

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE Second Epistle to the
THESSALONIANS

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THE Second Epistle to the THESSALONIANS

(These Notes were first printed in April 1973)

The second epistle to the Thessalonians is thought to have been written only a matter of weeks after the first, and its general theme is the same; our Lord's second coming. It seems that Paul's teaching about that coming had been misunderstood in certain quarters, and pressed to extremes he had never intended, and was causing some to be deeply troubled. He had already sought to correct this misunderstanding in what he said in the first epistle, but it had persisted, and confusion was becoming worse confounded, as we may see from chapter 2, where it would seem that a forged epistle had been put in circulation, purporting to be from his hand, stating that the Lord had already come (2:2 RSV). The second epistle is therefore a further corrective to the situation for which the first epistle was meant to have been a sufficiently full answer. Its teaching, however, is not a mere repetition of what is said in 1 Thessalonians - there is much that is new, and plenty for careful study.

1) 1:1-3

After an opening salutation very similar to that in the first epistle, Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonian believers (3). There are two things in particular that we need to note in this. The first is seen when we compare the Apostle's words here with what he said in the first epistle. In 1 Thessalonians 3:10 we find him concerned with what is lacking in their faith; here, his prayer is answered, and their faith is growing exceedingly. Also, in 1 Thessalonians 3:12 he prays that they might increase and abound in love; here, love is said to be abounding among them. Paul is, in fact, giving thanks for answered prayer. This is not only encouraging, it is a significant pointer to a most important consideration in pastoral oversight. It is prayer that brings believers on in the Christian life, and solves so many pastoral problems in their spiritual growth. Not only so: the all-important thing about the Thessalonian Church was that it was a growing Church, not only in numbers but in spiritual wisdom and vitality. That there were still matters, some of them serious, to be put right, could not conceal the fact that the unmistakable signs of life were there. They were growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us ask ourselves, in view of the evidence, whether the work in which we are engaged is undergirt by the kind of prayer that promotes spiritual growth.

2) 1:1-3

The second point to be noted in 3 is Paul's wholehearted and generous commendation of the Thessalonian believers, notwithstanding the faults and errors which he was about to deal with in the fellowship there. There are several important lessons here. For one thing, Paul is in line with our Lord's attitude in the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation 2 and 3, where He invariably begins with commendation and only then deals with the faults. It is poor work indeed that has nothing to commend it, and none of us should be slow to utter praise when praise is due. It is a false and miserly notion to suppose that praise puffs up people; on the contrary, genuine praise humbles, it is flattery that puffs up, because it is insincere. We must not suppose that either our Lord or Paul would begin with praise simply because it was good psychology (although it is), or in order to justify the criticism that follows. It is rather that they were seeing things in their proper perspective, and that they were refusing to allow the undoubted presence of faults to blind them to the evidence of much that was good and worthy among the saints. There is a world of difference between criticism that comes from a harsh, unloving animosity, and criticism that springs from a care and love that knows we can do better and is determined that we will do so. Such a spirit, that will not rest content while we are content to be less than it knows we can be, is not likely to be blind to what is worthy of praise. It loves too much not to be glad when genuine worth shows itself, even in the midst of many faults.

3) 1:4

Whatever might be said about the faults and failings of the Thessalonians (and, as we have seen from the first Epistle, there was much that needed correction) it is at least clear that their faith was vital enough to have produced and provoked reaction and opposition to it, and that they were not only standing firm but forging ahead in the midst of tribulation. We should learn from this that there are no ideal conditions in which the Christian life can be lived, and that not only are adverse circumstances not a ground of excuse for our failure to advance spiritually, but on the contrary the very factors that are likely to make our graces grow. This is how it was in Thessalonica, and explains Paul's generous commendation of them in spite of their faults. He knew what it meant to stand against opposition, and could appreciate the worth of their steadfastness of faith in face of it, realising that this very faithfulness was the quality that would at length bring its influence to bear upon the areas of their experience in which moral and spiritual transformation had not yet taken place. We should learn to discern the difference between this intermediate and temporary stage in growing young believers, and the spiritual stagnation which marks other lives that never seem to move out of the bit. The one is a wholly hopeful condition, faults and all, but the other carries a doubtful prognosis. There are some who do not look as if they will ever make much of the Christian life.

4) 1:5-7

The precise meaning of these verses is rather difficult to grasp, but what Paul appears to mean is that the fact that the Thessalonians were standing firm in the midst of persecution argues the unseen presence of the Lord upholding them. If so, then two things follow. On the one hand He is using the tribulation to bring to perfection the faith of His people (it is part of His righteous judgment to do so), and on the other hand, such a situation, in which evil men oppress the good, calls aloud for judgment, and indeed proclaims its certainty. The universe is built on moral lines, and God must vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked. And so the Apostle proceeds to speak of this twofold manifestation of judgment, in which the tables are turned and rest comes in place of affliction for God's people, and tribulation for the evildoers. This is related to our Lord's second coming, and as such belongs to the last judgment, but this should not blind us to the fact that God also reckons with men before that time, sometimes very severely indeed. We should also note particularly the plain and unequivocal statement in 6, 'It is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you'. This is the retributive element in punishment, as distinct from the deterrent, or remedial. Retribution is a righteous thing with God; let us be content, then, to recognise it as being valid in human systems of justice!

5) 1:5-7

In an article in which the subject of universalism (the idea that all men will in the end be saved) was being debated, Professor William Barclay made the comment: 'It is a strange thing that the very thought that all men should be saved arouses so many people to fury'. But this, though plausible, is hardly a reliable or convincing way to state a case for universalism. It is not the thought that all men should be saved, but the misrepresentation of the teaching of Scripture and of Christ Himself on this subject that arouses honourable men to a spirited defence of the gospel against such attitudes. For indeed, if we are to believe Jesus' teaching - and it is from Him that most of the unequivocal statements about the reality of hell have come, not from His apostles - nothing is surer than that all men will not in the end be saved; and if one is convinced about the truth of this, then it is a righteous thing to be stirred to fury against those who deceive and hoodwink careless and unsuspecting people with sentimental and naive notions about God's love being too great to allow any to perish - as if Christ had never spoken the solemn and warning words that He did, again and again. It is not wisdom, or enlightened scholarship either, to put Christ right on such matters, but folly. That is the only proper name for it. James Denney presents the true biblical position. 'If the gospel, as conceived in the New Testament, has any character at all, it has the character of finality. It is God's last word to men, and the consequences of accepting or rejecting it are final; it opens no prospect beyond the life on the one hand, and the death on the other, which are the results of obedience or disobedience. Obey, and you enter into a light in which there is no darkness at all: disobey, and you pass eventually into a darkness in which there is no light at all.... It is necessary to speak the more earnestly of this matter, because there is a disposition, on the plea that it is impossible for us to divide men into two classes, to blur or even to obliterate the distinction between Christian and non-Christian. Many things prompt us to make the difference merely one of quantity - a more or less of conformity to some ideal standard - in which case, of course, a little more, or a little less, is of no great account. But that only means that we never take the distinction between being right with God, and being wrong with God, as seriously as God takes it; with Him it is simply infinite. The difference between those who obey, and those who do not obey, the gospel, is not the difference of a little better and a little worse; it is the difference of life and death. If there is any truth in Scripture at all, this is true - that those who stubbornly refuse to submit to the gospel, and to love and obey Jesus Christ, incur at the Last Advent an infinite and irreparable loss. They pass into a night on which no morning dawns.'

6) 1:7-9

The AV rendering of Paul's words in 8 does not make sufficiently clear, as the Greek does, that a distinction is being made between 'them that know not God' and 'them that obey not the gospel'. Leon Morris thinks that the first refers in general terms to those who are guilty of culpable neglect of such knowledge of God as He has been pleased to give them - the rejection of proffered light - while the second is a more specific example of this, referring to the rejection of the ultimate revelation of God's saving activity. We incline, however, to Denney's view that Paul is distinguishing between the Gentiles on the one hand (who know not God) and the Jews on the other (who obey not the gospel). This is a theme which is echoed in the opening chapters of Romans, as also in Ephesians 4:17-19, and we should compare Paul's teaching in those passages with these verses. When we do, we shall realise that the Gentiles are brought into judgment not merely for ignorance as such, but because their ignorance was willing; 'they did not like to retain God in their knowledge' (Romans 1:21, 28), and stifled the inner witness of heart and conscience that might have led them into saving light and knowledge. It is possible for men to get to know God; indeed, our Lord's awful words in the parable, 'I never knew you' when literally rendered read, 'I not at any time knew you'. It is as if He had said, 'All along I have tried to get to know you, but consistently you have refused to allow Me'. This is as culpable in Gentile as in Jew (Paul's point in Romans is that both alike have been unfaithful to such light as they have received, whether light of nature and conscience or of law), and as relevant for men today as it was then for, as Denney says, God does not hide Himself from men, but wills all men to be saved.

7) 1:10

It is salutary for us to realise that there is a 'bright side' to the idea of judgment and that the darker aspect is God's 'strange work' (Isaiah 28:21), very different from this note of glory and rejoicing here. C.S. Lewis points out in his 'Reflections on the Psalms' that for God's people judgment is apparently an occasion of universal rejoicing, and suggests the reason for this to be that the Jews pictured judgment in terms of an earthly court of justice, in terms not of a criminal case with themselves in the dock, but of a civil case with themselves as the plaintiffs, hoping not for acquittal or pardon but for 'a resounding triumph with heavy damages'. Obviously then, judgment would be something to long for, in this latter sense. Paul, in fact, combines both ideas in the course of his exposition in these verses, and he describes the vindication of the righteous (the believers) in a twofold way 'rest' (7) and 'glorification' (10). J.B. Phillips' translation of 10 is illuminating: 'To those whom He has made holy His coming will mean splendour unimaginable. It will be a breathtaking wonder to all who believe'. The coming of the all-glorious Christ is itself the power that will transform and transfigure us. He will be glorified in us, that is to say, we shall be made like Him, the indwelling of the hidden 'Christ-life' in us (Colossians 3:3) being drawn out and made manifest by the coming in glory of Him in Whose image we have been re-created. This is wonderful indeed, but no more wonderful than the fact that this final glorification of the saints is linked inseparably with the proclamation of the gospel ('our testimony among you was believed'). Nothing could underline more strikingly than this the primacy of preaching, and the eternal repercussions, for weal or woe, that it has in the lives of men. Well might Jesus say, 'Take heed how ye hear'!

8) 1:11-12

If 10 speaks of the final fruition of the work of grace in the gospel, these verses show the intermediate stages, so to speak, through which God's purposes are brought to fulfilment. Inherent in the idea of 'calling' (11) in the Greek word used is not only that a call is given but that it has also been heard and obeyed, and this perhaps will help in the understanding of the latter part of 11 which has been variously rendered and interpreted. J.B. Phillips translates, 'That He will effect in you all that His goodness desires to do, and that your faith makes possible', which seems to be in line with the idea of response contained in the word 'calling'. Weymouth translates, 'Gratify your every desire for what is truly good, and make your work of faith complete'. Whichever way it is taken, however, both are true through the ministry of the Word (referred to in 10 in the words 'because our testimony among you was believed'). This moral and spiritual transformation (cf Philippians 2:13; Hebrews 13:21) is inseparably linked with knowing God and obeying the gospel (see 8). The willing and obedient hear, open to the influence of the Word - this is how the name of Christ is glorified in the believer and the believer glorified in Him. We must not, however, omit reference to the prayers of the Apostle as an integral factor in this ongoing work of sanctification, for this completes the picture in which an ideal interplay of divine and human considerations - the calling of God, human response, earnest intercession - is unfolded in all its mystery and richness.

9) 2:1-2

With this chapter we come to the main subject matter of the epistle - the events associated with our Lord's Second Coming. In 1, translations other than the AV render the words (we think correctly) 'We beseech you, touching the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Paul is not beseeching them in the light and expectation of the coming day of Christ to behave in a certain kind of way, so much as instructing them about the true meaning and implications of that doctrine. What he has already said in chapter 1 has made it clear that there is nothing in the doctrine which should make believers unsettled or alarmed, and this he now underlines here. The evidence in 2 seems to show that some of the Thessalonians had been disturbed by teaching which claimed that the day of the Lord was 'now present'. ('At hand' in the AV is misleading - Paul taught this elsewhere, as in Philippians 4:5 - and the whole point of the confusion was that currency was being given to the idea that He had already come. It was this that Paul was intent on counteracting. One does not need much imagination to realise how unsettling this would be!). The reference to 'spirit' in 2 is surely to the utterance of some believer in the Church under some spiritual impulse, and reminds us of the Apostle John's necessary warning in 1 John 4:1 to try the spirits whether they be of God, and not believe any spirit uncritically. In 1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21, Paul has already exhorted them to prove (try) all things, and hold fast that which is good, and this is his point here. The 'word' or 'letter' must refer to teaching that was circulating as having its origin in Paul ('It is true, Paul said it'), and, some scholars think, possibly a forged letter, or the false claim that a letter had been received from him. This is some indication of the moral issues involved in the holding of fanatical beliefs. When truth itself is sacrificed in the interests of upholding a theory, it is time to look out!

10) 2:3-5

Paul now gives a conclusive reason why Christ cannot have already come, namely, that something else and someone else must first take place and appear. This 'something' is given in the AV as a 'falling away', and the 'someone' as 'the' man of sin'. Scholars are agreed that the AV is both misleading and weak in the rendering of the first of these. 'The rebellion' is what Paul in fact says, and the terms in which Paul speaks of this make it clear that he has already referred to it in his teaching (5). We could wish that we had access to this earlier teaching on the subject, for as matters stand it is not easy for us to determine what Paul means, since he takes for granted the Thessalonians' familiarity with the theme. What he is teaching is that before the coming of Christ in glory 'the great rebellion', a final, climactic revolt against God would take place, and that associated with it there would appear 'the man of sin', an individual identified with sin, the incarnation of evil, in fact the Antichrist. We must be careful here; it is clear from other Scriptures (e.g. 1 John 2:18) that antichrist is a principle as well as a person, in the sense that there are and have been many precursors of the final antichrist. To John, Nero was antichrist, to Calvin, the Pope, to the twentieth century a Hitler or a Stalin, and these are correct interpretations so far as they go, in that they were adumbrations of this final figure, and pointed to him. But Paul has in mind the final manifestation, and until he appears Christ will not come again in power and glory. For His coming is to deal with the fountainhead of evil, not any lesser power behind which his evil majesty can conceal himself. He must be brought out into the open. And this is the wonderful, and comforting, thing - while it is true that the man of sin appears only when he is so sure of himself that he can afford to strut in arrogant and blasphemous might before men, it is still more true to say that his coming into the open is the work of God, Who draws him out thus in order finally to destroy him. This is the drama of the situation!

11) 2:3-5

The reference at the end of the previous Note prompts a further reflection. It is interesting that this man of sin is called by a name that our Lord gave to Judas Iscariot - 'son of perdition', and this may be some indication as to the kind of rebellion that will be at the end of time. We are told that the Devil entered into Judas Iscariot; we know that his dread act of betrayal was the fulminating point in a whole movement of evil in his dark heart, and it was only when this point of no return was reached that Christ was delivered into the hands of sinful men. In the same way, it is only when evil reaches its summit and climax of arrogance and rebellion that the crisis of Christ's coming and victory will take place. As Denney puts it, 'Paul could understand that, where a final judgment was concerned, the fullness of time would not arrive till evil had had every opportunity either to turn and repent, or to develop itself in the most utterly evil forms, and lie ripe for vengeance.' It is the implication of this fact that explains the seeming paradox of progress and deterioration in history. 'Are things getting better, or in fact are they worse, than they used to be?' we sometimes ask. Both are true, good and evil progress in parallel lines, in essential antagonism to each other, coming in mounting tension to fruition in a final showdown. This is why we find apparently contradictory ideas expressed in the Scriptures, when on the one hand great, worldwide effusions of the Spirit of God are prophesied for the last Days (as in Joel 2:28ff), and on the other, apostasy is forecast (as here), and the destruction of the organised witness of the Church (Revelation 11:3-14) and the improbability that the Son of Man will find faith on the earth at His coming (Luke 18:8). Both are true, for both exist together.

Another point arises in 4: it is that the final manifestation of evil as spoken of here by Paul, is refinedly spiritual, not brutal or sensual. The man of sin sets himself in the place of God, and claims to be God. If then this is not to be dismissed as ludicrous and fantastic, we must suppose that his deceptive qualities must be very great indeed. That is the point; people will be beguiled into thinking he is worthy of worship. The essence of counterfeit is surely that the counterfeit is very like, and not grossly unlike, the real thing. Satan's favourite guise is that of an angel of light. The following words by Emil Brunner, one of the greatest theologians of our day, underline this point: 'The Satanic element in human experience is not the instinctive animal instinct, greatly intensified, but it is evil with a luminous halo; not evil which repels, but evil which fascinates and allures by the magic of its attraction. We should therefore seek for traces of real devilry rather in the sphere of literature and art than in the criminal world. The devil does not care very much for what is low and insignificant, he prefers what is high and exalted. It is evident that he knows how to assume the form of 'the perfect gentleman' as well as that of literary and artistic greatness. He certainly prefers to fly high rather than low. But these are matters about which our own generation, and probably the theologians of this generation, know much less than was known centuries ago'.

12) 2:6-7

We have not yet done with difficulties of interpretation. 'Ye know what withholdeth', says Paul, and leaves the matter unexplained. For the Thessalonians the allusion was obviously sufficient, but unfortunately not for us, and we are left to speculate on his possible meaning. Various widely different interpretations have been given. Some have said that the reference is to the Holy Spirit, but it is unlikely that He should be spoken of as being 'taken away', for He has come to dwell with the Church forever, and when the Church is taken to be with Christ it is the end. The same objection can be made to the suggestion that it is the Church that is the restraining power. It could be some angelic being, although it is difficult to see why, if this is so, Paul should be so guarded in what he says. Many think he refers in veiled terms to the Roman Empire, or even more generally, law and order (which was represented by the Roman government in Paul's day). It is certainly true that the institution of law is intended by God to act as a restraint upon the irruptions of evil in society, and doubtless the properly constituted authority of the Roman government did in fact act as a check on the more blatant forms of evil that might have overwhelmed the Christian Church. Paul, however, seems to envisage a time when law and order will be removed (this surely corresponds to Satan's little season in Revelation 20:3?), and evil will have its head in the world. Whatever Paul may have in mind here, whether the eventual removal of the Roman power or some breakdown in the future, we can at least gather a principle from what he teaches, namely, that in periods of history in which law and order are brought under pressure or collapse (such as in the days of the judges in the Old Testament) evil becomes unrestrained and erupts with frightful consequences for the world. It is this that causes us so much disquiet today when we see divine law flouted and its very foundations questioned and repudiated, and a new 'morality' put in its place. In the light of these verses, what can we suppose that Paul would have to say about these sinister modern trends among the intelligentsia of the decadent West?

Whatever interpretation may be put on Paul's words it should surely be clear that the divine hand is in control of the situation. Evil is kept in check until in His sovereign purposes it is allowed by Him to be unleashed in all its fury. As we have seen, this is God's way of finally dealing with evil - by uncovering its real nature, exposing it as it really is, drawing its fangs so as finally to deal it a deathblow. This is one of the great lessons of the Book of Revelation also. The answer to the saints' cry, 'How long, O Lord?' (Revelation 6:10) is simply that He was drawing out evil to the full so as to destroy it.

13) 2:6-7

Two further things should be noted in connection with the point at the end of the previous reading. The first is the relation of what Paul is saying to the idea of 'common grace' which is often neglected in our thinking today. Common, as distinct from saving, grace operates in all life, even when it is most openly rebellious against God. The atheist and agnostic are both debtors to it day by day, the very energy with which they deny God being given them by Him. He makes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust alike. And what is true in the realm of providence is just as true in the moral realm. Common grace is at work in the life of the atheist bestowing on him what natural goodness may be manifest in him, and restraining the full outworking of his neglect of God and refusal of the gospel. This is the simple and sufficient answer to those who think it possible to live the good life without God. They do not know how indebted they are to Him. But it will not always be so. Sometimes, indeed always, eventually, the restraint is lifted; then they are seen for what they really are, sullen, ugly rebels against the living God.

The second point is that we see the idea of divine restraint at work in the life of our Lord Himself. In John's gospel particularly we can see the exemplifications of Paul's words about the mystery of iniquity being at work, for in His public ministry Jesus stirred up unholy antagonism against Himself, and the issues of good and evil became sharp, clear and well-defined. But, although the tension obviously increased, a restraint was also at work all the way through; nothing could befall Him, and the evil of evil men towards Him was foiled again and again because His hour was not yet come. And it was when in the sovereign will and purpose of God the restraint was lifted that evil broke loose, the son of perdition did his fell work ('That thou doest, do quickly'), and Jesus was crucified. But it was allowed to break loose so that in grappling with it in all its malignity Christ once for all broke its power, in His Cross and Resurrection.

14) 2:8

One point only requires to be underlined in this verse. There is no description of a headlong and long drawn out clash between the powers of good and evil. The man of sin is revealed, and thereupon consumed. It is the easy victory of Christ that is stressed! The phrase 'The spirit of His mouth' reminds us of Luther's great phrase, 'A word shall quickly slay him' (in the hymn, 'A safe stronghold our God is still'). One marvels at the realisation that the forces of evil in the world continue to operate only because thus far Christ has not chosen to speak that word, and not because they have succeeded in putting up a stiff and resolute resistance to His Kingdom. Hendriksen, in his commentary on Revelation, remarks in his exposition of chapter 19, 'Please observe that the battle itself is not described. This battle of Har-Mageddon is not a protracted struggle with now this and then that side winning. No; 'with the breath of His mouth' Christ at His coming defeats the foe. By the 'manifestation of His presence' He vanquishes His enemies. We are simply told that the anti-christian forces are gathered together against Christ and His army, and that they are put to naught'. This is certainly the force of Paul's word here. What comfort and confidence this should bring to our hearts, to know that Christ is so sovereignly in control, and to be assured, by implication, that in his 'interim' dealings with the powers of evil in our lives, He is just as instant and summary. 'At times, with sudden glory, He speaks and all is done; Without one stroke of battle the victory is won'. Wait, I say, on the Lord!

15) 2-9-10

That the man of sin is not Satan himself, but distinguishable from him, is clear from 9, but he is obviously so closely identified with him as to be his 'incarnation' in human form. Paul now reverts to a description of this fiendish creature's activities. It is a fearsome and frightening picture, horrific in its implications. J.B. Phillips renders it 'armed with all the force, wonders and signs that falsehood can devise' and goes on to speak of 'evil's undiluted power to deceive', but even this graphic rendering hardly does justice to Paul's meaning. Older commentators point out the blasphemous counterfeit that Satan's work presents here: the man of sin has a 'coming', as Christ has His coming; he works by supernatural power, as Christ wrought by the power of God; he works miracles as Christ did. This is all very alarming, and but for one consideration might lead to despair: those who are deceived and thereby perish are those who received not the love of the truth that they might be saved. Men are not subject to blind forces of fate; moral issues control human destinies, and it is in the first instance a wrong attitude to the truth that ultimately leads to total deception. It is not that they had not heard or known the truth, nor does Paul say so; it is that when they heard and knew it they did not care for it or love it, but refused it. It is want of sympathy with the truth that finally damns men. As Jesus said. 'This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil' (John 3:19). Here, then, are two constituent factors in the destruction of men's souls; as Denney puts it, 'They perish by their own agency, in that they do not welcome and love the truth; and they perish by the malevolence of the devil, who avails himself of this dislike to the truth to befool them by falsehood and lead them ever further and further astray'. Something else, however, remains to be said, and this we come to in the next Note.

16) 2:11-12

Paul now says that God Himself is active in this terrible judgment of men. 'God', he says, 'sends them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie'. We must not shrink from the solemn implications of these words, for they are corroborated in other parts of Scripture, and indeed echoed in our Lord's own words. It is exactly what Paul teaches in Romans 1:24-28 where three times he states that because men refuse 'the love of the truth' God gives them up to a reprobate mind. It is what our Lord Himself said of Jerusalem as He wept over it, 'O Jerusalem... how often would I have gathered thee... and ye would not. Behold your house is left unto you desolate...' (Matthew 23:37, 38). See then that this is no arbitrary act of vengeance on God's part, but something which He does with tears in His eyes, and concerning which He has been left no other option. If men repeatedly refuse His grace and truth, He has no alternative but to leave them to their choice, to a delusion of their own choice and through it a final darkness. Oh that men might see that this is the final issue of resisting the word of the gospel! True indeed it is that no man can listen to the truth and be the same again. It does something to him, for weal or woe. To resist it hardens his heart, and blinds his mind until, all insensibly, they become incapable of distinguishing between truth and error, right or wrong, good and evil, and their deception is complete. God grant that when we hear the truth we may learn to love it, for our salvation.

17) 2:13-14

Paul now speaks of those who do believe the truth and who do receive the love of the truth, and his words are all the more striking and impressive against the dark and sombre background of what he has just said. Here, then, is the solid ground of assurance for those who are Christ's. Salvation is not something initiated by the believer, but is bounded on all sides by the electing grace of God. From eternity to eternity God is the prime mover in this work, and the life and experience of the believer in grace is set between God's eternal intention and His eternal glory. From the beginning - that is, from before the foundation of the world, we are chosen in Christ for a destiny of salvation, and it is basic to the whole New Testament conception of the gospel that the good work of grace begun in us, being rooted in eternity, should continue unabated and unhindered until it finally brings us to eternity. The means whereby this work is accomplished is expressed in the words 'through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth'. The agent of divine activity is the Holy Spirit - He is the Executor of the Godhead, and applies the finished work of Christ to our hearts, making us participators in His death and Resurrection. For this He creates faith in us so that we believe the truth (cf Ephesians 2:8, Philippians 1:29); and in the obedience we offer to the word of the gospel the continuing work of divine grace is ensured and sealed in our lives. How different this to the sad and sinister downward movement into darkness recorded in the previous verses! Well might Paul give thanks for the Thessalonians, when so many marks of their election of God were evident in their lives!

18) 2:15

This exhortation to stand fast follows naturally on the previous verses. It is analogous to Peter's word in 2 Peter 1:10, 'Give diligence to make your calling and election sure', which is based on the same kind of presuppositions as Paul's. We must understand that apart from such a secure and firm basis as these fundamental affirmations of the faith in 13, 14 there can be no possibility of standing firm at all in the Christian life, and to ask people to do so is to offer them a counsel of despair. Always the apostolic order is, first the great indicatives, then the grand imperative. It is because of what God has made us, in Christ and the gospel, that we can be what He has called us to be. This is the heart of everything, and the inspiration of the Christian life, and its impelling, sustaining and comforting power. It is not too much to say that the whole gospel mystery of sanctification is summed up in the words 'Become what you are'. Without the 'indicatives' of grace, the 'imperatives' are impossible of attainment; with them, all things are possible. This is how we must understand Paul's words here.

'Traditions' is a word of which we tend to be suspicious; we recall the strictures which Jesus made against the Pharisees for substituting 'the traditions of men' for the commandments of God. But Paul is far from using the word in this sense, and in fact is simply reminding the Thessalonians that there are good and honourable traditions as well as bad ones. When he speaks in 1 Corinthians 15 of delivering unto them that which he also received, he conveys the literal meaning of the word 'tradition' something handed down from one to another. The 'faith once delivered to the saints' is a tradition that we not only may cherish and hold, but must, if the purity of the gospel is to be preserved (cf 2 Timothy 2:2 for a further example of this idea). Of 'bad' traditions that are very properly held in suspicion, Denney finely says, 'The bulk of so-called traditions in the Church of Rome are to be rejected not because they are traditions but because they are not traditions, but have originated in later times and are inconsistent with what is known to be truly apostolic. We ourselves are bound to keep fast hold of all that connects us historically with the apostolic age. We would not lose a single thought, single like or dislike, a single conviction or instinct, of all that proves us the spiritual posterity of Peter and Paul and John. The Reformers were right... in their claim to represent the true Church of Christ... and we will suffer for it if, in our eagerness for independence, we disown the riches of the past!' That is something worth pondering.

19) 2:16-17

Paul's final prayer for them is very beautiful and significant. The emphasis on 'The Lord Jesus Christ Himself' reminds us that holding fast to the traditions they have been taught (15) was never to be merely a matter of their grasp and assimilation of facts, not even of 'salvation' facts, but most of all a relationship to Christ. He, ultimately, and not merely the truth about Him, is our Comforter and Stabiliser in the Christian life. Then, we must see the point of the reference to God's love. The phrase 'everlasting consolation and good hope through grace' has a specific reference to the past tense 'hath loved us', and directs our thoughts to the Cross. The distinctive teaching about the divine love in the New Testament is always in the past tense - 'loved' rather than 'loves'; not that God does not still love us - of course He does! - but that its focal point is always the Cross, where it was once for all manifested and given to us. Such a love is both our consolation (how could it be otherwise when it has plumbed such depths, and gone deeper than the deepest human sorrow?) and our hope, for its final movement is the victory of the Resurrection and consequently provides all that is needful for a strong and steadfast life and witness, promoting every good word and work. One marvels at the skilful interplay of divine power and human responsiveness in these last verses of the chapter. Salvation is all of God, yet all of God in such a way that human endeavour is never atrophied but on the contrary quickened and engaged to the full. We work out our own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12, 13).

20) 3:1

The exhortation, 'Brethren, pray for us' is one that could very legitimately be taken out of context and made the basis of a general appeal for the work of God. There was never a time in all his long missionary career when Paul could not have, with equal force, made this moving entreaty, and from all over the world today the same cry rises from the mission fields of the gospel. All the same, however, there is a particular reason for Paul asking for prayer at this time, and the circumstances in which he was then placed, as recorded in Acts 18:4-18, make this very clear. Corinth, where Paul was labouring when he wrote to the Thessalonians, was a sink of iniquity (cf 1 Corinthians 6:9-11), and conditions there for the gospel were such that even the indomitable heart of the Apostle seemed to quail and falter, and God came to him in a vision with words of great assurance (Acts 18:9). At the time of writing Paul was in fact experiencing difficulty, and he was in his mind contrasting the great outpouring of the Spirit that had left such a mark in Thessalonica with the stubborn oppositions and hindrances he was encountering in Corinth. The phrase 'free course' literally means 'run' (cf Psalm 147:15) and may be taken in two ways, on the one hand referring to the swiftness and urgency with which he wanted to see the gospel word reaching men ('the King's business requireth haste'), or on the other hand suggesting the running of a well-oiled and properly maintained machine. We speak of 'work going well', and experiencing freedom and liberty in preaching. We do not have to choose between the alternative meanings; both have point and force, and both are integrally and essentially related to the prayer that undergirds the work. This is the continuing need.

21) 3:2

This verse explains why Paul felt such a need for prayer in his ministry in Corinth. There were real hindrances and obstacles in the way. In the Greek he asks to be delivered 'from the unreasonable and wicked men', and it seems clear that he has in mind a specific group of people rather than the enemies of the gospel in general. 'All men have not faith', he says. It is hardly likely that Paul was simply stating that all men are not Christians - this would be a statement of the obvious, and pointless here. What he means is that not all have faith that should have. The point is this: the opposition which he experienced came from the Jews, and of all people they are the very ones who should have been with him in his work, behind him, supporting and strengthening him in God: but instead, they were against him, his greatest opponents, his most dangerous enemies, his most consistent hindrances. They of all people should have welcomed his message, since to them pertained the adoption and the covenants, and all the glories of the divine revelation. They were being untrue to all their history and calling in opposing his message, for rightly understood his gospel was the fulfilment of all that Judaism pointed to. The word 'unreasonable' literally means 'out of place' and this is the only way to describe the Jews' opposition to the gospel, since by their calling they were best equipped to understand the message of grace. The relevance of this today is surely clear. Where would you expect to find faith in the gospel today, but in the Church? And yet, so often, where the true gospel is preached it is precisely from those in the Church that the bitterest and most unreasonable opposition comes. Minister after minister could testify with sadness and mystification that his biggest problem is not his lapsed members or those on the fringe, but those in the heart of his congregation's life who resist with might and main the real message of the gospel. Well might Paul express astonishment and mystification, and ask for prayer!

22) 3:3-4

Following the reference to the hinderers whom he had encountered, Paul makes a play upon the word 'faith' and stresses by way of contrast the faithfulness of the Lord, and his own faith concerning them. This is a necessary and salutary antidote against the hindrances we encounter in the work of the gospel. The sovereignty of God ever stands over against the opposition of men, and He will do His work in spite of them, and the necessary corollary of this is that the difficulties and sufferings of the path of Christian service will not prove too great for those who trust in Him. Significantly, Paul turns from his own burdens to those of the Thessalonians. 'He shall stablish you', he says. And, of course, the problems they were facing were much the same as Paul's, the unbelieving Jews were a thorn in the flesh wherever the gospel was preached. Now the ground of his confidence concerning them lay not in them but in the Lord (4). As Denney finely puts it, 'In the Lord, you may depend upon those who in themselves are weak, unstable, wilful, foolish. In the Lord you may depend on them to stand fast, to fight their temptations, to overcome the world and the wicked one... we may have confidence in the Lord that all whom He has called by His gospel will be able by His spiritual presence with them to walk worthy of that calling, and to confute alike the fears of the good and the contempt of the wicked. For the Lord is faithful, Who will stablish them, and preserve them from the evil one'.

23) 3:5

It is perhaps significant that the passage which begins with Paul's request for prayer for himself should end with his prayer for them, and this bears witness to the fundamental 'two-way' traffic of the communion of saints. Love and prayer are never unilateral, and when they are allowed to become so, we have become unchristianly selfish and self-preoccupied. The word 'direct' here means 'to make straight' and according to Leon Morris, has the idea of opening up the path so that there will be no hindrance in attaining the desired object. 'Love of God' is a phrase which in the New Testament sometimes means God's love for us and sometimes ours for Him. Often it is the context that will decide which meaning should be taken, and here it is probably better to take it as the latter rather than the former. 'Patient waiting' is better rendered 'patience'; it refers not to their waiting for the coming of the Lord but to their sharing of the patience and endurance of Christ. What Paul means in this prayer is that the Thessalonians should be so filled with love to God through Christ that they might endure all trials as He did, and be kept in the midst of them in unfaltering steadfastness. It is an echo of the concluding verses of Romans 8, in which Paul speaks both of being killed all the day long and of being more than conquerors through Him that loved us. Happy are those who are thus prayed for!

24) 3:6-9

There are a number of important and far-reaching issues involved in these few verses at the close of the epistle. The situation at Thessalonica was (cf 1 Thessalonians 5:14) that the teaching about the Second Coming had caused some unsettlement, and some were neglecting their work in preoccupation with its imminence. These had apparently not been amenable to correction and there was some evidence of indiscipline in the fellowship. Disorderly walk (6) and plain idleness (11) and positive resistance of Paul's instructions and discipline, were evident. This is what caused him to write as he does in these verses. Some of the Thessalonians were in fact not bearing a good witness, and Paul's point is that to fall down in Christian behaviour is to deny the faith. There are two opposite errors in relation to good works, both equally disastrous and fatal to those who commit them. The one is to misunderstand the whole meaning of the gospel by believing that by our good works we can be acceptable to God and accepted by Him. The truth of the gospel is that we are accepted not for our good works, but solely for the good work of Another, Jesus Christ, and we are justified by grace through faith alone. This essential truth has repeatedly been lost sight of down the history of the Church and has needed to be recovered and restored again and again. But in the process of recovering it, the pendulum has sometimes swung to the opposite extreme, in reaction against a 'gospel of works', and 'good works' have been belittled and held at a discount. This is a perversion of the biblical gospel, and so dangerous that we must spend another day discussing it.

25) 3:6-9

In reaction against the obscuring of the gospel of free grace in justification, men have sometimes gone the length of saying, 'Good works are useless: it is not what you do but what you believe that is important' - this, in opposition to the other attitude which said, 'It does not matter what you believe, so long as you are sincere. It is what you do that is important'. One sees what is meant, of course, and it is understandable that the exclusive emphasis on right belief should be made. But it does lead, and has led, to the obscuring of the ethical sanctions of the gospel. This is a major tragedy, for it betrays the whole genius of the gospel and its meaning. For, justification is always meant to lead to good works. We are created in Christ Jesus unto good works (Ephesians 2:10). And this is the only real evidence that a work of grace has taken place in the soul at all. True evangelical piety lays upon men inflexible demands for the highest standards of behaviour, for probity of life, and uncompromising honour and integrity. This was Paul's concern with some Thessalonians, who were apparently careless of the ethical obligations of their profession. This is a recurring problem which evangelicals would do well to lay to heart and face in all seriousness. Standards of integrity of behaviour are sometimes higher among those who try to 'work their passage' to heaven than among those who claim to have the true gospel. This does not mean that the former are after all right in their views, rather, their standard is high because they are living on the spiritual capital of our forefathers who were evangelical in the true, biblical sense, as to both belief and behaviour. It is only at a later date and in the next generation that you see the moral breakdown that is inevitable. But if evangelical testimony is not in fact producing this kind of high ethical standard, then - quite bluntly - we must say it is not true evangelical testimony, and a new moral grandeur must be discovered, through real ministry.

26) 3:10

This verse is focal in a passage that is highly important for true Christian thinking on a subject that generally tends to be misunderstood in our time - 'the Christian doctrine of work', or as Denney calls it, 'The Christian worth of labour'. In Thessalonica there were those who had allowed religious excitement to unsettle them and cause them to abandon the routine of duty. This means that they had a wrong conception of the nature, function, and purpose of work as such. The Scriptures teach about work that it is honourable. In Gen 3 the words 'By the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread' are to be regarded not simply as a penal enactment, but as a means of grace for man's life. What was man's discipline because of sin becomes an ennobling factor in his life and experience. The Sabbath commandment speaks of work as well as of rest - 'six days shalt thou labour....' The biblical doctrine of work is therefore far removed from the current idea that it is a necessary evil, to be got out of if at all possible. It is something more even than an economic means of livelihood. Even if we had independent means, it would be bad for us, and wrong, not to have work to do. It is the work itself that is important for us, for it is honourable in itself, and ought to be performed with all diligence and in absolute integrity. And when this is done, it is a means of grace, and a right attitude to it will turn it into a spiritual blessing.

To be honourable and faithful at one's work has two important implications. In the first place it imparts the grace of character to our lives. It has a sanctifying power and influence, and is a means of grace promoting the good work of God in the soul. This is what we should remember when we are tempted to cavil at the drudgery and the weariness of the uncongenial aspects of our daily duties. God has set these as a means of grace for our lives, and when we try to avoid them, we are refusing something which God has ordained as a sanctifying force in our experience. The man who takes his work seriously will grow and develop in character and stature. In the second place it will mean that a witness is borne to others for Christ. This is terribly important. Many Christians do not seem to realise that life as well as lip can preach the gospel, and that when life is not speaking aright, what the lip says is offensive and a hindrance to the gospel, however orthodox it may sound. We should remember that those outside the faith are not really interested in our testimony or spiritual experiences. What they see is our life, and this is what interests them. If that speaks, then something worthwhile will have been said for Christ that will make verbal testimony relevant. Not otherwise.

27) 3:10-12

Paul's words here were meant originally as a prescription for religious excitement and unsettlement and as such breathe a spirit of wisdom that is relevant for every age; but they are also a prescription for something that is fundamentally irreligious as well, namely laziness, and are probably the best and firmest advice given in Scripture for our dealings with beggars in general. It is a well-established fact in many ministers' experience that the majority of beggars who come to our doors are not genuine in the stories they tell, but are in fact scroungers. If this is so, then it is not an act of Christian charity to give them money; on the contrary, it simply aggravates an already critical condition, and may even effectively prevent any real help from being administered to them. We have found that sound and realistic advice on how to come to terms with themselves and with life so as to become useful citizens is not welcomed (not even when firm arrangements for getting a steady job of work have been made on their behalf). In such instances, 'taking pity on them' by giving them money, thus encouraging the continuance of their parasitical way of life, is really a pitiless action, lacking in moral value and in Christian realism alike. Needless to say, this can never be an excuse for Christians to be either heartless or insensitive to the need for a radical rehabilitation which so many of these people require. Social service is not an optional extra for the Christian Church, nor would Paul ever have taught it to be. What he does teach is that it should be based on Christian realism not on unchristian sentimentality.

28) 3:13-15

These verses indicate Paul's instructions for the treatment of the moral disorders at Thessalonica, and introduce the subject of Church discipline in general. We may usefully take the reference in 6 along with those in 14 and 15 and consider them together. The whole question of discipline is a thorny one, and not at all as simple as some would try to make out who take the attitude, 'The plain teaching of Scripture is...' and apply it mechanically and almost without feeling, as if they had forgotten that those to whom they applied it were human beings, not guinea pigs. They forget that although the Scriptures may be simple and unequivocal in their teaching, we are not, but on the contrary sometimes very complex, and it is therefore very easy for us to indulge, under the cloak of spirituality, very carnal impulses. It is true that we are exhorted in Scripture to admonish one another (Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16) - the 'admonish' here in 15, however, belongs to the spiritual oversight of the fellowship rather than to the individual believer - but we should be far more careful than we often are that our 'faithfulness' in dealing with the faults of others does not spring from a deep-seated and secret desire to assert a carnal ego, to lord it over others, or, worse still, to inflict hurt and humiliation upon them. That these may sometimes be the secret, controlling motives in the application of discipline and admonition between believers is seen in the harm it does. True admonition in the biblical sense is healthful and beneficial.

29) 3:13-15

We have often been impressed with the fact that those who are best qualified in the spiritual life to give admonition are much less prone to do so than those who are not (this is why, when admonition is given by them, it is worth listening to and accepting as from the Lord). There is a great deal for us to learn in this. It means, for one thing, that the spiritually qualified see the dangers involved, where the unqualified see only something that secretly attracts them. What are the dangers involved? Mainly that it is so easy to allow a harshness to creep into voice and attitude alike, and to convey the impression of taking a perverse pleasure in administering the discipline. This develops, much more quickly than one might realise, into an evil, critical spirit which can cause growing resentment and do untold harm. The man who is always 'putting people right', piously (!) arrogating to himself the authority to be (and earning for himself the reputation of becoming) a busybody in other men's matters (1 Peter 4:15), not only becomes a source of irritation to the fellowship, but reveals to the truly discerning a basic spiritual disharmony in himself that needs to be resolved (and indeed admonished!) before true development towards spiritual maturity is possible. Let us realise that the duty of admonition should be accepted with the same hesitation as the calling to preach the Word. The Hebrew Epistle says concerning this latter (5:4), 'No man taketh unto himself this honour, but he that is called of God'. As with preaching so also with admonishing; only those really called of God to do it and guided by Him in it can stand the responsibility of it without the danger of unhallowed motives creeping in unawares.

30) 3:13-15

Having discussed the dangers inherent in the administering of discipline, let us see now what Paul in fact advocates. 'If any man obey not... have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother' (14, 15). Paul's teaching here is withdrawal - not in the sense of snubbing, cutting or giving the cold shoulder, for such attitudes imply dislike, aversion and even bitterness and hatred towards the person concerned. It is not a change of feeling, but a change of treatment that is envisaged, and this distinction is of the highest importance. When we examine it more closely, we find that it derives from God, Whose love for us does not diminish or change when He is angry with us. Paul elsewhere exhorts us to have 'the mind of Christ' in all our dealings with men (Philippians 2:5) and this is the real, as it is the only, standard in applying discipline and admonition to others. But what in fact does happen in our spiritual experience when we grieve His Spirit because of our sin? He 'withdraws'. He is still with us, helping, guiding, sustaining, yet in some indefinable, quite unmistakeable, way, He withholds Himself from fellowship with us. There is 'something between', and not until this is dealt with can the former intimacy be restored. Friendly feeling is unchanged, for He still loves and cares for us, but friendly relations are affected. His treatment of us is different because of our sin. Let this mind be in you, says Paul to the Thessalonians.

31) 3:16

Some commentators take these words as referring particularly to what has been said in the previous verses about the possibilities of friction in the fellowship and the application of discipline to the disorderly. While they have relevance to this, it still seems better to take them as a general prayer of benediction in which the apostle sums up all his desire for the Thessalonians. We should not miss the force of 'Himself' here. Rightly understood, peace is not something God bestows apart from Himself. He is our peace, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:14 and this is the simple truth. Peace, as a gift, quality, power of experience, apart from Himself, is a meaningless concept, if we are to believe the Scriptures. Reconciliation is unto God, and the whole force of its meaning is that we who through sin were estranged from Him are now brought back to Him, into fellowship. Salvation is nothing more or less than the restoration of a relationship with God for which we were always destined but which was lost through sin. It is therefore a contradiction in terms to think of peace except in relation to Him. In the measure in which we are able to enjoy Him, we will know peace; no more, no less, that is to say, in the measure in which He is allowed to reign in our hearts, His peace will also reign (Colossians 3:15). This is just as true in the life of the fellowship as it is in that of the believer. It is no accident that the well-known word in Colossians 1:27, 'Christ in you' can as fittingly be translated, 'Christ among you'. It is when He has His way in a fellowship of His people that true harmony prevails, for thus He indwells the minds, emotions, consciences and wills of each member in such a way that He brings them, being in harmony with Himself, into harmony with one another. When this obtains, the 'always in every way' (as in the Greek) will become a blessed reality: no conceivable combination of conditions or circumstances will alter the overmastering reality of His sovereign presence. He is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

32) 3:17-18

The significance of the personal reference in 17 is that Paul's custom was to dictate his letters to an amanuensis (see Romans 16:22), and to append a few words with his own signature at the end by his own hand. Some think he did so because of bad eyesight, and that this explains the 'large letters' of Galatians 6:11. It is clear at any rate that this was his usual practice, and that it incidentally proved to be a token that the epistle was in fact genuinely from him, and not a forgery. (See also 1 Corinthians 16:21 and Colossians 4:18).

The benediction which closes the epistle includes all in the fellowship; the unruly, the disorderly, and the disobedient alike come within the apostolic blessing, and this serves to underline what was said in the Notes on 3:13-15 about the difference between change of feeling and change of treatment. To him, the unruly were still brothers (15), not enemies, and still loved in Christ, longed for and prayed for. It would have been unthinkable for him to have excluded them from the blessing, comfort and protection of Christ's grace. How much easier therefore would it be for the dissidents to receive correction from such a loving, gracious and winsome spiritual father!