this threefold way. What was said in the previous Note about the sovereignty of God in salvation is re-affirmed when we consider the last phrase of 10 ('delivered from the wrath to come') in relation to their turning to God. For 'Christ suffered.... that He might bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18). It is His death that enables men to turn to God because it annuls the sentence of condemnation under which they stand as sinners. How else should they escape from the prison-house (and be enabled to turn to Him) if their sentence were not cancelled? Christ does not break into the prison house illegally, but as of right. This thing was not done in a corner! Note also the order of Paul's words - to God from idols, not from idols to God. It is this positive salvation that Thomas Chalmers refers to in his famous phrase, 'the expulsive power of a new affection'. We do not turn back to idols in order to come to God, but rather, in turning to God we thereby turn from idols. Best of all, it is a coming back to God Himself from the separation and isolation of sin. The gospel restores a man from the loneliness of sin to fellowship and friendship with God; it is the repair of the ravages that sin had made in the original relationship between God and man. Apart from this central reality, it is not possible to understand the New Testament conception of salvation in general nor the Thessalonians' experience in particular. They were now into living touch with God. That is everything, in Christian life.

13) 1:9-10

The Thessalonians' turning to God from idols led to service for Him, and this flowed inevitably from the fellowship with Him into which they had been brought by the gospel. This is always the true apostolic order, but it is often, alas, departed from to such an extent that service becomes a substitute for fellowship with God. It is surely one of the tragedies in the life of the Church that there should be so many within its fellowship who are trying to serve a God they do not really know, and many who do know Him who have allowed service to displace fellowship with Him, to the great detriment of their own lives and the consequent barrenness and ineffectiveness of their influence on others. The vitality of service that flows from living fellowship is amply demonstrated in this very chapter. From them sounded out as a trumpet the word of the Lord (8). They were possessed by a Christ-like passion to tell out the gospel that had saved them. When they were set free from their prison house, their lips were touched with holy fire so to do. But this is possible only for those who walk in fellowship with God. Love for Christ was the constraint for the Thessalonians; but one does not love from a distance, in the Christian life: love implies involvement. This is what we desperately need to re-learn today. Effective service, as someone has put it, comes not from overwork, but from overflow. The overflow of hearts united in love and faith to Christ.

14) 1:9-10

There is a simple grandeur about the sequence in Paul's thought here - 'to turn...to serve ...to look for His Son from heaven', particularly the last phrase which we now consider. The coming of the Lord in power and glory is of course integral to the gospel message, and is a particular emphasis in the Thessalonian epistles. We may think of it in a number of ways: (i) on the world scale - His coming will be a coming to take His power and reign, when all His enemies shall be put under His feet and subdued, and the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea; (ii) in relation to creation itself - for His coming will be the signal for the rejuvenation and restoration of the created order which in the meantime, as Paul tells us in Romans 8:19ff, waits with eager longing for the manifestation of the sons of God; (iii) in personal terms - for, as is made clear later in the epistle (4:13ff) and in 1 Corinthians 15:51ff, believers have a personal hope of glory. When Christ comes the second time, He shall change our vile bodies and fashion them like unto His glorious body (Philippians 3:21) and we shall be saved to sin no more; (iv) in relation to future service, in the sense that how we live in the 'waiting time' will determine our 'capacity for glory' in the life to come. Paul says elsewhere that 'eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him', but we may gather, nevertheless, from our Lord's words in the parables of the talents and the pounds that faithfulness in this life conditions the future, and that the words, 'I will make thee ruler over many things' and 'Be thou ruler over ten cities' are a direct response to that faithfulness. All this Paul would have taught the Thessalonians when he imparted to them the truth of the gospel; all this is implied in the phrase 'to wait for His Son from heaven'.

15) 2:1-2

There is almost more in this epistle for preachers of the gospel than for anyone else, and more here for preachers than anywhere else in the New Testament. How grateful we should be that the Apostle speaks to us in such autobiographical vein, as he tells us of his ministry. He speaks in these verses, as so often he was obliged to speak, in defence of that ministry, to rebut the charges made so unworthily against him. He has already used the phrase 'our entrance in unto you' in 1:9 (the word in the Greek is the same in both cases). There, he spoke of it in relation to what others had heard about the apostolic visit to Thessalonica - everywhere he went he realised that men were aware of, and familiar with, the power with which he and his colleagues had ministered there. Even their opponents bore reluctant witness to it when they said, 'These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also' (Acts 17:6). Here, however, he refers to the Thessalonians, and reminds them of what they themselves had experienced of their coming among them. The force of this, as the commentators point out, is that Paul is concerned to defend his conduct against those who were slandering him to the Thessalonians, the Judaisers who plagued his life and ministry all his days. Denney says, 'From the false character in which he has been dressed by his adversaries, he can appeal to the true, in which he loved and moved familiarly among them'. One might marvel at the thought of a man of Paul's integrity and godliness of life being so maligned and misrepresented, if one did not recall our Lord's own words, 'Woe unto you when all men speak well of you'. Misrepresentation, it would seem, is part of the cost of faithful ministry, part of the price that has to be paid for the blessing that undoubtedly comes through it. To say, however, that blessing flows from it does not justify or excuse it in those who are guilty of it, nor does it mean that it should necessarily be acquiesced in by those who suffer it, and Paul spiritedly defends himself here, and is justified in doing so. When there is much at stake in the work of the gospel, there are some things that ought not to be let pass.

16) 2:1-4

It is striking to realise that so often Paul's most impressive statements in the gospel arise out of some local situation of this nature (viz. that of defending himself against misrepresentations), and tremendous, lasting truths are set down for the blessing of the whole Church. We are given in these and the following verses a picture of the kind of ministry that is not 'in vain' (1), that is owned and honoured of God in blessing to men. And first of all, we must take note of the manifest sense of God's compelling call to His work that throbs here and in all Paul's writings. It was by the constraint of the divine will that he was an apostle (cf Hebrews 5:1-4). Necessity was laid upon him (1 Corinthians 9:16), and he could do no other. There is little doubt that this was one of the primary factors that contributed to his fruitfulness. In this connection, the following comment by George Adam Smith, the great Old Testament scholar and former Principal of Aberdeen University, are very challenging and relevant: 'There are men who pass into the ministry by social pressure or the opinion of the circles they belong to, and there are men who adopt the profession simply because it is on the line of least resistance. From which false beginnings rise the spent force, the premature stoppages, the stagnancy, the aimlessness and heartlessness, which are the scandals of the professional ministry and the weakness of the Christian Church in our day. Men who drift into the ministry, as it is certain so many do, become mere ecclesiastical flotsam and jetsam, incapable of giving carriage to any soul across the water of this life, uncertain of their own arrival anywhere, and of all the waste of their generation the most patent and disgraceful. God will have no drift-wood for His sacrifices, no drift-men for His ministry.'

17) 2:1-4

The way in which Paul thought of his calling (4) is most impressive. If we read as in the AV, his words are expressive of the sense of wonder and high privilege that gripped him at the thought of being allowed to handle the gospel, this holy thing that can change human destiny. It is certainly true that Paul never got over the fact that God should have chosen him, the chief of sinners, to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ (cf Ephesians 3:8). But the AV's 'allowed' in 4 scarcely does justice to the word in the original, which is more accurately translated as 'proved' or 'tested'. The meaning is 'to approve after test', and Paul thinks of himself as having been 'tried out by God, and then trusted for service'. One thinks of the fourteen years that elapsed between his conversion experience on the Damascus Road and the setting apart by the Holy Spirit in Acts 13, and realises something of the significance of these 'silent' years, in which the Apostle was being prepared for his life's work. In view of the almost complete misunderstanding of this necessary 'testing time', and the consequent pitchforking of newborn babes in Christ into discriminate service, one is tempted to wonder whether many are not 'disqualified' (in the sense of Paul's word here) before they are well begun in the Christian life. It needs to be realised that approval for service is gotten not in service but first in life and character. The ministry is here regarded as a stewardship committed to men, for which they will be required to give an account, and obviously no master is going to commit such responsibility to his men without some idea whether they are fit or not to bear it and discharge it. Why should it be thought different in the work of the kingdom of God?

18) 2:1-4

While on the subject of being approved as ministers of Christ, the following quotation from the writings of Dr James Denney bears a highly relevant and challenging message for all who would serve Christ in fidelity and truth: 'The essential qualification of the Christian minister', he says, 'is a heart pledged to his brethren in the love of Christ. That is the only possible basis of an authority which can plead its own and its Master's cause against the aberrations of spiritual liberty, and there is always both room and need for it in the Church. Certainly it is the hardest of all authorities to win, and the costliest to maintain, and therefore substitutes for it are innumerable. The poorest are those that are merely official, where a minister appeals to his standing as a member of a separate order, and expects men to reverence that. If this was once possible in Christendom, if it is still possible where men secretly wish to shunt their spiritual responsibilities upon others, it is not possible where emancipation has been grasped either in an anarchic or in a Christian spirit. Let the great idea of liberty, and of all that is cognate with liberty, once dawn upon their souls, and men will never sink again to the recognition of anything as an authority that does not attest itself in a purely spiritual way. 'Orders' will mean nothing to them but an arrogant unreality, which in the name of all that is free and Christian they are bound to condemn. It will be the same, too, with any authority which has merely an intellectual basis. A professional education, even in theology, gives no man authority to meddle with another in his character as a Christian. The University and the Divinity Schools can confer no competence here. Nothing that distinguishes a man from his fellows, nothing in virtue of which he takes a place of superiority apart: on the contrary, that love only which makes him entirely one with them in Jesus Christ, can ever entitle him to interpose. If their joy is his joy; if to grieve them, even for their good, is his grief; if the cloud and sunshine of their lives cast their darkness and their light immediately upon him; if he shrinks from the faintest approach to self-assertion, yet would sacrifice anything to perfect their joy in the Lord - then he is in the true apostolic succession; and whatever authority may rightly be exercised, where the freedom of the spirit is the law, may rightly be exercised by him. What is required of Christian workers in every degree - of ministers and teachers, of parents and friends, of all Christian people with the cause of Christ at heart - is a greater expenditure of soul in their work.'

19) 2:1-4

In the quotation in the previous Note, Denney mentions substitutes for true authority, and this raises the question of those who, through falling into the temptation to take lower ground, fail the test for approval. Lack of, or loss of, authority is one consequence; but there are others also. If open falling away does not occur - sometimes it does, for who has not known of those who allow spiritual issues to be crowded out of their lives - something almost as terrible, if not worse, is liable to, the development of a blase cynicism, more dangerous by far than the most powerful corrosive. One has seen this in young men (sometimes in older men too) at the outset of their ministry or not yet through their college training. It is frightening to behold, for it spells barrenness and blight on a man's work before he even starts. It is something to guard the soul against as from the plague. Sometimes such a cynicism is a camouflage to conceal a desperate un-sureness that has developed in the mind; sometimes it conceals a death that the man is refusing to die. But, whatever it is, it is a destroying power, expressing itself in 'cleverness', 'smartness', 'flippancy' and even a questionable moral tone. 'Ichabod' is writ large upon such lives before ever they begin to serve. O the tragedy of it! It is possible to get away with it in the context of life and training at college; but in the loneliness and the responsibility of a parish ministry, where exposure of all forms of unreality is always a certainty, no one gets off. One has to be real there, for work to be done!

20) 2:1-6

It is the sense of having been put to the test by God and entrusted with the gospel - with the solemn consciousness that this inevitably brings of working under His all-seeing eye - that explains Paul's vehement disclaimers in these verses. Neither error, uncleanness or guile, flattery, covetousness nor seeking of glory, could be possible for one who wrought as he did in the sight of God, who tries the hearts of men. This, in fact, tells us a good deal about both the man and his message. On the one hand, being entrusted with the gospel, which is the truth of God, as a sacred stewardship, Paul is conscious of the 'givenness' of the message he is called upon to preach. It was not something he had to work out himself, or grope after. In 1 Corinthians 15:3, he says, 'I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received'. On the other hand, true doctrine and true character always go together. As Denney says, 'For Paul it was unthinkable that true doctrine should not make him true. Indeed, he generally argues from the one to the other. 'Look at my work', he says, 'Let that tell you what manner of man I am'. Such was Paul's defence of himself against the calumnies of man.

21) 2:1-6

Something else that we see in these verses is the cost of faithful ministry. The evil speaking against him that Paul had so often to endure must have been a heavy price for such a spirit to pay. Jesus once said, 'Blessed are ye when men shall revile you...', and one does not doubt that the Apostle proved the truth and grace of these words; but reviling is not nothing, for all that, and one great part of the cost of fruitful work in the gospel is the pain that comes to hearts that because of their very nearness to Christ are deeply sensitive to the hurts and slights and evil speakings of unworthy men. The reason for this is, of course, not far to seek, for the gospel when preached at depth challenges men so much that it forces the evil in them to react and retaliate, and to their own dismay and shock they are not able to resist the venom they express against the true servant of God. It is ever true that 'the thoughts of many hearts shall be revealed' by the impact of the gospel (cf Luke 2:34, 35). We must not suppose that it will ever be much different in the service of Christ. There will always be opposition. Since men are men, it will never be plain sailing in gospel work. Great and effectual doors opened to us will always also mean many adversaries. Favourable circumstances for the preaching of the gospel must simply be regarded as an idealistic dream; there are none. The gospel flourishes in the midst of difficult situations, and the costliness involved in facing these situations makes its significant contributions to the blessing that flows from the preaching of the good news.

22) 2:7-12

The central idea in these verses lies in 8 - 'we were willing to have imparted to you...our own souls'. This stands in direct contrast to the base accusations that had been made against Paul of engaging in gospel work in order to gratify his love of gain. So far from being self-regarding, his ministry was in fact characterised by self-giving of the most absolute and costly kind. This self-giving is expressed in two wonderfully eloquent metaphors - a nurse cherishing her children (7), and a father charging his children (11). Concerning 7, there is a variant reading for the word 'gentle', and some manuscripts read 'babes' instead. The meaning would then be that Paul ministered to his converts 'like a nurse among her children talking in baby language' - indicating the tender way in which the Apostle adapted himself to their capacity. This is possible, of course, but we think hardly likely; when we think of the strong meat of the Epistle to the Romans, for example, which the Apostle wrote to relatively new converts in Rome, it becomes clear that he was not in the habit of accommodating his teaching to their capacity, but rather giving them all the deep truths of revelation, making no concessions whatever, and thereby creating capacity to receive, and enlarging it. We therefore incline rather to the reading adopted by the AV, and take the Apostle to refer to 'the tenderness of a mother warming her babe at her breast' (Denney). This is the quality of the care which he gave to those he brought to the birth in Christ, and the metaphor is well chosen, for no one reading his epistles could mistake the gentle, loving, faithful and sacrificial spirit with which he ministered to those who were on his heart. As Denney finely puts it, 'He not only kept back from them nothing of the whole purpose of God; he kept back no part of himself'. And when a man loves like that, he has earned the right to say anything to those he loves.

23) 2:7-12

Not only, however, did he show the wealth of tenderness and gentleness that characterise a mother's love, but also the loving discipline of a father's heart. And as this combination has such a significant part to play in home and family life with natural children, so also in spiritual life its importance can scarcely be exaggerated. The whole passage here speaks of what is involved in spiritual parenthood; Paul's ministry was never a mere academic exercise, but a bringing of many sons and daughters into glory, travelling in birth until Christ was formed in them (cf Hebrews 2:10; Galatians 4:19). Good parents in this sense are those who live 'holily, justly and unblameably' before their children, but this will mean a combination of gentleness and firm discipline, and never the one to the exclusion of the other. It is the departure from this in either direction in the spiritual life, into sentimentalism, on the one hand - gentleness without discipline - or into loveless harshness on the other - discipline without gentleness - that causes such profound and lasting stultification of personality in the spiritual life, creating problems that sometimes a lifetime of patient pastoral care will scarcely suffice to solve. Paul's concern was to avoid this, and to lead them (11) by personal counselling into all God's perfect will for them, seeing as he did what they had it in them by the grace of God to be, and refusing to let them be anything less. No less than this was involved in their 'walking worthy of God', who had called them into His kingdom and glory.

24) 2:7-12

Dr James Denney has a fine passage commenting on these verses. Speaking of the power of the gospel to create new relations and enrich life, and referring to the wealth of love kindled in the Apostle's heart for the Thessalonians, he says: 'He had given up everything for Christ's sake. He had no home, no wife, and no child; as far as we can see, no brother or friend among all his old acquaintances. Yet we may be sure that not one of those who were most richly blessed with all these natural relations and natural affections knew better than he what love is. No father ever loved his children more tenderly, fervently, austerely and unchangeably than Paul loved those whom he had begotten in the gospel. No father was ever rewarded with affection more genuine, obedience more loyal, than many of his converts rendered him. Even in the trials of love, which search it and strain it, and bring out its virtues to perfection - in misunderstandings, ingratitude, wilfulness, suspicion - he had an experience with blessings of its own which surpassed them all. If love is the true blessedness of our life, surely none was richer or more blessed than this man, who had given up for Christ's sake all those relations and connections through which love naturally comes. Christ had fulfilled to him His promise (Mark 10:29, 30); He had given him an hundredfold in this life, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children. It would have been nothing but loss to cling to the natural affections and decline the lonely apostolic career.'

25) 2:13-16

Paul touches in these verses on a subject that has an impressive significance for the Scriptures - hearing and receiving the Word of God. Two statements made by our Lord provide a useful starting point for discussion: in Mark 4:24, He says, 'Take heed what ye hear', and in Luke 8:18, 'Take heed how ye hear'. The first of these lays the responsibility of the ministry fairly and squarely on the preacher, but the second equally forcefully on the hearer. To hear the word worthily is something of tremendous, eternal moment, and to fall down here has fateful consequences, as we see from the reference in Luke: 'whosoever hath (e.g. faith / responsiveness of heart) to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have'. How, then, did the Thessalonians hear the Word? In the answer to this question we find an explanation, from the human standpoint, of the extraordinary vitality of the Thessalonians' experience. Paul tells us that when they received it, they received it not as the word of men, but as the word of God, accepting its authority and the categorical imperative it presents to heart and conscience without question or reserve. This is the only proper way for the Scriptures to be received, as will become clear in the next Note.

26) 2:13-16

Following on from what was said at the end of the previous Note, it is significant to see that the word 'received', which is used twice in 13, translates two different Greek words. One scholar points out that the first word is a technical term used in the New Testament to describe the reception of the message preached by the apostles (cf 1 Thessalonians 4:1; 1 Corinthians 11:23, 15:3) and denotes, as it were, an action that is formal and outward. The second word, however, is warm and rich in its association, and conveys the idea of a welcome. It is the word used to describe the reception we give to a welcome and honoured guest. We can learn a good deal from this contrast of ideas. There are different ways of receiving news: we can do so indifferently, only half heeding it, not realising its significance, not allowing it really to register; we can receive it with dismay, or with incredulity; or we can welcome it with great joy. All these reactions are possible also in hearing the Word of God. One recalls the different ways spoken of in the Parable of the Sower, with seed falling by the wayside, on stony ground, and among thorns, as well as on good ground. Men may hear the word of the gospel without understanding it, and see without perceiving it. But the Thessalonians were different: they not only received the word, they welcomed it. They were like the Psalmist who said, 'I rejoice at Thy word as one that findeth great spoil' (Psalm 119:162). Why was this? It was that they discerned behind the words of men the word of the living God (cf Acts 10:44, where Cornelius, listening to Peter's words, heard the Word; also 1 Corinthians 11:29, where Paul speaks of 'discerning the Lord's body' in the sacrament).

27) 2:13-16

Why does our hearing of the gospel so often fall short of that of the Thessalonians? One possible answer to this question is that there is a preparation of heart for hearing the Word that is often neglected. One recalls in this connection what is said of the Bereans in Acts 17:11. They had readiness of mind: and it is to prepared minds and hearts that God can speak. It is safe to say that many people effectively prevent the Word from doing its work in them before ever they hear it, because they put hindrances in the way and close up their hearts. See 1 Peter 2:1ff and James 1:21. What is sometimes read at Communion Services about the manner of coming to the Lord's Table can be said just as truly of coming under the sound of the Word: 'It is necessary that we come with knowledge, faith, repentance and love; not holding fellowship with evil or cherishing pride or self-righteousness, but conscious of our weakness and in sorrow for our sins, humbly putting our trust in Christ and thirsting after Him, and seeking His grace'. The importance of coming to the hearing of the Word with a sympathetic spirit should also be stressed, for this can work a release in the preacher and draws the Word forth from him. And if preaching is God's appointed means for speaking to His people, then as Calvin says, we should come to hear it with all the eagerness with which the wise men came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him'.

28) 2:13-16

What was said at the end of the previous Note leads to another point: the exercise of living faith in the hearing of the Word. As we see from Hebrews 4:2, the preaching needs to be mixed with faith in them that hear it. Paul teaches in Romans 10 that 'faith cometh by hearing', and this is true; 'When one hears the gospel and is mastered by it, this is faith' (Nygren). The Word creates the faith. But it is not the whole story. There is the reality of human responsibility within the mystery of divine election, and in the Scriptures men are always held responsible for not believing the Word and receiving the gospel. It is necessary to mix faith with the Word, to make it profit. And when this happens, Paul tells us that 'it effectually worketh' in those who believe. If we really welcome the divine Word, it will never be inoperative, for it is living and dynamic. Paul speaks in Galatians 3:2 of 'receiving the Spirit by the hearing of faith'. This is why the welcoming of the Word is never inoperative! 'Wherever there are hearts that will give an undivided welcome to God's Word, and mix their hearing with faith, there God's gift will be given, and the Holy Spirit will come'. This applies, moreover, at all stages of the Christian life, not only at its inception. The Word derives its divine character after it is received. Faith conditions its efficacy.

29) 2:13-16

But there is the other side. The Word has a twofold work, its strange work as well as its proper work, and this also is fraught with momentous consequences. Questioning and resisting the Word results in dulness of hearing (Hebrews 5:11); this is a judicial deafness from the Lord (Isaiah 6:10), and is but an intermediate stage in the journey to full and utter opposition to its message. This was the situation with the Jews as a people; they refused the Word; it did not profit them. And not only did they refuse it, they tried to hinder and prevent others having it, that they might be saved (16). One has only to think of Paul's long experience of being harried and opposed by the Jews wherever he went in his missionary travels, to realise how bitter and implacable was their opposition to the truth of the gospel, and how their attitude simply confirmed all their previous history down the ages of the Old Testament. Stephen spoke the simple truth about them when he cried, 'Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7:51). The end result of continued resistance to, and refusal of, the Word of God is always judgment, and Paul points to this in 16b. The 'wrath' here referred to is not, Denney thinks, the final judgment, but some event or some act of God in which His wrath had been unmistakably made manifest, some definite temporal judgment that came upon them for the specific sin of resisting the gospel. God is not mocked; those who refuse the Word, reject its claims, and seek to hinder others from hearing it, fill up their sins always, and bring the censure and chastisement of God upon themselves.

30) 2:17-20

There is a great deal for us to learn in these seemingly casual remarks that conclude the chapter, not least in the reference to Satan. It is clear, for example, from this that the Apostle had instructed the Thessalonians about the reality of the powers of darkness in the Christian life. The way in which Paul simply states his facts here is evidence enough to show that they already knew enough about the devil and his wiles for a simple mention of his working to be sufficient, without the necessity of a long explanation of what he meant. 'Know your enemy' was a theme that was included in his teaching of his converts. We cannot say how it was that Paul was hindered in this instance with the devil, but what is of more importance is to ask how he was able to discern between the hindrances of Satan on the one hand, and the restraints of the Spirit of God on the other, as in his experiences in Asia when he was forbidden to preach in Mysia and Bithynia. How does one know when it is God, and when it is the devil who speaks? Well, you can know, and you do so by getting used to their respective voices. They can be surely distinguished. Part of Satan's subtlety is to camouflage his voice to make it sound like the voice of God. Old Isaac said, in the deception by his son, 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau'. We must learn to recognise the evil voice behind the attractive and compelling deception. Jesus said, 'My sheep hear My voice, and a stranger they will not follow; for they know not the voice of strangers' (John 10:5). From this we may learn that, whenever there are tones in the voice purporting to be from God which are strange and unusual and familiar, whenever there are alien elements in a situation which almost, so to speak, ring a warning bell in the mind, however faint and distant, the evil one is at work, and we must refuse to be pressed into action.

31) 2:17-20

We should not, in all this, forget to ask why Satan sought to hinder Paul. There are two things to be said about this. The first is that whenever there is a work of God begun, Satan begins to retaliate. He always comes with a counter-offensive. This is seen throughout Acts, where the pattern of thrust and counter-thrust unfolds in chapter after chapter. The second point is this: very often Satan makes his attack before a work of God is to take place. He can see, as often in the nature of the case we are unable to see, what God is purposing to do, and tries to hinder, if not prevent it. We should spare a thought for this today, especially if we are conscious of his attentions in our lives, asking ourselves, 'What is he trying to prevent? What does he see is coming, that he should make me his special target at present?' What Satan was intent on hindering in Thessalonica was the establishment of the Church there, but in this he did not succeed, even though he kept Paul away from it. This is very wonderful. We heard some time ago of how missionaries in Ethiopia were forced to flee the country when Mussolini invaded it in 1936, leaving but a handful of struggling believers. This was, so far as they were concerned, Satan's will to hinder and destroy the work of the Kingdom. But when missionaries returned seven years later, they found a Church many thousands strong. God had used the 'bereavement' (17, RV) for good, to implant the qualities of endurance and steadfastness in His people. He is able to use Satan's worst for His own glory, and turn the wrath of man to praise Him. Evil does not have the initiative at any point, however seemingly so it might be. This is what we need to remember about Satan, grim reality though he be in the experience of the saints. The most important thing the Scriptures teach about him is this: Jesus Christ has conquered him!

32) 2:19-20

The 'dividends' Paul expected in future from the 'investments' of love and sacrifice, tears and toil which he made in the service of the gospel were spiritual ones. Lives that love had touched and shaped and transformed, lives in which the image of God had been renewed - these were the rewards he had, if that be an adequate word to describe them. There is, in fact, a twofold reference here: on the one hand, the quality of the Thessalonians' testimony crowned Paul's ministry in the 'here and now'; they were the seal of God on his costly labours, and what joy and comfort and pride must have been his when he saw how well and how steadfastly they stood in the Christian life. On the other hand, they would also be his crown at the coming of Christ, in the sense that the work that had been begun in them would continue until they were presented faultless before the presence of His glory in the great Day. That he should have been the human instrument in that transformation invested the future with a bright and blessed prospect that filled his heart with joy. Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 3 of building 'gold, silver, precious stones' in Christian service, and it is certainly true that in Thessalonica he had laid solid foundations and built firm superstructures as a wise master-builder, and done work whose lasting worth would be brought out by the fire that shall try every man's work, of what sort it is. Long ago the prophet Daniel echoed this thought in the words, 'They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever' (Daniel 12:3) Happy is the man who can face the future with such a confidence as Paul had!

33) 3:1-5

We see clearly in these verses (and in those immediately preceding them) how wholehearted and unstinted Paul was in his love and care for the Thessalonians. It amounted in fact to an abandonment of love for them (cf 2 Corinthians 12:14). This is one of the glories of the gospel's work in a man's soul, and the chief evidence that he has been well and truly saved. For the gospel above all plants love in a man's heart: and love is the antithesis of self-seeking and self-centredness. Love gives (cf 2:8) and gives without reserve. But the Scriptures everywhere indicate that love is costly, and its costliness lies supremely in this, that it involves pain and hurt. C.S. Lewis finely writes: 'To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung, and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.... We shall draw nearer to God, not by trying to avoid the sufferings inherent in all loves, but by accepting them and offering them to Him, throwing away all our defensive armour. If our hearts need to be broken, and if He chooses this as the way in which they should break, so be it.'

This is where sanctification is proved real or counterfeit. We are not asked here about our prayers and earnestness, our spiritual exercises or piety, or our grasp of the doctrines of the faith. What we are asked is: Do we give ourselves away, or do we keep ourselves to ourselves? Some Christians need a broken heart, a cross, a thorn, to make them human, and loving. This alone is sanctification. Nothing else matters.

34) 3:1-5

Suffering for the Thessalonians was very real. They had received the Word in much affliction (1:6), and it is clear that they were maintaining their faith in the midst of afflictions. Strong and radiant as their witness was, they were passing through a difficult time, and Paul was anxious to have someone there to help and encourage them in it, and to interpret it to them. Not that they were unaware that suffering was a necessary part of Christian experience, as has already been pointed out, but as Denney says, it is one thing to know it by being told, and another to know it by experience. It is, after all, possible during a time of suffering to be so engrossed in facing it and coping with it that we have scarcely time to recognise its significance or to be aware that it might have a purpose. Is there not a place, then, for being told by some wise, discerning friend. 'This is that', and helped to recognise it for what it is? Paul at least thought so, and sent Timothy for this purpose, and we are sure that the latter proved an inspiration and encouragement to these hard-pressed believers as he related the previous teaching of the Apostle to their present experience. Happy are they who learn to understand their circumstances in the light of the Word of God.

35) 3:6-10

As the previous verses speak of sufferings, so these speak of the consolations, of the gospel, and the compensations, rewards, and fruitfulness of the life of suffering for Christ's sake. A superficial reading of the passage might seem to suggest that one moment Paul was in the depths, and the next in the heights, as if he were the victim of moods or unstable emotions. But this is to miss the whole point, which is that you cannot give yourself in the gospel as Paul did without knowing such transitions from the deepest feelings of sorrow to the highest transports of joy. In this case, the coming of Timothy changed Paul's situation entirely (cf Psalm 126:1, 2 for a similar experience). Two points should be noted here. In the first place, we may see in the good news brought by Timothy the timely intervention of God on the Apostle's behalf. He knows when to give us encouragement! In the second place, we should see the significance of the words, 'now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord', not merely as referring to comfort and encouragement for Paul, but particularly assurance, in the sense that their standing fast proved something to him. The Thessalonians were, so to speak, a test case for the kind of ministry he maintained. They vindicated his teaching emphasis. The stress on 'ye' in the Greek indicates this particularly. For Paul, much depended on the steadfastness and faithfulness of their Christian testimony. For a man who, like Paul, has been maligned by his critics and his enemies, this must necessarily be of the first importance, and also a sufficient vindication.

There is a wealth of realism in Paul's pastoral concern for the Thessalonians, and this is seen very plainly in that in the midst of rejoicing in their steadfastness he can nevertheless speak of perfecting what is lacking in their faith (10). One is tempted to think again of chapter 1 and say, 'Like this - yet lacking?' But we must remember that, as C.S. Lewis says, 'God is easy to please, but hard to satisfy'. The verb Paul uses here means 'to render complete', with the sense of bringing something into its proper condition, and this is valid in spiritual life both in our growth unto maturity and growth in maturity. Calvin says, 'From this it is clear how much we must devote ourselves to teaching. For teachers were not ordained only that in one day or in one month they should bring men to the faith of Christ, but that they should bring to completion the faith that has just begun.' It is surely significant for us to see that even in the context of an upsurge of the Spirit of God in revival power, such as certainly was evident in Thessalonica, it is necessary for a teaching ministry to conserve and make good the spiritual advances made, and to lead those who have been blessed into still deeper truth, that they might grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, and become mature in character and conduct.

36) 3:11-13

The association of ideas in 12 and 13 need to be deeply and carefully pondered. According to Paul, it is through increasing and abounding in love towards one another and toward all men that hearts become established unblameable in holiness. This is not our usual way of thinking about sanctification, but it is something which at all costs we must begin to learn. Commenting on these verses, Denney says, 'Paul seeks love for his converts as the means by which their hearts may be established in holiness. That is notable direction for those in search for holiness. A selfish, loveless heart can never succeed in this quest. A cold heart is not unblameable, and never will be; it is either pharisaical or foul, or both. But love sanctifies. Often we only escape from our sins by escaping from ourselves; by a hearty, self-denying, self-forgetting interest in others. It is quite possible to think so much about holiness as to put holiness out of our reach; it does not come with concentrating thought upon ourselves at all; it is the child of love, which kindles a fire in the heart in which faults are burned up.... Do not let us imagine that there is any other holiness than that which is thus created. There is an ugly kind of faultlessness which is always raising its head anew in the Church; a holiness which knows nothing of love, but consists in a sort of spiritual isolation, in censoriousness, in holding up one's head and shaking off the dust of one's feet against brethren, in conceit, in condescension, in sanctimonious separateness from the freedom of common life, as though one were too good for the company which God had given him: all this is as common in the Church as it is plainly condemned in the New Testament. It is an abomination in God's sight.'

37) 4:1-2

We have another insight in these verses into the nature of the Apostle's ministry. We have already seen how he instructed the Thessalonians in specific issues, such as the fact of Satan (2:18), and the inevitability of suffering (3:4). Here it is expressed in general terms. He taught them how to walk and to please God (1), and gave them commandments 'by the Lord Jesus' - a phrase which Denney takes to mean that Paul used the words and example of Jesus as the basis of his moral teaching. One is reminded of our Lord's own words in Matthew 28:20, 'Go ye therefore and teach (make disciples of) all nations.... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you'. The right relation of the ethical teaching of the New Testament to the gospel is very necessary, if we are to avoid the mistake of confusing ethics with the gospel itself. The proper understanding of the Sermon on the Mount, for example, is to take it in relation to what immediately precedes it, viz. Christ's summons to repent and the command to follow Him; that is, it presupposes commitment to Christ, and cannot be appreciated, let alone followed, apart from this fundamental fact. To begin with the Sermon on the Mount is nothing but a counsel of despair. It is only when men enter the Kingdom that it can possibly be relevant for them. But it is not the way in, but rather the instruction that those new-born in Christ need in the great moral and spiritual rehabilitation that grace undertakes in them, in which conscience is re-awakened and re-educated to assume its God-appointed status as His monitor in the soul. It is this that Paul refers to in these verses.

38) 4:3

There is a sense in which the whole teaching of the New Testament would be necessary to explicate the meaning of this characteristic Pauline word 'sanctification', for this, in fact, is what the New Testament is about. The word itself is by definition 'the process of which holiness is the completed state', the process of making or becoming holy. This should save us from the false assumption that sanctification is a 'crisis' experience, although of course crises can frequently take place - as often, in fact, as there is a build-up of resistance to the will of God in our hearts. What is of importance for us to see here is that, as always in Paul, teaching comes before exhortation (1, 2). The word 'received' in 1 is the 'official' term for the hearing and reception of the gospel (see Note on 2:13), and the 'beseeching' and the 'exhorting' follow upon the reception of the teaching, and are made upon the basis of it. This must always be understood, even when, as here, the emphasis is on the active 'outworking' of sanctification in the believer's life. The 'abstain' in 3, which J.B. Phillips renders forcibly and graphically in the phrase, 'this entails a clean cut with', corresponds in fact to 'Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies' in Romans 6: 12, in which chapter we are made to see very clearly that it is only on the basis of the fact of our union with Christ in His death and resurrection that this directive has any hope of being fulfilled. So here, we can make a clean break with sin only because in fact Christ has once for all made that break for us when 'He died unto sin once' (Romans 6:10). We 'abstain' in Him, and it is from this that strength comes in experience to do so.

39) 4:4-8

We should not miss the plain implication of Paul's words in 5. The immorality of the Gentiles is linked inseparably with the fact that they 'know not God'. This is an assertion that is fundamental to Paul's position and to the teaching of the Scriptures as a whole. Ungodliness, as he makes plain in Romans 1:18, is always followed by unrighteousness of men. It is a failure to appreciate this inevitable sequence that explains the surprise and dismay many people feel when disclosures of scandal in high places become headline news in the national press. We should remember that the corruption and vice that brought God's ancient people to the disaster of the Babylonian captivity stemmed from the people's, and their rulers', departure from God and His ways. We should also remember this when the apostles of humanism - the creed of kindness and enlightened forbearance in human relationships without any reference to God - claim that a true ethic can be established among men without any adherence to creed or religious dogma. The fallacy of this plausible idea is not - yet - apparent. It is that the humanists are still working on Christian capital - it is dwindling, to be sure, but it is still there - and what moral integrity Humanism may have comes not from Humanism but from the influence of the Christianity it has rejected. Sooner or later, any way of life that excludes God will revert to the attitudes expressed in these verses, for this is how men who know not God eventually live.

One further thought. Why should ungodliness always lead to unrighteousness? It is because ungodliness is not merely lack of godliness, but also revolt against God. Men do not like to retain God in their knowledge (Romans 1:28). He is ousted from the life of man, and His place, His rightful place, is usurped by the proud, arrogant, independent spirit of man. One of the great humanists of our time, Julian Huxley, is quoted in the Bishop of Woolwich's 'Honest to God' as saying, 'For my own part, the sense of spiritual relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God as a supernatural being is enormous'. Exactly. The biblical idea of the revolt of man could scarcely have been expressed more plainly than in these words. And this is precisely why ungodliness always comes to grief. God help us to see it! Whether in national life, or individual life, the exclusion of God always leads to moral breakdown. God has made us for Himself, and He intends on pain of punishment that we shall be His, and that He shall be the centre and heart of our life. How therefore could the desire to be independent of Him lead to anything other than trouble and disaster? God is not mocked.

40) 4:9-12

These verses underline another characteristic of the early Church, namely, the spirit of love, just as the previous passage stressed the spirit of purity. Together, these undoubtedly tell the secret of the effective witness of the Thessalonians. It is not difficult to realise how attractive to the outside world such a combination must have proved, especially when gross immorality and harsh brutality combined in pagan society to make that world a bleak and cruel place. 'Brotherly love' refers not to all men in general, but rather to love among fellow-believers (cf 2 Peter 1:7). Paul does not of course mean that Christian love is to be confined to fellow-Christians: it is simply that the wider aspect is not in view in these verses. What he says about brotherly love is that it is of the very essence of true Christian experience, and is planted by the finger of God in every renewed heart. As Denney says, 'It is the best and only guarantee' of salvation. It is interesting and instructive to contrast 9 with 1 and 2, where Paul implies that there was need for him to have instructed his converts as to how they ought to walk and to please God, whereas in 9 he explicitly states that there is no need for him to write on the subject of love. This is surely because being born of God, it is now the Christian's nature to love. The point of the contrast may become clearer if we think of a simple illustration. It is nature for a new-born child to live; but the child must be instructed and trained in living. In the same way, since in the Christian life to live is to love, loving will be inevitable where true Christian life exists, but it may well need direction and instruction, and how to express it will be a matter for wise and discerning teaching, as we shall see in the next Note on 11.

41) 4:9-12

The 'direction' Paul gives to the spirit of love in 11 is full of interest. 'Study', he says, 'to be quiet', or 'Make it your ambition to have no ambition' (J.B. Phillips), or 'Let it be your ambition to keep calm' (NEB), or 'Aspire to live quietly' (RSV). The word in the Greek translated 'study' came to have the meaning of 'to seek restlessly' or 'to strive eagerly'. And it is thought that what Paul refers to here is the unsettled, restless spirit that a wrong attitude to the Coming of Christ seems to have stirred up in some of the believers in Thessalonica, making them so anxious to be ready when the Lord returned that they neglected their ordinary duties so that, having ceased to work themselves, they became a burden upon their fellows. This, Paul maintains, is contrary to the spirit of love and must be eschewed. Restlessness of spirit must be replaced by quiet, unassuming adherence to the ordinary duties and responsibilities of life (11), for this, not the other, is well-pleasing to God. There is, after all, a testimony to be maintained towards the outside world, and such attitudes as were being shown by some were calling in question the true dignity and integrity of the Faith. The last phrase in 12 is also a counsel to be independent, and its significance seems to lie in the fact that some, as stated above, having neglected their ordinary duties were living on the charity of their fellows. Far better, urges Paul the realist, to work yourselves and not have to depend on the bounty of others. Denney says acutely, 'It is a sign of grace to be charitable; but though one would not speak an unkind word of those in need, it is not a sign of grace to require charity. The Gospel bids us aim not only at brotherly love, but at independence'. The Lord will provide, it is true, but what if His provision is meant to come via our own hands and works?

42) 4:13-14

These words introduce one of the most notable passages in the New Testament, full of rich teaching and instruction about the Last Things. What we need to notice first of all is the situation which these words were meant to meet. There was, it seems, some confusion in the Thessalonians' minds as to the exact repercussions that the Return of Christ to establish His kingdom would have. While they waited for His coming, some of their number had died, and the question arose as to what was their position in relation to the coming glory. 'Had they been robbed, by death, of the Christian hope? Had the inheritance which is incorruptible, undefiled and imperishable, passed for ever beyond their grasp, because they had died before Christ came to take His people to Himself?' (Denny). It was to correct such mistaken ideas that Paul wrote these and the following verses. He tells them that it is not the will of God that they should have any doubts about either the safety or the well being of loved ones who had died in Christ. We should not miss the force and significance of Paul's words here. He is not saying that Christians may sorrow, but not to the same degree or extent as the heathen do. This is to miss the point. The sorrow is 'concerning them that sleep', and about their 'fate', not the sorrow we may feel for ourselves. It is certain that the quality of pain and distress that believers feel in bereavement can be very deep, deeper often than anything felt by the unbelieving, for the reason that the Christian Faith creates tenderness of heart of a kind unknown outside it. But the believer who falls asleep in Christ is surely not to be sorrowed over, for not only has he not lost anything, but on the contrary has gained immeasurably. He is gone to be with Christ, which is far better. In this sense the hopelessness of pagan sorrow, which mourned the dead because they had been cut off from all that makes for life and all the blessings man can ever enjoy - this, says Paul, must surely be impossible for one who believes in Christ, for the dead in Christ are not thus cut off. We may weep for ourselves in our loss, and God will surely comfort our hearts and wipe our tears away, but we need not weep for those we have lost, if they are Christ's, for they are beyond the reach of hurt or loss. They are the blessed dead.

43) 4:13-14

The reason Paul gives for the assurance he has just expressed in 13 is that the bond that unites the believer with Christ is one that death can never break. The 'last enemy' can never drive a gulf between the soul and the Saviour. If Jesus died and rose again, then those that sleep in Him, God will bring with Him when He comes again because they are indissolubly united to Him. The words in Romans 8:38, that 'neither death nor life.... shall be able to separate us from the love of God' are meant to be taken literally as well as seriously. We are one with Christ, and He is one with us, in life and death alike, and in every conceivable circumstance, and those who sleep in Him are no more dead than He is dead. It would be true to say that He cannot come without them, since He is bound to them and they to Him in such an intimate union. 'He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit' says Paul elsewhere (1 Corinthians 6:17). One further and blessed implication of this is that believers who die are not even separated from fellow-believers who are left, for those that are united to Christ are thereby united to one another, and this means that the communion of saints is not disturbed by death either. Needless to say, this is no warrant for the absurd claims of spiritualism to be able to make contact with the dead, but it does bear witness to a fundamental reality that robs sorrow of its sting and its finality. In this sense also believers do not sorrow as those who have no hope.

44) 4:15-18

'Prevent' in 15 is the old English word meaning 'precede' or 'go before'. What Paul is saying - and this is the final assurance for what he has been emphasising - is that there will in fact be no difference between believers who are alive and remain at Christ's coming and believers who have already died, for it will simply be a question of the resurrection of the dead taking place for them to join the living (who will have been changed), and together being caught up to be with the Lord forever. To have died in Christ or to be alive and remain is all one for the believer, so far as the coming of the Lord is concerned.

We should note particularly how the 'dead in Christ' are referred to. They are said to 'sleep in Jesus'. There is great significance in this expression, especially in contrast with what is said of Christ. He 'died' believers 'fall asleep'. This is a contrast that persists throughout the New Testament (cf John 11:11, 'Our friend Lazarus sleepeth': Mark 5:39, 'The damsel is not dead but sleepeth': 1 Corinthians 11:30, 'Many sleep'). What we call death, Jesus called sleep. Death as we know it is, for believers, but a sleep. But Jesus did not sleep, in this sense; He died. What was His death? Not the bodily agony He endured, only, or the cessation of life as such, but that from which His soul shrank in Gethsemane and finally experienced in the hours of infinite suffering in the darkness of the Cross - death as the wages of sin - when God turned away His face from Him. That is death, and no one who believes in Him shall ever die that death. He has died that death in our place. This is the basis of the assurance Paul gives the Thessalonians. As to the position of the 'Dead in Christ' at the present time nothing could be finer than the words of the Westminster divines: 'The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God Who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies' (Westminster Confession, 32:1).

'The righteous shall be delivered from death itself at the last day, and even in death are delivered from the sting and curse of it; so that, although they died, yet it is out of God's love, to free them perfectly from sin and misery, and to make them capable of further communion with Christ in glory, which they then enter upon.... The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible Church enjoy immediately after death is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls' (Larger Catechism 85,86).

45) 4:15-18

That the coming of Christ is a personal coming ('The Lord Himself'), and cannot be spiritualised to mean either the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Paul's words here were written long after Pentecost!), or to the coming of death to the believer (does not Paul make a distinction between death and the Coming in this very passage?) is surely clear from what is said in these verses. Even within the ranks, however, of evangelicals who do believe in a personal return of Christ there is wide divergence of view as to its exact meaning and significance. Sufficient for our purpose today is to underline two points. The first is to 'identify' the event; and this is possible when we compare what the Apostle says here with his statements in 1 Corinthians 15:51ff, and with our Lord's own words in Matthew 24:29-31, and with John's in Revelation 8. Consistency of interpretation should make it clear that the trumpet in each of these passages refers to the same event, and that this event must necessarily take place at the end of time. The last trumpet ushers in the judgment and the Day of God. The second point is that this necessarily means a general resurrection of both just and unjust at the same time. The millennialist objection to this idea stems from a misunderstanding of Revelation 20 which, it is averred, proclaims two resurrections, separated by the space of a thousand years. But we must remember that Revelation is apocalyptic, and when there are plain statements elsewhere in Scripture saying the opposite, it is surely wisdom to start with them, and interpret apocalypse in the light of them, and not vice versa. Jesus' words in John 5:28, 29, echoed by Paul in Acts 24:15, are quite unequivocal as emphasising a general resurrection, whereas Revelation 20 speaks of the souls of the righteous, not their bodies.

46) 5:1-3

If the implications of what was said in the previous Note are fully realised, it will become plain that the 'day of the Lord' referred to in 2 must be the day of God's coming at the last trump, and this we must insist upon in spite of attempts made by millennialists to interpret it as a different event. It is surely clear that Paul's thought runs on in these verses from what he has just said. The idea of the 'day of the Lord' originates in the Old Testament; it is a day associated in prophetic and apocalyptic literature with the ideas of divine judgment and deliverance, and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. It is in this character that it is taken over by the writers of the New Testament, with the same ideas, and indeed given exact and unmistakable emphasis by our Lord Himself, from Whom Paul certainly takes the simile of the 'thief in the night' and the idea of the unexpectedness of His coming (see Revelation 16:15, Matthew 24:43, 44). All this the Thessalonians knew; they lived in the light of the coming judgment, in the light of eternity and the end of time, and had no need of Paul to write to them of the times and seasons when it would take place. But we face a very different temper today, not only in the world but also in the Church. For the very idea of judgment is distasteful, if not rejected outright. But no one has the right to evacuate biblical words and doctrines of their plain meaning and still claim for the emasculated result the name of Christian. Paul did not blaze a costly trail across the ancient world preaching salvation from something illusory and imaginary, but because he believed that without Christ men would perish without hope. One of the greatest needs of our time is for the recovery of a note of urgency in the gospel that only a sense of the reality and certainty of coming judgment can impart. May God grant this to His Church today!

47) 5:4-7

As if to stress the solemn realities of time and eternity, Paul takes great pains to stress the absolute contrast between light and darkness, day and night, in spiritual things. Again, this is something that is very distasteful to the natural mind because, of course, it separates men, and forces them to take sides in the eternal battle between good and evil. The following words, written by the Rev. William Still, are an apt and penetrating comment here: 'We do not like to think of anyone as absolutely bad, any more than we find anyone absolutely good - Jesus apart. We do not think of human life as black and white, but as of all shades of intermediate grey, darker or lighter in various degrees of good or bad. So it seems to us. But God sees only black and white, because He sees every man as ultimately belonging to Christ or to the devil, and in the end there will be no such thing as a grey life, in any shade. But black or white.... This is not an easy thought.... but it is surely better than the delusion that since we are all mixed up in the murky greyness of human life, we serve a common end. We don't, and must take sides, for even if we try not to, out of a sentimental sympathy with sin, or for any other plausible reason, we shall find that, inasmuch as we do not choose Christ, in fact we choose His enemy.' This is not one bit too stark; it is the plain meaning and implication of the Apostle's words here, and we must never forget that, put at its simplest and most fundamental, the work of the Church at home and abroad alike, is to win men from the one allegiance to the other.

48) 5:4-7

We should notice in these verses how the Apostle describes the life of the worldling, the man who is without Christ. He is asleep, says Paul (6, 7). This is all the more striking when we realise that it is commonplace for the worldling, and especially the intellectual worldling, to dismiss the Christian rather contemptuously as living in an unreal world, a world of fantasy. The opposite is the case, in fact, if we are to believe these verses. It is the unbeliever who is asleep, and to him the solid, objective reality of the spirit-world is as a dream. We could put it this way: a man may be very acute and wide awake in commerce and industry, a 'brain' in the business world, but look at him when spiritual issues are before him! The claims of God, the future of the soul, the issues of eternity - he is embarrassed and ill at ease. And not only so; he is also out of his depth. He has a blind spot. These things are 'too heavy, too long, too difficult, too complicated' - this is his reaction to the most elementary aspects of Christian doctrine. He is asleep, in a sleep of death, from which nothing but the quickening Spirit of God can awaken him. And when the Spirit does so, what a shattering experience it is for him to realise that he has only now wakened from sleep into a real world of which he has hitherto known nothing, and in which he is in the wrong with God. Small wonder that men so often wish to relapse into slumber to escape the intolerable glare of reality. Anything rather than that! As someone has said, it is one thing to wake up, another to get up. It is possible to fall asleep again when you wake up in the morning, especially if the new day is likely to face you with decisions from which you naturally shrink. Now see who is the realistic one, the believer or the unbeliever!

49) 5:8-11

There are two things in particular that we may fix our thoughts upon in these verses. The first is the reference to the Christian armour in 8. This is the embryo, so to speak, of the much fuller treatment given to the subject in Ephesians 6:10-17, and the latter passage should be studied along with this one. It is particularly appropriate for it to be mentioned at this point, since what the previous verses imply is a continuing conflict and struggle between the powers of light and of darkness. The Christian lives in a hostile world, and it behoves him to be on his guard. It is certainly not without significance that, on more than one occasion in his epistles Paul, when speaking of the old order and the new, and the believer's participation in each, refers to the old not only in terms of the reign of sin but also in terms of the dark power that lies behind all sin, that is, the devil. It is this that accounts for the personalised terms in which he describes the power of indwelling sin in Romans 6:15ff (cf the 'slaves and masters' illustration) and particularly Romans 7:7ff. The hostile world in which the believer lives is certainly personal in its enmity, and this is why Christian armour is very necessary, if he is to stand firm without faltering. Denney finely points out that the same graces which at the beginning of the epistle (1:3) are adduced as evidence of their election of God and a cause for apostolic thanksgiving, constitute here a defensive armour by which the Christian is shielded from every assault. There is much food for thought in this. Is it not the Spirit Who, when we allow Him, produces these graces in us, and is it not He Who clothes us in heavenly protection in the conflicts of the faith?

50) 5:12-22

The remainder of the epistle is occupied with various practical injunctions which really flow from what Paul has just said. He has been stressing the need to watch and be sober, and what he says here defines the proper demeanour of those who are 'of the day' (8), and is the practical outworking of putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation. It is significant to note that while the Thessalonian Church was probably the most vital and dynamic in the whole of the early history of the Church - we have seen in chapters 1 and 2 what a decisive impact their testimony made in all Macedonia - it was nevertheless by no means perfect. There were matters, some of them serious and critical, which needed attention for some things were being neglected, others persisted in, that were likely to cause disturbance in the fellowship, and Paul was eager to deal with them and have them put right. This paradox of knowing and experiencing the abundant blessing of God with much nevertheless needing to be rectified in the life of the fellowship is one that raises some very real issues, to which we shall turn more fully in the next Note. Enough for us today to recognise the problem, and to meditate on C.S. Lewis's epigrammatic comment that 'God is easy to please but hard to satisfy'.

51) 5:12-22

The fact that the Spirit of God can be at work in great power and grace in a fellowship while there are still serious matters calling for urgent attention does not in any wise condone the continued existence of these things, as if to suggest that they are after all not very important, nor does it excuse the Church for allowing them to go unchecked and unheeded. But it does call in question the thesis that God can bless only a pure Church - pure, that is, in the sense that all that offends has been purged away and removed. This does not mean that we must not strive very earnestly to remove offending things from the life of the fellowship, but rather that God is so eager to bless that when fundamental issues are at rights, and the basic question of surrender to God is settled and established, God does not wait for anything else, but moves in blessing and benediction in His work. This has been proved, time and time again, in the history of God's people. One thinks of Old Testament experience in the time of the Kings. On several occasions there was a turning to God on the part of some of them. They did not always or often go far enough - 'they walked not as their father David' (cf 2 Kings 14:3) - but God blessed for all that, and turned the fortunes of His people. Likewise, in times of declension, when men have turned to God, He has blessed and revived His people, even though much has remained among them that could rightly be said to grieve His Spirit. Many of the revivals in Scottish history have taken place within churches that have been far from pure in doctrine, order or discipline, and often when a 'mixed multitude' has sat at the Lord's Table. Surely this fact should give us pause to think, when we are tempted to pontificate, as we are sometimes prone to do, as to how and when God is able, or not, to bless!

52) 5:12-22

There is undoubtedly a certain tension - even paradox - in this matter that we do well to consider. It is, of course, right and necessary to have a true order and discipline in the Church - this is Paul's concern here - but it is possible to become over preoccupied with it, and to over emphasise it wrongly and in a wrong spirit. And this can grieve the Spirit more than the presence of wrong things in the fellowship. It is possible to be sticklers for this kind of discipline and yet - and by this very attitude - quench the Spirit's gracious working. Doctrinal or ecclesiastical orthodoxy does not necessarily guarantee the Spirit's presence and working; and fleshly assertion can subtly creep into the application of true biblical principles to vitiate the whole issue and sometimes do irreparable harm. One of the saddest of experiences is to learn that impeccable orthodoxy and discipline can prove on occasion to be devoid of any sense of the Spirit's presence, with great and thrilling doctrines of grace and redemption made to sound dull and dreary. One has known of fellowships that have experienced the glorious liberty and blessing of the Spirit in earlier days passing to a zeal for correct order and discipline that has degenerated to a negative, censorious and hyper-critical attitude that has dried up the streams of blessing, and a glory has departed from the work. We must be very careful: this is a realm where serious, even disastrous, mistakes can be made.

53) 5:12-13

It is still, nevertheless, a duty to apply New Testament standards to Christian life, and with the dangers in the previous Note given due consideration, we must seek to do so. Scholars think that what lies behind these two verses is that in the prevailing restlessness in the fellowship at Thessalonica due to the expectation of Christ's coming, the leaders of the Church had rebuked some members, and that their exhortations had not been given as tactfully as they might have been, or meekly received. Paul thus addresses the Church at large on the duty of having a proper respect for their leaders. The fact of authority in the Church is one that became established very early in its life (Acts 11:30, 14:23), and submission to the discipline which elders administered, including admonishing, was expected from all its members (cf also 1 Corinthians 16:16; Hebrews 13:17-22). Nor is this something merely accidental, as if some other, alternative, system might as easily have evolved in their corporate life, but integral to the whole New Testament concept of the Church as the Body of Christ. Membership of the body implies differentiation of function among the members. As in the human body, so also in the Body of Christ there are parts designed to be in authority, and parts to be in subjection. And when this order is reversed, trouble begins. No member is of course independent of the others: all are inter-dependent, hence the continued emphasis on 'one another' in 11, 13, 15. But this in no wise contradicts the fact that there are authorities to be obeyed, just as in the human body instincts are meant to be submissive to reason and mind, otherwise trouble ensues. Once recognition of the validity of this idea is conceded - as conceded it surely must be, in the light of the Scriptural emphasis - all legitimate objection to subordination and subject to lawful authority will disappear.

54) 5:12-13

To 'know' in 12 has the meaning of 'to know the worth of', 'to appreciate the worth of' (cf 1 Timothy 5:17). There may be a personal note in Paul's words here, in view of the opposite treatment he has often received from those among whom he laboured (see 2 Corinthians 12:14,15). The appeal for high esteem is made 'for their work's sake'. It is as if Paul were saying, 'Look at their work, and see if it merits such criticism or resentment on your part (when they are faithful in dealing with you) before tearing them to shreds'. Viewed in this light, the criticism Paul received was quite inexcusable. Calvin speaks of the necessity of receiving ministers of God with an anxious, conscientious desire to do the very utmost that duty and love could require. Commenting on this, Denney adds, 'Sometimes, with the most innocent intention, the whole situation is changed, and the minister, though received with the utmost courtesy and kindness, is not received with fear and trembling at all. Partly through his own fault, and partly through the fault of others, he ceases to be the representative of anything that inspires reverence, or excites to conscientious earnestness of conduct. If, under these circumstances, he continues to be kindly treated, he is apt to end in being, not the pastor, but the pet lamb of the flock. In apostolic times there was no danger of this, but modern ministers and modern congregations have sometimes thrown away all the possibilities of good in their mutual relations by disregarding it. The affection which they ought to have for each other is Christian, not merely natural; controlled by spiritual ideas and purposes, and not a matter of ordinary good feeling; and where this is forgotten, all is lost'. These, then, are the two extremes, both alike to be avoided. How healthy and right is the biblical emphasis here!

55) 5:14-15

It would be true to say that in these closing verses of the epistle what Paul has in mind is the idea of a rightly ordered life and a rightly ordered fellowship. In such a fellowship and such a life there will be a ministry of mutual help and encouragement (14, 15), a spirit of personal dominion and victory (16-18), and a right relation (18). This threefold division corresponds in general to what the Apostle says in Titus 2:11-14 about living 'soberly, righteously and godly in this present evil world', and it will be useful to think of these verses before us in this light. First of all, then, our attitude to others (14, 15). In plain, untheological terms, to live righteously is simply to live right. What is it to have a right attitude to others? We see in 14 that it is not a negative thing, nor strict and unbending, but positive and full of vitality, with sensitive shades of meaning. A rightly ordered fellowship, with all the variety of expression that is entailed in the idea of membership, will mean that each member will be set free and liberated to play his proper part in the life of the fellowship. And when this is so, we find something of the richness and wealth of mutual understanding, sympathy and faithfulness that is the glory of the Christian Church. For with each member doing his proper work, fulfilling his proper function, there is a true realisation of the whole idea of Christian fellowship, and of health and well-being in the Body. Hence Paul's emphasis here: mutual exhortation, comfort, support and patience within the fellowship, and towards one another, shown by one another. People sometimes ask for work to do in the Church, thinking doubtless of special 'tasks', but here are things not only that we may do, if we will, but also that we ought to be doing, with all our might.

56) 5:14-15

To 'warn them that are unruly' or, as the more modern versions put it, 'admonish the disorderly', is in one sense the especial province of the spiritual oversight in a fellowship, but members in general ought to have this on their hearts also. The word in the Greek is a military term, referring to 'those who leave their place in the ranks'. When therefore there are disorderly ones in a fellowship, it means that the solid front is broken, and advantage is given to the enemy. Those who are out of place, or out of step, in a fellowship, are a known disruptive influence and stand in need of warning for the harm they may do to the work of God. The RSV translates the next phrase 'encourage the faint-hearted'. It is a word of wide application: the spiritually despondent are included, those who sometimes seem to go to pieces, the fearful, and those who have fallen and failed in time of temptation. The grace of comforting such comes from the Spirit of Him of Whom it is said, 'A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench' (Isaiah 42:3). We must learn how to speak a 'word in season' to those that are weary. The 'weak' are those weak in the faith, rather than those unable to work. They are easily led away by winds of doctrine, by new ideas, new companions, and they need above all a steadying hand. It is easy to see what an incalculable blessing a friend who is strong and steady in the faith can be to such unstable souls. To fulfil these urgent and continually necessary tasks in the Church will require much patience, for there will be many setbacks and disappointments. Character-building is not accomplished overnight! God grant that we may ever 'follow that which is good' in these terms, in the fellowship.

57) 5:16

It might be thought rather incongruous to place Paul's words to Titus about living 'soberly' alongside 16, but this would simply mean that we had misunderstood the New Testament conception of sobriety, which is never incompatible with joy and laughter. It is seriousness, not sadness, that Paul has in mind. And true merriment is possible only where men have taken themselves, and life, and God, seriously. The rejoicing Paul advocates here has nothing to do with natural cheeriness of temperament. It is rather a spiritual experience which flows from a basic reality that nothing - literally nothing - can alter or destroy. The gospel is a joyful sound and puts gladness into the heart that no kind or combination of circumstances can abate or take away, for nothing in heaven, earth or hell can rob those that are Christ's of the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins. It is some measure of how far the Church has strayed from the apostolic message that our services of worship should often be so joyless and dull today, and that church-attendance should be for so many the dreary duty it is, instead of the highlight of the week. Denney has some very blunt things to say in commenting on this verse: 'Langour, dullness, dreariness, a melancholy visage, are a libel upon the gospel. If the knowledge of the love of God does not make us glad, what does it do for us? If it does not make a difference to our spirits and our temper, do we really know it? If God in Christ has done an eternal work in our souls, then we have something worth rejoicing about, and when it really grips us, we will'.

58) 5:17

Concerning this verse, P.T. Forsyth says: 'To pray without ceasing is not, of course, to engage in prayer without break. That is an impossible literalism. True 'they rest not day and night, saying Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, Who wert, and art, and art to come'. But it is mere poverty of soul to think of this as the iteration of a doxology. It is deep calling unto deep, eternity greeting eternity. The only attitude to God's eternity is an eternal attitude of prayer'. This is the point - an unceasing attitude of prayer, and a realisation of God's Presence without intermission. This is really implied in the idea of the new relationship established between the soul and God at conversion. The life of prayer is a life lived in fellowship with God, walking with Him. We recall a notable passage in the biography of D.L. Moody which beautifully and strikingly exemplifies this unceasing spirit of prayer. His biographer writes: 'He told me.... he had no experience of being weighed down and burdened before God. He did not try to get into this state. His work kept him in the spirit of prayer and dependence upon God, and he just gave himself wholly to the work. For a year or more before he left Chicago he was continually burdened, and crying to God for more power. Then, he was always wanting a few people together for half a day of prayer, and would groan and weep before God for the baptism of the Spirit. He did not seem to be in this state now. I wanted such a season while with him, feeling my own need, but he was as one who had passed through that experience, and had just put himself wholly in God's hands... His prayers while I was with him were as simple as a child's, full of trust, humility and expectation that God would not disappoint him. There seemed to me to be an understanding established between the Master and the servant which made long prayers, or the importunity of repetition, unnecessary.' The practice of the presence of God indeed!

59) 5:18

It is the extremes of Paul's language in these verses that strikes us so much. Rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and now, giving thanks in everything. This last is also no extravagance, but in harmony with some of his most characteristic teaching elsewhere in his epistles. It is no mere natural thankfulness which men of human sensibilities feel and express when their lives have been blessed and enriched by the providence of God. It is rather born of the realisation that all things - whether good or seeming ill - work together for good to them that love God. It is the recognition that evil does not have the last word in the lives of those who believe in Christ and belong to Him, but that God uses even the darkest experiences to work blessing in them. Paul has already hinted at this in 4:13, in the thought that the Christian does not look on sorrow with the eyes of other men. He knows that in the total earthly loss of bereavement there is an all-wise and all-loving purpose that will, though at the moment he may not discern it, work the good and perfect will of God in his life. 'What I do thou knowst not now, but thou shalt know hereafter', said Jesus to His disciples. This really places the Christian in an invincible position; nothing, literally nothing, can touch him, for nothing is able to separate him from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38, 39). This is why he can give thanks in everything.

60) 5:19

This word about the Spirit is of wide application, although its reference here is probably to the more specific danger of pouring cold water on the undoubted spiritual enthusiasms that were abroad in the Thessalonian Church. It is, first of all, an appeal for care lest any authentic expression or manifestation of the Spirit be curbed by an attitude that is not prepared to recognise His freedom of operation. There is great wisdom here: we need to take far more seriously than we do the words, 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' (2 Corinthians 3:17) - not merely in the sense of our liberty, but His. Let us take a specific illustration of this. There are those in evangelical life who are convinced that strictly orthodox patterns and shibboleths are the only possible vehicle of the Spirit's working and operation in the Church, and hold in suspicion anything that deviates from their familiar, cherished notions. They cannot conceive how a ministry that 'breaks all the rules' can have the seal of God upon it. Well, it often does, and manifestly so, both in the sense of the divine presence that is inescapably evident and in the fruit it produces. The fact is, we have often such petty, legalistic minds, even as Christians, that we tend unconsciously to put the Spirit in bondage too. But He will have none of it; He delights to explode our neat pigeon-hole theologies with the breath of life. It is of this that Paul speaks here.

61) 5:20-21

There is a fine balance in these two verses, and we should take them in reference to what was said in the previous Note about the freedom of the Spirit. Some commentators think that what Paul has in mind are the gifts of the Spirit (which proved such a problem in Corinth), and it is quite possible that this is so. At all events, prophesying was one of these 'charismatic' gifts, and the warning here is against despising them (and so quenching the Spirit). This does not mean, however, that anyone claiming to have the prophetic spirit should necessarily be uncritically tolerated. Nothing is further from Paul's mind than this. Such a situation could certainly lead to chaos and anarchy and every kind of extravagance. No: they were to prove all things and hold fast to that which was good, and to reject everything that did not pass the test. This is also the Apostle John's advice when he says, 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God' (1 John 4:1). This is the exercise of the spirit of discernment, not a critical spirit. It presupposes the presence and control of the Spirit of God in the heart of the man who exercises it, and this recognises and answers to the presence (or otherwise) of the Spirit of God in that which is being discerned. How otherwise could we know the true from the false?

62) 5:21-22

The word 'prove' in 21 is one often used of testing metals, and in this connection the commentators point out that Paul's words here have been held by the early fathers of the Church to echo a saying attributed to Jesus but not recorded anywhere in Scripture. 'Show yourselves approved money-changers'. Further, Denney points out that the word rendered in the AV as 'appearance' (22) and in the RSV as 'form' has a connection with 'mint' (coinage), and it would certainly seem that what Paul has in mind is some kind of picture concerning money and banking. It is as if he were saying, to use Denney's paraphrase, 'Show yourselves skilful money-changers; do not accept in blind trust all the spiritual currency which you find in circulation; put it all to the test; rub it on the touchstone; keep hold of what is genuine and of sterling value, but every spurious coin decline'. In view of the devaluation, not to say the debasing of evangelical currency today, this is a word of timely import. As the saying goes, all is not gold that glitters. And just as a man who cannot tell good money from bad is not likely to get far in business, so also a Christian who is unable to tell the difference between the real and the counterfeit in spiritual life is not likely to grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord.

63) 5:23

This notable verse raises a number of important questions which will require some thought before we leave the epistle. Let us deal first of all with the question of the nature of man: is man a bi-partite (twofold) or a tri-partite (threefold) being? At first sight, Paul's words here seem to indicate the latter - 'body, soul and spirit' -but in fact 'soul' and 'spirit' are sometimes used in Scripture almost interchangeably, with now the one, and now the other, being set in contrast with 'body' (cf 1 Corinthians 7:34; Matthew 10:28). Denney suggests that 'the 'soul' means the life that is in man, taken simply as it is, with all its powers; the 'spirit' means that very same life, taken in relation to God'. This way of regarding 'soul' and 'spirit' as two differing aspects of the same reality seems to be the most wise and acceptable, if confusion of thought is to be avoided.

Another, and more serious, problem raised in this verse is the matter of 'entire sanctification', which the word 'wholly' seems to suggest. This is a matter of terminology, of course; from one point of view, we must consider Paul to be praying that the Thessalonians will be entirely sanctified, for why should we suppose that God would do less than an entire work in them? At the same time, however, from another point of view, we must not strain Paul's language in such a way as to make it mean something contradictory to what he plainly states in his other writings. We have only to read Philippians 3:12, 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect' to realise that the Apostle cannot mean the eradication of sin here, or any doctrine of sinless perfection. The wise and balanced comparison of Scripture with Scripture would save us from much extreme and distorted and extravagant teaching on the subject of sanctification. We will turn again to this verse and subject in the next Note.

64) 5:23

The idea of entire sanctification, scripturally interpreted and understood, is the answer of the gospel to the doctrine of total depravity, and the same kind of misunderstanding obtains in each. Total depravity means that there is no part of our nature and personality that is not tainted and vitiated by sin and the Fall - mind, heart, will, emotions, affections, conscience, imagination, memory, body, and every other aspect of human life, are alike affected by the virus of sin. In the same way, entire sanctification must mean that every part of our nature will be touched by the invigorating, rejuvenating grace of God in Christ. This opens up great vistas of glorious possibility, for it speaks of the restoring of the image of God in man, of the reconstitution of man as man in the image of God, and the unification of the personality (cf Psalm 86:11, 'Unite my heart to fear Thy Name'). Sin robbed us of our humanity; grace makes us men again, warm, human and real (any brand of sanctification, therefore, that makes us remote from humanity and clothes us with haloes of unapproachability is clearly suspect). Sanctification is progress towards true humanity, in which all the hitherto conflicting forces of personality are united and unified in one whole and deeply harmonised integrity of life. In this connection it is surely not without significance that Paul says that this is the work of 'the God of peace', for the 'once-for-all' reconciliation wrought in the death of Christ for us has also in this respect a continuous application in which we progressively 'come to terms' with ourselves, and the civil war within us is brought to an end. It is in this sense that the gospel speaks of making men whole.

65) 5:23-24

That the word 'blameless' in 23 cannot be construed as 'sinless' will be clear from what was said in the previous Note. This does not mean, however, that our interpretation should be thought of as lesser, or inferior to the extravagant claims of perfectionist ideas. Indeed, one's experience of the latter tends to underline the very partial nature of the work of sanctification in the deep reaches of personality, through very preoccupation with the more overt forms and expressions of sin, and the resultant imbalance emotionally and psychologically, not to say spiritually, of the life taken as a whole. It is safe to say that neither Paul nor any of the apostles ever thought of sanctification in terms of sinless perfection, for the very good reason that they thought of sin not in terms of moral misdeeds but as a power that, apart from grace, rules over men's lives, and from which Christ alone can set them free, healing the wounds and ravages that this dark power has made in them. This, for them, is the meaning of sanctification, and that the healing and unifying of the whole personality is not a hopeless ideal, impossible of fulfilment, is seen in the confident affirmation Paul makes in 24, 'Faithful is He that calleth you, who will also do it'. After all, Paul has already said in 4:3, 'This is the will of God, even your sanctification', and it is one of the axioms of the biblical revelation that God is able to do all that He wills to do. How, then, is this glorious work accomplished in us? By the ministry of the Word and Spirit of God (see Notes on 4:1-3) ploughing into our souls the virtue and dynamic of the death and resurrection of Christ. There is no other way; but for those who are prepared to face the disciplines that this will involve, the sanctification of body, soul and spirit unto rehabilitation of the whole man will become a blessed reality.

66) 5:25-28

The appeal for prayer in 25 reveals how much and how deeply Paul depended on the intercessions of the churches for the furtherance of his work of mission. It is certain that this is something of quite basic importance in the service of the gospel; and it prompts us to ask why it is, if this be so, that the prayer meeting is virtually a thing of the past throughout our land today. But this is not all that such an appeal does: it is also a challenge to the Thessalonians to take their responsibility seriously, and to prove that grace has really wrought in them something truly Christian, namely, a spirit of loving gratitude. Men to whom we are indebted in the spiritual life have an inalienable claim to our prayers and love and continued care. A sense of gratitude is not an optional grace for the believer, and one of the sinister, not to say fatal, signs in a life on which patient care and pastoral concern have been lavished is that this should produce little or no answering outgoing of the heart in grateful thanks to those who have been a blessing to him. As Christians we must learn to say 'Thank you' and one of the ways of doing so is to engage in prayer for those who have brought us to the birth and nourished us in the things of God. It is not the will of God that some of His children should always be at the receiving end so far as loving consideration is concerned. We are to love one another. Indeed, receiving love is surely to the end that the well-springs might be opened up in us so as to enable us to give it in turn to others. Paul is nothing if not practical!