

The Bible Student



Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.



Editors:

WILLIAM M. MCPHEETERS, D. D.

BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD, D. D., LL. D. SAMUEL M. SMITH, D. D.

GEORGE T. PURVES, D. D., LL. D. DANIEL J. BRIMM, D. D.

JOHN D. DAVIS, PH.D., D. D.



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The Bible Student.

CONTINUING

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The First Epistle to the Thessalonians is the earliest writing that has come down to us from Paul's pen, and affords us, therefore, our best opportunity to learn from the Apostle's own hand what the gospel was that he preached at the opening of his career. He had come to the Thessalonians filled with a vivid sense of his divine mission, in response to the heavenly vision of the Macedonian man; but more immediately fresh from the persecution at Philippi and oppressed in spirit from his experiences there (ii. 2). Waxing bold in God, he had proclaimed the gospel to them not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance (i. 5); and had not only adorned the doctrine he preached by a life of self-denial for its sake (ii. 9), but also commended it with an exceptional eagerness (ii. 13). As fruitage of their acceptance of it, the Apostle perceives with joy the Christian graces their lives had from the first exhibited,—their work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope (i. 3, 8; iv. 9). In writing back to them to strengthen them in the face of the persecutions which

had meanwhile fallen upon them, and to urge them to a continual advance in the Christian life, Paul naturally makes much of the gospel which had wrought such a revolution in their lives. He calls it affectionately, his gospel (i. 4) and reverentially God's gospel (ii. 2), which was his, therefore, only because, as God's minister in the gospel of Christ (iii. 2), he had been approved to be entrusted with it (ii. 4). It is to it and not to himself that he attributes all that had been wrought in the Thessalonians: he was but the minister of this gospel,—it was itself God's own word, and it was it that energized, as the word of God, in them that believed (ii. 14).

Now what was the content of this wonder-working gospel which Paul preached to the Thessalonians? It is given to us in its most pregnant form in the compressed phrase, "Jesus, which delivereth us from the wrath to come" (i. 10). Somewhat more fully drawn out, we meet with it in the ringing declaration, "For God appointed us not unto wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation

**The Sum of
The Gospel
To the
Thessalonians.**

through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that we should live with Him" (v. 9). Other elements of it are supplied here and there in the course of the epistle,—notably in such sentences, occurring at the beginning and end of it, as these: "We give thanks to God always for you all—knowing, brethren beloved by God, your election" (i. 4); "Faithful is He that calleth you who will also do it" (v. 24). But the core of it is set before us in the sentences already adduced, as we are additionally assured by the fact that it just so that Paul himself sums it up in the Second Epistle (2 Thes. ii. 13-15).

Let us seek to understand, more in its details, the nature of the gospel which Paul preached to the Thessalonians, and on the basis of which that Apostolic Church was built up. Obviously, it was, in its most fundamental character, specifically a gospel of *deliverance from sin*. Behind it there lies the great black shadow of sin: and it is this that gives to it its whole character. This is already manifest in the words we have quoted from the epistle as containing its sum; and that in a double implication. First, there is the contrast drawn in the declaration, "For God appointed us not unto wrath, but unto the obtaining of salvation." It is evident that those who do not obtain this salvation, remain under the wrath of God: wherefore, Jesus is proclaimed specifically as "the deliverer from the coming wrath." Here the background of sin is set forth as guilt, deserving the Divine wrath. Again, there is the contrast underlying the declaration, "Faithful is He that calleth you, who will also do it." For the purpose of this great assertion is to comfort those who despair of attaining a blameless life in God's sight. They are pointed not to

their own native powers, but to God, the great Doer, as the support of their hopes. Here the background of sin is set forth as pollution, producing inability to good. In both aspects, sin lies everywhere presupposed in the epistle as the very condition of Paul's preachment; and the very condition of the quality of glad-tidings in his preachment. His proclamation of deliverance becomes good news only because of the reality and poignancy of the state from which it offers deliverance.

Just because it was a gospel of deliverance from sin, again, Paul's gospel to the Thessalonians was emphatically an *ethical gospel*. In the Apostle's own summary of it in 2 Thess. (ii. 13-15), this characteristic of it is thrown into very special prominence. The salvation which he makes the substance of his proclamation, he there describes as finding its whole sphere just in "sanctification of the spirit." This note is equally the fundamental note, however, of the First Epistle. It is precisely for the revolution that had been wrought in the lives of the Thessalonians by the gospel, that Paul thanks God in their behalf (i. 3 sq.). It is for the establishment of their hearts and lives, blameless before God, that he especially prays in their behalf (iii. 12, v. 27). He declares with strong asseveration that God's will for them is that they should abstain from fleshly lusts and be sanctified,—that God has called them not for uncleanness, but in sanctification (iv. 8). It is the holy walk alone, he declares, that is well-pleasing to God (iv. 1); and he intimates that nothing can exhibit ignorance of God more plainly than walking in uncleanness,—for, says he, God is an avenger in all these things (iv. 6, 7). Thus the very essence of their salva-

tion is made to consist in holiness of life. It is the new life of his converts,—their “work of faith and labor of love and patience of hope”—for which he particularly gives thanks to God. And the chief objects of his writing to them were to urge upon them a more abounding zeal in holiness (iii. 11; iv. 1, 3-7), and to comfort them in their sense of hopeless short-coming by a great promise of Divine efficiency within them, pledged to attain the goal (iv. 23).

Nevertheless, the gospel of deliverance from the pollution of sin, did not exhaust the glad tidings he had brought his readers.

An Eschatological Gospel. It did not even constitute its most prominent element. It is distinctly on the future rather than on the present that the Apostle fixes his eyes. Even the holiness of life on which he lays such stress is not looked upon as primarily for this life: even it rather has its chief significance for the life to come. We read: “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love towards one another and toward all men,—to the end that he may establish your hearts unblamable, in holiness before our God and Father, *at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints*” (iii. 11-13). We read: “And the God of peace sanctify you wholly: and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame, *at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (v. 23, 24). Thus the very sanctification on which such stress is laid is prosecuted not in and for itself, but as a preparation for something to come, in which something to come salvation finds its deepest meaning. It is emphatically, therefore, *an eschatological gospel* which Paul preached to the Thessalonians; and the epistle that he wrote to them is accordingly a markedly eschatological epistle. The salvation

he was proclaiming to them was a matter less of present fruition than of hope: their helmet was to be “the *hope of salvation*” (iii. 8). Their present attitude was not to be one of attainment, but of expectation: they are to *wait* for God’s Son from heaven (i. 10). Whatever comes to them here and now in the way of its enjoyment, is, therefore, by way of prelibation only: Jesus is pointedly proclaimed as deliverer *from the wrath to come* (i. 10). And, on the other hand, nothing that in this world befalls those who are appointed to the obtaining of this salvation, can mar their joy in believing. Not a life of suffering and persecution: indeed, to that, too, they to whom salvation is destined are appointed (ii. 3). Not death itself: to those who believe that Jesus died and rose again, death itself is but a sleep, from which they shall wake to be brought with him (iv. 13 sq). This salvation, in a word, is at its center, not a temporal salvation from present day evils, but an eternal salvation from the endless burnings of the wrath of God against sin; not a temporal salvation to present day excellences, but an eternal salvation to the endless favor of God. In a word, it is even more fundamentally than it is a salvation from the pollution of sin, *a salvation from the guilt of sin*.

And just on this account, Paul’s gospel to the Thessalonians was distinctly *a heterosoteric gospel*,—that is to

A Heterosoteric Gospel. say, a gospel that offered salvation in and by the work of another, and not in and by efforts of their own. Had Paul had in mind merely some amelioration of the conditions of life in this world, some better adjustment of society, or of the individual life, with respect to the several duties pressing on it in its surroundings, it might have been more

possible for him to have thrown the weight on man's own shoulders: though, with his deep sense of sin and of the paralysis it induces in our activities toward good, even this would have been impossible to Paul. But with his eyes set, rather, on salvation from the awful wrath of God, that burns against sin conceived as guilt, what hope could be placed in man himself or any power of will he might be fancied to possess? Accordingly, he preached to the Thessalonians a gospel, not fundamentally of effort from within, but of deliverance from without. Its substance was, "Jesus *our deliverer* from the wrath to come;" not Jesus *simpliciter*, be it observed, but Jesus *the deliverer*; or, as he elsewhere, puts it, Jesus "as crucified" (1 Cor. ii. 2). The stress is not laid on the person of Christ, but on his work. Not as if, of course, his person were treated as of no importance. He is ever "the Lord" to Paul, and that is the most pregnant sense (i. 6, 11, 15; iv. 1, 2, 15, 16, 17, v. 10, 12, 28), or, with loving appropriation, "our Lord" (i. 2; iii. 11, 13, v. 9, 24, 28); God's unique Son (i. 10), in whom all Christian graces move as their sphere (i. 3; iii. 8; iv. 1, 2), who, along with God, determines the ways of men (iii. 11), and from whom grace is invoked for men (iii. 13, 28). But the entire stress of the proclamation is thrown on His work of deliverance, and especially on *His death* in our behalf (v. 10). With His death, His resurrection is connected as the object of the faith of believers (iv. 14, cf. i. 10); and with these, His second coming from heaven is associated (i. 10; ii. 19; iii. 13; iv. 14, 15, 17; v. 2, 23) as marking the period of the completed salvation. But it is the death of Christ that is signalized as the hinge of his saving work (v. 10; iv. 14). "He died for us that we should live with Him"—in those words sounds the heart of

the heart of Paul's gospel.

It will scarcely need emphasizing therefore, that Paul's gospel to the Thessalonians was emphatically a *supernaturalistic* *gospel*.

A gospel proclaiming salvation to sinful men by the death of the Son of God, must needs be supernaturalistic to the core. A gospel of salvation not especially from earthly ills, or even predominatingly from earthly sinning, but specifically from the wrath to come, can have no chariness of the supernatural. A gospel pointing to a deliverer not of the earth or on the earth but in heaven (i. 10), and to a deliverance not to be wrought here, but at the last day in the midst of the great scene of the descent of the Lord from heaven and the ascent of men from the grave, is through and through supernaturalistic. Even in those processes of the working out of this deliverance which appeal less to the outward eye as the wonderful works of God, however, Paul's conception of the salvation he offered was intensely supernaturalistic. The very facts that his converts are Christians at all, that they have received the gospel he brought to them, that they are exhibiting Christian graces in their lives, he ascribes directly to God, and thanks God for them (i. 2 sq). His hope for the perfecting of their lives, no less than his hope for their escape from the impending wrath (v. 9), is set only on God (v. 24),—"Faithful is He that calleth you, who will also do it." It is to God, in fine, that he raises his and his reader's eyes, as to the author of all that is good in them, as well as of all that is good in store for them: all is attributed alike to the mighty power of God.

Participation in salvation is certainly suspended on the proclamation

An Indispensable Gospel.

and acceptance of the gospel (i. 2, 6; ii. 13). Paul's own joy in having been entrusted with this gospel, turns on his estimate of the importance of its proclamation (ii. 1 sq); and one of the chief counts in his terrific arraignment of the Jews is, that they showed themselves nothing less than haters of men, when they forbade him to speak to the Gentiles *that they might be saved* (ii. 16). Obviously, where the gospel is not conveyed, there is no salvation; and where the gospel, though conveyed, is not accepted, there is no salvation. But it does not at all follow, and Paul does not permit his readers to imagine that it follows, that nothing is involved in its acceptance except opportunity to hear it and a native movement of the human will. To him, on the contrary, sinful man was not conceived as an acceptor of the gospel proclamation. That it was ever accepted, was, in his view, due proximately to a "call" from God; and ultimately, to the divine "election" (ii. 12; iv. 7, v. 24, and i. 4, v. 9). That it was retained, after its acceptance, was, to him, equally due only to God's faithful working within them (v. 24). So little is there in his mind any sense of incongruity between salvation coming to man through acceptance of the truth, and salvation communicated to man by the appointment of God, that he brings the two ideas together in the most pointed way in the central passage of all, in which the terms of his gospel are most fully set forth. Fear not, he says to his converts, in prospect of the dread coming of the Lord,—fear not, "for God appointed us not unto wrath, but"—not simply "unto salvation," but bringing the personal act in receiving it prominently forward, "unto the obtaining, the acquisition of salvation through Jesus Christ" (v. 9). It is our "ac-

quisition;" it comes only to those who "obtain" it: but that we acquire it, that we obtain it, by whatever subjective act, is only because of our appointment thereunto by God: or, as it is put in the parallel passage in the Second Epistle, because "God has chosen us from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth, whereunto He called us through our gospel unto the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. ii. 13).

In Paul's gospel to the Thessalonians, accordingly, obviously, *all the glory is given to God*. From the beginning to the end of it, its fundamental note is *solī Deo gloria*. It is God that he thanks for all the Christian graces he discovers in his readers. It is to God that he ascribes their very hearing of the gospel and acceptance of it,—the God who "called" them unto His *own* kingdom and glory (ii. 13), as one would say, Who else but He could give *these* to others? It is to God that he attributes every step they take in the life of holiness into which they have been called. It is to God that he prays that they may be perfected in their sanctification and presented blameless before His judgment seat at the last day. It is to God that he commits their keeping until that day. It is on God's faithfulness,—the faithfulness of the Caller who is also the Doer,—that he hangs all his hope and his converts' hope, of escaping the wrath they deserve. It is all of God: nothing, in the ultimate analysis, is of man, but the sinner to be saved: the entire salvation is of God. And though it be a man that God saves, and He saves him as a man, and, therefore, in the full exercise of all his activities as a man,—so that he is saved by the acceptance of the truth,

in a life of holiness, through a perseverance to the end: yet it is always God to whom the acceptance, the walk, the endurance is due: who, in a word, is working at every step, the willing and the doing, in accordance with His own good pleasure. The details of God's modes of operation, in bringing the vessels of his election, whom he has appointed not to wrath but to the obtaining of salvation, into His own kingdom and glory, are, to be sure, but little dwelt upon in this epistle. We hear certainly of the Holy Spirit as the agent in carrying on the work (iv. 8, cf. i, 5, 6, v. 19), but only incidentally and with no pause for explanations. But the fact of the dependence of the whole process of salvation on the loving will of the Father, who selects, and calls, and sanctifies, and glorifies, whom He will, is the underlying assumption in every allusion.

And it is but the obverse of this to say, finally, that Paul's gospel to the

A Gospel of Trust.

Thessalonians was emphatically a *gospel of faith, a gospel of trust*. The terms, "believe," "faith," do not, it is true, occur with special frequency and pregnancy in this epistle (i. 7; ii. 10, 13; iv. 4; i. 3, 8; iii. 2, 5, 6, 10, v. 8); but the thing is the dominant undertone of the whole of it. Just because the whole proclamation of salvation which it makes, runs it back in every one of its steps and stages to God, as its author and its furtherer, a continual sense of humble dependence on God and of loving trust in Him is fostered by every declaration of the epistle. The eye of the reader is continually being withdrawn from himself, and his face turned upwards in adoring gratitude to and continual trust in the great Giver. In this attitude, of course, one discovers the very essence of religion. It is the

only possible attitude for the sinner who is alive to the real nature and effects of his sin. It is equally the only possible attitude for the saint, whose instinctive trust and ineradicable feeling of dependence on God for all grace, the Apostle's exposition only justifies and confirms. In his proclamation of the gospel of trust, therefore Paul presented to his Thessalonian readers the only gospel in which religion comes to its rights, in which our hopes can find justification, in which salvation can be acquired or retained by sinful man.

B. B. W.

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No one, we suppose, will deny that "the Bible is literature." No one

A Phrase Calling for Orientation.

with any knowledge either of the Bible or of literature could ever, by any possibility, have denied that "the Bible is literature." When, therefore, men of intelligence are at pains to declare in a formal, positive, and emphatic manner their conviction that the "Bible is literature," and urge us to recognize the Bible as "a national literature," it is obvious that there must be meaning in their urgency and purpose in their emphasis. When a journal like *The Sunday School Times* quotes one who is at the head of a Bible institute for Christian workers, as saying—"Let me thank you for your suggestive reminiscences of HORACE BUSHNELL in *The Sunday School Times*. He was one of the first to realize that the Bible is literature, and the age is hungry for him," it is time for us to stop and ask ourselves exactly what this language means. If literature means merely a written or printed production, "marked by elevation, vigor and catholicity of thought," "by elegance, purity and grace of style," and "by artistic vigor," surely it did not require the