

## First and Second Thessalonians

Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians can be considered as the concluding word on the Christian life. This section begins with the book of Romans, which presents the complete gospel of God and shows how sinners are made sons of God to constitute the Body of Christ, which is expressed as the local churches. First Corinthians shows that we need to take Christ and His cross as the solution to all the problems in the church. Second Corinthians describes the ministers and the new covenant ministry which are needed to bring the distracted believers back into the experience of Christ for the Christian life. Galatians shows that Christ replaces the law and is versus religion and tradition in the Christian life. Ephesians reveals the church as the goal of the Christian life; it is the mystery of Christ, the Body of Christ as His fullness, which becomes the fullness of God. Philippians shows that the Christian life is a life of experiencing Christ, in which we take Christ as our living, pattern, goal, power, and secret. Colossians reveals that Christ is the all-inclusive One, who has the first place in all things. He is the mystery and embodiment of God, the Head and constituent of the church, the allotted portion, the life, constituent, and hope of the saints, and the reality of all positive things. We need to give Christ the pre-eminence in all things and hold Him as the Head in order to have a Christian life for the church life. First and 2 Thessalonians conclude this section of Paul's Epistles by revealing its principal characteristic. Paul makes clear to the young believers in Thessalonica that the Christian life is a holy life, a sanctified life. The purpose of these Epistles is to unveil a holy life for the church life.

### The Sanctified Life

The sanctified life is spoken of explicitly five times in the two Epistles to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3 Paul writes, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification," and in verse 4, "That each one of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor." Three verses later Paul declares, "For God has not called us for uncleanness but in sanctification." Chapter 5 verse 23 begins, "The God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly..." Then in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 Paul says that God's choosing us from the beginning is "unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit."

In addition, the concept of the sanctified life appears throughout these Epistles. First Thessalonians 2:10 speaks of the apostles conducting themselves in a "holy...manner"; 3:13 says that God establishes our hearts "in holiness"; our greeting of one another is to be with "a holy kiss" (5:26); and as God's chosen ones we are the saints (i.e., the holy) with whom Christ will return (3:13) and in whom He will be glorified (2 Thes. 1:10). Thus, we are not merely brothers of each other, but holy brothers (1 Thes. 5:27).

The words *sanctify*, *sanctification*, *holy*, *saints*, and *holiness* are translations from Greek words all of which are from the same root, which fundamentally means "separated, set apart." Witness Lee distinguishes their meanings in the New Testament context as follows:

To be holy<sup>1</sup> is to be separated, set apart (to God). The saints are the separated ones, the ones set apart (to God). Holiness is the nature and quality of being holy. Sanctification (to God) is the practical effect, the character in activity, and the consummate state produced by being sanctified. (Recovery Version, Rom. 1:2, note 3)

A Christian is a person who has been set apart to God, and the mark of a Christian's life is separation to God.

What, then, is the sanctified life as set forth in these Epistles? The first Epistle speaks of three major attributes—serving the living God (1:9), conducting ourselves in a holy manner (2:10), and waiting for the Lord's coming (1:10). The second Epistle encourages us to continue in this life (1:3-12) through God's salvation (2:13—3:5) and corrects the misconception concerning the Lord's coming that results in a disorderly walk (2:1-12; 3:6-15).

### Serving the Living God

As believers in Christ, we are called by God to serve Him. However, in these books we will search in vain for details concerning the focus of our service and work. Instead, the apostle Paul speaks about the factors that produce, motivate, and sustain our work. These are faith, love, and hope, the basic structures of the Christian life, which Paul repeatedly emphasizes in these books (1 Thes. 1:3, 9-10; 3:10-13; 5:8; 2 Thes. 1:3-4). In 1 Thessalonians 1:3 each

factor is associated with a different characteristic of our service: faith produces work, love produces labor, and hope results in endurance. Service to God begins as a work of faith, which means that it “originates not from the ability of the believers’ natural being but from the infusion of what God, in whom they believe, is” (Recovery Version, 1 Thes. 1:3, note 2). Hence, faith is the work’s nature and strength. Service then grows into a labor of love, for love motivates and characterizes it. “It is carried out by [the believers’] sacrificial love toward their loving Lord, who loved them and gave Himself for them, and toward His members, whom He has redeemed through His death in love” (Note 2). Eventually, service is sustained by hope, the source of endurance. It “lasts and stands unchanging by the sustaining power of the hope in which the believers look for their beloved Lord, who promised that He would come to take them to Himself” (Note 2).

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 Paul describes this threefold structure from another perspective. There the work of faith is to turn to God from idols, which are the evil replacements of God that have usurped fallen mankind’s worship. Footnote 2 for verse 9 explains:

To turn to God from the idols is to turn away not only from the false gods, together with the devil and the demons behind them, but also from all things other than God. This is accomplished by faith infused into the new converts through their hearing of the word of the gospel. (Recovery Version)

This turn to God ushers in our service for the living and true God. In this instance, we should not understand *God* only in the general sense of His being the Creator and of His intervening in creation. In the New Testament, God is living and true in the experience of His believers because He has been processed through incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension in order to become the consummated Spirit who indwells His believers as their life and reality.

To serve a living and true God is to serve the very God who is triune—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—who has been processed to be the believers’ life and life supply for their enjoyment. They should experience Him not only as the object of worship but also as the all-inclusive Supplier who lives in them. This experience is brought about by love produced within the believers by the sweet taste of the rich supply of the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit. (Note 2)

Finally, to await the Son of God from the heavens is

to look for the One who passed through incarnation, human living, and crucifixion and entered into resurrection and ascended to the heavens, and who will come back to receive His believers into glory. This is the hope that strengthens the believers to stand steadfastly in their faith. (Note 2)

Faith, love, and hope are combined by Paul in 1 and 2 Thessalonians to describe the three substances of our life of service to the living God. A life that receives the infusion of what God is, that tastes the sweetness and enjoys the rich supply of the bountiful God in His rich attributes, and that awaits with the surety of hope the coming of the resurrected and ascended Lord, is the first attribute of a sanctified life, separated and set apart to God.

### *Conducting Ourselves in a Holy Manner*

A sanctified life, however, not only concerns service. The apostle also addresses the manner of our conduct, which must match our service in being holy (1 Thes. 2:10). To conduct ourselves in a holy manner requires us to exercise our whole being—our spirit, soul, and body (5:23), together with our heart (3:13). In chapter 3 of 1 Thessalonians, Paul deals with our heart (which includes our soul), in chapter 4 with our bodies, and in chapter 5 with our innermost part, our spirit.

For a sanctified life we need our hearts to be established blameless in holiness (3:13). The heart is composed of

three parts of our soul—the mind (Matt. 9:4; Gen. 6:5), emotion (John 16:6, 22), and will (Acts 11:23)—and also our conscience (Heb. 10:22), which belongs to our spirit. Our hearts are established in holiness by the transforming of the Lord Spirit in all the parts of our inner being (2 Cor. 3:18). As we behold the glory of the Lord with an unveiled face, implying a conscience that is without any offense (Acts 24:16; Heb. 10:22), the Spirit transforms us, first, by renewing our mind (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23), the leading part of our soul. This renewing spreads to our emotion and will so that our entire inner man is renewed (2 Cor. 4:16). This is not merely an outward change but the inner transformation through a metabolism of life, whereby the element of our natural man is replaced by the element of God, who is holy in His nature. This happens as we partake of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). For our hearts to become holy is for our inner being to be saturated with the holy nature of God, just as a cup of water becomes tea by the element of tea saturating the water.

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holiness, if our bodies are not sanctified, we cannot live a sanctified life. In Romans 6:19 Paul speaks of presenting our members, that is, our bodies, as “slaves to righteousness unto sanctification” and in 12:1 of presenting our bodies a living sacrifice, holy to God. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3 Paul deals with the sanctification of our bodies: “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication.” God’s will, His purpose, for man is that man would express Him. Hence, He made man in His image and according to His likeness (Gen. 1:26). “Concerning this purpose, nothing ruins man more than fornication. This prevents man from being holy, separated unto God, and contaminates man to the uttermost in fulfilling God’s holy purpose” (Recovery Version, 1 Thes. 4:3, note 2). To be sanctified unto God requires that we abstain from fornication. We are to possess our own vessels (our bodies) in sanctification and honor (v. 4); moreover, we are not to overstep or take advantage of a brother by committing adultery with his spouse (v. 6). Fornication is “the most gross sin in the eyes of God,” and as believers we must “avoid its damage and contamination” (Recovery Version, v. 3, note 2). It is the most unclean thing (v. 7) and it “destroys the holy standing and character of God’s called saints” (Note 4).

Paul’s charge in 1 Thessalonians 5:22, “abstain from every kind of evil,” certainly applies to his charge to abstain from fornication. The word *abstain* (*apochōreō*) means “to go away, to leave” (Newman 23) The word *kind* in this verse means “species.” “It denotes anything in view, anything in perception; hence, a sight” (Recovery Version, 5:22, note 1). To be safeguarded from such a damaging and contaminating sin, we must abstain from doing things that are in the view, sight, or perception of fornication. For example, to be alone with a member of the opposite sex to whom we are not married would mostly be in the view, sight, and perception of fornication. We must abstain from, leave alone, and go away from every kind of evil so that we may be preserved in sanctification.

If our hearts are established, our bodies possessed in sanctification and honor, and yet our spirits are defiled, then our holiness is not perfected (2 Cor. 7:1). Nothing defiles our spirit as much as deadness (Heb. 9:14, cf. Rom. 9:1; 8:16). Therefore, in 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul charges us to have a spiritual life for our full sanctification (v. 23). This spiritual life comprises seven items (vv. 16-22): always rejoicing, praying unceasingly, giving thanks in everything, not quenching the Spirit, not despising prophecies, proving all things and holding fast to what is good, and abstaining from every kind of evil. The Spirit, who is the consummation of the processed Triune God and is mentioned in this sequence, governs all the items. “The Spirit causes our spirit to be burning (Rom. 12:11) and our gifts to be flaming (2 Tim. 1:6). Hence we should not quench Him” (Recovery Version, 1 Thes. 5:19, note 1). However,

a spiritual life can be realized only by the exercise of our human spirit, in whom the Spirit dwells (John 3:6; 4:24; Rom. 8:16). Hence, to rejoice always is to exercise our spirit (Luke 1:47, KJV). We must pray at every time in spirit (Eph. 6:18) and give thanks at all times by being filled in spirit (5:18-20). We must not despise prophecies, because prophecy is a spiritual gift through the exercise of our spirit (1 Cor. 14:1, 32). We must prove all things not only by the Spirit but also by the knowledge of our spirit (Mark 2:8). This includes “to discern prophecies (1 Cor. 14:29), to discern the spirits (1 Cor. 12:10), to test the spirits (1 John 4:1), to prove what is the will of God (Rom. 12:2), and to prove what is well pleasing to the Lord (Eph. 5:10)” (Recovery Version, 1 Thes. 5:21, note 1). Finally, we can abstain from every kind of evil by the enabling power of the law of the Spirit of life as we walk according to the spirit (Rom. 8:3-4).

Through the spiritual life portrayed in these seven items, we cooperate with God’s operation to sanctify us wholly and to preserve our “spirit and soul and body” complete and without blame at the Lord’s coming (1 Thes. 5:23). Here, as in Hebrews 4:12, Paul makes a clear distinction between the spirit of man and the soul. To disregard, or worse, to deny, the revelation of the tripartite nature of man in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 is to reject the very means of living a spiritual life and cooperating with God for our full sanctification. The exercise of the spirit requires the denial of the self (Matt. 16:24), and the self is the soul-life (v. 26; cf. Luke 9:24-25). Hence, to deny the self is to reject the soul—not the soul’s faculties but the life of the soul, that is, the natural life, by which we are a soulish or natural man (1 Cor. 2:14). In experience, this practically means that we do not depend on the soul in any way but rely absolutely on our spirit. Only then will our soul, through God’s sanctification, fulfill its function in expressing God and magnifying Christ (Gen. 1:26; Luke 1:46; Phil. 1:20).

### *Waiting for the Lord’s Coming*

The third characteristic of a sanctified life is that it is a life that waits for the Lord’s coming (1 Thes. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thes. 2:1, 8). Here we cannot cover the details surrounding the events of this coming, though we note that what is composed in these Epistles, especially in the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians, must be interpreted in the light of other New Testament passages, particularly Revelation 12 through 19. Our present concern is on the sanctifying impact that the Lord’s coming and the associated “day of the Lord” has on the Christian life (2 Thes. 2:2; 1 Thes. 5:2). In these two Epistles, this impact is both an encouragement and a warning.

Hope in the Lord’s coming is the spontaneous product of our hearts being established in holiness through faith and love (3:10-13). His coming is our hope of the resurrection

for those who have died in the Lord and our expectation of rapture as those who may remain alive until His coming; hence, it is a comfort and an encouragement to us (4:13-18). The revelation of the Lord from heaven will usher us into rest from our afflictions (2 Thes. 1:7), that is, “relief, ease, repose, liberty. In this age the believers suffer persecutions and troubles for the Lord. At the Lord’s coming back they will be relieved of their sufferings and will enter into the Lord’s rest and enjoy its liberty” (Recovery Version, note 1).

If these passages demonstrate the comfort and encouragement of the Lord’s coming, they are complemented by passages that reveal the Lord’s coming to be a great motivation to the Christian life. Every chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with the coming of the Lord, which

shows that the writer, Paul, lived and worked with the Lord’s coming before him, taking it as an attraction, an incentive, a goal, and a warning. He not only did this himself but also encouraged the believers under his care to do the same. (Recovery Version, 5:23, note 8)

Positively, Paul was motivated at the prospect of receiving a reward at Christ’s coming (2:19). Negatively, Paul feared that the believers, including him, may be found with blame at the Lord’s coming (3:13; 5:23).

Concerning the coming of the Lord, Paul speaks of “the day of the Lord,” a term that denotes the Lord’s judgment (5:2-3). The day of the Lord will bring judgment upon men, a sudden destruction. This will be God’s vengeance upon those who do not know Him and who do not obey the gospel. Its penalty is eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord (2 Thes. 1:8-9). In the light of this day, Paul charges the new believers not to sleep but to watch, and not to be drunk but to be sober (1 Thes. 5:6-7); for this they need to engage in spiritual warfare with a breastplate of faith and love and a helmet, the hope of salvation (v. 8). If the believers will not be judged, why should Paul charge us to watch and be sober?

The phrase *the day of the Lord* as used in the New Testament clearly indicates that the believers will be evaluated and judged by the Lord. In that day we need to be confirmed unreprouvable (1 Cor. 1:8); on that day the fire of His judgment will declare our work and manifest what sort it is (3:12-15); our spirit needs to be saved in the day of the Lord (5:5); the faithful believers will boast in that day (2 Cor. 1:14); and in that day a crown awaits those who love the Lord’s appearing (2 Tim. 4:8). Each positive

aspiration in these verses has a converse: in that day we may suffer reproof; our building may be manifest as being with worthless materials and consumed; instead of boasting, we may be put to shame; and we may lose our crown (Rev. 3:11). Moreover, the outcome of the day of the Lord does not depend on mercy and grace but on righteousness. In 2 Timothy 4:8 the Lord who gives the crown is “the righteous Judge,” not the merciful God or gracious Redeemer, and the crown is “of righteousness.” “This prize is not of grace nor by faith, but is of righteousness through works (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12; 2 Cor. 5:10),” and “the believers will be recompensed with such a reward, not according to the Lord’s grace but according to His righteousness” (Recovery Version, 2 Tim. 4:8, note 2).<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, it is because of the judgment in this day that we need salvation. In 1 Thessalonians 5:9 Paul writes, “For God did not appoint us to wrath but to the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This salvation in the context of this chapter (vv. 3-4, 9) is “not salvation from eternal perdition through the Lord’s death, but salvation from the coming destruction (v. 3), through the Lord’s coming back” (Recovery Version, v. 8, note 3). Paul exhorts us to be sober and to fight the spiritual warfare for this salvation (v. 8). Those believers who are not sober and who do not fight may not participate in that salvation at the Lord’s coming, even though they are eternally saved through the Lord’s redeeming death.

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On what grounds do we receive this particular salvation? The complete answer to this is given in the second Epistle. In 2:13 Paul writes that God chose us “from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.” Undoubtedly, this is the same salvation as in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, for it is also in the context of the day of the Lord (2 Thes. 2:2). The preposition *unto* implies that we have yet to receive this full salvation. We will receive this salvation at the Lord’s coming. It is the consummation of the work that began with God’s choosing and is carried out by the Spirit’s sanctification and the belief of the truth. The Spirit’s sanctification has various stages, all of which are needed for the believers to obtain the salvation to its fullest degree:

Sanctification of the Spirit consists of three steps: (1) the Spirit’s seeking us and convicting us at the time that He caused us to repent and believe (1 Pet. 1:2; John 16:8); (2) His sanctifying us both positionally and dispositionally (Heb. 13:12; 1 Cor. 6:11) at the time we were saved; and (3) His sanctifying us dispositionally as we pursue the growth in life (Rom. 6:19, 22). By these three steps of the

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Spirit's sanctification, God's salvation is applied to us that we may obtain and enjoy it fully. The three steps of the Spirit's sanctification not only separate us from all old and negative things, making us holy unto God, but also sanctify us, making us a new creation full of the Lord's essence and element, that we may obtain the Lord's glory." (Recovery Version, 2 Thes. 2:13, note 3)

By cooperating with the sanctifying Holy Spirit in the procedure of sanctification, we will obtain the goal, "the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thes. 2:14).

The glory of the Lord is that He, as the Son of God the Father, possesses the Father's life and nature that He may express the Father. To obtain the Lord's glory is to be in the same position as the Son of God that we may express the Father. (Recovery Version, note 2)

**O**ur cooperation with the Spirit's sanctification is the belief of the truth. Here, there is an echo of the Lord's prayer in John 17:17: "Sanctify them in the truth: Your word is truth." As we hear the truth conveyed through the preaching of the Word of God (Rom. 10:17), this truth causes a response of faith within us, the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2, 5). This is subjective faith, which corresponds to the objective faith of which the truth is the content and reality. Belief of the truth refers to this subjective faith within the believers produced by their hearing the Word (Eph. 1:13). Hence, it can also be called the "faith of the truth" (*pistis alētheias*). The more a believer loves the truth and pursues the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), the more he will experience the sanctification of the Spirit for his salvation.

First Thessalonians 5:23 also indicates that our salvation is still a progressive matter that needs to be complete at the Lord's coming. In this verse Paul uses two qualifiers in relation to God's sanctification of the believers: *wholly* and *complete*. Again, the converse of these qualifiers is that sanctification may be only partial and preservation incomplete at the coming of the Lord. Both *wholly* and *complete* refer to the three parts of man.

God sanctifies us, first, by taking possession of our spirit through regeneration (John 3:5-6); second, by spreading Himself as the life-giving Spirit from our spirit into our soul to saturate and transform our soul (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18); and last, by enlivening our mortal body through our soul (Rom. 8:11, 13) and transfiguring our body by His life power (Phil. 3:21). (Recovery Version, note 5)

For God to preserve us complete means that

He keeps our spirit, soul, and body perfect. Through the fall our body was ruined, our soul was contaminated, and our spirit was deadened. In God's full salvation our entire

being is saved and made complete and perfect. For this, God is preserving our spirit from any deadening element (Heb. 9:14), our soul from remaining natural and old (Matt. 16:24-26), and our body from the ruin of sin ([1 Thes.] 4:4; Rom. 6:6). Such a preservation by God and His thorough sanctification sustain us to live a holy life unto maturity that we may meet the Lord in His parousia. (Recovery Version, note 6)

**T**he church of the Thessalonians was only a few weeks old when they received Paul's letters. Paul took the opportunity with these young believers to instruct them concerning their Christian life for their infant church life. This life is a sanctified life in which the believers serve God in faith, love, and hope, conduct themselves, that is, their entire being, in a holy and blameless manner, and wait for the Lord's coming in view of His judgment. As such, these two Epistles form a fitting conclusion to the foregoing Epistles from Romans to Colossians.

### Conclusion

The books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians point to the fundamental procedure of God's economy, which is reflected in Ephesians 1:4-5: "Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before Him in love, predestinating us unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will." *To be holy*, both positionally through Christ's redemption and dispositionally through the Spirit's sanctification, is the procedure of God's eternal economy; *unto sonship*, God's corporate expression in His many sons, who are begotten of God and live by His divine life, is the goal.

by Jim Batten

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Greek word translated holy (*hosios*) in 1 Thessalonians 2:10, however, is a different Greek word from the word commonly used for holy (*hagios*). It also expresses the thought of holiness but with the emphasis on godliness and devoutness before God. See note to Luke 1:75 in Lee (183).

<sup>2</sup>Whereas the Lord's judgment on unbelievers at His coming will be eternal in consequence (2 Thes. 1:9), the judgment on the believers will be temporary, a dispensational discipline during the coming millennial kingdom (1 Cor. 3:15).

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