1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by John Nelson Darby

Collected Writings of J.N. Darby: Prophetic 2, Principles Displayed in the Ways of God, Compared With His Ultimate Dealings, The

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It seems to me that the examination of the great principles which God has brought out in His ways, in the history given us in the Bible, would facilitate the intelligence of His ultimate dealings with men and the understanding their prophetic announcements, the accomplishment of which will be the establishment in power of the principles which God has already displayed and taught historically in His dealings of old. I send you therefore some thoughts upon the progressive development of these principles. In the very outset of creation we have one of the last importance, and which gives in figure the ultimate results of God's ways in His dispensations towards men, a kind of exhibition that what begins in thought is to be the end in action.

Adam was created in the image of God, and was set to rule over the works of God's hands, the center of a vast system subordinate to him, and over which he had universal dominion. He was, says the apostle, the image of Him that was to come; and the same apostle takes Psa. 8, which, in the letter of its application there, would be limited to the first Adam, and applies the universality of its terms to the full dominion of the second. No doubt the dominion of the Second Adam is far more extensive than that of the first, because, having Himself created all things, He is to inherit all He has created; but it is not the less true that the first Adam, as image of God, as center of the system in which he was placed, as having dominion over the creation by which he was surrounded, was the image or type of the Lord Jesus, Son of man, Head over all things. Other accessories enlarge this resemblance. Eve, partaking of a lordship to which she had no right of her own, but which she enjoyed as one with Adam, is the liveliest picture of the church, and so used beautifully by the apostle in Eph. 5 We have also, according to Rom. 5, in Adam fallen, the head of a race involved in his sin and all its consequences, as in the Second Adam, when righteousness was accomplished, the Head of a brotherhood or family which participates in all that He is, as the Head of it in the presence and sight of God.

I pass over the time before the flood, whose general character offers a sad contrast to the time when righteousness dwells in the new heavens and the new earth, without a government to maintain it and make it good against the opposition of an adverse nation or the weakness of a failing one. Neither one nor the other can properly be called dispensation. They are both another world from that in which we live.

With Noah we begin the course of dispensations, or of the manifestations of the ways of God for the final bringing out the full glory of Christ. These ways regard the earth, and are founded, so far as they are conferred blessing, on the sacrifice of Christ. Enoch indeed had been taken out of the midst of a corrupt world and had a heavenly portion, while he testified of the judgment of the world, out of which he was called, by the coming of the Lord with His saints-a very remarkable anticipation of our portion in Christ. But Noah was preserved through the deluge, to begin a new world, of which he was the head and chief.

The name Noah is expressive of the rest of the earth, comfort concerning the work of men's hands, because of the ground which the Lord had cursed. Three especial features accompany and characterize this position: the sacrifice which turned aside the curse, the restraint of evil, and the pledge of secured blessing to creation while earth lasted. But, as regards dispensation, Noah was the head of a new system, where evil was, but where evil was to be restrained, and the curse relieved under which the earth groaned.

The next important principle brought out is calling and election. The earth was not only now corrupt and violent-it had departed from God. It had not liked to retain God in its knowledge, and served other gods. God, in sovereign election, calls Abram to follow Him apart from the world; and separation from the world for the enjoyment of promise by faith becomes the divine principle of blessing. Abraham is the father of all them that believe. He has to quit all on the supreme claim of the Lord-country, kindred, and father's house-for a land only in promise, which God would show him. Brought there, he has still to walk by faith in patience, not yet inheriting the promises. When in possession of them in pledge, in Isaac he has to give them all up, as held in the present life of Isaac, in unquestioning confidence in God, to receive them in the power of One who raises the dead.

We have election, call, promises, by which the believer is a stranger in a world departed from God. To this we may add the distinct principle of receiving the promises by the power of God in resurrection. This special position made of Abraham in a peculiar manner the father of the faithful-of all them that believe-the father of many nations before God in whom he believed, the heir of the world. The detail of the promises (whether of the blessings of the nations, only given in Gen. 12, and confirmed to Isaac in Gen. 22, or of a numerous seed according to the flesh, and of the land of Canaan) are not properly our subject here.

The latter leads, however, to the next important step in the ways of God, the formation and deliverance of a people from the power of their enemies by judgments and an outstretched arm, by which they were set apart as a people of dilection to God on the earth. Israel's coming up out of Egypt is, I need not say, the event in which this was prefigured. Long subject to hostile arid oppressive Gentiles, and particularly at the close, when God was about to deliver them, His arm, who had already given the blood of the Lamb as the safeguard against His righteous judgment, delivered the people with a power which none could dispute, executing judgment on the proud enemies who oppressed them and defied His majesty.

Joseph and his Egyptian wife had given meanwhile the remarkable type of a rejected Christ exalted on high and His Gentile bride, who had made him to forget all his affliction and his father's house.

But the deliverance of Israel gave occasion to the introduction of an entirely new principle, not the prefiguring the ways of God, but the putting of man to the proof on the revealed principles of what he ought to be, and that, when thus delivered and brought near to God, as a favored people guarded of Him with every motive and means for walking before Him who had thus borne him on eagles' wings, and brought him to Himself. In a word, the law came in. Immediately broken, Israel is anew, through intercession, placed under it as a condition, with the added revelation of all the graciousness and goodness of the character of Him under whose government he was placed, and who would act in

that government on the principles thus revealed. Still he was placed under law, and held the blessings under the condition of his own obedience. This, as the apostle states, came in by the by-added because of transgression, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made. The law in itself could do nothing but convict man of his incompetency. But it gave in general the principle of a rule of God's will, to be written afterward in the heart of His earthly people; in obedience to which, maintained in their hearts by God, they would enjoy the blessing conferred by Him on His people on the earth. But on the principles of government declared by God to Moses, and announced in Exodus, the people were placed on the mediation of the priesthood, under the immediate government of God. The priesthood was there to maintain the blessing if there was failure, where it was not departure from God, or sinning with a high hand; and Israel, in obedience, would have had their peace flow like a river.

But Israel (incapable of walking by faith and trusting God, even when the blessings were immediately consequent on obedience) prefers being like the nations, and demands a king, when God was their King. However, this gave occasion to the revelation of another principle of God's ways with men, the establishment of royalty in Zion, a royalty whose sway should extend much farther, and in which the Gentiles should trust. However royalty is established, and in Zion, and that by grace, after the failure and ruin of the people through disobedience to God, under His immediate government. The priesthood itself loses its place, and the faithful priest is to stand before God's Anointed. The king is now the anointed of God, The principle of this royalty is on one side the throne of the Lord (Solomon is said to sit on the throne of the Lord), and on the other, it is strength out of weakness. See Hannah's song. It is the re-establishment of Israel in blessing when hopelessly ruined, by the means of the rejected but God-fearing king, who delivers them from their enemies and subdues the heathen. This re-establishment by royalty has a double bearing-the blessing of the people after their ruin, by the deliverance wrought, and then re-established in accepted worship after the guilt (the temple after Shiloh, and that in a peculiar manner in grace, after the numbering the people). There were three stages to this royalty: when rejected entirely in Israel; when the ark was placed by David on Mount Zion: the energy of victory in connection with the assured covenant, but not yet the blessing of peace-this was the third state, which was Solomon's. Christ, I doubt not, has filled up, or will fill up, all these-the rejected, the victorious, and the powerful King. In general, we have the important additional principle of a human ordained king, in a royalty established by God over His people, said to be seated too on the Lord's throne.

This, as we know, in man's hands failed like all the rest, and gave rise to another and large modification of the principle of royalty, the confiding the power of universal dominion, wherever the children of men dwell, to man on the earth. This was sovereignly conferred beyond the limits of Jewish promise and dominion, acquired by no faithful service in suffering, but divinely bestowed by the God of heaven. This also fell, and more than fell. Substituted for the Jewish royalty, it united with the Jews and their ecclesiastical rulers in the rejection of the Son of God and King of the Jews; one of which titles, in its lowest acceptation, is the character in which (above all descent from David, though that be at the same time true) Christ is to have the heathen for His inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession; and the other of which expresses evidently His title among the Jews as the Anointed, the Son of David. We have thus far all these features:-

Adam, center of the earthly system under God.

Noah, head of the earth blessed after the curse, restraining evil.

Abraham, called by election out of the world, to which promise is annexed.

A people redeemed and formed as such, as belonging to God on the earth.

The law, the rule of the people so formed, and the path of blessing as the will of God.

The royalty of Israel in the family of David, the anointed king; and the royalty of the Gentile world, sovereignly conferred by the God of heaven.

All these will be made good in Christ, in Person, or for His people. He is the second Adam; the head of the earth, restraining evil after the curse; the chosen one separate from the world, in whom all the promises are yea and amen; the head and uniter of redeemed Israel, the true vine, the son called out of Egypt, the one in whom the law was magnified (these two facts will also have their accomplishment hereafter in His people); the Son of David; and the head of the Gentile world established such by the sovereignty of God. Hence all this progress of development closed with the rejection of Him in whom all was to be accomplished.

The testimony of the Holy Ghost in patience called to repentance them who had put Him to death, but the call was unheeded and the guilt remained upon them. And thus closed all God's dealings with the earth, as presenting means of blessing, to their acceptance, and Christ the Lord, the Son of man, must return, sent by the Ancient of days, before the principles of blessing held out, and the revealed means of relationship with God, could be made good in power and available in blessing.

In all this, it will be evident that the church of God does not at all enter. The scene had for the time closed in which these various principles were developed on earth, to be resumed in power when Christ returns there to whom all the title and blessing belongs. Meanwhile He is hid in heaven, and unites to Himself a heavenly people outside all these ministrations, to be associated with Himself as a better Eve, when He shall take the inheritance and accomplish all that God has held out to man. Yet in one point there is connection (that is, in Abraham). Although there be higher principles of blessing which never formed the subject of promise (such as being united to the Christ, members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones), yet Christians do come in under Abraham as heirs of promise, as strangers and pilgrims on the earth, walking by faith, called out of the world. Thus they fill up the gap during the power of the Gentiles, guilty of rejecting the Lord, and the setting aside of the Jews for their despisal of Messiah, until called to take their place in the heavens with the Lord. In Christ we are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise, though God has reserved some better thing for us. But as the church, she is entirely outside all this, unknown and a mystery, till the time Israel was set aside, and there was nothing but what unknown and sovereign counsels might introduce, until God too keep Israel again for repentance and blessing.

This very plainly shows the distinction of the church from all earthly position and promise, though manifested there until God shall again begin to act from the throne on the nations, and take up again His questions with the earth then in judgment, as heretofore in grace-judgment, to which men will be callous, as they have been to grace, till it assumes a character which there is no escaping, and when despair will be as complete as revolt and self-will were before. It does not enter into the subject of this paper to treat of the details of that day. The judgments on the Gentiles are the subject of the Revelation; the state of the Jews, of the Old Testament prophecies chiefly. After a moral preparation in

the hearts of the Jews, the presence of the Lord Jesus will at once bring, not only in the accomplishment of promises made to them, but the concentration in His Person and kingdom in the power conferred on Him, of all the scattered elements of the divine ways previously revealed.

It may be remarked, that I have left prophecy out of the list I have given of manifestations of divine intervention. The omission was not forgetfulness. A prophet was one by whom God sovereignly maintained His relationship and connection with Israel, and even in a measure with the world, when there was entire failure. It took place in every dispensation, and was not properly one, but ran through all, though God wrought by it in emergencies. It revealed God and foretold Christ, but evidently was to cease when the things it spoke of were accomplished, for then it had no place. Its character was the sovereign intervention of God, not the development of His ways. Hence it was in exercise at all times, when, as regards those ways, man had failed. It showed and reproved the failure, and encouraged the faith of the Jew, faithful among the faithless, in the enduring fidelity of the Lord, pointing out with an increasing fullness the intervention of God in power, when the faith that made its way through the power of evil would be no longer needed, because that evil would be set aside by power. Hence we find it in Enoch before the flood, in Noah, in the patriarchs, and, in a particular manner, in Samuel when Israel had failed under the theocracy, and in Israel departed from God, and in Judah become unfaithful in her kings.

I do not touch here on the character of prophecy in the church, as spoken of in the epistles. The church was based, as we have seen, on the failure of everything; and to it, and in it, the mind of God was specially communicated. To that which takes a definitely prophetic form the above remarks, however, fully apply in principle. Only the church, counted faithful, is made the depositary. We have prophecies in Thessalonians, Timothy, Jude, and Revelation. In the latter case, the part fully and properly prophetic treats of the world and the apostasy, or of the Jews; so that it takes a distinctly prophetic character, and returns to the principles stated above. The prophetic character was accomplished in the Lord at His first coming, as far as regards His Person.

The priesthood does not enter either in its Aaronic character into the ways of God with man. It was the means of approach of man to God, and subsisted in connection with the existence of His people without a king and under the kings. It supposed an accepted earthly people, so far as it was in daily exercise, though there might be particular failure. So far as the acceptance of the people was in question, it was hidden within the veil. In this character it is Christ's present position with regard to Israel, for we know the acceptance, the veil being rent. It existed under different dealings of God to maintain individuals in their position, and was not positively itself one.

Christian Truth: Volume 24, 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

In this passage Paul puts the coming of the Lord in connection with every Christian affection. This Apostle, who abounded in love toward the saints, desired also that they themselves walk in love, in order to abide in holiness, and to shine in that day. He does not yet state the order of the facts by which this result will be seen, but he mentions the moral truths and the practical grace which prepare it.

"The Lord make you to increase and abound in love... to the end He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness." The love of God possessing the heart is what enables the Christian to walk in holiness. Here we find again the doctrine of John: "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light" (1 John 2:10). It is interesting to see these fundamental elements of faith and of individual blessing forming an integral part of the powerful testimony through which Paul was forming the Church.

"To the end He may stablish your hearts," etc. It is an actual establishing of the heart, but which will be seen in 'its results at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ: 'We must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10).

"Before God, even our Father." Paul always sees the Thessalonians in their relationship to the Father. It does not appear that these believers had as yet got beyond the state of babes in the faith. "I write unto you, little children, because ye know the Father" (1 John 2:13).

The sense of verse 13 is this: May God establish your hearts in holiness (now, by the exercise of love), that ye may be (seen) unblameable in holiness, before our God and Father (at that moment) at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. In this passage the coming of Jesus is not presented in the act of our gathering together to Him, when we go to meet Him, but in the act of our coming with Him from the Father's house, after having been in His presence. It is that moment which will show whether we are unblameable.

When Paul, occupied with the coming of Jesus, considers the privilege of faith, he sees the saints all gathered together to the Lord, tasting before Him the common joy. When he considers the responsibility of the Christian's walk, he always sees the appearing of Christ. There can be nothing but joy in our hearts at that blessed moment when we shall go with Jesus into the Father's presence, taking a place which the love of God has given to us, and which the work of Christ has procured to us. It will be otherwise when we return with Jesus. Without losing our position and our blessedness in Him, we shall nevertheless be in a different scene; we shall have reached that solemn moment when the consequences of our responsibility will be manifested.

Letters 3, Resurrection, The

I suppose I must have perceived that this objection could be raised, for in the fourth edition,1 which I got to look at it, I have, 'All this (1 Thess. 4:14-16) is a matter which belongs exclusively to the saints—to those who, sleeping or waking, are Christ's, and who will be, from that moment, forever with the Lord.' The truth is, the mind is justly occupied with what concerns the church; and so I find in the New Testament many passages refer directly to the christian saints who form the church, because they were there and then before the writer's or Holy Spirit's mind, which yet from other places we may know to be true of Old Testament saints. Here the word 'exclusively' meant to the exclusion of the wicked dead. I do not doubt the Old Testament saints will arise, though in many a passage they are not atall brought before the mind; because the Spirit was founding and encouraging the hopes of Christians then tried, perhaps persecuted, not meaning to deny that Old Testament saints would be in the kingdom. The word 'exclusively' does not apply here to the Old Testament saints, but to the world; but the mass of passages in the New Testament apply in fact only to the church. Other passages say we shall sit with Abraham and Isaac in the kingdom, and the Lord teaches clearly their resurrection. That which the Old Testament saints do not form is the body and the bride.

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