

THE THESSALONIAN CHRISTIANS

– JULY 9. – 1 THESSALONIANS 1; 4:13-18. –

ST. PAUL'S LETTER TO THE YOUNG CHURCH AT THESSALONICA – THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL AMONGST THEM – THEIR REJOICING IN TRIBULATION – THEIR ACTIVITIES IN SPREADING THE TRUTH – THEIR HOPE, CENTERED IN THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST – A HIGHLY FIGURATIVE DESCRIPTION OF OUR LORD'S SECOND PRESENCE AND THE RESURRECTION OF THE CHURCH – "THE DEAD IN CHRIST" VS. "THOSE THAT SLEEP IN JESUS."

**"If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with Him."
– Chapter 4:14.**

WHILE our Study today deals chiefly with the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Epistle of which it forms a part gives a description of the class that will rejoice in His Second Coming and with good reason. In this Epistle St. Paul points out some of the characteristics of those to whom he says, "Ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that Day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all children of the light, the children of the Day." (Chapter 5:4,5.) Of these characteristics the essential one is "the love of God," "The love of Christ," extending to all who are of the Household of Faith, and manifesting itself in a spirit of sympathy toward the entire "groaning creation."

Although the Church at Thessalonica was composed of those who in respect to length of Christian experience were but "babes in Christ," nevertheless it is very evident that the persecution which had come upon them had caused them to grow very rapidly. It was about a year since they had received the Gospel; and yet the Apostle witnesses to their rapid development, as evidenced by their love for

one another – not only for the little company at Thessalonica, but to all of the Household of Faith throughout Macedonia. The Apostle declares that this love of the brethren was a manifestation of the fact that they had been "taught of God."

One of the first effects of a knowledge of the grace of God in Christ and of a full consecration to the Lord is this love for all fellow-servants – "the brethren." Would that the fervency and the zeal of first love, both toward the Lord and toward the entire Household of Faith, might not only continue, but increase with all! But, alas! many who start warmly and earnestly grow lukewarm – become captious, cynical, hypercritical, high-minded and self-assertive – and lose much of the simplicity, zeal and humility of their first faith and their first love.

This is the first attack of the great Adversary to re-ensnare, through the weaknesses of the flesh, those who have escaped his chains of darkness and have come to see some of the glory of God shining through Christ. If they do not resist these attacks, the effect is sure to be not only lukewarmness toward the Lord, His Cause and the members of His Body, but eventually the cultivation of the fruits of darkness – envy, malice, hatred, strife – instead of the fruits of the Spirit of Christ – meekness, gentleness, patience, brotherly-kindness, love. Hence the Apostle urges the Church, "We beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more" – in love and service one for the other; for this increase implies a growth in all the graces of the Holy Spirit.

CHRISTIAN DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The religion of Christ is designed to blend with all the proper duties, perplexities, trials and pleasures of the home and the family. Thus the majority of the people of God can best let shine the light which they have received from the Lord. Each should "study to be quiet" – to have a quiet ambition, not a restless busting for notoriety and for great exploits, but a quiet, earnest perseverance in well-

doing, a condition in which the fruits and graces of the Holy Spirit will best thrive.

True, the light received will make a great change in many of the affairs of the home. It sets before us new ideals, to be esteemed and copied. It introduces us to a new relationship, a new kindred – the family of God. Thus it brings us some new responsibilities and privileges; and if we are filled with the spirit of the Truth, with love toward God and all who have any of His likeness, it will make us very zealous in the dispensing of the grace of God, which has brought such blessing to our own hearts.

This does not signify that it is the Lord's will that all who receive the Truth should go forth as public teachers, abandoning home, trade, occupation, duties, responsibilities, etc. The Lord's call will never conflict with proper duties and responsibilities previously upon us. The man who has a family to provide for should not even think of leaving such obligations, nor consider himself called to public preaching, if it would imply the neglect of duties and obligations already resting upon him. Such persons should quietly and thankfully do all in the Divine service that a proper regard for those dependent upon them would permit.

On the other hand, those who are free to give time and energy to the Lord's service, and who have talents of any kind, should, when they receive the Truth, humbly present their all to the Lord and then seek to use their every opportunity in His service as He shall open the way. Thereafter such consecrated ones should be very careful that they do not so encumber themselves as to hinder their usefulness in such service.

RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARD THOSE WITHOUT

Not only have we duties and a ministry toward every member of the Body of Christ, but we have certain responsibilities toward those who are in darkness, out of Christ. The Christian is to be a

burning and shining light toward the world. The world sees not from the inside, as does the Household of Faith. Hence there is great necessity that the Christian should so live before the world as to be a "living epistle, known and read of all men," honoring to the Lord and to His Word.

The Christian life should be seen by the world, not merely as just and honest, but also as noble and honorable. There are honest people who are mean. There are truthful people who tell the truth in a combative and repellent manner. But in the true Christian, love should produce so generous a sentiment that it would ennoble every virtue. To this end, also, the Christian should strive "to have need of nothing" – so far as possible, not to be dependent upon charity, but rather, as the Apostle elsewhere states it, to "labor, working with his own hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." (Ephesians 4:28.) The Lord's instruction to fleshly Israel that they should lend, but should not borrow, may well be applied in principle by Spiritual Israel. This principle applies to buying on credit, a practise which should be avoided by the Lord's people; and as a rule this principle would be found advantageous to mankind in general.

"ENSAMPLES TO ALL THAT BELIEVE"

Under St. Paul's instruction, supplemented by Timothy's, the young Thessalonian Church had in a very short time attained considerable knowledge of the Divine Plan – much more, apparently, than is enjoyed by a majority of Christian congregations today. For instance, they knew what many today are ignorant of – that the Christian's **[R5913 : page 187]** hope centers in the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the gathering of the Church to Him. They also knew that their friends who had died were "asleep"; and their hope was that all the sleeping dead would be awakened from the death sleep by the Lord at His Second Coming. Realizing that all hopes of eternal life depended upon the Second Coming of

our Lord as the great Life-giver, there was no danger that the early Church should ever lose sight of this inspiring hope set before us.

For several centuries past this fact that the dead sleep, and cannot be awakened until the Second Advent of our Lord, has been lost sight of; and as a result all faith in the Lord's Second Coming has generally languished. It has come to be believed generally by Christian people that the dead do not "sleep," but are more awake than they were when alive – that in the moment of dissolution the dead go to Heaven or to Hell, and that these conditions are permanent, unalterable. With such unscriptural thoughts before their minds, who can wonder that to the majority of professed Christians the Second Coming of the Lord is an event without special interest? Hence it is regarded lightly by some; and by many it is wholly disbelieved and declared to be a useless, uninteresting and pernicious teaching.

However, "the brethren," who have been instructed in the Word of the Lord, and who do not follow "cunningly devised fables" originated by the Arch Deceiver, find that the Scriptures as a whole, from Genesis to Revelation, are illuminated with the grand hope of the coming of Messiah in glory and power, to establish His Kingdom of Righteousness in the earth, to awaken and uplift those who have fallen under the hand of Death – to give beauty for ashes, and the oil of joy for the spirit of heaviness – to as many as will accept His blessing, under the terms of the New Covenant. – Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-13; Isaiah 61:1-3.

"THEM THAT SLEEP IN JESUS"

As originally pronounced in Eden, the penalty against the race of Adam was not a sleep of death for a few days, years or centuries. On the contrary, it was absolute extinction – destruction. (Genesis 2:17; 3:19.) But God had purposed a redemption from the curse of death; and for this purpose Christ Jesus came into the world and died, "the Just for the unjust," that He might bring mankind back to

God – back to Divine favor, where the gift of God – eternal life – will be a possibility for the willing and obedient. Ever since the Ransom-price was laid down at Calvary, and its acceptance manifested at Pentecost, it has been proper to regard the whole world as being no longer dead – wholly cut off from life – but as merely sleeping – awaiting the return of the Redeemer as the Awakener, the Vivifier, the Live-giver. – Romans 6:23; John 5:25,28,29; 1 Corinthians 15:12-23.

In this sense of the word, all mankind may be said to "sleep in Jesus," the Redeemer; for by His death our Lord Jesus secured for all of Adam's posterity another trial for life – instead of the one lost by Father Adam through disobedience. Our Lord Himself declared that as a consequence of His being lifted up as the great Sin-Offering upon the cross, He will yet draw all men unto Himself. (John 12:32,33; 3:14-16.) Thus He showed us that the world is not to be considered as dead – extinct – but as merely "asleep," waiting for the drawing time foreordained of the Father, and provided for by the "Ransom for all." (1 Timothy 2:5,6.) This drawing, like that exerted for the selection of the Church, will be through a knowledge of the Truth, and signifies that ultimately all mankind will be made aware of God's gracious provision, under which they may, if they will when brought to a knowledge of the Truth, obtain life everlasting.

Since the majority of the race of mankind went into death before the Ransom-price was provided, this implies an awakening from death in order that they may be drawn or come to a knowledge of the Truth. In harmony with this thought are the words of our Lord to the effect that the hour is coming when all that are in the graves shall hear His voice and come forth; and that then those who hear – obey – shall live – everlastingly.

A future life for all has been provided by our Lord, who "gave His life a Ransom for all"; and the fact that their death sentence has been provided for makes it proper to speak of them as "asleep in

Jesus," instead of as being dead in Adam. The fact that many of them did not know of their redemption would work no greater hindrance than would the fact that many of the same ones had no knowledge in particular of the original sentence through Adam. They came under the Adamic sentence without choice or knowledge, and later came under the benefits of the redemption similarly without choice or knowledge. – Romans 5:18.

"THE DEAD IN CHRIST"

In the use of the phrase, "them also which sleep in Jesus," the Apostle cannot refer merely to the saints; for the Gospel had been preached at Thessalonica for only about one year, and during that year not very many of the saints could have died. Furthermore, when we remember that the saints are generally not related according to the flesh we can readily see that in appealing to their hopes in order that they might not sorrow as did others, the Apostle must have meant not only hopes for the saints, but also hopes for all of their friends who had died. If their hopes had been merely for the saints, and if they had believed that all others were hopelessly and everlastingly lost, it would have been in vain for the Apostle to appeal to them to sorrow not as others who have no such hope; for such bad hopes respecting the great majority of their dying and dead friends and relatives would have been a cause for greater sorrow than they or any other heathens could have had when they had no knowledge and no definite hopes.

This fact is set forth by the Apostle in Chapter 4:14. There he points out that the Christian's faith is built upon the fact that Christ Jesus died, and that He rose again. Our Lord died for the sins of the Church, "and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2.) His resurrection is an evidence that His sacrifice was acceptable not only on behalf of His Church, but also on behalf of all for whom He died; and therefore it becomes a guarantee, or pledge, that in His own due time God will establish Christ and His

Church as the Kingdom of God, and that this Kingdom when established shall bless all the families of the earth with the knowledge of the Truth.

Believing this, we are bound to believe also that all mankind redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, shall, according to His promise, yet come forth from the sleep of death to hear His Word as the great Law-giver of the New Covenant, and to have, if they will by obedience to it, the gift of God – eternal life – through Jesus Christ our Lord. As God accepted the sacrifice of Christ and raised Him from the dead, "even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring [from the sleep of death] with Him" – through His instrumentality.

But let us not confound this thought that the future of the whole world has been changed from "death" to **[R5913 : page 188]** "sleep" by the Ransom-price, which Jesus gave for all, with the very different expression, "the dead in Christ," which is applicable to no other than the elect Church. The name Jesus, which signifies Savior, has special application to the Ransom and Restitution features of our Lord's work. But the name Christ is the title to His kingly office. The call to "be baptized into Jesus Christ," thus to become "members of the Body of Christ" – the Anointed – is an offer which is restricted to the "called and chosen and faithful" Church of this Gospel Age. But the redemptive benefits covered by the name Jesus are "for all," "for every man," for "whosoever will" accept those mercies on the New Covenant conditions.

"IN JESUS" VS. "IN CHRIST"

So then, in the language of the Apostle, we exhort Christians in respect to all their dead – in Christ and out of Christ, New Creatures and old creatures, those enlightened and blessed by the marvelous light of the Gospel, and those who have died while blinded by "the god of this world" – that they sorrow not as others who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died for all; that He has risen from the

dead; that on this account all the dead are to be considered as sleeping, waiting for His return and the exaltation of His elect Church also in glory; and that then all whom God counts as asleep in Him, or on account of Him, or through Him and His work, shall also be brought from the dead.

Few Christians have noticed the frequency with which the Scriptures use this word "sleep" in reference to the state of the dead. Notice that in Chapter 4:13-15 the word is used three times in three successive verses. Notice also the following instances: John 11:11,12; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 2 Peter 3:4; 1 Corinthians 15:6,18,20,51; Matthew 9:24; 13:25; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; Matthew 27:52; 1 Corinthians 11:30.

In these instances, all from the New Testament, the word sleep is used instead of the word death, and used in full view of the Ransom by which all shall be redeemed. What was the custom in Old Testament times? Looking back, we find that Daniel (12:1-3) prophetically speaks of those "who sleep in the dust of the earth," and describes the sleepers as being of two classes – some who will awake to everlasting life, and some who will awake to shame and everlasting contempt – the latter class representing those who will be tried during the Millennium. Similarly, of both kings and prophets – one after another – it is declared that "he slept with his fathers."

The basis for this expression and of the faith in a future life which it implies is set forth by our Lord, saying, "That the dead are [to be] raised, even Moses showed at the Bush." (Luke 20:37.) "Have ye not read in the Book of Moses how in the Bush God spake unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." (Mark 12:26.) "He is not a God of the dead [the extinct, for whom no future is designed], but [He is the God] of the living, because all live unto Him." (Luke 20:38.) It was as a result of Moses' experience that the Jews thereafter spoke of their

dead as "asleep" and "waiting for the morning," when they would be "awakened."

But be it noticed, God's reason for speaking of humanity as yet having a hope of life beyond the grave rests not upon any change of the sentence from death – extinction – to a profound "sleep" for a period, but upon His predetermined Plan to provide a Savior who would redeem, purchase back, for Adam and all his race "that which was lost" – the privilege of life everlasting in harmony with God. – Luke 19:10; John 10:10.

SPECIAL MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH

Having spoken of the general hopes of the entire "groaning creation," all of which center in the Second Coming of our Lord, the Apostle delivers, not an opinion or a guess, but a special message to the effect that the sleeping saints will suffer no loss by reason of having fallen asleep, but that on the contrary they will be granted a priority over the living saints in that they will be "changed," "glorified," to see the Lord, to be like Him and to share His glory, before those of the same class who are alive at the time of the Second Advent. Elsewhere we have given at considerable length our reasons for believing that the shout, the voice and the trumpet here mentioned by the Apostle are symbols, as in other parts of the Scriptures; for instance, in the Revelation. See STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES, Vol. 2, 143-150.

Apparently the Church at Thessalonica had been studying the subject of our Lord's Second Coming, and were fearful lest some of their number might "fall asleep" before that event, and were doubtful as to how much of the blessing might thus be lost by these, as well as solicitous for their friends. Hence the Apostle says, "Comfort one another with these words."

The word translated "coming" in Verse 15 is *parousia*. This Greek word does not really have the significance of our English

word "coming," but signifies presence – after arrival – giving the thought that our Lord will be present before "the dead in Christ" are "raised," although this will be prior to the "change" of the living. This Scripture, as well as many others, indicates distinctly that the Lord's presence will not be manifest, visible, to the world during this time. As our Lord said before He went away, "Yet a little while, and the world seeth Me no more." (John 14:19.) This thought is emphasized by St. Paul's subsequent remarks respecting the Day of the Lord and the fact that the world would not know of it, but only the "brethren," those not "in darkness." – 1 Thess. 5:1-5.

It speaks well for the rapid growth in knowledge on the part of the Church at Thessalonica that the Apostle could thus write to them. How definitely he separates the Church, the Body of Christ, from the world! How particularly he shows that the one class will be in total ignorance of this subject, while the other class will have knowledge of our Lord's return! Knowledge of the Second Presence of our Lord is a feature of the Day of the Lord – the Day of His Presence – "the Harvest," or end of this Age, during which the great Chief Reaper will not only gather the sleeping saints first, but proceed also to seal and to gather all the living members of the Elect class, who shall be counted worthy to escape the great afflictions which are about to come upon the world, in the culmination of the great Time of Trouble, which will dissolve present institutions and make ready for the establishment of the Heavenly Kingdom, under the rulership of Christ Jesus and His "little flock" of joint-heirs – the Seed of Abraham, who are to bless all the families of the earth, living and dead.

"Painful and dark the pathway seems
To distant earthly eyes;
They only see the hedging thorns
On either side that rise;

"They cannot know how soft between

The flowers of love are strewn,
The sunny ways, the pastures green,
Where Jesus leads His own."

