1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Hugh Henry Snell

Streams of Refreshing From the Fountain of Life, Conversion; or, Paul's Preaching at Thessalonica, and Its Effects

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Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even

Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:9, 10).

The gospel is still the power of God unto salvation. The same power which raised Christ from the dead brings sinners to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. It gives spiritual life to the dead, imparts peace to the tormented conscience, delivers from the love of sin and unholy associations, and makes the soul happy and at rest in the presence of God. Thus a vast change is produced. You may, perhaps, have seen a drowning man just taken out of the water in a state of senselessness and inanimation. The anxious bystanders feel for the pulse in vain; they place their ears to the mouth, and watch and listen with breathless silence for that bosom once more to heave a sigh; they move the eyelids, but all sense of light seems extinguished; they call aloud, yet not a single feature moves in response. But powerful remedies are used, and in a little while the apparently lifeless form moves, the features beam with happy intelligence, and fully manifest every faculty of vigour and animation. How great the change! How powerful the remedies! What a vast alteration in the person! Yet this is but a feeble illustration of the power of the gospel of God in those who pass from death unto life.

Those who preach should look for decided effects, and those who hear would do well to consider whether the gospel has wrought a mighty change in them. Why has it not? Because they have not believed. They have heard that Christ shed His blood for the remission of sins, but they have not believed on Him; for the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God; but it is not hearing about Christ only, but believing on Christ, that is the way of salvation; not merely knowing, as some say, the plan of salvation, but coming to Christ to be saved, that makes the power of the blessed gospel to be experienced in the soul.

After Christ had offered Himself as a sacrifice for sins on the cross, and rose from the dead, He sent forth the gospel, or word of reconciliation, to a guilty world by His servants. Among others, He specially raised up Paul, and sent him a great many places to proclaim the gospel of Divine mercy to sinners. In due time he was directed to a large city, called Thessalonica. Here the gospel was an entirely new thing. The inhabitants were for the most part idolaters, though there were many Jews there also. The Jews thought themselves the objects of God’s peculiar favour, because their ancestors had been so; they prided themselves on the round of duties connected with their synagogue service, and looked with pity on their ignorant neighbours, who so perseveringly persisted in falling down and worshiping an image that their own hands had fashioned. But Paul well knew that both classes were alike guilty before God, and that none could stand in blessing except on the ground of the atoning blood of Christ. Yet he remembered that the Jews once stood in covenant relationship to God, and that the Lord Jesus, after His resurrection, commanded His apostles to preach first at Jerusalem. Accordingly he went into the synagogue of the Jews every Sabbath-day, and reasoned with them out of the Scriptures, proving from their own prophets that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead, and preached the blessed gospel of present and eternal salvation to all who believe in Christ. Paul also preached the same gospel to the Gentile idolaters; for he knew that Jews and Gentiles were both alike under sin, whatever their birth, education, or privileges had been, and that God had met them alike in the cross of Christ; and in this way could bring both into present and eternal blessing. It is well to notice that Paul did not go into this dark city with religious forms, ceremonies, or sacraments; he did not propose to them self- improvement, education, plans for moralizing the profane, and the like. No, he struck at the root at once; he planted the cross of Christ before their minds; he proved to them that they needed salvation, that they were far from God, perishing in their sins, and declared that Jesus Christ the Son of God had died on the cross for sinners, and rose again because He had for ever put away sin; and that God now preached that finished work to them, as that which could give them present and eternal deliverance from the wrath to come. Thus he preached Christ, salvation by Christ alone, present and eternal blessing by the death and resurrection of Christ the Son of God. The idolater, who had been groping in darkness among idols of wood and stone, and the Jew, who was cleaving to formal ordinances and traditions of men, alike manifested that they were under sin, and guilty before God; and the gospel of the grace of God met them both. God in mercy spoke to them of redeeming love; and the gospel of the living and true God still comes close to the ears of Pharisees and publicans, the chaste and defiled, the Jew and Gentile, with words of mercy and peace by the death of His Son.

Oh, the wonder of wonders, that the thrice holy God should come down to sinners of every race and class with words of reconciliation, a message of pardon and peace, through the death and resurrection of His only-begotten Son! This is Divine love; this levels men, with all their boastful pretensions, to the dust; this shows God’s judgment of man, whether Jew or Gentile; this reveals the fact that God is a sin-pardoning as well as a sin-hating God, giving remission of sins to every lost sinner that believes. Paul’s preaching, then, was the cross. Wherever he went, he set forth Christ crucified and risen, because this alone can deliver from the wrath to come, this alone is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. But though he said,

We preach Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23),

we know he sometimes entered also into the coming glory of Christ, as well as of His past humiliation and suffering, as we find he did at Thessalonica. He preached to them about

another King, one Jesus (Acts 17:7).

This magnifies the glory of the cross. The fact that Christ is soon coming to receive His people unto Himself, that God is yet going to set up His blessed Son as King over all the earth, and put everything in subjection under His feet, bring every knee to bow, and every tongue to confess to Him, reflects greatly on the value of His cross, and shows God’s estimate of His finished work, however men despise and reject it. Thus we see that Paul went into this heathen city with the glorious gospel of the grace of God (Acts 17). Now let us consider its effects.

THE EFFECTS of Paul's preaching at Thessalonica were two- fold; some persecuted and blasphemed, others believed and found salvation. So great was the enmity brought out by the preaching of the death, resurrection, and coming of Christ, that Paul and Silas had to escape for their lives.

The carnal mind is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7);

it therefore cannot bear to hear of God's love in Christ. Such esteem the gospel to be foolishness, calculated to interfere with the world's ease and progress, and check man's lofty pretensions. Thus his wicked passions are stirred up, and his hatred to God and His truth manifested, in persecuting and oppressing His servants. Yet, with all this, the gospel was to many the power of God unto salvation. The Holy Spirit wrought effectually in many hearts by the truth; so that we read that

some of the Jews believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few (see Acts 17:4).

These constituted the Church of God at Thessalonica, to whom the epistles were afterwards addressed; and a beautiful sample it is of the Church of the living God, which is made up of both Jews and Gentiles, called out by the preaching of the gospel, and baptized by one Spirit into one body. Made in Christ, of twain, one new man; having resurrection-life, indwelt, and united to Christ, by the Holy Ghost, and members of His body, His flesh and bones, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, but Christ is all and in all. (See Eph.2:13-17.)

Thus the gospel prospered in this city. The glory of God in the person and work of Christ shone with such brilliancy into many hearts, as to cause Jewish tradition and formality, as well as Gentile heathenism and idolatry, to be alike laid low at the Savior's feet, and both ceased to glory in the flesh, and were enabled to glory in the Lord. The cross not only reconciled each to God, but also reconciled Jew and Gentile to each other, and brought both into the place of worship and thanksgiving before God. Each found Christ to be a suitable Savior, worthy of their heart's confidence, an object for endless contemplation and praise, and a hope full of brightness and immortality. Thus the gospel came unto them, not in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance, so that the results were most decided and manifest; for Paul says,

Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:9, 10).

Now let us look at the results a little more attentively.

1. THEY TURNED TO GOD FROM IDOLS. God drew them to Himself with cords of love. They had heard and believed that God is love. They saw in the death and triumphs of Christ unparalleled love, unsearchable wisdom, and almighty power; and they felt the boundless grace of God in presenting that salvation to them. They found the living God through Christ an object of attraction instead of dread; for they heard the sweet voice of redeeming love instead of condemnation and judgment. They knew that they were exposed to the wrath to come, and justly deserved eternal condemnation; but they saw God meeting them with mercy and peace in the wounds and death of His own most blessed Son. This amazing kindness of God melted their hearts, changed their minds, drew them heavenward, constrained them to turn to God, to confide in God, and to rest in the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. Not a god of their own fashioning, but the living God, the self- existing I AM, the First and the Last, the Creator of the ends of the earth, the only wise God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. They thus experienced a great change, a turning from carnal objects to the Savior-God. This is conversion. It was the turning-point in their history. They were turned from darkness to light; from the power of Satan to God; to the living and true God, from dumb idols. Thus they rejoiced in knowing salvation by Christ. Their confidence was in the living and true God, who cannot deny Himself, and whose word will never pass away. Thus they were at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ was all and in all; Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ glorified, Christ interceding for them, Christ coming; for through Him they had found present justification, and eternal deliverance from the wrath to come. They had turned to God, and found all they could desire in Him. How, then, could idols be anything to them now? Before the deep reality of the cross of Christ, the folly and worthlessness of idols were made manifest; it was easy, therefore, to give them their proper estimate as dung and dross for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus the Lord. One believing view of Immanuel's love in His blood-shedding and death is enough to expose the world's folly, and the emptiness of its religiousness, and to allure the heart to the bosom of the Father, who so freely sent His Son to deliver us from the wrath to come.

Dear reader! has the gospel produced this great effect in you? Has the story of the Savior's tears, groans, agonies, blood- shedding, and death, melted your heart, and turned you to the bosom of the God of peace? Have you known such a turning-point in your history? Can you look back on the time when you had hard thoughts of God, dreaded appearing before Him, and wished you had never been born; but that the gospel reached you, faith came by hearing, you believed the love of God, and through the atoning death of His Son found peace with God? This is the way the Holy Spirit leads, this has been the experience of millions; and multitudes still delight to say —

2. THEIR SERVICE to God was another effect of the gospel; they

turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9).

The love of God constrained them to serve Him; for, according to the Savior's words,

to whom much is forgiven the same loveth much (see Luke 7:47).

They loved God because He had first loved them. A feeling of gratitude for such unfathomable mercy made His service unspeakably happy. The knowledge of the Savior's kindness made His yoke easy, and His burden light. A sense of deliverance from the wrath to come, through the death and resurrection of Christ, is the main-spring of true service. This service is happy liberty — perfect freedom; it is the way of faith which works by love. How many mistake here. They serve in order to be saved, instead of because they have received forgiveness of sins and eternal life; and the mistake is fatal. To expect salvation in any measure by works of the flesh is a fearful delusion; to work in obedience to God, because of being pardoned and accepted in Christ, is the blessed path of the Spirit. The Savior's words are,

If ye love me, keep my commandments (John 14:15),

and

love one another; as I have loved you, &c. (John 13:34)

It is of the utmost importance to be clear on this point. It is plain that the Thessalonian converts were on right ground; for Paul addressed them as those who were (not would be, but already) delivered from the wrath to come. They knew that they served the living God. Long had they served dumb idols; but now they obeyed the living God. Persons do not believe that “God is,” that His eye beholds them, His ear is open to their cry, His face set against evil-doers, that His heart loves, His arm brought salvation, and that His hand is open to satisfy the desire of every living thing. People do not think this; they do not believe that He is the living God. The language of many a heart is, “No God”; hence it is that the creature is so often set up and worshipped more than the Creator, and that so many live without God and without hope in the world, so that God is not in all their thoughts. Not so, however, were these Thessalonians; their faith and hope were in the living God, and they served Him, sought to please Him, obey Him, honor and glorify Him, who had redeemed them with nothing less than the precious blood of His own Son. They also knew Him as the true God. This was happier still. They knew He had always been true to His word, and that He would be true to His promises, true in hearing and answering prayer, true to all who put their trust in Him, true to accept their service, true to sustain them in time of trial, true to bring them through every difficulty, and true to present them faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. Oh, if people believed that God was true, how would sinners fly to Jesus to escape the wrath to come! and how quiet would believers be in time of trouble, how submissive in affliction, patient in waiting upon God, and cheerful in the darkest dispensations! The true God has given us His own word to guide us and hope in, until wilderness experiences are past, and we shall be able, when in the glory, to look back and declare that not one jot or tittle has failed. Thus we see that the Thessalonian believers were a working people; they served the living and true God, and were well known for their works of faith and labours of love. We may be assured that turning to God through Jesus must ever be connected with loving service.

3. THEIR POSTURE OF SOUL, is also set before us as another effect of the gospel.

Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven (1 Thess. 1:9).

This is very blessed. God looks, not only for the ready hand and willing foot, but He also looks for the patient hope — the mind and heart to be inclined in the right direction. All Christians, on realizing pardon and acceptance in Christ, find it in their hearts, more or less, to serve the living and true God; but comparatively few, in the present day, see that it is their happy privilege to wait for His Son from heaven. Many will tell us that they wait for the world to be converted by the preaching of the gospel; but the Scriptures certainly do not teach this. Others say that they look for great changes in the nations, and especially among the scattered Jews; but the Thessalonian believers were taught by the Holy Ghost to wait for Christ. There has been much darkness as to the hope of the Church, even among true Christians; and, where the doctrine has been scripturally taught, it has not been received by many, because of their not seeing the certainty of their salvation, their own security in a risen and exalted Savior. Not able to rejoice in being already delivered from the wrath to come, how could they love the sound of the Savior’s second coming? How can those who have not peace with God wait for His Son from heaven? True hope of glory must be connected with assurance of salvation. The Thessalonian believers knew, through the gospel Paul preached, that they were delivered from the coming wrath. They had no doubt of their eternal salvation by Christ; they could therefore happily wait for the return of the Son of God from heaven. Instead of considering Christ’s coming with fear and dread, they anticipated it with joy and gladness. They did not wait for the world’s conversion, nor for the reconstruction of the Roman Empire, nor for the restoration of the Jews to their own land, nor for any other earthly event; but, as saved ones, they served the God of love and peace, and waited for His Son from heaven. Christ Himself was their hope, as well as their confidence. The apostle afterwards taught them that the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God; and that all in Christ, whether dead or alive, will be caught up to meet Him in the air, and so be for ever with the Lord. They waited for God’s Son from heaven. They knew of no happiness, no heaven, no glory, apart from the person of Christ the Son of God. They were in love with Christ. He was all their desire, as well as all their salvation. The Savior’s promise,

I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also (John 14:3),

was very precious to their souls. They therefore hoped for Christ — to see Him, be with Him, like Him. They might possibly die before Jesus came; but it was not death they looked for, but Christ — to be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and caught up to meet the Lord in the air. This is the true and blessed hope, the comforting, sanctifying, soul-reviving hope of the gospel, and this was their posture of soul; their energies flowed outward in faith and love in the service of God, and upward in blessed expectation of His Son from heaven. Faith, hope, and love were thus kept in lively exercise, the true and blessed effects of the glorious gospel they had received.

And the believer is still called to wait for God’s Son from heaven. Many centuries have passed since these dear Thessalonian believers thus honored the Lord Jesus, and He has not yet come; but He will come, according to promise. Yes,

He that shall come will come, and will not tarry (Heb. 10:37).

For this, too, not a few are waiting now, and can truthfully say — Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!