1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Robert Kerr

Bible Treasury: Volume N9, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Notes on

Article from https://bibletruthpublishers.com/bible-truth-study-bible/btsb

No doubt most of you in reading these two Epistles have observed their singular charm. There is a peculiar freshness, warmth, and simplicity in these letters of the apostle Paul which we do not find elsewhere in the same degree, and the reason is not far to seek. These Epistles to the Thessalonians were addressed to very young believers. I would not say positively, but I think the First Epistle was written only about three months after their conversion. Paul's short stay in Thessalonica (only three Sabbaths are mentioned in the brief account in The Acts) had been brought to an abrupt conclusion by fierce persecution. So these Thessalonians were left, after such a little while, in the midst of fiery trial, not fully instructed in the faith, and exposed not only to the wiles of the devil but to his open power— “going about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.” It was therefore necessary that these epistles should be written for their instruction and comfort. The Second followed at no long interval after the First.

In both epistles much is said of the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the fourth chapter of the First Epistle we have the most remarkable statement concerning it in the whole of Scripture, and in each of the five short chapters of which the Epistle is composed, Christ's coming again is mentioned at least once. Some would think this too high truth for such young believers, but it is not so. Depend upon it, the Spirit of God is wiser than we are. The Thessalonians knew that they were beloved of God, they knew their election, that they had been in God's thoughts from eternity, and so they were waiting for His Son from heaven.

Now let us come to the 13th verse of our second chapter. There was matter for special thanksgiving—the beautiful simplicity in them and in their manner of receiving what was brought to them by God's servant. The apostle was conscious of bringing them nothing but the word of God—that was his one object. In this same chapter he speaks of being willing to impart “not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls.” Here came a man among them who brought the word of God to them.

We should bear in mind that all scripture is written by the infallible guidance of the Holy Ghost, even to the very words. He not only supplied the truths to be imparted, but the words with which they were to be clothed. The more closely we look into God's word, the more we realize that the most appropriate expression has been used on every occasion. The more closely we investigate, the more satisfied are we that it is the word of God.

In his introduction to the Epistle to the Galatians the same apostle tells us that he did not receive the gospel from man, not even from a fellow apostle, but from the Lord Himself (chap. 1:11, 12). No human instrumentality was used even for its communication. It was a revelation direct from the Lord, and it is communicated in all the purity in which he received it.

I often think of an inscription on an old fountain in Aberdeen—

“As heaven gives me, so give I thee.”

The apostle might have said something like that. As the Lord gave the gospel to me, so give I it to thee. Ought we not to value it then?

There was a readiness on the part of the Thessalonians to receive God's word as such. This is the cause of much thanksgiving on the part of the apostle. They took it into their knowledge and intelligence, took it into their heart as an invaluable treasure. “Thy word have I hid in my heart.” That is the right place for it; it is safe there. We have need to be on our guard; the fowls of the air spoken of in The Parable of the Sower are figures of actual evil spirits hovering around us, seeking to rob us of the treasure which we have received.

How have we received the things communicated herein? I went once to see a man who was ill, and I quoted something from Paul. He said, “Oh, that is only Paul!” He evidently thought that only the words of the Lord were of weight and authority. If we have any thought like that it is time we were on our knees confessing our sin before God. I grant you that there is a special fullness and depth in the actual words of the Lord, a fullness which perhaps we may not find in any other part of scripture; but all bears the same stamp of divine authority, for, let us recollect, one Divine Person is the Author of the whole, though the writers may be many. The Old Testament and the New form one grand whole, and we must receive them as such. We could not do without a single portion. The Lord Jesus when here accredited the whole of the Old Testament, which was then just as it is now, the same books, the same contents, and the same general division into The Law, The Prophets, and The Psalms—all as from God. “Scripture” is a word which the Holy Ghost has appropriated to Himself. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto every good work.” Where will you find another book to do that for you?

In the memorable walk to Emmaus, the Lord, “beginning at Moses and all the prophets, expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” What was the effect on the two hearers? “Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened unto us the scriptures?” He opened to them the scriptures, and then their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, if you remember. Observe the connection of things. He opened the scriptures (all the scriptures, mind you; scripture has weight from the beginning), but that was not sufficient; their understanding needed opening. The natural man has not spiritual discernment; he may have all wisdom concerning this world, and yet be utterly in the dark as far as any right understanding of the scriptures is concerned. Was it not so with all of ourselves until we were born again and received the Spirit? In the case of Nicodemus, the Lord had to rebuke him: “Art thou the teacher of Israel and knowest not these things?” Here was a man in a high place in Israel and yet he knew not the A B C of Christianity nor even of divine life.

But with the Thessalonians there was this great thing to thank God for—that they received the word of God not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God.

We should question ourselves as to how far we treat this book as the word of God. We know on the authority of the Lord that the Old Testament is inspired, but the New is inspired equally with the Old. We have this said especially of Paul's epistles (2 Peter 3:15, 16). If God speaks, what is becoming to us? Surely reverence, attention and faith. Abraham fell on his face when God spoke to him. He believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. How beautifully simple. And it was not written for his sake alone, but for ours also.

In Deut. 33 we read that at Sinai the people sat at God's feet. “Every one shall receive of thy words.” This is the right way. It reminds us of one in the New Testament who sat at His feet and heard His word.

The effectual working of God's word is in them that believe. Even when the Lord from heaven spoke, there were those that refused to believe. There is no promise to unbelief in the whole word from beginning to end. There are threatenings, but all the promises are to belief. Only those are blessed in hearing the word that believe it. It little matters how instructed we may be in the word unless the heart receives and believes it, and it is submitted to and welcomed to its rightful place in the soul. The apostle says, he is “not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” —but what to him that believeth not? Belief opens the door at once into all manner of blessing. You might have heard the word many times before without being in the least touched by it, but you remember the time when light entered in and the word wrought effectually, filling with terror at first, and then the same word led you to trust Him. In my own case, over fifty years ago, one word of God brought light after months of despair —that was, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” That one word “whosoever” wrought effectually in my heart, and led me to Christ.

All scripture leads to Him, as it is said that all roads lead to London. Christ is God's great center. He is “the way, the truth, and the life.” It is by Him that you have been brought to God; and how has it been since? By the guiding of His Spirit and His word has He not brought you on your way until now? The word that imparted life has been the means of sustaining that life (1 Peter 2:2). The word brings down life from God; that life must return to its source in love, faith, and adoration.

These dear people had been worshipping ugly, inanimate idols, and they turned from them to serve the living and true God. What came afterward? “Ye were ensamples to all them that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad.”

All this came of receiving the word of God. Having found this treasure they had to share it with others. Why, you cannot have a monopoly of God's word! If you impart something of the truth of God to a soul you retain it yourself as well; you are not impoverished thereby. “The word of God grew and multiplied.”

Oh, that there was the same zeal now to sound out the word of God! It is the only means of building up; it helps, strengthens and comforts saints. Where there is any real work now it is just through these two mighty provisions of God—the Spirit as the power, and the word as the instrument. Very well, let us pray that it may so work in us.

We cannot dwell on it now, but there is just one thing I should like to say about it. We read in 1 Peter 5, “The God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, himself shall perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.” That is His purpose—we shall be perfected. He is going to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. And how is the work going on now? “By the washing of water by the word.” We have the figure of it in John 13 in the feet washing.

Let us then go on meditating on the word and giving it its controlling place, and He will sanctify and cleanse us by it, changing us from glory to glory.

“And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.”

R. K.

Bible Treasury: Volume N10, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Notes on

My purpose tonight is to speak a little about the word “sanctify” —it is a large subject, spread over the whole book of God. I fear it is not adequately understood by the large majority of Christians, though it is certainly of very great and special importance; indeed, so important is it that we find each person of the Godhead occupied with our sanctification. In Heb. 10:10 we read: “By the which will (God's) we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once.” Here we have the working of the Father (compare also John 17:17). Then in Heb. 12:12 we have the Son— “Jesus also that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate.” And in 1 Pet. 1:2 it is the Spirit— “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” Thus we see that our sanctification is of such vital importance that each Person of the Godhead has His blessed part in it. The God we have to do with is a holy God. If we are to dwell in the Father's house through eternal ages it is necessary that we should be “holy and without blame before Him,” and that is what God is working for. It is not enough that we should have a title to be there, there must be fitness for His presence. He will have us to be at home there according to all that God is. The work for us is finished, through the Saviour's death for our sins, and nothing can be added to it. It is ever before God in all its beauty and perfection—our sanctification and meetness in this respect is a accomplished thing—but there is a work necessary to be wrought in us, and this is by His word and Spirit. Suppose we were forgiven and this were all—that would be a wonderfully incomplete thing that would not fit us for a place in the Father's house. Our nature is at enmity with God— “it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7). There can be no holiness in us apart from the communication of the new nature. “Ye must be born again.” “In me (that is, in my flesh),", says the apostle, “dwelleth no good thing.” That is as true of us as of Saul of Tarsus, and that old nature, the flesh, must be got rid of, and the new nature which alone can work what is pleasing to God be implanted in us.

The word sanctification is used in various ways in five or six different senses. In Tim. 4:4, 5, the sanctification of our daily food is spoken of. We know that the food cannot be changed in its nature or made actually holy; the meaning is that it is set apart for our use. The word is used in 1 Cor. 7 in connection with the unbelieving husband and the believing wife, with the unbelieving wife and the believing husband—the unconverted one is said to sanctified by the converted. I have known cases where the unconverted husband became all the worse, persecuted his wife, shut her out of doors, and altogether behaved in a far worse manner than he did before his wife was converted. This passage does not mean that the unbeliever is made morally pure, but that the husband and wife might live together, in contrast to the condition of things under the law.

If we go back into the Old Testament we find that the Tabernacle was to be anointed and sanctified, and likewise the altar, the laver, and Aaron and his sons (Ex. 41), just meaning that all was to be set apart to God. A man might also sanctify is house or his field. The thing or person was to be reckoned holy, although it could not be altered in its nature—it was a kind of positional holiness. “All His saints are in Thy hand.” In this sense the whole nation was sanctified, though we know how wicked they were actually. In John 10 the Lord Jesus applies this same word to Himself “Whom the Father hath sanctified.” Did that make Him more holy than before? He was always holy: there could be no degrees in His sanctification— “The holy one of God.” It means that the Father set Him apart for the great work He had trusted Him with. Later, in John 17, the Lord says, “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.” He as the spotless One, the One whose purity under the eye of God was unsullied. What He meant was that He set Himself apart on behalf of, these apostles, even as He now appears in the presence God for us.

Thus far sanctification means setting apart, and that thought enters into its meaning wherever you meet with it, only in the cases we shall look at, now the meaning gets deeper. In 1 Thess. 5:23 we get what is practical, not merely what is positional.

Still we must remember that in the great majority of cases it is positional—that part is complete, not partial or progressive. In the passage already quoted in 1 Peter 1, the Spirit is beginning His work in the soul—what is that? Setting that soul apart. He did that at the very beginning, though the soul might not have had intelligence of it. It is a remarkable thing that the order set forth in human theology is not that given in the word of God. In the Westminster Catechism which I learned when a boy, and which is perhaps the embodiment of human theology, the order is Justification, Adoption, Sanctification. In the word of God we have these three things, but we do not get them in that order. You will find that wherever sanctification and justification come side by side, sanctification comes first. We should have put it last. If we had our choice about that matter we should have been getting under the shelter of the blood before anything else, but that is not God's way. The Holy Spirit begins His work by appropriating the individual for God. We are set apart to obedience, to obey as the Lord obeyed. The soul is required to bow to the truth of God and accept it.

In 1 Cor. 6, after reminding the Corinthians of what some of them had been, the apostle says “but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified.” Why does he not put justified before sanctified? We see the significance of washing. If a rich man adopts a gutter child, the first thing he must do for it is to see that it is washed, the next that it is properly clothed, and then that it is properly instructed in proper manners and behavior. These people had been rolling in the gutters of sin; first of all they needed to be washed, and that is where God began with them.

We read in 2 Thess. 2 of those who shall fall under the strong delusion of the man of sin. “But... God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto He called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ:” There we have this beautiful order again. God would have us to know how He begins His work. We want to have our thoughts running in a line with His truth. Nowadays there is a great deal of striving after holiness, or sanctification if you will. It is a good thing to see hearts exercised, but we want to listen to God's word and be guided by it, or we may be led into all kinds of fanaticism; on the other hand, if we take up the word apart from the Spirit we shall run into rationalism. The Spirit enables us to understand the word of God, and to walk in its light. We must remember that there can be no holiness and no good works, as God requires them until the soul is born again. The best works of the flesh are dead works. “How much more shall the blood of Christ... purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” The good must be purged away as well as the bad; it is a fine thing to get rid of such deceiving and disappointing things, “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). “Be ye holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:15). This is practical sanctification, brought about by the Holy Spirit, who sets us apart from the evil within and around. We must bear in mind that the new nature is sinless and cannot sin, but side by side with that is the old nature, which, if it acts at all, can do nothing but sin. The old nature cannot be improved, nor can it be got rid of until we get to the end of the journey, but its members are to be mortified. God has executed judgment on it in our Substitute on the cross, Who was there made sin for us. “For ye are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). We must first believe this fully, and then go on to reckon ourselves “dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The mighty power of the Holy Spirit lusting against the flesh within us enables us to do the things that we would (Gal. 5:17). “Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14), words that remind us of what Paul said of himself, “For to me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). If we are living Christ we are living a holy life. “He that saith he abideth in Him, ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked.” We know how He walked, doing the will of God perfectly—delighting in it. May the same mind be in us!

The process of practical sanctification is going on. At the same time we must remember, “This is the will of God, even your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). Listen again to the words of the apostle, “Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph. 5:25-27). The means of this cleansing and sanctification is through the word. How we should give heed to that cleansing and purifying power. When the Lord washed the disciples' feet they not understand it. It is with us as with them; our whole person is cleansed, but we have to walk through this world, and we contract defilement by the way, and we need to be cleansed from that defilement. We do not go back to the blood; what we need is the washing of water by the word. How we should seek every opportunity of hearing the word, of reading and studying it Even in the Psalms we find the question “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?” and its answer, “By taking heed thereto according to Thy word” (Ps. 119:9). “By the word of Thy lips have I kept me from the paths of the destroyer” (Ps. 17:4). If we have the word dwelling in us in all wisdom, our hearts and minds are kept and led on into all holiness, and the flesh is kept in place. In 2 Cor. 6 great promises have been spoken of. “I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God.” The next chapter opens, “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” We see how we are to go on growing more and more in the image and likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. This will be holiness indeed.

The verse we have specially before us takes the form of a prayer for the sanctification of the whole tripartite person. This was the desire begotten in the apostle's heart by the Holy Ghost; it is His desire for us still. When the Holy Ghost is allowed to work in us, there is His gracious preservation. “Unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” — how constantly the Spirit of God carries us on to that wonderful event. “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, even as we do toward you: to the end He may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Chrigt with all His saints” (1 Thess. 3:13). “What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God?” We want to keep these great events before our minds—they have a sanctifying power. “Beloved, now are we children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is.” What then? “Every man that hath this hope on Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure.” Nothing short of this should satisfy us; that is what our aim and endeavour should be. There is no way in which we can more impressively and effectively glorify Him here than by having the same mind that was in Him. We are left here to follow His steps. When the Lord was here He was the light of the world— “As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world.” In view of His going out of the world He said to His disciples “Ye are the light of the world.” The more we grow like Him the brighter will be our light.

Verse 24 is very encouraging; it gives the answer to the prayer, “Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it.” It is by the power of the indwelling Spirit alone that we can “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit,” and present our bodies “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.” The whole person must be given up to Him. “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ.” In 1 Thess. 5:24 we get the added assurance “Who also will do it.” Surely it is the Father's desire that all His people should be holy as He is holy. Israel was set apart, and failed, but there is little excuse for us if we are not a holy people practically and really. We have the position and standing of a holy people, but we must walk as such. God grant us a deeper aspiration after true holiness of walk and life, truer likeness of mind and will to our Lord and Master, yea, a practical giving-up of our entire being to Him! He is going to present as faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. ."That He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” The spots are moral defects, sins—in plainer language; wrinkles are brought on through the cares and sorrows of this life. But all the spots and wrinkles will disappear. We shall hardly know ourselves when we come to that.

There will then no longer be the need for watchfulness, as is so continuously called for here. But all His desires in regard to us will have been consummated in glory.

“The God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you” (1 Pet. 5:10).

R.K.

clickbible.org