2 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Henry Allan Ironside

Continual Burnt Offering: Daily Meditations, November 10

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“We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth” — 2 Thessalonians 1:3.

A GROWING faith tells that one is going on with God and learning to depend upon His Word because of having proven the truth of its promises. Faith is confidence, and confidence is increased as we see the Lord working in accordance with His revealed will, for the blessing of those who walk in obedience to His precepts. When growing faith and abounding love go hand in hand there is true spiritual development. Unbelief dishonors God and lack of love is a reproach upon the Name of Him who prayed for His own, “that they all may be one.” The better we know God our Father the more we shall love all the household of faith. To profess to love Him while cold to His children is but hypocrisy.

—W. A. Rice.

Daily Sacrifice, October 3

“For this cause Gad shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” —2 Thess. 2:11,12.

WHEN light is refused darkness ensues and God Himself gives men up to the errors which they choose in place of His truth.

It is a very solemn and serious thing to trifle with revealed truth. Pharaoh refused to hear the voice of God and was given up to hardness of heart, We read of some who, because they received not the love of the truth that they might be saved, shall be given over to strong delusion that they all might be judged who obeyed not the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. Judgment does not produce repentance. When men are seen suffering from the results of their own waywardness we read, “They gnawed their tongues for pain, and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds.” It is the goodness of God as seen in the cross of Christ that leads to repentance.

—William Cowper.

Continual Burnt Offering: Daily Meditations, November 11

“But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because 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” —2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14.

NOTICE the order here. Believers were chosen by God from the beginning. He foreknew all who would form part of the Church, the Body and Bride of His Son. In bringing them to the knowledge of salvation He wrought upon their hearts by His Holy Spirit, thus separating them from the godless world around. As a result of the Spirit’s working they were led to believe the truth— “the word is the truth of the gospel”— and now they can look forward in faith to the coming glory into which they shall enter at our Lord’s return. How every heart should go out to God in thanksgiving, when such grace is known!

—Eversfield.

Continual Burnt Offering: Daily Meditations, November 12

“Now the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always by all means. The Lord be with you all” —2 Thessalonians 2:16.

PEACE is more than joy, and is far deeper than happiness. It is that restful sense that all is well which comes from confiding in the Word of God. Christ Jesus is called “the Lord of Peace.” He is the only Man who ever walked through this world in perfect peace at all times—until in Gethsemane He faced the judgment He was to bear when taking the sinner’s place upon the cross. As a result of that work peace has been made between God and the needy sinner, a peace which is entered into by faith alone. But there is not only peace with God which has to do with the sin-question which has been settled forever. Daily the peace of God is poured into the heart that learns to commit all to Him in prayer.

—J. Denson Smith.

Mysteries of God, Chapter 8

“The Mystery of Lawlessness”

BLESSED and holy have been the mysteries thus far contemplated. Dark and sinister is that which next comes before us. So fearful is it, in fact, that it would seem, at first sight, quite improper to class it in any sense among the “mysteries of God.” And yet it is rightly so spoken of; for, of all secrets, none is more difficult for man to comprehend than God’s toleration of aught so evil. Yet He has not only permitted its existence, but warned us of it beforehand, and foretold its end.

The great theme of the first letter to the Thessalonians is the coming of the Lord for His saints; that of the second epistle is His return in manifested glory with them.

Between these two events will be fully developed the mystery of lawlessness, or the secret of iniquity. It does not, however, then appear as a new thing, or for the first time. Far otherwise: even in his own days, when Christianity was but in its infancy, the apostle wrote, “The mystery of lawlessness doth already work,” and that effectually, for so the last word implies in the original (2 Thess. 2:7). Side by side with the proclamation of the truth has ever been the satanic work, energetically carried on, to corrupt the truth, introducing poisonous counterfeits that delude the souls of all who receive them.

We have already seen this set forth in symbol under the figures of the enemy sowing darnel among the wheat, and the woman hiding the leaven in the food of the people of God—the three measures of meal. The same thing is set forth in the letter to Thyatira, where the false prophetess Jezebel is instilling her abominable teachings into the minds of her disciples (Rev. 2:18-23).

Invariably Satan works by imitation. God has revealed holy mysteries to His servants. The devil too must have his deep things, which thus appeal to the spiritually proud and carnally-minded. The mystery of lawlessness is, in fact, the working of the human mind, energized by Satan, in divine things. Refusing the sure testimonies of the Lord, and walking in vain confidence, the ear is readily given to fables, and the mind revels in wonderful and strange teachings, which delight and bewilder, but are not only to no profit, but to the actual subverting of those who run greedily after them. The object of Satan is to turn the eye from Christ; hence the mystery of lawlessness makes much of man, and, by any means whatever, puts the Lord Jesus at a distance. And it is by imitating scriptural truths that this is successfully accomplished. Were it otherwise, the simple would take alarm. So we are told that “as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses (by imitating the miracles performed), so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith” (2 Tim. 3:8).

In tracing out the progress of this dark and dreadful mystery therefore, we must look for some gigantic systematizing of error, by counterfeiting divine truths. Nor have we far to seek; for from the beginning it is only too manifest. In its earliest inception, this mystery consisted in taking up the hopes, forms and ceremonies of the Jewish dispensation, and transferring them gradually to the Church of the present period. This accomplished, the heavenly calling would be lost sight of; the great mystery of Christ and the Church would be effectually bidden; and believers would thus sink down to the level of the world, becoming, in spirit, dwellers on the earth1 and forgetting that their politeuma2 is in heaven (Phil. 3:20.).

To persuade erstwhile Jews and heathen, used to forms and ceremonies, that a Christianity bereft of outward attractiveness was inferior to an ornate and elaborate ritual, was not a matter of great difficulty. Hence we soon see the truth of the priesthood of all believers, each one having immediate access to God, displaced by the teaching that, as in Judaism and in heathenism, so now, there is a special priestly order who alone have to do directly with the mysteries of religion, and who act as mediators and go-betweens for the laity, or the commonalty. This was one of Satan’s most cunning devices to put the people at a distance from God. How well it has succeeded the centuries witness! By degrees, more and more power, with its accompanying pomp, was delegated to this superior hierarchy; gorgeous vestments were adopted, magnificent titles accorded, and thus the simple Christianity of early days seemed almost crushed out of existence. Priestly functions, too, extended farther and farther. Baptism became a sacrament only to be administered by this special class, who likewise alone were holy enough to dispense the elements of the Lord’s Supper, to solemnize a marriage, to anoint the sick, and to hear confessions of sin, with the power to grant absolution.

The ordinance of baptism itself became a great mystery, whereby the taint of original sin was supposed to be washed away, and the baptized one born anew. The simple “breaking of bread” gave place to the mysterious and blasphemous sacrifice of the mass—a continual and unbloody sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead! Anointing the sick with oil by the elders of the church, that they might be healed in answer to prayer, became the sacrament of extreme union to prepare the doubting, bewildered soul for death, instead of life I Christ Himself as the “one Mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 3:5) was largely replaced by “saint “ (made so after their death by hierarchial authority) and “the holy Virgin” more accessible than her divine Son! Thus, one by one, doctrines and usages were so perverted as to be unrecognizable.

Suffice it to say that so effectual has been the working of this mystery of lawlessness that there remains not one doctrine of Scripture that has not been denied, and an imitation foisted upon the ignorant in its place. Thus it went on spreading, not only through the Roman counion, but among so-called Greek orthodox, and now among Anglican and even Protestant denominations, as well as heretical sects like Christian Science, New Thought, etc.

But it has not yet attained its full growth, nor will it while the Church, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, remains upon the earth.

In 2 Thess. 2 we read of a hindrance to the full manifestation of the evil of the mystery of lawlessness referred to, which is evidently the presence of the Holy Ghost in the Church on earth. He “lets,” or hinders, until “He be taken out of the way.” When He goes up with the Church at the Lord’s descent into the air, “then the lawless one shall be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus shall consume with the breath of His mouth, and shall annul by the appearing of His coming; whose coming is according to the working of Satan in all power and signs and wonders of falsehood, and in all deceit of unrighteousness to them that perish, because they have not received the love of the truth that they might be saved. And for this reason God sends to them a working of error, that they should believe what is false, that all might be judged who have not believed the truth, but have found pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:8-13, J. N. Darby’s Trans.).

This is certainly a most solemn passage, deserving to be carefully weighed. It refers to something which may take place very, very soon; a state of affairs many living now may enter upon shortly. The more minutely it is examined, the more clearly it will be seen that it pictures a terrible period, soon to come upon all that dwell on the earth; when the Church will be gone, the secret of iniquity will be headed up in one man, the Antichrist of prophecy; and all who had chosen the earth in place of the heavenly portion will be given over to strong delusion. This cuts off all hope of any being saved in that coming “hour of temptation” (Rev. 3:10), who have heard the gospel of the grace of God in this “day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2), but heard only to reject it. It puts a terrible responsibility on those who listen again and again to the proclamation of salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, yet have never trusted Him for themselves, but have either gone on their sinful course in utter indifference, or else supposed that by trusting in the Church, a human priesthood, or religious ordinances, they had made their peace with God; thus ignoring Him who alone made peace by the blood of His cross.

It is solemn indeed to realize that if Christ should come to call His own away while they are in this awful state, they would be left for certain judgment, for God Himself would send the delusion, or working of error, which would shut them up to judicial darkness. In this dispensation of grace, they “loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” In that time of deepest distress they will be given up to the darkness they have loved and deliberately chosen.

For former instances of God’s sending men delusions and visiting them with judicial blindness, see the cases of Pharaoh (Ex. 11:10), of Ahab (2 Chron. 18), and of the nation of Israel (Isa. 6:9,10; Matt. 13:13-15). All who hear the gospel and believe it not are “condemned already” (John 3:18). If the Lord comes while they are still in that state, the condemnation is final, and we note their dreadful doom in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, together with the contrast of the blessed place that might have been theirs had they but believed the testimony so graciously given. “The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power; when He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.” There could be no stronger declaration that all who reject the testimony now, will be unable to avail themselves of the testimony then, while the result of the outpouring of divine wrath upon the scene will only harden, in place of bringing to repentance (Rev. 16:9-11, 21)

It would seem, from a careful study of the book of Revelation, that immediately after the rapture of the saints all the Christless fragments of Christendom will be united for a time in one universal world-Church —Babylon the great. For not in any past history of Rome has Revelation 17 been completely fulfilled; Babylon in its final phase is yet future. She there is seen as the great harlot bearing rule for a brief season over many waters, which are, as interpreted, “peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues” (vs. 15).

Upon her proud forehead is written, “MYSTERY, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth.” She is drunk with the blood of the saints, who in all ages have been slain by the adherents of false religion. For a time she bears sway over the revived Roman empire, until at last she is overthrown and given to the flames by those who had once been her abject slaves.

Thus shall Babylon’s power be broken, and all worship and homage be paid to a man— “the man of sin”— who heads up in himself the mystery of lawlessness. This is the subject of the thirteenth chapter of Revelation, which in point of time seems to be subsequent to chapter 17, for there we see no woman riding the beast. Her doom has already come, and now the man of sin is fully revealed, and all pay homage to the Antichrist, the false Messiah.

This will be the devil’s masterpiece, and the culmination of the mystery he has been developing for so long. But his triumph shall be but momentary; for when iniquity is at its height, and Satan’s power seems to be supreme, the heavens shall be opened, and He shall ride forth whom John saw in vision, as described in chapter 19 of the same book. “And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns; and He had a name written, that no man knew but He Himself. And He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.... And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him that sat on the horse, and against His army. And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshiped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone” (vers. 11-14, 19:20).

Thus shall the mystery of lawlessness be forever blotted out and righteousness alone shall reign!

Daily Sacrifice, October 4

“Even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread” —2 Thessalonians 3:10-12.

EVIDENTLY there were those in the Thessalonian church who were obsessed with the idea that, since the Lord’s return is ever imminent, it was useless to work for daily sustenance. They preferred to be supported by their brethren who were in better circumstances than themselves. Such demonstrated the truth of the saying, “Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do.” Living careless, idle lives, they became thoughtless in speech and were troublemakers as they went from one home to another expressing themselves with undue freedom.

God has ordained that man should live by labor (Gen. 3:19). To attempt to go through this world as a parasite, subsisting on that which others have earned, is to bring dishonor upon the name of the Christ whom they profess to serve.

—Henry Van Dyke.

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