

New Testament Books 1 Thessalonians chapter 2

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

When the ministry of Truth for Today began, back in 1998, it was decided that there should always be some systematic, chapter by chapter, Bible teaching in the programme. This present series on the first epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, was suggested by our oldest member of our broadcasting team. The Bible is unlike any other book, we cannot exhaust it, or reach the point where we know it all. We may well gain an understanding of the truth of Scripture, through careful study, but the Bible is alive, and has a message for us each and every day. Verses we know and which we have read many times before can, and do, speak to us in freshness, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As usual, in my talks, I will be reading and quoting from the Authorised Version of the Bible, sometimes called the King James Version, and these references will be listed in the transcript.

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The way these talks are written and recorded means that we (as contributors) do not have the benefit of listening to the previous week's talk before giving ours. However, I feel sure that last week you would have heard that the letter to the Thessalonians was almost certainly one of the earliest of Paul's letters, and followed on from a very short visit made to the city. From Acts Ch.17 vv.1-9, we learn that Paul was only in Thessalonica for about 3 weeks before a Jewish-led riot resulted in these newly converted Christians sending Paul and his fellow-worker, Silas, out of the city, under cover of darkness, to safety at Berea. This is the background to this letter which was written shortly after the events recorded in Acts Ch.17.

When I think of this, and read again chapter 1 of the epistle, I marvel at the effect which the Gospel had on the people of this city, and in such a short period of time! Three weeks or so of preaching the Word of God, "in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance" had turned the city "upside down" (or more accurately right side up!). God was at work! And when God is at work, the devil is at work too. The riot, on the face of it, brought the work to an untimely halt, but as a result we have Paul's letters to the Thessalonian Christians. God is not, nor ever will be thwarted by the actions of His enemies. Let us always remember this, 'God not only moves behind the scenes, but He moves the scenes which He is behind.' (I think this quote is attributed to the late John Nelson Darby).

God is sovereign, and He will act according to His own will and purpose. I say this especially to encourage any who seek to preach the Gospel to the unbeliever. A noble work, and one which is

commended in Scripture, (indeed Paul tells the young man, Timothy, among other things to, “do the work of an evangelist” (see 1 Timothy Ch. 4 v.5)), but remembering that we cannot affect the outcome. The Gospel preacher must realise that it is only God who can move the human heart to repentance and faith. It has been said that we ‘preach as if it depends on us, but we pray knowing that it depends on God.’ God uses the preaching, and even the preacher, but it is His work. Paul certainly recognised this as in writing to the Christians at Corinth he says, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (see 1 Corinthians Ch. 3v.6). We are called to be faithful in our preaching and presentation of Christ as the only Saviour for sinners, and we can leave the results with God.

Chapter 1 ends with the wonderful truth that, Jesus is coming again! Hallelujah! I am so sad that sections of the Christian testimony have lost sight of this most precious truth that Jesus is coming again. I’m sure for those who believe this Biblical truth, our hearts leap at the thought that at any moment our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself, will come into the air and take us to Himself. This truly is the Christian’s hope! This doctrine was part of Paul’s “Gospel” and in this little letter he speaks of the Lord’s coming in every chapter. Perhaps this is the very reason why our elderly brother was exercised that we should consider this epistle. The darker the night, the brighter the light shines, and the light of the Lord’s imminent return for His church should be a real source of comfort and joy to the hearts of every believer. In the darkness, both spiritual and moral, which is descending upon our western world, we are encouraged to be “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (see Titus Ch. 2v.13).

As an outline for the epistle we could look at the references to the Lord’s coming. In chapter 1 the thought is the hope of **salvation**. In chapter 2 it is the reward for **service**. In chapter 3 it provides **stability**. In chapter 4 the Lord’s coming is comfort in **sorrow**. And in chapter 5 it is in relation to **sanctification**.

I trust that you believe and rejoice in the truth of the Lord’s coming, for His church. This is what He longs for, to present His bride, His church, to Himself. This is what He promised His own as He gently prepared them for His departure out of this world. In John chapter 14 He makes them a promise, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (see John Ch. 14v.2-3).

In chapter 4 of the epistle we are considering, we have a direct prophecy in relation to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes authoritatively, “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord...”. We should be in no doubt that the verses which follow are divinely inspired and give us, perhaps, the clearest outline of what is spoken of as “the Rapture”, the snatching away of the Christian church out of this world (see 1 Thessalonians Ch. 4v.15-18).

This promise and this prophecy shed light on the parable which Jesus gave in relation to the bridegroom and the bridesmaids. Five had oil and were ready for the bridegroom’s return, but five were foolish and were shut out of the marriage. Let us, individually, be ready and watchful for the return of our bridegroom. The cry has been made, “Behold the bridegroom!” (see Matthew Ch. 25 v.1-13).

So we have a **parable**, a **prophecy**, but most precious of all a **promise** from the Lord Himself concerning His coming for us. Well may we sing –

O Lord Jesus how long, how long
Ere we shout the glad song -
Christ returneth! Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Amen.

H. L. Turner 1878

We will come back to this wonderful subject, of the Lord's coming, later in our talk, and see what hope Paul and Silas and Timothy had in respect of the believers at Thessalonica.

In chapter 1 Paul writes of "our prayers" and "our gospel", and in the first verse of chapter 2, of "our entrance." Reading through the chapter, I was struck by the further references to "our exhortation" (v.3), "our labour and travail" (v.9), "our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing" (v.19), and "our glory and joy" (v.20), and I thought we could look at each of these in turn as a summary of the chapter.

Our entrance

As we have already said, there was a mighty work done in the very short period Paul and Silas were at Thessalonica. It was therefore clear for all to see that their entrance in unto the Thessalonians was not in vain, nor without success. The conversion and the changed lives of those at Thessalonica (as described in chapter 1) was an open testimony of the fact that the apostle's visit had been fruitful. In warning against false teachers, the Lord Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (see Matthew Ch. 7v.20). In a positive way, we should see evidence of the fruit of the Spirit of God in the lives of the people of God. I am no gardener, and only work in the garden under my wife's supervision. Plants and weeds look the same to me, but I can tell the plum tree and the apple tree when they are in fruit! In the same way, the men and women of the world should see the fruit of the Holy Spirit outwardly in our lives.

Looking down the chapter we see in verse 7 and in verse 11 the way the apostles conducted themselves in Thessalonica. It is interesting that the picture of a nursing mother and a caring father are both used by Paul to describe their "entrance" - of their demeanour amongst these new converts to Christ. Our behaviour and deportment ought to be such as commends the Gospel to those we live beside, our neighbours and our colleagues. Those who know us best should see features of Christ in our lives, not in perfection, but in evidence just the same. Perhaps this is the biggest barrier to our preaching, our lifestyles! It has been said,

We are writing a gospel, a chapter a day.
By the things that we do and the things that we say.
Men read what we are by the things that we do,
So, what is the Gospel according to you?

I know we live in a society which challenges the different roles of mother and father, but Paul deliberately uses both parents as a picture of their care for the young Christians in Thessalonica.

Our exhortation

Exhortation is an interesting word. In the English dictionary it means, to urge strongly and earnestly; to counsel, but there is another aspect to this word. Looking at a Greek Bible dictionary you will find that the noun is PARAKLESIS, which speaks of being alongside, as an encourager and helper. This is also used to convey the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers today. The words for consolation and comfort also come from the same root. In the parable of the younger son (in Luke Ch. 15) the father is seen as 'intreating' the elder son – the same word translated here as exhortation. Can you imagine the father raising his voice to his son as he entreated him? Do you think that the conversation developed into an argument? I don't think so! The father would have been gentle, encouraging his son to rethink his position and change his attitude and actions.

What about our style of preaching? I must confess as one who has preached in the open-air, shouting loudly (sometimes with the assistance of a megaphone), and quoting Bible verses to passers-by, that I do wonder about the effectiveness of that approach. But as we have already

said, God is sovereign and He will use whoever and whatever means He pleases to bring men, women and children to Himself. It would seem, however, that the apostle began his search for converts in the synagogue or in places where people had gathered to pray or to listen to sermons. He was therefore engaging with people who were seeking. Perhaps like those at Athens they did not know who they were seeking, but they were seeking nonetheless. I think we do need to be prayerful and wise as to how we handle the Gospel.

From verses 3 to 6 of our chapter we read how the apostles handled the message which had been entrusted to them. They were concerned to gain God's approval, not the approval of men. Their words were true and devoid of flattery. They didn't look to please or entertain the crowds. There was no show on their part, no drama, no impure motives. There was no thought of material gains to be made, no appeal for funds to support them in the work of God.

The way they behaved and the way they spoke commended the Gospel to the people of Thessalonica and God used their visit to bring many to Himself. Perhaps there are lessons for us in this as we desire to see others brought to know the Lord Jesus Christ. Just like Paul and Silas, we have been "put in trust with the gospel" and we need to "speak; not as pleasing men, but God."

Our labour and travail

In Philippians, Paul commends those who had laboured with him in the Gospel. However, I judge that the inclusion of the thought of travail, both here and in the second epistle chapter 3, is speaking of the manual labour of tent-making which the apostles did to support themselves so as not be a financial burden to the newly established church at Thessalonica. The thought of travail brings to mind sorrow and pain, and in that sense the apostle would not speak in this way of the work of the Gospel. It is true that he felt deeply the burden of the churches as they were being attacked by Satan, and that he felt sorrow as many forsook him and his teachings, but the work of the Gospel was joyous to him. Thinking again about his experiences in Philippi, and how he and Silas were beaten and cast into prison, we marvel that at the darkest hour, midnight, they prayed and sang praises unto God. What a testimony to the grace of God! The epistle of the Philippians has been summarised as, "Joy in jail." Paul writes to them (and by extension to us), "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice" (see Philippians Ch. 4v.4).

I'm sure you will have heard these sayings, "If you want something done, ask a busy person", and "The devil finds work for idle hands?" Although these are not Bible quotes, there is a good degree of truth in them.

The apostle was a busy man, working manually night and day, as well as preaching the word of God. There was no idleness about him. I am convinced that the discipline of work, whether manual or otherwise, is good for the Christian. To be clear, I do not just mean paid labour, as many jobs are unpaid. Those who keep home, look after children or provide care in the family, perhaps have harder days than some of us who go out to work. But I believe it is good for Christians to gainfully occupy their time. Even in retirement from secular roles and responsibility, we should be concerned with what the Lord would have us do in His service.

I am not speaking against those who feel called to service in a full-time capacity and who move in faith upon the Lord for their upkeep. The Scripture is very clear that the labourer is worthy of his hire, and the people of God have a financial responsibility to those who serve God by serving them. However, there is a lot to be said for those who support themselves and their families, whilst at the same time finding opportunities to serve the Lord.

Our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing

In verse 17-18, the apostle states his great desire of heart. He says, "But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us." There was no doubting the affection which the apostle had for these believers, who had been led to Christ through his preaching. In chapter 3 we read that when it became clear that Paul could not visit them personally, he sent Timothy to them, to encourage and establish them in the faith. There evidently was some concern that those of their number who had died would in some way miss out at the Lord's coming again.

I do not want to take you into chapter 4, but to understand the hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing which the apostle writes of here at the close of chapter 2, we need to understand what is meant by the phrase, "at his coming." At the start of our talk today, I tried to emphasise the importance of the doctrine of the Lord's return, for His saints, what we call the Rapture. Paul assures the living Thessalonians that those among them who had died would not miss out. He writes, "them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him" (see Ch. 4v14). But how are these dead (or more correctly these sleeping), as well as the living believers, taken into heaven in order to be brought out "with him?" Well, the prophecy which follows in chapter 4 is a wonderful insight and brings great comfort to our hearts, especially at times of bereavement.

In Scripture, the word "hope" has a different meaning from what we usually think of in our everyday usage of it. Perhaps we may say, 'I hope to do this or I hope to go there', but there is more than a degree of uncertainty about whether we will be able to do so. When we read of hope in the Scriptures, we read of something which is "sure and steadfast" like an anchor. The hope we read of in the Bible is describing our waiting for something we cannot see, but which is guaranteed. Our hope is in a God, who cannot lie. His promises are yea and amen. We can trust, have faith, and have hope, in Him.

Our glory and joy

This simple, but lovely statement, closes our chapter, "For ye are our glory and joy". There are five things spoken of in the last two verses of our chapter: hope, joy, crown of rejoicing, glory, and joy. We have said quite a lot about the hope we have as Christians, which is the Lord's return to take us to be with Himself. But there is more to consider in these two verses. I suppose the joy is quite easy to understand. What a joy it will be for the Christian, to be with Christ in heaven! I often think of the words of a hymn, in relation to the joy Christ will have too in that day –

He and I, in that bright glory,
One deep joy shall share –
Mine, to be forever with Him;
His, that I am there.

Gerhardt Tersteegen 1697 - 1769

The Scripture will then be fulfilled, "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (see Isaiah Ch. 53v.11).

For the last few minutes, I want to focus on the thoughts of, "crown of rejoicing" and "our glory." Crown of rejoicing could be translated, "crown of boasting" (JND) and it is often spoken of as "the soul-winners' crown." The picture is of crowns being given as rewards, and there are at least five separate crowns mentioned in the New Testament which will be given out by the Lord, the righteous judge. Our labour for Him will not go unrewarded in that day. I know there is a great deal of sentimentality around the subject of what, and who, we will know in heaven. But I believe this Scripture indicates that we will indeed recognise each other in heaven. The apostle Paul was

looking forward to seeing the Thessalonian Christians again during his lifetime, but that was proving to be difficult. However, his hope and joy were that in glory, he would indeed see them again, and would boast in them. They would be his glory. I know it is difficult for us to think about boasting and glorying in a positive way, but this is what we have in this verse. The believers at Thessalonica would be the crown of boasting, and glory of the apostle in the day when he would see them, with Christ, at His coming.

The Sadducees (who did not believe in resurrection) asked the Lord Jesus a hypothetical question concerning a woman who had seven husbands before she died. They asked, "In the resurrection whose wife shall she be of the seven? for they all had her." In reply the Lord said, "You do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage..." But He went on to say, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (see Matthew Ch. 22vv.23-33). We can conclude therefore, that although some natural relationships will not be known (or continued) in heaven, there will be recognition of persons. In the story which Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus (in Luke Ch.16), Lazarus was still Lazarus after death and the rich man was also the same person after his death. There was obviously recognition, too, in that scene described as the after-life for the saved and the lost.

I believe this is what Paul is saying at the end of chapter 2, that he was looking forward to being re-united in heaven one day with the believers whom he had brought to know the Lord, and whom he loved. We, too, can look forward to that great reunion of loved ones who have gone on before.

Friends will be there I have loved long ago;
Joy like a river around me will flow;
Yet just a smile from my Saviour, I know,
Will through the ages be glory for me.

Charles H. Gabriel 1900

May God bless you all.

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