1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by R

Bible Treasury: Volume 12, Wherefore Comfort One Another With These Words

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1 Thess. 4:18.

The blessed and animating hope of the Lord's return for His saints is so definitely marked in scripture, in varied and striking ways, that its super-eminent importance cannot for a moment be contested by any one who is truly subject to the word. With it is bound up the fulfillment of God's eternal purposes, for the glory of Christ and of those who are His at His coming. And by it, as a motive and object before the saints, the Holy Ghost seeks to make good to our souls all the present ways of God—detaching our hearts from every un-Christ-like thing, and connecting our affections with Himself in always-increasing conformity to His own image, till He come. No object could be more blessed, as an object, than this consummation in glory then, and no motive, as a motive, more powerful in swaying the affections and the life now. It eclipses by its unique blessedness to the heart, every other desire that the revelation of the glory has formed in the soul of the saint, and it equally transcends in its present spiritual power every other means of practical sanctification to God.

This being established in our souls, there is little difficulty in apprehending why the Spirit of God has given such limited instruction upon the state of the disembodied spirit of the believer.

Man in innocence was in his full perfection and maturity as a creature, body, soul, and spirit, in an earthly paradise. Man in glory will be equally in the full perfection and maturity of his new order of being, body, soul, and spirit in the paradise of God. Of the former of these, Adam had experience as the first man, but only for a brief moment; of the latter, the second Man is now the ever-living witness, the glorified One for eternity!

These two things are normal states or conditions according to God, and everything else abnormal. Man's state as a sinner in the world alive in the body, is an anomaly; and equally so, if he have died, that he is not yet in the lake of fire. On the other hand, the saint alive in the body in a world like this, is an anomaly; and equally so, if he have fallen asleep, that he is not yet in the Father's house.

Body, soul, and spirit in the lake of fire is no anomaly to the sinner who has perished in his sins, or to God, who, in holy horror and judgment of thorn, has cast him therein. Solemn thought!—the anomaly ends there The rationalist and the skeptic may reason as they will that an eternal hell is an anomaly and a blot in the ways of God; the truth is that the anomaly ends where they say it begins. And so for us, beloved reader, the anomaly of divine life as now exhibited where the curse prevails, and that other anomaly of unclothed spirits not yet clothed upon, these alike end in the glory which comes to us with the coming of Christ, and in the crowning blessedness of the Father's house.

Presuming that our first parents became believers, they only of the human family will have passed through all these four states of condition of blessing: (1), innocent beings in Eden; (2), believers in the world; (3), unclothed spirits with Christ; (4), glorified saints with the Father. None but they passed through the first; many since then have passed from the second into the third, and are waiting for the fourth; while we who are now in the second are looking for the fourth, but may have to reach it through the third. We know, however, that some will not—even those who will be remaining alive when the Lord comes, and who will undergo that instantaneous change from the image of the earthy to the image of the heavenly, which will translate them from the second to the fourth, in the same moment, and by the same resurrection-power and sovereign grace as will lift the sleeping saints from their graves, uniting the spirit with the body, the latter thus passing from the third to the fourth, or final, perfect and eternally glorified condition of the believer. For this, our true and proper hope, we wait and we watch, having the eye now filled with the beauty of those cheering rays which reach us from “the bright and the morning Star,” passing through the night's long vigil as “they that watch for the morning.”

When this is fully understood, no surprise will be felt at the Holy Ghost's measure of silence upon the subject of the condition of the saint's spirit after leaving the body; for clearly that condition is what may be termed abnormal. Moreover, the uniform design of the Holy Ghost since Pentecost being to foster and encourage in the soul as a cardinal element in Christianity, a salutary sense of the proximity of the Lord's coming to take to Himself all those who are His, it would have fatally marred the desired effect had more than passing reference been made to the disembodied state. Be it noted, therefore, that it forms no subject of special teaching by the Lord Jesus in the days of His flesh, nor of the Holy Ghost since He was glorified; but what we gather is of an incidental character, yet of precious and inestimable value. In whatever is said, there is everything to sustain and solace the hearts of those saints who appear to be about to leave the body, and to cheer and comfort those who are, or probably are about to be, bereaved mourners refusing every consolation that is not drawn from purely divine springs.

The apostles had looked for the Lord to come in their lifetime, and when they left the body, transmitted the same sublime hope to those who came after. Thus this precious heirloom has continued to cheer, more or less, the hearts of fifty or sixty successive generations of saints, carrying its benignant and sanctifying effect all along its course to these last days, culminating in the midnight cry, “Behold the Bridegroom,” which went forth some half-century ago, re-awakening in the hearts of the saints what is due to the Person of Christ, and then necessarily the transcending blessedness of His return to receive His heavenly ones to Himself.

But as each succeeding generation has augmented from its ranks the imposing company of those who have died in the Lord, there cannot but be a deepening interest in their state, and it becomes us, while refusing all the sentimentalities and vapid conceptions of men's minds, to accept with thankfulness whatever may be found in, or soberly inferred from, the word of God. Two reasons hate already been adduced, and others may possibly occur to the reader, why so little direct teaching has been given us upon this subject—first, the anomalous character of the condition in question; and, second, the nearness of the Lord's coming, as the commanding thought of the Spirit of God, forbidding any such diversion to this subordinate and temporary state as would be calculated to weaken the hold of the soul upon its true and proper hope—the greater and more magnificent thing, glory together with Christ!

There are two errors, opposite in their character, which may here be fittingly noted: one is, that on the death of the believer the spirit sleeps until the resurrection morning; the other, that the spirit passes into glory at once, as Toplady sang,

or, as our Wesleyan brethren say, “sudden death, sudden glory.” But scripture never speaks of spirits sleeping, nor of spirits glorified. The sleep of the saint is the sleep of the body in the grave, and the glorified saint is a glorified body re-united to the spirit when the Lord comes to raise the dust, or change the living bodies, of His redeemed ones.

Meanwhile scripture affords more than sufficient evidence that the disembodied spirit is by no means in a state of torpor, apathy, or oblivion. It is simply monstrous to maintain, in the teeth of the Lord's word to the thief, “To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise,” that when relieved of this “cumbrous clay,” and our ransomed spirits with Christ, they will be oblivious of the untold blessedness of being in that new and singular way present with aim. Were it so, it were altogether preferable to abide in this scene, but how, then, could Paul have said, to depart and to be with Christ is eversomuch better than even a life on earth which “is Christ"? Then, on the contrary, the spirit will be in a state of blessedness, far, very far, transcending our present blessing, and, if not in that rapturous bliss which belongs to glory, will be in the happy serenity and profound quietude of an eternally-unruffled peace, having, above all, the joy and the gladness of the Lord's own presence, Without a distraction from within or without. Here we are absent from the Lord, there should be present with Him. Here at home in the body, there at home with the Lord. Here our spirits enjoy communion with Him, despite the character of this sinful scene and the poor sinful bodies in which we tabernacle—how much more in that secure retreat where it will flow on without let in unimpeded and unbroken current. Every bit of knowledge of Himself gained here, every bit of likeness to Him acquired in the scene of His refusal (the hindering body having been put off), will be qualification for enjoying with enhanced susceptibility to every spiritual emotion, and therefore more blessedly than ever before—Himself and the joys and secrets of His loving heart. Oh, what blessed confidences are shared, and what bosom-joys are found, in the unclouded presence of our adorable Lord and Christ, when every hurtful, hindering thing, as to ourselves and our surroundings, has been swept away forever!

How graphically does the apostle speak of his own estimate of the dead weight the body imposes, when he says that in our earthly tabernacle-house we groan, being burdened (2 Cor. 5); this is the language in which the tell-tale spirit speaks of the encumbrance which we carry about in earth's dense atmosphere; how it longs, too, to be invested with its house from heaven when mortality shall be swallowed up of life! For this there was ardor of desire—ardently desiring to have put on, or clothed ourselves with, our house which is from heaven. (The English reader may possibly demur to the apparent clashing of the two different figurative thoughts concerning the body, it being here regarded at the same time as a suit of apparel we wear, and as a house we occupy; but when it is observed that the expression used in the first verse denotes that our present bodies are but temporary dwellings, tabernacles, or tents, and when it is known that the camel's-hair cloth of Cilicia of which tents were made was often used for clothing, the incongruity disappears.) But between these two states, the groaning burdened one, and that of being invested in the glorified body, is the disembodied or unclothed state, concerning which the apostle says, “We do not wish for it.” Reflecting that with this state is connected blessing to the saint, rather than glory to Christ, and that every demonstration of His victory, and its triumphant results to Him and to us waits for the day of glory, we see how fittingly he centers his desire upon the investing of the spirit with its glorified body, when, and not till when, “mortality shall be swallowed up of life!” Yet, though he speaks so clearly as to this, he could not lose sight of the fact, that, so long as we are present in the body, we are absent from the Lord; nor does he suppress the deep feeling of his heart, that he would be pleased rather to be absent from the body, and present with the Lord. That this was his deliberate judgment is conclusive from what he writes to the Philippians, that, though living was to him expressed by one word— “Christ” —yet, nevertheless, to die was gain; and blessed as it was to live to Him and for Him, engaged in that wonderful service with which he was entrusted, and which was beyond compare, yet, to depart and to be with Christ was, as to himself, far, “very far, better.” But, being put to the test (as to continuing or departing), he gives the opposite solution to his case, for his devotedness and his self-denial were such, that his choice was governed by what was due to the interests of Christ and the beloved saints, rather than by any interests of his own.

And if to represent and serve Christ in this world in a way suited to His own heart, be indeed the common, but surpassingly wonderful, dignity and privilege of every saint of God, it is clear that where this service is really fulfilled, it is gain to Christ that it should be continued, and every true-hearted, self-denying one may well say, “Be it mine to represent and serve Him here a little while longer, and more efficiently, even until He come.” But if the interests of the saint alone be considered, the conclusion is inevitable, it is very far better to be with Him!

And so, one by one, day after day, from Abel downward, has He aggregated the vast company of His sleeping saints, taking their emancipated spirits into the retirement of that serene enclosure where (1) they participate in the unwonted blessedness of His uninterrupted, unclouded presence; where (2) the highest joy which our spirits have ever yet experienced—their enjoying Himself, is their unbroken, blest employ; and where (3) the brightest anticipation that ever gladdened our hearts here—that of the rapture of our glorified bodies into the presence of the Lord on high—continues to be their blessed hope, but heightened and enhanced a thousandfold. Let the soul select the brightest moment in her history, yet “absent from the body, present with the Lord” will outstrip its blessedness; let the saint recall his richest, sweetest experience of communion with the Lord, or with His saints, yet his new experiences of the presence—joys of Christ will transcend it supremely.

Surely all this is fall of sweetest solace, consolation, and refreshment of spirit for the departing, as well as for any are in trembling anticipation of the poignant sorrows of bereavement. The coming of the Lord is the one bright pole-star in faith's horizon, towards which, as the only luminous point, every such feeling should inviolably converge. The departing one is not entitled to say, “You will meet me where I am going,” for that may never be, but rather, we shall meet in the clouds, and together be welcomed by the Lord Himself in the air. The bereaved one is not entitled to draw his comfort, as David in his day fittingly did, from the reflection, “I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me,” but in the blessed apprehension of what “is now made manifest by the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and incorruptibility to light by the gospel,” should find his comfort rather in this, that “if we believe that Jesus died, and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him.” Sweet, sweet thought! When God brings the Lord Jesus into the air, He will also bring us together to meet Him there, our body of humiliation transformed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, “into conformity to His body of glory, according to the working of the power which He has, even to subdue all things to Himself.” “Wherefore comfort one another with these words.” R.

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