The First Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians[1]

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THE LETTERS of St. Paul are the only documents of the Apostolic Age that have come down to us. Jesus himself left nothing in writing. The Gospels preserve the tradition of his words and deeds, but this was transmitted almost wholly by word of mouth throughout the first generation, and was not committed to writing in our earliest Gospel (St. Mark) until something like forty years after his death. Though part of St. Mark's materials may have been available to him in written form, as seems probable, not a single one of the documents that he used has been preserved. None of the immediate disciples of Jesus left anything in writing—the epistles attributed to James, Peter, John, and Jude are without exception works of a later generation; the Gospels that bear the names of Matthew and John are in fact anonymous, and are not the work of the men to whom they are attributed; and the "Gospels" of Thomas, Philip, Matthew (Matthias), and others of the inner circle are fabrications of the second century, composed in support of the false doctrines of the Gnostic schools. From the first age of the Church, nothing has survived except the nine or ten letters of the Apostle of the Gentiles. This alone would give them an inestimable value and interest, as our one direct link with the first generation of Christian believers. But apart from this accident of literary survival, they are intensely interesting in their own right, by reason of the qualities of their author.

The letters of St. Paul are not theological treatises or essays, and we must not approach them as if they were. We must keep in mind that they are true letters. They are not addressed to the public at large, not even to the Christian world in general, nor were they intended for all time and for all men everywhere. They spring out of the personal relationships between the Apostle and his churches, and each of them bears upon local conditions in the church to which it is addressed. A great part of our difficulties in understanding his thought arises out of the difficulty in reconstructing the local situation. But if we are to make anything of his letters at all, we must pick up his scattered allusions and references and put them together, and in one way and another piece out as clear a picture as we can of the place and the people and the particular circumstances that have impelled him to write as he does.

1. This paper is the script of a talk that was given over the national networks of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on Wednesday evening, April 5th, 1961. It has been revised throughout, and some new material has been added at the beginning and the end.

The earliest of the letters that have come down to us is the First Letter to the Thessalonians. This is, therefore, the very earliest piece of Christian literature that has survived. It was sent off from Corinth, in A.D. 51 or 52, right after Timothy had returned from a flying visit to Thessalonica. St. Paul himself tells us of the circumstances in which he came to write it. He and his companions, Silvanus and Timothy, had been forced to leave Thessalonica after a fairly short mission, and had not been able to return. They were full of anxiety about their converts—they could not even be sure that they would hold firm to their new faith in the face of the hostility and active persecution of their pagan neighbours. At last they decided that Timothy should go back to Thessalonica. This is how St. Paul tells about it:

Brethren, when we found ourselves cut off from you for the time being—cut off in person, but not in heart—we were all the more eager to see you face to face, with intense desire. For we made up our minds to go to you—I, Paul, resolved upon it more than once—but Satan made it impossible. . . . So when we could stand it no longer, we were willing to be left alone in Athens, and sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow-worker in the Gospel of Christ, to confirm your faith and to exhort you, that none of you should be shaken by these afflictions; for you know yourselves that we are put here to undergo these things. For when we were with you, we foretold that we are bound to suffer affliction, just as it has turned out, as you know. For this reason, when I could stand the strain no longer, I sent to get knowledge about your faith, for fear that the Tempter had tempted you and our labour had been made vain (2:17–3:5).

As it turned out, these apprehensions were needless. To the unbounded relief of the Apostle's mind, Timothy came back with a glowing report of conditions in the Thessalonian church. Let St. Paul again tell of it in his own words:

Now Timothy has come back to us from his visit to you, and he brings us good news of your faith and love. He tells us that you always keep a good remembrance of us, and are as eager to see us again as we are to see you. For this reason, brethren, we have been comforted about you, through your faith, in all our need and trouble. We can breathe freely again, if you are standing fast in the Lord. How can we repay God sufficiently with our thanks for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sakes in the presence of our God, while we keep praying earnestly night and day that we may go to see you face to face and amend your faith where it falls short? (3:6–10).

You see how personal this is—how far removed from a theological treatise. You see how closely it reflects the circumstances of the writer and the readers—the affectionate concern of the apostles over their converts; the reciprocal affection of the Christians of Thessalonica; the relief and joy of Paul and his fellow-workers when they learn that their converts are holding firm to their faith in Christ. This letter carries us right back into the first century, into the pulsating life of those days, until we seem once again to be living among those early Christians and sharing their struggles, and gaining an insight into their hearts and minds.

The city of Thessalonica, whose name has been shortened to Saloniki by long usage, was an important seaport and commercial city in those days, as it is now. It lies at the head of a great gulf in the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea. Behind it lies an immense and fruitful plain, watered and continually built up with fresh alluvial soil by three great rivers. The Vardar valley opens into it from the north, and affords good communications with the Danubian lands. Through the heart of the city ran the Egnatian Way, one of those great arterial roads that the Romans built for the swift movement of the legions; this was the main military highway between Italy and the province of Asia. It began at Dyrrhachium (the modern Durazzo) on the Adriatic, where it was connected by a short sea passage with Brundisium (now Brindisi), the southern terminus of the Appian Way; and it ran eastwards to Neapolis (Cavalla), just a few miles from Philippi, not far from the Dardanelles. Thessalonica was faithful to Octavian, the future Augustus Caesar, in his wars with Antony and Cleopatra, and as a reward it was granted the privileges of a free city, with its own popular assembly and its own magistrates, called Politarchs.

It was a cosmopolitan city, mainly Greek and Macedonian in population, but with large numbers of Italians, some Asians, a sprinkling of Egyptians, and a fair-sized community of Jews. In religion, it offered a great variety of gods and cults. Most of the familiar Greek deities were worshipped there. The coins of the city show heads of Apollo and of Artemis, of Athena, of Heracles and of Dionysos, of the hero Perseus, of the sea-god Poseidon, of Pan, and of Zeus, the great sky-god who reigned over gods and men from the ethereal heights of Olympus. Others bear the head of the goddess Roma, the personification of the imperial city. Monuments of the imperial cult were everywhere—altars and temples and images of Rome and Augustus, of the deified Caesars (in St. Paul's time, Julius and Augustus), and of the Augustan Peace. A special place belonged to Kabeiros, a fertility-god of Phyrgian origin, who had somehow become a patron saint of seafarers and received a cult all around the Aegean region—a cult marked by singularly ferocious rites, even including human sacrifices. The Jews, of course, took no part in any of these forms of worship. They had their own synagogue, where they studied the scriptures, said the prayers, and sang psalms of praise to the God of Israel.

Here, as in all their travels, Paul and his companions made their first approach through the synagogue; and as usual, the gospel made its strongest appeal not to the Jews themselves, but to the Gentiles who had begun to attach themselves to the synagogue. The apostles had just come from Philippi, where they had been brutally treated—assaulted by mobs, beaten with rods at the command of the magistrates, thrown into jail with iron fetters on their arms and legs, and asked to get out of town the next morning. But they were not to be intimidated: they never thought of abandoning their mission to Macedonia. Once released from jail, they turned westwards along the Egnatian Way and made straight for the capital of the

province, the city of Thessalonica. This is how the story is told in the Book of Acts:

Travelling through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul, as his habit was, went in to worship with them, and for three Sabbath days he debated with them from the scriptures, interpreting them and expounding them to prove that the Messiah was destined to suffer and to rise from the dead. 'This is the Messiah,' he said to them, 'this Jesus, whom I am proclaiming to you.' And some of them were won over, and joined Paul and Silas; and so did large numbers of 'God-fearing' Greeks, and a great many of the leading women. But the Jews were made jealous by this success, and they hired some toughs among the loiterers in the Agora and worked up a rioting mob which threw the city into an uproar. They stormed Jason's house, and tried to bring the missioners out to the people. But since they did not find them there, they dragged Jason and some other converts before the Politarchs, shouting, 'These people who have made trouble all over the world have come here, and Jason has given them a home; and they are all making mischief, defying the decrees of Caesar and telling people that there is another Emperor, Jesus.' These accusations stirred up the mob and worried the Politarchs as they listened; and they required Jason and the others to post security, and let them go. And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away, by night, to Beroea (Acts 17:1–10).

This is all that Acts has to tell us. As you see, it gives a spirited and vigorous picture, but it does not tell the whole story. When we read Paul's letters to this church, we find that the congregation was not made up in the main of converts from Judaism and "God-fearing" Greeks—that is, Gentiles who were already adherents of the synagogue and worshippers of the God of Israel. They were nearly all people who had "turned to God from idols." We also find that Paul does not lay the blame on the Jews for the trouble that arose; according to him, it was the pagan Macedonians who attacked their Christian neighbours. "You became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea," he writes to them, "for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews" (2:14). More than that, Acts leaves us with the impression that the apostles were driven out of the city after little more than the three weeks of teaching in the synagogue, while the words of Paul certainly suggest a much longer period of house-to-house visitation and pastoral care. It seems probable, then, that the mission which began in the synagogue was continued in the streets, with a direct appeal to the pagan population and a good deal of success.

There is not a great deal of direct Christian teaching in this letter. It is not a theological treatise, but a personal communication, and nearly all of it speaks of the relations between the apostles and their readers—recalling the days of their conversion (1:4–6), the new spirit of faith, hope, and love (1:3—the well-known Pauline trilogy of virtues occurs here for the first time), and the kind and faithful service done by the missionaries. Here is Paul's account of it:

Our words have never been flattering words, as you have cause to know; nor, as God is our witness, have they ever been a cloak for greed. We have never

sought honour from men, from you or anyone else, although as Christ's own envoys we might have made our weight felt; but we were gentle with you as a nurse caring fondly for her children. . . . Remember, brothers, how we toiled and drudged. We worked for a living night and day, rather than be a burden to anyone, while we proclaimed before you the good news of God.

We call you to witness, yes and God himself, how devout and just and blameless was our behaviour towards you who are believers. As you well know, we dealt with you one by one, as a father deals with his children, appealing to you by encouragement, as well as by solemn injunctions, to live lives worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:5–12, New English Bible, used by permission).

The first three chapters of this letter are entirely filled with such intensely personal sayings as these. With the fourth chapter, St. Paul does introduce some instruction in Christian morality. Here we must keep in mind that in the pagan world there was generally no idea of a relationship between morals and religion. A man could be very "religious" and attach himself to a dozen different cults, without any feeling that his devotion to the gods should make any difference to his moral conduct. Young Greeks would even seek to justify the most profligate conduct on the ground that they were only following the example of Zeus or Apollo or Aphrodite. One of the first things the convert had to learn was that the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ called him to a life of honesty, purity, and love—"a life worthy of God." St. Paul had to teach his people the meaning of the summons of the God of Israel: "Be ye holy, for I am holy," and of the charge of Jesus to his followers: "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Lev. 11:45; Matt. 5:48). So he writes very simply of these elements of Christian living. This is how he puts it:

Brethren, we urge and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that just as you received from us the tradition of how you must live to please God—as indeed you are doing—that you do so more and more fully. For you know the commandments that we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is God's will—that you should live in holiness, that you should abstain from fornication, that every one of you should be able to possess his wife in purity and honour, not in lustful desire like the pagans who have no knowledge of God; that no man should break bounds and wrong his brother in the matter. . . . For God did not call us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore anyone who cheats is not cheating man, but God—the God who gives us his own Holy Spirit.

About the love of the brotherhood there is no need for us to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; you are indeed manifesting your love towards all the brethren in the whole of Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to abound in love more and more. And make it your ambition to live quietly, to attend to your own business, and to work with your hands, just as we charged you, so that your way of life may win respect among non-Christians, and that you may not need help from anyone (4:1–12).

Even here, as you see, the instruction is direct and personal, and points towards the failings of these particular readers. Most of the words have the widest application, so that Christians today can read them and apply them to themselves—take them as a word of God for the guidance of their own

lives, now, in the sixties of the twentieth century. Yet they were not written in the first instance as a section in a handbook of Christian ethics, for general use. They were written for the direction of the Christians of Thessalonica of the fifties of the first century—people who only a few months before were worshipping the gods of their neighbours and giving themselves to the vices common to the times, and uncondemned by their old religion.

We may go a step farther, and suggest that the real weight of these injunctions lies in the last sentence—the exhortation to live quietly, to mind their own affairs, and to earn their own living, not expecting somebody else to pay their expenses. We seem to have a hint here of some tendency to religious excitement at Thessalonica that had led some members of the church to neglect their own business while they put a finger in that of everyone else, and to make their devotion to Jesus an excuse for loafing and sponging on their friends. We shall find St. Paul dealing with this problem much more sternly in his second letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 3:6–13).

The one fragment of doctrinal instruction that the letter contains follows upon this moral exhortation. Like everything else in the letter, it is directly related to an immediate local problem that had been troubling the Thessalonians. It is apparent throughout the letter that the apostles have taught their converts to expect the coming of the Lord Jesus in the near future, and that they have been looking forward to his coming with eager anticipation. When they turned to God from idols, it was to serve him as the Living and True God, but it was also "to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who delivers us from the Wrath to come" (1:10). Paul himself clearly expects that he will still be living when the Lord comes, and he counts on standing before him with the throng of his converts, who will be his glory and joy, and his crown of victory (2:19f.). But some of the little band have died since Paul left the city, and their friends are anxious about them, for fear that they will not be present to share in the festivities and rewards of the Lord's arrival. So the Apostle writes to remove these needless fears and to console them:

We want to enlighten you, brethren, about the destiny of those who sleep in death, so that you may not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have not your hope. For as surely as we believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead, so surely shall God bring back those who have fallen asleep in Jesus, with him.

This is the first part of his message of reassurance. The second part is more difficult, for it is cast in a kind of imagery that is unfamiliar to us, though it would seem not at all strange to men of the first century. This is how it goes on:

We tell you this by the word of the Lord, that we, the living, who are left on earth until the Arrival of the Lord, shall not reach the goal before those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself shall come down from heaven with a shouted command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God. And first the dead in Christ shall rise: then we, the living, who are still on earth, shall be caught up along with them, to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall

be with the Lord forever. Therefore comfort one another with these words (4:13–18).

The imagery is strange to us. The voice of the archangel, the trumpet of God, the cry of command—these are drawn from the colourful symbolism of Jewish apocalyptic, best known to us from the book of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John. This is interwoven with other symbols drawn from the pageantry of the reception prepared for a visiting prince or governor, when the people would stream out of the city to greet him on his arrival, and escort him into their city, in the expectation that he would have favours to bestow. Such a visit was known by the technical term "Parousia," which I have translated "Arrival"; it was quickly adopted by the early Christians to designate the expected return of Jesus their Lord. If this imagery was to be used at all, the meeting of the Coming One with his rejoicing subjects could only be conceived as a meeting "in the air," since Jesus was coming "from heaven"; and the religious imagination of the time (more among the Greeks than among the Jews) thought of the air as the abode of all manner of spiritual beings. It is unlikely that Paul himself ever intended his imaginative words to be taken as a literal description of events to come. His language here is highly symbolic, evocative, mythical. More difficult still is the expectation that this glorious Arrival of the Lord Jesus will take place during Paul's own lifetime—he clearly anticipates that he will be among those who take part in the joyful welcoming of his heavenly Lord.

Few Christians today would picture the return of their Lord in anything like the way Paul describes it here. His imagery belongs to an age long past and to a literary tradition that is to us exotic and by no means compelling. The permanent truth of his words, for Christian thought, remains in the assurance that the resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee of resurrection from the dead for all who believe in him. The glory of the life to come is sufficiently expressed, for Christian faith and love, in the words: "So we shall be with the Lord forever."

The coming of Jesus, in Paul's thought, has aspects of terror as well as of joy. For the unbelieving world, it is the day of final reckoning. Old Testament prophets had spoken of "the Day of the Lord"—literally, in their ancient language, "the Day of Yahweh"—in terms of fearful judgment upon all the earth. Once Israel had looked for it as the day of national triumph, when Yahweh would give his chosen people the victory over all their enemies. But the prophet Amos tore away this complacency with a rough hand:

> Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!
> Why would you have the day of the Lord?
> It is darkness, and not light;
> as if a man fled from a lion,
> and a bear met him;
> or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall,
> and a serpent bit him.
> Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light,
> and gloom with no brightness in it?
> (Amos 5:18–20, R.S.V., used by permission.)

The classic passage is the oracle of Zephaniah, which is taken up in the famous Latin hymn *Dies Irae*. This is how it runs:

> The great day of the Lord is near,
> near and hastening fast;
> the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
> the mighty man cries aloud there.
> A day of wrath is that day,
> a day of distress and anguish,
> a day of ruin and devastation,
> a day of darkness and gloom,
> a day of clouds and thick darkness,
> a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
> against the fortified cities
> and against the lofty battlements.
> (Zeph. 1:14–16, R.S.V.)

Paul reverts to this thought of impending judgment at the beginning of chapter 5. "The day of the Lord" will come swiftly and unexpectedly, and there will be no escape. But for Christian believers, this day of wrath has become the day of the Lord Jesus, and Jesus delivers his followers from the wrath to come. And so the Apostle passes at once to thoughts of hope and assurance, and makes their expectation the ground of an exhortation to vigilance and sobriety. For the world, that day will be a day of darkness and gloom, but for the followers of Jesus it will be a day of light. These are his words:

> You are all children of light, children of day. We do not belong to night and darkness, and we must not sleep like the rest, but keep awake and sober. Sleepers sleep at night, and drunkards are drunk at night, but we, who belong to daylight, must keep sober, armed with faith and love for breastplate, and the hope of salvation for helmet. For God has not destined us to the terrors of judgment, but to the full attainment of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 5:5–11, New English Bible, used by permission).

The remaining verses of the letter consist of directions for the life of the community, and closing benedictions and greetings.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The greatest of all commentaries on the letters to the Thessalonians is in French, written by Father B. Rigaux, and published at Paris in 1956 in the Roman Catholic series *Etudes Bibliques*. In English, there are two major commentaries that are not wholly outdated: those of G. Milligan (London, 1908), and J. E. Frame (I.C.C., Edinburgh and New York, 1912). More recent, but slighter, is the admirable commentary of W. Neil in the Moffatt series (1950).