

George Philip Bible Readings

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THE SECOND LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

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1:1-2

It seems likely that this second letter was written within a few weeks of the first one, Paul having received some news of the reaction of the believers to what he had said. Paul no longer finds it necessary to defend his own personal character and some at least of the misunderstandings about the Lord's return have been dealt with. But at the same time the believers do not seem to have grasped that the imminent and sudden return of the Lord is not in any way cancelled or contradicted by the teaching about a rising tide of lawlessness before the Lord returns. This is what Paul teaches in this epistle, in the context of both praise and encouragement for earnest believers who were seeking to press on in faithfulness to God. The other theme dealt with for the second time is that of lazy idlers who were refusing to work, choosing to be more "spiritual" and concentrating on talking about the coming again of the Lord from Heaven. Paul again describes such people as meddlesome, idle and a hindrance to the true witness of the church (3:6,11-12). The witness to the Gospel must be guarded because of the circumstances of the church which involved persecutions (1: 4), spurious letters claiming Paul's authority (2:2), wrong conduct (3:11) and a tendency to lose heart (3:13). If there is a degree of solemnity, even lack of warmth in Paul's words in this second letter, the explanation may be found in Paul's own difficult circumstances at the time of writing (3:2). We, who have such fluctuating moods for which we plead so many extenuating circumstances, must not expect God's apostles to be totally different from ourselves. If they were they would be less than human.

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1:3

Paul now gives thanks for these believers as he had done the first time (1 Thess. 1:1-3). We know that in the first epistle he went on to pray for an increase in the very things he commended them for (1 Thess. 3:10, 12). Now he acknowledges that his prayers are being answered because of the increase of both faith and love, and yet in this epistle he goes on to rebuke, correct and encourage in these very same things. This teaches important lessons. In all pastoral counselling we must begin with prayer. This is not only because it is in prayer that our attitude to and disposition towards the person in need is mollified and engraiced; and not only because we are thereby made more fit to exercise pastoral counsel; but also because many problems are dealt with by prayer and are in great part solved before we ever get to the stage of "dealing" with them in words. This is eminently safer and more satisfactory than precipitate interference in a situation. The other lesson is seen in Paul's concentration on commendation before correction. This is not merely good psychological technique (softening up the victim for the criticism to come would be diabolical deception), but realistic grace that recognises the good in a person even though there may also be manifest faults. Some criticism comes from a spirit of denunciation that secretly delights in the failure and the misery of the person being corrected. But there is a criticism which comes from love, which love is delighted when its rebuke is no longer required. Yet true love will never allow the loved one to remain casually on a second-rate level when he is capable of much more.

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That the Thessalonian church had many marked defects Paul would be the first to acknowledge, but at the same time he was able and willing on a factual basis to boast to others of the quality of love and faith manifested among these same believers. They were standing firm and forging ahead in the context of persecution and difficulty, which things were no doubt stirred up by the reality of their radical witness. It was exactly this manly grace of steadfastness and faith in the face of continuing difficulty that persuaded Paul that these believers would in fact battle their way (with help and instruction) through their present uncertainties about the Second Coming and also through their ethical and practical limitations in certain areas of their lives. When we are very aware of defects in our fellows we must not fall into the harsh error of condemning them out of hand for their imperfections, if in fact they are standing firm and going ahead in spite of tribulation. Perhaps if we exercised a little more of Paul's grace of encouragement we would be less fascinated by defects in others, and perhaps more aware of our own limitations and need of prayer support from those we tend to despise, whose circumstances may be far more demanding than our own.

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1:5

This is a closely reasoned passage. Read in from v.3. You will see that today's verse is expounding the theme of the endurance, faith and growth in grace of the Thessalonians as they undergo trial. These believers were beginning to wonder if their battles signified their backsliding and God's abandonment of them. Paul says rather that it is evidence that God is working in and for them, and that His working is proceeding on the basis of righteous judgment. This principle of the present and future operation of God's judgment is taken up in the next verses. But here the emphasis is on the activity of God, working for His people, advancing His kingdom and at the same time providing all things needful for the perfecting of the saints, so that they might be shown to be worthy, or *reckoned* to be worthy, of the Kingdom of God. The thought is not so much that they be *made* worthy (RSV) as if this constituted a merit which gained them their place, but that the endurance under suffering produced in them those graces which attested the fact that God had worked savingly in their hearts. Look at it this way, we begin to see that God's operations of judgment in the context of the persecution of the church are more creatively concerned with His own saints than with the rebuke of the ungodly. This is made clear in our Lord's parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-30). A premature dealing in judgment with manifest evil would serve only to hinder the growth of the good crop. How wise God is. Would that we were more like Him in His confidence of action.

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1:5

While no Christian should ever set out to seek suffering, if need be (1 Pet. 1:3-9) he must accept it, seeing that God is working out His eternal purpose through it. "Suffering is not thought of as something which may possibly be avoided by the Christian. For him it is inevitable. He is ordained to it (1 Thess. 3:3). He must live out his life and develop his Christian character in a world which is dominated by non-Christian ideas. His faith is not some fragile thing, to be kept in a kind of spiritual cotton wool, insulated from all shocks. It is robust. It is to be manifested in the fires of trouble, and in the furnace of affliction The very troubles and afflictions which the world heaps on the believer become, under God, the means of making him what he ought to be. Suffering, when we have come to regard it in this light, is not to be thought of as evidence that God has forsaken us, but as evidence that God is with us. Paul can rejoice that he fills up 'that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake, which is the church,' (Col. 1:24). Such suffering is a vivid token of the presence of God The fact that they (the Thessalonians) had been able to endure it (suffering) so courageously, with unshaken steadfastness and faith, is evidence that God is working in them. It is a righteous thing with God to provide for His people all things needful for them. The plain fact is that He has done this for the Thessalonians." (Morris)

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1:6-7a

The whole passage, v.3-10, is really necessary to complete Paul's picture of ultimate and final judgment, against which background these various points of instruction must be understood. The reason why we can be detached from the personal animosity of wicked people and be equally calm as we view the manifest wickedness rampant in the world is that we believe in the righteous retribution of God (Rom. 12:17-21; 1 Pet. 3:12-17; 4:12-19; Rom. 1:16-18, 20-21, 28). This is a principle which is already at work and which will come to full expression in the day of judgment at Christ's coming again. Note carefully that Paul says here that retribution is a valid and righteous element in punishment (as well as the remedial and deterrent aspects). This must be remembered in all modern discussions on punishment. We must never confuse the righteous wrath of God with the outbursts of anger and temper so common on the human level, and so often unbalanced if not totally unjustified. But on the other hand we do despite to the whole Christian message, especially to the words of Jesus, if we refuse to recognise that there is a basic and eternal difference between being right with God and being wrong with God. In the end, those who do not obey the Gospel, who refuse to love and serve Jesus Christ, pass into darkness on which light never shines. That we hear so little today about God's righteous judgment is a sign of how far our gospel proclamation has departed from the full tenor of Biblical truth.

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1:6-7a

God's work of recompense, in this present world as well as the next, is not confined to His judgment of the wicked and unbelieving. His *reward* to His afflicted saints is equally real and is spoken of here as being relief, rest (AV). The commentators suggest that the word "rest", in contrast to affliction, has the meaning of freedom from restraint and tension, as in the slackening of a bow string. That there is a reward of rest, here and now as well as in eternity, for the people who live their lives in the obedience of faith is clear from Scripture (Heb. 4:1-11). That there is ultimately a great reversal of fortunes in the eternal experience of faith and unbelief is clear from Jesus' story in Luke 16:19-31. But even in the throes of the present experience of affliction for God's sake, the Psalmist speaks of a table of peaceful banqueting *in the presence* of his enemies (Ps. 23) and also gives expression to the calm understanding of reward in (Ps. 73:14-28). Our concept of Christian service may lack much if we are impelled by what we think we will get out of it (reward), but it will be equally defective if we do not take full comfort and encouragement from all the promises in Scripture where God pledges Himself to be the reward of His own people (Gen.15:1).

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1:7b-10

The event which finally seals the judgment of unbelievers and the blessing of the faithful is of course the personal return of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory at the consummation of history, the end of the world as we know it. The sooner we get into our heads that there is an end the better; and the sooner we grasp that this coming will be swift, sudden, unexpected and cataclysmic, as Jesus taught, the more realistic we will be about Christian life and witness (Matt. 23-24). The Second Coming is here spoken of as a revelation, the uncovering of something which was always there so that it now stands in open view. Just think of it, behind the scenes of unbelief, persecution and contempt of the Gospel, over against the arrogant pride and pretension of men, there stands *now and all the time* this Christ who will suddenly burst in upon the human scene to the utter astonishment of all. The Lord will be revealed *from Heaven*, where He sits at the right hand of the everlasting Father. With Him will be the *angels* of His power (mighty angels), possibly the spiritual beings who are to execute the process of judgment (Matt. 13: 36-43, 49; 26:53). The overall nature of this coming is with *flaming fire*, awesome in appearance as well as intent, which is judgment. Fire is often used in Scripture to denote the presence of the Lord in His majesty, and again it is a sign of the spiritual declension of the church that we have reduced God to such a puny size that we are all apt to be far too familiar with Him both in speech and action. We need such passages as Rev. 1:10-20 and Isaiah 6:1-8 to make us think.

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1:7b-10

The word punish (taking vengeance AV) must not be thought of in terms of a personal vendetta on the part of God but rather as a visitation of righteous judgment. The N.E.B. reads, "Then He will do justice upon," and this seems the best way to understand the phrase. The solemnity of God's retribution in v.8 is set in the context of His marvellous grace in the Gospel, and the objects of His retribution are seen to be those who have stood out against the mercy and love of God in Jesus Christ, refusing both with a stubborn totality that sets the seal of necessity on their judgment. The twofold reference to those who "know not" and "obey not" the Gospel indicates those who are willingly ignorant of the truth of God and who decline to submit themselves to that truth because it would require them to change their way of life. This is the theme of Rom. 1:18-21 and Eph. 2:1-3 and 4:17-19. If we look again at Rom. 1:28 we shall see that it is deliberate ignorance that is spoken of: people pushing God away from their conscious awareness at every attempt He makes to come near with grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. This is exactly what is seen at the Cross where religious unbelievers shrieked their antagonism and rejection in open blasphemy. When you think that people can look right into the face of the Crucified and see nothing to touch and move their hearts, you can begin to understand the meaning of Hell. These people are their own hell and are already in it. But there is more to it than that, as we see tomorrow.

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1:7b-10

In v.9 the word for punished comes from the same root as the earlier words for righteous and vengeance. It signifies a just penalty thoroughly merited and it is described as “eternal destruction”. This speaks not of annihilation but of the total loss of everything worthwhile for an “age-long” time. This is all very logical, for it stands to reason that what we have become in this life in relation to all the merciful dealings of God with us we will continue to be, and to be even more so in the world that is to come. Read Rev. 22:11 where the idea of continuance is expressed in, “He that is unjust, let him be becoming unjust still.” How very frightening! Read also Rev. 6:12-17; 9:20-21; 16:5-11 and be awed by the total absence of even the slightest suggestion of repentance. To be in the presence of Jesus Christ is sheer hell for some on earth; how much more would it be so to be in His presence in full glory. Now, just as eternal life is spoken of in terms of being with the Lord in His glory (1 Thess. 4:17; John 17:3, 24), eternal Hell is spoken of as being for ever “away from” both the presence and the glory of the Lord. Think of Jesus’ words in Matt: 7:21-23; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 13:23-35. One thing is very clear: when we are faced with the challenge to respond to the saving love of God in Jesus Christ in the preaching of the Gospel, we are not engaged in some minor or incidental thing which has little real consequence. It is a matter of life and death in time and in eternity.

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1:7b-10

This last verse simply gleams with light, though it is difficult at first to think this way with regard to the awful judgment spoken of in the past few days’ notes. There is a great day coming and while it will be our day, it is primarily His day and this is the real emphasis of v.10. It is not, as J.B Phillips translates, a case of splendour unimaginable and breath-taking wonder for *us* who have believed the message of the Gospel, although that is of course involved. The thrill of being partakers of this glory is almost beyond our imagination, let alone our intellectual grasp (1 John 3:1-2). Nor is it, as the N.E.B. says, that Christ will be glorified and adored *among* all believers, although that also is true. The A.V and R.S.V, both emphasise that Christ will be glorified *in* His saints and marvelled at in all who have believed. On that day we will at last begin to be utterly astonished by the glory of the everlasting Gospel with which we have been so familiar and which we have taken so casually. On that day all the pain of travail and conflict will simply vanish away and be forgotten. Not only will Christ see of His travail and be satisfied (Isa.53:11 AV) we also shall see, and likewise be satisfied. The Psalmist felt the same in Ps. 17:15.

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1:11-12

These two verses signify that Paul has as much confidence in God and the Thessalonians for the intervening stages of experience as he has for the final stage of glory and vindication. This confidence stems from the *calling* of God, which is effective calling, not only in that there will be no thought of falling away, but in that there will be created in those called a desire to go on with God so that all His holy purposes may be brought to completeness. This has to be thought of in two ways. Paul prays that God will effect in these believers all that *His* goodness desires and *their* faith makes possible. This is J.B.Phillips’ understanding of the verse. But it is equally true that the effectual call of God in Jesus Christ creates in the believer, by the Holy Spirit, a desire or will for good. This makes the will for good (purpose) and the work of faith (I Thess.1:3) refer to the willing consent of the Thessalonians. And yet these verses make it clear that it is all of God from beginning to end, and all the glory is His alone. Do you see how closely intertwined are the divine and human will-to-action? We have Paul’s ministry and prayers; the Thessalonians’ response, desire and earnest effort; and the sovereign, undergirding effectual grace of God, all working together to the end of completeness. Both Phil 2:12-13 and Heb. 13:20-21 speak of the same thing and it is in this light that we must understand and be encouraged by the deep longings after righteousness that are our conscious, if not constant, experience. The God who has created the desire will most certainly want to fulfil it, and will do so gloriously if we allow Him freedom to work. This process will be painful if we are stubbornly reluctant, and may even cast an element of doubt on the validity of our conversion.

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2:1-2

If we substitute the word "concerning" for "by"(AV) in v.1, as modern versions do, we will see that the verses are concerned with instruction rather than exhortation. There was confusion in the Thessalonians' understanding of the Second Coming of Christ and Paul is now explaining things to them, adding to and amplifying his actual preaching during his visit to the city, a visit which lasted possibly as little as three weeks. Since there had been teaching, and then further instruction in the First Epistle, we must not create a total doctrine of the last things based on this chapter alone. Paul has shown in the previous chapter that the coming of Christ is, for the saints, a happening of vindication, rest and glory, full of rejoicing, and because of this he challenges whatever

teaching was current that was so shaking them out of their wits. Men were saying that the day of the Lord was "now present" (at hand) rather than a future event, and claiming that Paul had in fact taught so. This could be maintained if people concentrated on the illustration of "a thief in the night", (1 Thess. 5:2) but not if 1 Thess. 4:16; 5:4 were remembered together with the word "gathered" in today's verses. What we are dealing with here is the perennial sin of alarmist exaggeration, by which one small point is magnified into the whole, so corrupting both faith and integrity of life. That this leads to alarm, the paralysis of fear, division and restlessness within the fellowship, marks it out as Satanic. Since vested interest in exercising "spiritual" power over others is prepared to stoop to plain lying (invoking Paul's ministry as justification) there remains no doubt as to inspiration or attitude. We must ignore such people.

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2:1-2

There are some people whose constant influence in a fellowship is towards setting it in a state of confusion and distraction. Paul warns against influence and teaching which stirs up sudden excitement (a constant danger to those who are spiritually insecure) and leaves people off-balance, jumpy, and fretful about spiritual certainties. This can never be the work of the good Spirit of God, even though it may claim to have some sort of "spiritual" confirmation. We must put the spirits to the test (1 John 4:1). In like manner if the "authority" comes from what someone has said or written we must consider the teaching, comparing Scripture with Scripture, giving heed to the context and not merely adducing proof texts for or against the subject. This highlights the exercise of reason in spiritual matters rather than the impulse of feeling. If there was more of this, there would be less of the disastrous shambles left behind by people whose motives as well as techniques leave very much to be desired. The danger of the particular imbalance here is simply that there is more than a grain of truth in it. Since the victory of Christ *has been* won we are in fact living in "the last days" and the benefits of that victory are already operative. But there is a difference between the first streaks of dawn and the brightness of high noon. We live in the light of the day of victory, which day we must never think of as postponed indefinitely. And yet. the day has not yet actually come, else we would not be here but in heaven with Christ. In understanding the Scriptures we must. indeed become adults not children (1Cor.14:20), holding truth in balance and in paradox if necessary, for this alone is peace and poise for service.

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2:3

Before Christ comes in His glory and final triumph two things must happen. There must. come first *the* apostasy or rebellion (falling away is too weak a term), which theme the apostle has apparently spoken about in earlier days. It seems to be something of a widespread and violent defiance of God, the supreme effort of Satan against all that belongs to God, and it is associated with the appearance of the man of sin or lawlessness. Note that all this clearly formed part of Paul's initial Gospel ministry (5), and it highlights both the realism and the teaching nature of apostolic evangelism. It is because we do not tell people honestly the message of the Bible that we produce so many complicated and ineffective Christians! If we consider 1 John 2:18 we see that Antichrist is a principle as well as a person and operates in every age. For this reason we should think rather of patterns of antichrist activity emerging rather than of any given personality of incarnate evil, although. there have been many such in history. Some of the fierce and frightening characters who have risen up to fascinate men and nations and to work diabolical terror and destruction have given cause to many to identify them with this man of sin. But all these figures have risen and fallen and there still has to come the day when this final man shall appear. He will emerge from obscurity, making no attempt to conceal who and what he is in relation to God, for

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in the brash confidence of the Devil himself he comes forward to establish his kingdom and receive the worship of men.

But although the man of sin is sure of himself, God is surer, and has not merely allowed this usurper to come forward but has in fact drawn him out into the open to reveal what he is and to make the finality of his judgment an absolute and righteous necessity. This is mighty drama indeed.

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2:4

In the light of yesterday's note we can see how world affairs will develop, getting both better and worse as the final climactic moment draws near. This is how we are able to hold in the tension of faith the fact of the promise of an outpouring of the Spirit in the last days (Joel 2:28ff) and the searching words of Jesus in Luke 18:7-8. Note now how the emergent antichrist is described. It is not evil in some gross, crude and thoroughly fleshly form, but evil refined, cultured, religious and spiritual. This man of sin is not content with some secular or political ascendancy, for he aims at an exaltation which makes him take the place of God. The frightening thing is that people are taken in by him, so exquisitely deceptive is his counterfeit of the spiritual (2 Cor.11:14). It is only when it is too late, when deception has led to bondage from which there is no escape, that men realise that they have been taken in by what is anti-God and have committed themselves to that which is finally destructive. This man of sin brooks no rivals, he is totalitarian, he is religious, but he will have nothing of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. He is spoken of as sitting in the Temple, which may suggest his H.Q. of evil is within the establishment of religion (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). Paul's words seem to suggest that this manifestation of antichrist in the end of time takes place in some actual building where this incarnate evil genius makes his claim to deity. Little wonder we are told to watch and pray and to read the signs of the times.

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2:5-6

We have already commented on the depth and seriousness of Paul's initial ministry in Thessalonica, and this seems to be the reason why he does not elaborate now in greater detail. He assumes that they had grasped the significant truth the first time it was told them. This is some indication of the power of the Holy Spirit that attended his ministry, and it certainly exposes the lack of coherent impact in the ministry of our own day. Perhaps we have not the same thrill of conviction and urgency which made these early apostles get right to the point, with the least possible delay, and impart a fantastic amount of Scriptural truth to their hearers. Paul simply reminds the Thessalonians of how they spoke together of that power which holds in restraint the man of sin and all his activities until God's appointed time. Just what power Paul is referring to we are not in a position to know with any certainty. He speaks of it in personal terms in v.7. Some say the Holy Spirit is the restrainer. Some suggest that in Paul's generation it was the authority of the Roman Empire. Some specify "law and order". Some say it is the presence of the church in society that restrains the principle of elemental corruption. The one sure thing is that we cannot be sure in our identification. But we can be sure that in our own day, when we see all that we mean by the former "restraints" on human behaviour being lifted, we are living in times that have more than normal significance. This is why we must see to it that we are not found in complicity with any principle or activity that is working against God and is in reality on the side of evil.

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2:6-7

Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Tim. 2:1-3 are passages which speak of the restraints of God operating in human society and this is emphasised again in v.7 which declares that evil is kept in check under the sovereignty of God until the fulness of the time is come. Whatever human or angelic or spiritual instrument is used in this work of restraint, the power is God's, and we must find rugged comfort in this doctrine. Read such passages as Psalm 2 and Ps. 21:8-13, Psalm 91 and the paraphrase of Ps. 90, "Under the shadow of Thy throne, Thy saints have dwelt secure; sufficient is Thine arm alone and our defence is sure." Of course if this "common grace" is operative in all human experience through history then unbelievers benefit from it as much as believers, and a great section of the community is constantly unaware because of unbelief just how much it owes to the presence in the world of God's people and His work. This explains in measure how some totally Christ-rejecting people can be so nice and do such kindly things for their fellows. But what happens when the hidden restraint is lifted

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away? Many a person has been shattered by what they have discovered about themselves when work has taken them away from the secure context in which they previously lived. Ask people who were in the Forces during the war what the lifting of restraint meant, and apply the principle to the final emergence of unrestrained evil in the last days. It highlights the need for a mighty Saviour.

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2:6-7

We will never understand the world and its experience with all the horror, cruelty and suffering we see, unless we grasp this truth that there is a "mystery of iniquity" in operation. There is a principle or spirit of lawlessness, rebellion and refusal of God, at the heart of this world, which is a fallen world, and it is the operation of this principle in and through the affairs of men and nations that makes the present world what it is. It is a world gone wrong, a world refusing God, and in consequence not desiring nor seeing the need to be put right. Granted, the world wants to ease its pain and anguish, and Christians must be to the forefront in this work of compassion. But we must never lose sight of the fact that to ease the pains of disorder is a limited, temporary work, doomed to failure if the underlying cause is not dealt with. This means that we must face the fact that in measure our work of compassion will be a failure if people will not, in Christ, be reconciled to God. The root of sin remains and the fruit is inescapable in a harvest of varying increase (Gal. 6:7-8; 1 John 2:15-18; 5:19). This is a "mystery" that the world cannot and will not see, with the result that it rails against God for "allowing" all the tragic things of the world to happen. But faith sees that God has done something in the Cross of Jesus Christ to remedy the world's deep sickness, so that the world need not go on in pointless suffering and death. But the world will not believe and remains under judgment (John 3:16-21). It is only because we know, by faith, that evil operates always under restraint that we can be at peace; and it is the peace of realism, not escapism.

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2:8

The mystery of iniquity will no longer remain when the restraint of God is finally, perhaps suddenly, removed and evil in its true personal and diabolical character will be exposed and brought to stand in the blazing light of God Himself. The exposure of this Lawless One is the culmination of a long process of permitted evil in the world and seems to involve at least a brief career of manifest evil on the part of this supernatural personage of incarnate Antichrist. This is spoken of in the next few verses, but here the salient point is given first, namely that of the total, absolute and immediate over-riding sovereignty of God. There is no suggestion of a long drawn-out struggle for the mastery between God and this climactic person of evil. In the moment of revelation the Lawless One is consumed with the breath of God's mouth. This victory is something that was settled in eternity, manifested on earth in the fulness of time, and declared with finality in the word of Jesus from the Cross, "It is finished!" But the greatest manifestation of evil is immediately prior to its judgment, and this is a very practical lesson for daily life (John 12:31; Luke 22:53; Rev. 12:12). It is also a very comforting message, for it teaches us that while we must never sit casually to evil, we must never dread its power. Remember that in the Gospels Jesus never argued the point with demons. He always commanded them, and they had to obey. But let there be no false presumption. *We* are not Jesus, although we stand in His victory, and the demons know just how realistically we do stand (Acts 19:11-20).

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2:9-10

In yesterday's note we allowed the possibility of the man of lawlessness having a brief, brilliant career, and held this in tension with the teaching about the immediate annulment or destruction of that evil person by the sheer appearing of the Lord in person. This is very thrilling. The Lord's coming is spoken of literally in v.8 as the "epiphany, or manifestation, or brightness of His personal appearance and presence," and this is almost exactly how the coming (the same word as for the coming of the Lord in v.8) of this man of sin is described. The splendour and power of Satan (Lucifer, the shining one, Isa.14:12-14), whose servant he is, is manifest in this evil person appearing in history. The result is that he is able to perform with power, signs and wonders to fascinate and captivate men. The words "power (miracles), signs and wonders," are the words used to describe the mighty works of Jesus and we must take the words "all lying or counterfeit," to be the qualifying description

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of these Satanic works. This is important because it highlights the counterfeit activity of the Devil as being of a very high quality. Some frauds are crude and obvious and to that extent not really dangerous because no-one in their senses will be taken in. But here, the reality of the miraculous and the astonishing works is acknowledged, while their inspiration is clearly marked out as evil, and their objective as being to deceive men and take them away from God. But why are people deceived? Are they to be pitied and excused because of the brilliance of the deception worked by such a plausible power? NO! "Although people are led astray by deceit, they are never completely deceived, and are therefore never innocent. The depth of their disease is seen in the fact that they not only do not receive the truth, but do not receive the love of the truth." (W. Still) It is resentment of and resistance to the truth when it comes that gives the Devil his opportunity, which he is not slow to take.

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2:11-12

Yesterday's note began to indicate man's own responsibility for his deception and this is now continued in these verses which reveal God as having an active part in the drama of judgment. Romans 1:18-32 is a basic commentary on this theme and we must note there the emphatic statement that "when they knew God" they would not have Him but chose rather the creature as the object of their obedience and love. In this rejection of the love of the truth, God confirmed them in their choice and they were given over to *the* lie. "Men start by rejecting the Gospel voluntarily; they then reach the stage when they are unable to tell what is gospel and what is fallacy. This is the powerful 'delusion' which Paul rightly regards as an Act of God." (Neil, quoted by Morris). The true reading in v.11 is that, "God sends them a delusion," and this may suggest that the principle is at work now, and in every stage of confronting men with the truth of the Gospel. We cannot listen to the truth and be the same again. There is a hardening or softening process always at work, and v.12 indicates that the hardening of heart against the truth of the Gospel presented in its most gracious and appealing terms, is indicative of a moral choice already made in the interest of unrighteousness. Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). A God of righteousness cannot stand by while this rampant virus of evil works unchecked, for it will always assail that which is good, true and holy. There must be judgment, and there is, now and eternally.

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2:11-12

"The principle underlying this verse 11 is of great importance for the understanding of the moral government of the universe. From the foregoing verses it might perhaps be thought that there is a contest in which Satan on the one hand, and God on the other, make their moves, with God somewhat the stronger. But Paul has a much grander concept. God is using the very evil that men and Satan produce for the working out of His purpose. They think that they are acting in defiance of Him. But in the end they find that those very acts in which they expressed their defiance were the vehicle of their punishment. Paul has the same truth in other places. For example, in Romans 1:26, God gave up certain sinners 'unto vile passions'. They thought that they were enjoying their sinful pleasures. They turned out to be 'receiving in themselves that recompense of their, error which was due.' The same truth is found in other parts of the Bible also God is sovereign. No forces of evil, not Satan himself, nor his Man of Lawlessness can resist His might. He chooses to use men's sins as the way in which He works out their punishment". (Morris)

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2:13-14

Those men destined for judgment are not described as sinning through force of circumstances or any other form of compulsion. They have come to find their pleasure in sin. They delight in wrong. Evil has become their good and they choose it with enthusiasm. But there are those who do believe the truth, who rejoiced in it from the very first moment they heard its gracious promise of power and life, and this is proof of the working of God in their hearts unto salvation. Note how Paul speaks of their salvation, describing it as something rooted and grounded in the electing grace of God. This truth is the necessary and comforting antidote to the fears inevitably generated by thoughts of the fascinating, counterfeiting power of Antichrist. From the beginning we, who have now believed, were chosen by God (Eph. 1:4-7; 1 Pet. 1:2). This divine, electing love was manifested and

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became actually operative in time when we heard the message of the Gospel, and it is now continually working to carry through to the triumphant end that purpose of salvation and sanctification in which we were chosen. Because this is so, not even the malevolence of the man of sin can rob us of our inheritance of glory to which we are effectually called through the Gospel, by the working of the Holy Spirit who singles us out to belong totally to Christ, through our willing response of faith. It is time we thought more deeply and grandly about our salvation. We would then begin to worship!

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2:15

The life and experience of salvation must be seen by the believer to be garrisoned by the great walls of God's eternal intention and God's eternal glory, and nothing could be more secure and guaranteed than that (Col. 3:3-4). It is because this is so that Paul gives this exhortation in today's verse. Because you know that God has eternally grounded you in Christ, stand your ground, and refuse to be robbed of the fact and the experience stemming from the fact. But keep the right order: it is facts first, and then the enjoyment of them in experience.

In any given set of circumstances, through mental, emotional or physical tiredness or strain, the immediate awareness of the joy of salvation may or may not be present in greater or lesser degree. But the subjective lack of awareness cannot change the divine and eternal fact. This is why we must learn to stand firm and hold fast (1 Cor. 16:13; Phil. 4:1; Eph. 6:13-14; 1 Thess. 5:21; 2 Tim. 1:13; Heb. 3:6, 4:14, 10:23). There is a healthy rigour about this business of faith, and it is by the fight of faith that we do in fact lay hold on eternal life (1 Tim. 6:12).

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2:15

The word "teachings" is translated "traditions" in AV and RSV. Of course "traditions" is a loaded concept, about which there is much emotional talk and to which there is much unthinking reaction. There are good traditions as well as bad ones. We recall the rebuke of Jesus to the Pharisees who, through their loyalty to human traditions and all the incidental accretions to religious life and service, were in fact and practice denying God and His grace (Matt. 15:1-9). In the contemporary church situation a great deal is defended on the basis that it is "traditional". But when this is examined it means simply that in the memory of some older folk certain things have always been done in a certain way, and if we research another decade or two further back we discover that the tradition is really an innovation and has no real spiritual validity whatever. In our own church of Sandyford an evangelical, biblical ministry is regarded by some as an intrusion, changing the church from "what it used to be". But, if we go back to the beginning of Sandyford we find that from its inception in 1855 until 1903 its ministry was fundamental, biblical, evangelical and on the lines of "the deepening of spiritual life". Now, in the seventies (when these notes were first written), we are seeing all over Scotland a resurgence of that kind of ministry in the national church that once made Scotland the land of the Book. If a return to apostolic ministry is accompanied by apostolic power then we will know again the salvation of God.

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2:15

There are good traditions which are nothing less than substantial apostolic instruction which, far from originating in man's fertile imagination, is given by God (1 Cor. 11:23ff; 15:1-3; Gal. 1:6-12). It is in this sense that Paul uses the word "traditions" and he is referring to the "faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2). Note that Paul makes no distinction between the spoken and the written word of instruction. It is so clear all through Paul's ministry that he was utterly persuaded that there was a message clear and plain and complete given by God, and that to depart from this message or to qualify it in any way was the deepest folly. It was because of this conviction that he guarded against undue eloquence or verbal cleverness (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1-5) lest the truth be concealed or hindered. In like manner he recognised the demonic element in what we would call "novelty" (Eph. 4:14-15; 2 Tim. 3:1-10, 14-17; 4:1-4; 2 Pet. 1:12-2:3). In the light of these Scriptures we see the responsibility that is ours to hand down the "tradition" of the Gospel, and to this end all our devotion must be directed, so that there will be after us a firmly grounded church which will stand the test of each succeeding generation.

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2:16-17

In the first note on v.15 we spoke of the rigour of the fight of faith, and in today's verses we have the peace of God which passes understanding keeping our hearts and minds in that fight. We must "think big" about God and our salvation in Him. We are chosen from the beginning (13), called in the Gospel (14), standing fast in the faith (15), and we learn increasingly that undergirding the whole of our experience as believers is the amazing, personal love of God in Jesus Christ. Note how Paul is exhorting these Christians in an attitude of earnest consecration and dedication to guard against any "fleshly" effort to be faithful to God and active for Him. This would be a crafty seduction of the Devil, for then we would be acting as if we were in charge of our own salvation, which we are not. But in like manner we would also be deceived if we were simply to *rest* in the *acceptance* of fundamental salvation doctrine, because our Christian life is a matter of relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and relationships have to be maintained and developed. It is in this idea of living relationship that there are brought together our active part, which is the fight of faith, and God's all sufficient salvation. But it is always the divine that is primary: quickening, instructing and enabling us to be and to become what we have in fact been made. It is all God's doing from beginning to end, and yet it is this in such a way that we have still to work hard at our salvation, how hard, only those in earnest really know. But even in the struggle we know that it is in fact God who is working in us His glorious will (Phil. 2:12-13).

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2:16-17

Note finally in these two verses how the emphasis is, as so often in Scripture, on the fact that God *has* loved us. This does not deny that God loves us *now* and will *go on* loving us. How could it? But it emphasises a tremendous commitment on God's part from which He will never move. God made up His mind about us long ago and gave us His heart in a pledge of everlasting love. As far as He is concerned there is no going back from there, only going forward. It is in this way that we see the significance of everlasting consolation, comfort and encouragement which issues hope. It is all of grace, full, sufficient, dynamic and eternal, and it strengthens (rather than comforts, though it does both) the whole inner life and not merely the emotions. This inner strengthening is needed in the face of the emergence of the personal powers of evil and the man of lawlessness spoken of earlier. And we have *good* hope (as opposed to the vain hopes of mere human ideologies which are illusory). Even though to worldly eyes the Christian is of all men most to be pitied, yet he is grounded in absolute certainty because of the coming of the Lord and the emphatic victory over the evil one which is already his in Christ. It is this inner assurance which releases the true believer from the strains, fears and inhibitions which can so easily paralyse the personality and enables him to be stabilised both in speech and action.

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3:1-2

There is so much here that we need to concentrate on the first part alone, linking it with similar calls for help in Eph. 6:12-20. Paul's prayer is primarily for the furtherance of the Gospel, rather than for His personal blessing, and he engages the prayers of the Thessalonians for the work of the Gospel in Corinth (from which city he was writing this letter). This is how fellowships should deal with each other, instead of being competitive or jealous. After all, it is the Lord alone who blesses, and He does so when, where and in what way He pleases. In Corinth at this time the work was besieged by difficulties and dangers, whereas in Thessalonica when Paul first visited it the Gospel had a free run, a speedy advance and triumph, moving forward unhindered with such success that it was glorified in the emergence of a living vibrant, believing church after a mere three or four weeks' ministry. Paul asks them to pray that the same working of the Word would prevail in other places as it had done and had continued to do in Thessalonica. The spiritual potency of the phrase "spread rapidly" (which some translate as "run free") is seen if we think of pushing a barrow along a prepared path with pushing the same load along a muddy path where the wheel sinks in up to the axle and makes progress virtually impossible. A prepared path for the Word, and indeed a well-oiled barrow (good name for both a minister and a congregation) are the result of prayer. Preacher and fellowship together are needed to make the Word run free. This places great spiritual responsibility on both.

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3:1-2

Paul is constantly aware of the possibilities latent in every preaching of the Word of God and is always exercised that all the people involved should be alive to this situation, so that nothing is allowed to frustrate or even hinder the realisation of the possibilities. This means we must have faith in our message, faith in the intentions of God to bless, faith to discern the promptings and restraints of the Spirit of God, and faith to walk with God and not go rushing ahead of or away from His main-line operations. It is this kind of faith that is needed to make us pray and to keep us praying, because we know that in doing so we are being co-opted on to God's board of directors and are working in co-operation with Him. How we can ever trifle with such a high and holy, not to say exciting, calling is beyond explanation. Of course, it is serious business, requiring as a basic necessity, especially on the part of those who are called to preach, the knowledge that we are in the place God wants us to be. When we are sure of that we can get on with the job without distraction from men or devils (Neh. 6:3). All this becomes more vividly real if we consider Paul's actual situation in Corinth at this time, recorded in Acts 18:4-18 and 1 Cor. 6:9-11. Perhaps it was in answer to someone's prayers that the vision of Acts 18:9 was given. Brothers, and sisters pray for us. And pray especially on any given Sunday when you feel the minister is struggling with his preaching. That is much more useful and more sensible than criticising!

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3:1-2

The second verse here indicates that Paul is speaking of a specific situation with identifiable men who are set on opposing the free run of the Word of God. This is realism, and we do well to have such clear sight in all our own work, to be able to discern the approach of such fierce, devilish opposition and thus be prepared for it when it actually bursts out into the open. Wicked and evil men ("unreasonable and wicked men" AV) seems to refer to a group of wrong thinking, unrighteous, wrong-headed, bigoted men who were of an evil and malignant temper, setting themselves resolutely against the apostle's ministry as he sought to propagate the faith. The opposition no doubt came from the religious segment of the community, the very people one would expect to respond to a living ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. But experience shows this is not so, and there are none so dogged in resistance as those whose preference is for a religion that leaves them untouched. The margin of my AV Bible gives the reading "absurd" for "unreasonable", and this is what the Jews were. All their history, tradition, training and confessed hope were in relation to Messiah who was to come, and when He came they hated the very mention of His name. How many young and not so young ministers of the Gospel would testify painfully that the persecution they have known for Christ's sake has not been at the hands of lapsed members nor godless pagans in the community, but those "pillars of the kirk", at the heart of the congregation's life, who have refused and resisted with all their power and influence every spiritual move that has been made, and have declined to be associated with either the ministry or the prayer meeting in support of it. Little wonder ministers and missionaries cry, "Brethren, pray for us."

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3:3-4

Over against the malicious unbelief of men spoken of yesterday, Paul places the faithfulness of God (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13; 2 Cor. 1:18). God is the Lord, the undisputed Governor over all the powers of the world and the underworld of evil, leading His people on in assured confidence. It is because he is persuaded of this that Paul, having asked for the prayer help of the Thessalonians, now turns from his own needs in respect of the work to express his confidence in them. This is not simply confidence that the Lord will enable them to stand fast no matter their trials, but that they will prove to be Christians amenable to instruction and even discipline. In a very real sense Paul is bringing these believers into a place of spiritual responsibility and in doing so he wisely and graciously indicates that he is depending on them not to fail, for the sake of the Lord's work. Very soon we will read stern words addressed to this church in Thessalonica, and Paul is leading up to this point. But there is more than technique here, as there must always be with us when we seek to exercise spiritual influence. There is no Biblical warrant for the corrupt practice of dishonest talk or flattery whereby we lead people on to open their hearts to us and then, when they are exposed and vulnerable, go crashing in with hard and hurtful words. There

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is a basic relationship here of spiritual confidence between Christian people who pray for each other. It is a relationship in which spiritual discernment is operative to see not only the Lord's intentions already working out, but also to see the essential spiritual willingness of believing men and women. What a contrast there is between those who are for ever dragging their feet in sluggish obedience and those you know to be instant in their preparedness and capacity for service.

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3:5

It is a great thing for a minister to be able to say to his fellows in the work, "I know I can trust you and I rely on you." Of course there is always an element of risk, and there can be many disappointments, but Paul's confidence is in the Lord, and in the Lord you can depend on those who are in fact weak in themselves. This is a word to those who excuse themselves from spiritual responsibility because of their self-conscious awareness of weakness. Let God make you strong and He will use you safely to His glory since you will be the first to confess that no good could possibly come from you. It seems to be in this context that Paul prays that their hearts will be directed to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. It is the sense of the amazing love of God for us and not a spirit of stoical endurance that enables us to endure in steadfastness. It is also the sense of the love of God that enables us to live together in fellowship, and work together in harmony, learning from one another, encouraging and rebuking one another, so that we may become more and more free of resentment towards people or circumstances. Of course the love of God must be allowed to touch our hearts and not be locked up in our minds as some sterile theological concept. The meaning is that the Lord might clear the way of obstacles so that His love might move freely into our hearts and through them out to others. If lovelessness is challenged, so also is idleness rebuked by the thought of the steadfast continuance of Christ. This is what Paul now goes on to deal with.

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3:6

The passage beginning here runs right down to v.15 and deals with godly discipline within the fellowship in a way that mingles resolute reality with stern but kindly grace. The object is remedy rather than judgment, the retrieving and restoring of the defective brother rather than his excommunication. This subject has already been spoken of to the Thessalonians in 1 Thess. 4:9-12; 5:14-15, but there were obviously those who were still idling away their time, being a material burden to the fellowship, and all the while excusing their conduct on the grounds of spirituality. Note how Paul finds no difficulty in bringing together the fact of apostolic authority (command) and that of fellowship and equality (brother). When the testimony of the church is imperilled by the obtuse unteachability of a group of lazy believers who prefer talking to working, then action must be taken. Recognise the necessity for withdrawing from intimate, warm fellowship with the offenders in order that they might be made aware that by their attitudes they have created a situation which precludes real and true fellowship. This withdrawing has nothing in it of sulking, nor of that laziness which refuses to make the effort to have fellowship, and none at all of the pride that considers others not worthy of fellowship. This is clear, definite but gracious action of discipline in respect of the "disorderly" (AV). If we compare AV and NIV we may see that the words used have a military significance referring to those who refuse to "keep rank", who are constantly out of step, and generally contributing to the disorder and disarray of the army. The nations being under the control of the Roman armies, Paul's illustration will have registered. Roman soldiers did not break rank. Should Christian soldiers be less committed?

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3:6-9

The argument from personal and costly example is always a powerful one, especially when it concerns integrity of life and character. Paul goes so far here as to declare that it is not optional to follow the apostolic example but a matter of obligation in the light of the manner of his life among them for the Gospel's sake. There was nothing disorderly, untidy or self-indulgent about his life among them, and not even the mighty responsibility of preaching the Gospel was allowed to hinder the testimony of his manner of life. He, who was entitled to be maintained in his ministry (1 Cor. 9:1-15), did not claim his right but worked to support: himself and his

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colleagues in order that he might be free from any suspicion of making money out of the Gospel. In the light of such example, what right had any of the believers to stop working, to live off the kindness of their friends, simply to indulge their propensity for spiritual chatter? This is a principle which applies to many modern situations where our lack of priorities, our poor quality work and our poor sense of responsibility, give a very bad example which leads unstable believers astray and presents an impoverished picture of Christ to a world that needs a real Christ. Be quite clear on this: spiritual activity and conversation never constitute a justification for human idleness.

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3:6-10

Note how Paul builds up his argument for spiritual responsibility. He accepts the principle that a Christian's life will always be narrower than is strictly allowed, for the sake of testimony to others. As a minister of the Gospel, Paul will not ask of any person what he himself has not first been prepared to be, to do and to give. Of course, Paul is not here counselling an attitude of pride which refuses to be helped by others. All his epistles tell how much he depended on others in the fellowship of Christ, and this is how it should be. How else can we be our brother's keeper? But he follows Christ's example in forfeiting his rights (Phil. 2:3-8) in order to be God's servant. We can understand the sharpness of his tone as he deals with those who are so casual and irresponsible with regard to the burdens of the life and work of the fellowship. Why should such behaviour be allowed in the family and house of God when it would be dealt with in no uncertain terms in the domestic situation? We have no right simply to make use of our homes, families, parents, wives and husbands while we go our own sweet way, even if that way be garlanded with Christian activities. The best testimony that some young people and some husbands could have would be to stay at home some evenings and give their love and their practical help to their families. That might make their families believe that Christ really meant something.

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3:6-10

The last verse here declares, possibly in the form of a Jewish proverb, what might be called the Christian doctrine of work. Incapacity for work through ill-health, old age, or lack of opportunity is no denial of our Christian profession, but to will not to work, and not to accept available help to make us well enough to work is a contradiction of all we profess. Paul would have no part in this kind of thing, nor would he be inveigled into helping such people, for it would have been false charity, having the effect of enabling and encouraging them to go on in their wrong ways. To work is a moral duty for Christians. It is also a means of grace in relation to God. The words of Gen. 3:17-19 are not merely a sentence of judgment. "What was man's discipline because of sin becomes an ennobling factor in his life and experience," and this brings a new glory to the humdrum business of daily life. It also makes clear one link between the current work-shy philosophy of our generation and the moral and spiritual decline that is so much part of the contemporary problem. Our work must never be regarded as a necessary evil to meet the economic necessities of life. This is why so many are discontented. To take our daily work, however humdrum, and do it as unto the Lord, is part of the process of growth in grace which imparts integrity to our characters. Since this is so, we see how wrong it is to give in to the work-shy on whatever basis and with whatever story they approach us for help. We must be straight with them, not because they may want our help without wanting Christ: there are many to be helped who will never come to Christ and we must help them; but because it would be harmful to them and dishonouring to God. Christianity and sentimentality are never to be confused.

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3:11-12

It is clear that Paul is speaking of a specific group, easily identifiable within the church at Thessalonica. This situation was becoming common knowledge and Paul was constantly hearing about it and it could not be allowed to go on unchecked. These people were "busybodies instead of busy," (Moffat), "minding everybody's business except their own," (NEB), "never doing a stroke of work, and busy only in other people's affairs," (J.B.P.). Literally we could describe the malingerers as very active but not actually working. They were possibly the busiest people in the organised church but the effect of their labours was totally bad. Do you see how

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possible it is to be immensely busy and at the same time be totally lazy? You can even gain a reputation for spirituality and be applauded for wearing yourself out in the Lord's work, while all the time you are in actual fact, by your busy-ness, evading the Lord and refusing to deal with Him in the basic matters of growth in grace and character. This is why some people run themselves into the ground with sheer exhaustion, sooner or later. Perhaps part of the explanation for such conduct is an inner sense of insecurity which tries to be reassured by showing how deeply involved we are in spiritual things. But this was an excitable spirituality, so different from the life of our Lord, and Paul exhorts them to be quiet, and to cultivate that calmness of disposition which should mark the lives of those who know that, whatever the circumstances, the Lord Himself is in charge. He alone can do spiritual work and He does it far more in the context of the daily grind of earning a living than we realise.

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3:13-15

Paul would never countenance the attitude which sits back, "leaving it to the Lord," and shows no inclination to be involved in sharing the work load of the true witness of the fellowship. But he does not appeal to the lazy busybodies for they, in spite of their obvious "spirituality" are in actual fact in no condition to be of use to anyone or anything. Indeed, so strong have Paul's words been about their condition that we must see them to be in some measure at least under the beguiling influence of the Evil One, that enemy who is behind and at the heart of all disruption and distraction in the church of Christ. Always remember that the wellbeing and progress of the work of the fellowship at any given time do not depend on nor rest in the hands of those who have backslidden. God is always at work with the remnant of faith and for this reason our attitude must be one of faith and not fear. If we are motivated by fear, all our words and attitudes will have a bitter, critical edge to them, and we will do a great deal of harm to the very cause we seek to defend from the influence of those who are manifestly not what they should be. Go on doing what is right, because in the end you will reap blessing for many, if you show no weakness and faint not (1 Cor. 15:58). You may feel you stand alone, but just think of what God has done in times past with one man or woman who really believed Him.

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3:13-15

It is generally agreed that Paul is exhorting the faithful growing saints not to weary in their efforts to bear with and to win back the defectors, no matter how obtuse, offensive and difficult they were proving to be. This requires strength rather than weakness, and gentleness rather than harshness, for the end in view is to awaken shame unto repentance and restoration, rather than to rouse a spirit of anger towards the one who does the admonishing. Now the method Paul counsels is that spoken of in v.6 namely that we should withdraw from the brother who insists on remaining unteachable. This calls for a change in attitude but not a change in feeling. If we stop loving the erring one, we have lost all hope of reclaiming him. If we approach him with the attitude of proving him wrong, saying "the clear teaching of Scripture is" we may win our argument to our own satisfaction but, we have not won back our brother. Indeed the erring brother may rightly protest that the plain Scripture quoted does not meet the situation nearly so accurately as our rigid piety seems to think. This happens when we are so set on dealing with wrongs we have a fixation about, that we forget that the erring brother is flesh and blood, capable of deep hurt, and his predicament may be the result of a long history of experiences of which we have no knowledge. It is not easy to discipline another believer and we need to recall Jesus' words about specks and planks (Matt. 7:1-5) and Paul's words in Gal. 6:1. A famous character in English history once pleaded with his antagonists "by the compassions of Christ consider the possibility that you might be wrong!" A wise word indeed.

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3:13-15

This whole matter of disciplining ourselves and others within the fellowship and for the sake of the testimony of the church is a very comprehensive one and two further things need to be said. Those who take upon themselves to be counsellors of others must be very careful of their own motives and must make allowance for their limitations as well as their capacities. The qualifications in the Old Testament of a high priest to deal with and

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for men in the things of God are made clear in Heb. 2:10-18; 4:14-5:9. Take close note of 5:4 and recognise that to be a counsellor or shepherd of men is a calling from God and we may not barge into it as if it was incidental service. We can do damage psychologically as well as spiritually in counselling in realms we have not experienced under God. The other thing to be said concerns the necessity of not being weak about sin and wrong, whether in our own lives or others. To sin against love is a very serious thing and our silence or easy forgiveness is often nothing but a condoning of sin. We need to live close to God so that our thoughts about sin will correspond to His. And then we will be individually and as a fellowship in a far healthier condition, and consequently a more effective instrument for bringing the genuine forgiveness of God to sinners.

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3:16-18

This is a glorious ending to a letter. Its emphasis is all on the Lord Himself, who not only brings peace but *is* our peace (Eph. 2:14) and causes His own peace to rule over all the turbulent frictions and needs of a growing fellowship (Col. 3:15). This peace-giving presence of the Lord Himself in His exquisite humanity and divinity is given both to the fellowship and to the individual within it, in relation to His guiding of His people in service. The quiet confidence of Acts 15:28, "It: seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us," is a marvellous example of settling difficult questions that inspired very heated opinions. The same assured confidence is seen in Acts 13:1-4. It is the presence of the Lord of peace among a people who are willing to be the right kind of people which settles questions of great moment. When we find situations that continue to be tortuous and beyond solution, we must ask why this should be. Is there wrong in the life, grieving the Lord and clouding the sense of His presence because He has had to withdraw? Has the Devil been allowed entrance to weave his spells and work his works of complication? This is not what the Lord wills for His church. Because we believe His presence and know it, we trust Him to deal with every situation at all times and in His own way. This is indeed peace which passes understanding because it is ours even at the heart of a storm. Read Phil. 4:1-11.

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3:16-18

Paul, as was his custom, signs the letter himself, writing in his own hand these last verses. That his heart was that of a true pastor is seen in his emphasis that his words are for *all*: the disorderly, the critical, the disaffected, the struggling and the constant. His desire is to bring them in to Christ and he yearns over them as His Master does. The sheer genuineness of this greeting and prayer must have made it easier for some at least to put aside their complaints and come back into fellowship and service. How gladly Paul would forget and forgive any personal hurt done to himself if such a returning was genuine. These men and women, in spite of all their wrongs, were still his brothers and sisters, precious to him and to God. The grace of God filled his heart and flowed out in prayer for each of them, and they would know it. They would know also that all the stern words of discipline and earnest words of instruction were spoken in love not harshness. We begin to see that it is the bond of mutual love that makes a fellowship in Christ what it is and should always be, a haven and a healing place for saints and sinners alike. God is still prepared to dwell with the lowly and contrite in heart and where He does, those who enter in will say, "Surely God is in this place." So let it be with us. Amen.

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