

THE FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS – PART II

CHAPTERS 4 AND 5 - LIVING FOR THE RESURRECTION

I. In chapters 4 and 5, the First Letter to the Thessalonians turns more clearly to instructional matter, with regard to moral and doctrinal issues.

A. The letter had hinted at the need for more instruction by speaking of St. Paul's desire to remedy the deficiencies of the Thessalonians' faith. Here the letter turns to this subject.

B. The chapters deal with five interrelated topics: (1) sexual morality; (2) mutual fraternal love and dedicated work; (3) the resurrection of the dead; (4) the time of the return of the Lord; and (5) a spirit-filled unity in the Church. These topics are interrelated.

1. Pure lives open one up to true love and labor and prepare the body for the resurrection.

2. The fraternal love and dedicated work are ways to prepare for the resurrection and return of the Lord and allow the Church to be more unified and a better witness

3. The Resurrection of the body and the anticipated return of the Lord are the two ways of seeing the final judgment. And, by focusing on them, one is more able to live lives of purity and love.

4. In order to help people live in all of these ways, the church should be unified and filled with the Spirit as the letter then calls for.

II. Chapter 4 begins with the overall theme of this second part of the letter, namely that Christians must conduct themselves so as to please God and follow the instructions of Jesus.

A. The letter calls for attention in the name of the Lord Jesus, emphasizing that the instructions to follow are not options or simply ways of living, but the way of living.

B. St. Paul indicates that he is simply repeating what he has said before, and what the Thessalonians are already to some degree doing. There is no notion in this or any Pauline letter that novelty is a value in itself. Rather, the Christian is meant to become what he, in a sense, already is.

III. Verses 3-8 of chapter 4 then address sexual morality, which would have been a challenge in the pagan world.

A. The beginning sets the theme for this and all other moral instructions, i.e., that we are called to holiness, and not mediocrity. St. Paul would begin most of his later letters to communities with that call to holiness. See Rom. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; Philemon 4. The letters to the Galatians and Hebrews would focus on the call to the adopted children of God. See Gal. 4:1-7; Heb. 12:7-11; see also Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 39.

B. The letter then calls for chastity, both in conduct and in the choosing of a wife. St. Paul says that a man should choose a wife for holiness, not lust.

- There is a noble idea here that marriage is not just an institution needed to deal with human passions, but a sanctifying commitment.

C. Unchastity is presented here, not as a victimless crime, or an offense only against God, but as injustice against a brother. This instruction does not seem to be limited only to adultery, but even to unchastity with someone's future spouse.

D. Using a term of art from Jewish law, such unchastity is called uncleanness. The Jewish moral code, especially described in the Book of Leviticus, had both moral and ritual laws, with the violation of either being a source of uncleanness. With the Council of Jerusalem a couple of years before this letter was written, the Church held under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the ritual law was no longer binding. But here the letter makes clear that immorality still does make one unclean and unholiness.

- Ezekiel had promised that God would cleanse His people of idols and give them the Spirit. See Ez. 36:25-26, 37:12-14. Here St. Paul warns of forfeiting this promise.

IV. Verses 9-12 then turn to mutual charity that God has shown to the Thessalonians and that they are called to show to each other and the world.

A. St. Paul indicates that the Thessalonians are doing fairly well on this front, but should increase this mutual love.

B. There is a subtle wordplay here, as St. Paul says that the Phillipians have to need to be taught about brotherly love, or love of friendship (the Greek term is philadelphia) because they have already been instructed by God Himself in perfect love (the Greek term is agape.)

- St. Paul and others have taught the Thessalonians about the doctrines and practices of the faith, but, fulfilling the promises of the prophets, God Himself has infused in the Thessalonians a knowledge of His love. See Is. 54:13; Jer. 31:31-34; John 6:44-46.

- That perfect love of God then informs every other sort of love.

C. St. Paul then commends the Thessalonians for teaching others this love of God and commends them to do so all the more by dedicated labor that will be a witness to the world.

- Earlier, St. Paul had described how his own dedicated labor was a witness to the Thessalonians, and in Second Thessalonians he will condemn those who do not work. Here, he calls for labor to be a witness of love to others. See 1 Thess. 2:9-12; 2 Thess. 3:6-16; cf. Matt. 5:16; John 13:34-35; Col. 4:5-6.

- There is a paradox here, for the word the letter calls for people to "aspire to work quietly," with the word for aspire (philotimeithasthei) implying a desire for honor. The idea is that, as people in the world work passionately for honor, the Christian should show such enthusiasm for witnessing to the faith.

V. The letter goes right from the moral instructions to the doctrinal teaching regarding the resurrection of the dead.

A. Verse 13 describes the issue, i.e. that some were thinking that those who died would be deprived of the benefits of Christ's return in glory and would not be raised again.

- The phrase "fallen asleep" was a common Jewish phrase referring to death. See, e.g., 2 Sam. 7:12; 1 Kings 2:10, 11:43; Ps. 13:4.

B. Verse 14 then points out that, if Jesus rose from the dead, God will bring all people from the dead. The power, exercised once, would not then be set aside.

- The argument is that, if the head of the human race is in heaven, surely God will bring all of humanity with Him. In First Corinthians, St. Paul makes a similar point in the reverse direction, saying that, if Jesus has not been raised, there is no resurrection of the dead. See 1 Cor. 15:12-28.

- In the Greek speaking world, the resurrection of the dead would have been difficult for some people to accept because of the Platonic notion that the soul is all that really matters, and that the body is merely fallen matter.

C. Verses 15 to 17 then describe the resurrection and unification of the living and dead in glorious terms.

1. There had been in Judaism some descriptions of the resurrection, although they were heavily debated. See, e.g., Wis. 3:1-12; Dan. 12:1-3. Jesus had supported the Pharisees in this argument as against the Saducees and others who denied that there would be such a resurrection. See, e.g., Matt. 22:23-32; see also Acts 23:6-10 (describing St. Paul's defense of the resurrection as causing division among his opponents.)

2. Here, St. Paul assures everyone that there will be a great rejoining of the living and the dead when Jesus comes again in glory. That return is described in terms that would remind the people of an emperor entering a city in triumph, but here in more glorious terms, for the entry will be of heaven into earth, and rejoin all ages, past, present and future. The triumph will not only be over the world, but over death itself.

- The image reflects the references from Isaiah and the preaching of Jesus about the angels blowing trumpets announcing the coming of the Lord. See Is. 27:13; Matt. 24:31. The Book of Revelation would also describe the trumpet calls of the angels, but there in terms of the judgment of God poured forth upon the earth, combined with the music of heaven breaking through.

3. St. Paul says that the living will be "caught up into the clouds." The reference is likely to the prophesy of Daniel, in which "on like a son of man" will come in the clouds of heaven to judge all nations. See Dan. 7:13.

- There is a notion of a rapture in the sense of an ecstatic meeting with God, perhaps reminiscent of the appearance

in glory on Mount Sinai. But there is not a notion here of an earth that continues on without those caught up in the air.

- The final reward will be that the just will always be with the Lord. There is a reflection both of the rewards promised to the just in the Book of Wisdom, and of the parables of Jesus, which end with the just being brought into joy with their Lord. See Wis. 3:3-9, 15-16, 4:16-19; 2 Macc. 7:30-38; Matt. 13:24-32, 25:10, 23, 34-36.

4. This news is consoling to all the faithful, although words of warning to those who lapse from the faith.

VI. The first part of chapter 5 then describes the implications of this future judgment, warning the faithful always to be prepared, but not to try to calculate the day of this return.

A. The first three verses warn both against trying to calculate the times of the return of the Lord and against assuming that it will be at some distant time.

1. Then as now, there had probably been some people who were trying to determine exactly when Jesus would return, generally claiming it would be very soon. Jesus had warned that that day cannot be calculated, and St. Paul here restates that warning. See Matt. 24:36.

2. But others would presume on God's patience and assume that the day would be always somewhere in the future and thus there would always be time to repent. Thus, also building on an analogy used by Jesus, St. Paul describes the day of the Lord coming as a thief in the night. See Matt. 24:33-34; Luke 12:39-40. The idea is that thieves come when people are asleep and take what the people think is secure. Here, the Lord will come when the world is asleep to eternal things and takes what is really His, but what the world thinks is its own. St. Paul mocks the worldlings' false belief in its peace and security, for the Lord will take these things away in a moment if they are not based upon His justice. See Jer. 6:14, 28:8-9; Ezek. 13:10, 16.

3. St. Paul refers to this time as "the day of the Lord," using a phrase the prophets had used to describe God's cataclysmic condemnation of the world. See, e.g., Amos 5:18-27; Joel 2:1-3; Zeph. 1:7. But here, if one is faithful, this judgment will work to one's salvation.

B. St. Paul then draws a dramatic contrast between those who live in the light of God's truth and those who seek to live in darkness, trying to avoid the truth of God.

1. St. Paul describes those who do not live in accordance with righteousness as asleep and drunk. Elsewhere, sleep could be morally neutral, as in meaning death. But here, it means ignorant of the law and judgment of God. Here, as elsewhere, drunkenness does not only mean drunk on alcohol, but on anything that overthrows reason by its excess, such as pleasure, power, money, or popularity.

- There may be a reflection of Isaiah's condemnation of the false leaders as asleep and drunk, possibly literally, but also possibly a reflection of their neglect of the moral state of the people. See Is. 56:9-12; see also Is. 52:1.

- Jesus would compare the negligent person who assumes that God will not judge him soon to a drunk and slothful servant who does not care for the house that he has been entrusted with. See Luke 12:41-48. St. Paul warns against this neglect with similar images.

2. St. Paul draws a dramatic contrast between people of darkness and people of the day, saying that those in darkness assume that their deeds will not be seen by anyone above; people of the light live in the knowledge of God's justice. See John 1:9-11, 3:19-21.

3. St. Paul then brings in a military analogy and describes the virtues of faith, hope and charity as like the protection a soldier has in battle.

- St. Paul uses imagery about God's judgement from Isaiah and the Book of Wisdom and here applies it to the faithful, who are protected by their virtues. See Wis. 5:17-22; Is. 59:16-17. St. Paul will use this imagery later in the letters to the Romans and Ephesians. See Rom. 13:12; Eph. 6:13-17. The idea is that we can expect this world to be a battle, but with the virtues that come first from God, our supernatural life will be protected.

4. Verses 9 and 10 speak of God's wrath, but as something God did not call us to. There is a notion of destiny, but not one that is irresistible, but rather one given by God to be lived by us. The word here for destined, *epheto*, has the connotation of being placed in a position, for example, to be placed in a family through adoption.

- Verse 10 makes it clear that this destiny is accomplished by the death of Christ. This letter does not focus as much as others on the centrality of Christ's death for our salvation, but here St. Paul states the doctrine as central to our salvation.

5. As with the previous section on the resurrection, this section ends on a note of encouragement. There is the judgment and wrath of God, but those who are faithful, whether living or dead (awake or asleep), need not fear it.

- St. Paul uses the same word, asleep, to refer to the just dead and the unjust living. The idea is that there are two types of death, simple physical death, which comes to all, and spiritual death that comes from rejecting the gospel and choosing to live in the darkness.

- There is a call to build each other up. We do not advance along the path of salvation alone, but as a church. Later Pauline letters, especially First Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians will emphasize this point more. This calling to advance together sets up the final major section, on unity within the church.

VII. Verses 12 through 22 then speak of the church and prayer life, calling for peace under leadership and then setting forth fourteen instructions in rapid order.

A. Verses 12 and 13 call for respect and esteem for the leaders of the church and peace within the church.

1. This letter does not elaborate as much on church offices as later letters would do. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Eph.4:7-16; ; 1 Timothy 3:2-13, 5:17-18; Titus 1:5-16. But the idea of church leadership is here.

2. The letter does begin by calling all of the Thessalonians brothers. The idea is that, even though there are on earth positions of authority, we are all in the family of God.

3. This authority is meant to be the labor of love that St. Paul spoke of in the beginning of the letter, as opposed to using offices for personal benefit. Cf. Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-30.

4. St. Paul says that the leaders must be respected even when they admonish the people. The idea is that leadership is always easy to accept when one agrees with it; it is criticism that is difficult to take.

5. Combined with loyalty to the church are unity and peace within the church, necessary for the church to be a witness to the world. Jesus' final prayer at the Last Supper, called His "high priestly prayer" included a passionate desire for a unity among His people that the world might believe. See John 17:20-23.

B. Verses 14 through 22 apply this idea of life in the church in a quick series of fourteen maxims.

1. The first six maxims concern dealings with others, particularly those who have gone astray or may be struggling.

- The first four admonishments deal with correcting those who are erring in various ways, but with patience. There should neither be a tolerance for evil, nor an alienation of others, but rather kind reproof and encouragement. Cf. Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Tim. 4:11-5:2; 2 Tim. 4:1-2.

- There is also a notion of forgiving injuries, especially when needed to build up the church together.

- St. Paul is calling for a careful balance. The community should correct wrongdoing in general, not out of anger, but from a desire to build up all people together.

2. The second seven maxims concern the life of prayer and the Spirit.

a. The first three maxims, which are combined into one sentence in the original text, express the idea that the faith must have its effect continually in one's life, not now and then.

- In calling for the faithful to rejoice always, St. Paul is not recommending always being happy in a worldly sense, for that is an emotion. Christian joy, which is a common theme of the Pauline letters, is something deeper, a sense of thrill at God's presence that endures whether times are good or bad. See, e.g., John 3:29; 16:20-24; Rom. 5:11, 14:17, 15:11; 2 Cor. 2:3, 8:2; Gal. 5:2; 1 John 1:4. In fact, this joy shows itself most perfectly when there are struggles, and one is joyful still. See, e.g., Luke 6:23; Heb. 12:2; James 1:2. St. Thomas Aquinas describes this joy as the overflowing of love. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II, question 28, article 4.

- In calling for the faithful to pray without ceasing, St. Paul is not saying that the faithful must always be in the act of prayer, for that would contradict the acts of charity and love that he has earlier called for. Rather, it seems that he means either: (1) that one should offer prayers continuously throughout the day, see Luke 18:1, Eph. 6:18; (2) that there should be an aura of prayerfulness and a desire to prayer continually; and/or (3) that such a fundamental disposition will make all of one's life a prayer. See Fabio Guardini, Pray Without Ceasing (1998) 331-361.

- In calling for continual thanksgiving, St. Paul recommends a continual spirit of gratitude that gives one a sense of thrill, not taking anything for granted, but always rejoicing in the gifts God has given. See Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:17. The word here for giving thanks is eucharisteite, from which we derive the word Eucharist.

b. The next two maxims call for a willingness to accept prophesy and the Spirit. In the First Letter to the Corinthians St. Paul lists prophesy as one of the charisms that the Holy Spirit gives to build up the church. See 1 Cor. 13-14. This prophesy could mean a deep penetration into the mysteries of the faith, or some special knowledge given by God. In any case, St. Paul calls for the faithful to be open to special graces that the Spirit will pour forth.

c. However, balancing that openness to the charisms given by the Spirit, St. Paul also calls for careful testing of the abilities that may be from the Spirit. St. Paul does not at this point describe how to test those claims. First Corinthians would speak of the discernment of spirits as one charism of the Holy Spirit. See 1 Cor. 12:10. That letter also calls for people to ask whether the claimed gifts are building up the church. The letter to the Galatians adds two tests for any claim. First, it must be consistent with the message already received from the apostles. Second, it will lead to the fruits of the Spirit, and not to the fruits of the flesh. Gal. 1:8-9, 5:16-23; see also Matt. 7:16, 20. These principles set up an overall rule that, to test any new idea for the Christian practice, one should ask whether it builds up the church or divides it, whether it is consistent with what else we know to be true, and whether it leads to the love, joy, patience, self-control, and the other fruits of the Spirit.

3. This list of maxims concludes with the overall point of avoiding all evil whatsoever. The idea is that one is called to a life

of complete prayer and holiness, and the implication of such a call to perfection is that one must always seek to avoid sin.

VIII. The conclusion consists of a benediction that summarizes the main points of the letter and offers final greetings.

A. The benediction in verses 23-24 summarizes the main points of the letter regarding sanctification, the coming of Jesus, and the workings of God.

1. Verse 23 calls for the holiness that the letter has been describing as the calling of Christian. It refers to body, soul, and spirit. Here, the term soul means the living principle of a person generally (life, intellect, freedom), while spirit means specifically the ability to be holy and in union with God. See Giardini, *Pray Without Ceasing* 15-39.

2. Verse 23 also refers to the fact that such sanctification will make us prepared for the coming of Jesus that the letter has been describing.

3. Lest one think, however, that this sanctification is primarily a matter of our own efforts, verse 24 emphasizes that we are cooperating with the calling of God.

B. Verses 25-28 give a farewell along lines St. Paul would generally use elsewhere.

- St. Paul makes it clear that he needs prayers as well. He also makes it clear that the letter is not merely for the select few, but is for all the church.