

Unblamable in Holiness

by John F. Walvoord

Paul prays for the Thessalonians to abound in love and be established unblamable in holiness before God at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Topics: "Sanctification", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the theme of sanctification in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-4:12. The chapter begins with Paul sending Timothy to Thessalonica to comfort and establish the church in their faith. Paul's great heart for the Thessalonians is evident as he prays day and night for their spiritual growth and completion in faith. The passage emphasizes the importance of prayer, compassion, and sensitivity to the needs of others, urging believers to abound in love and strive for holiness. Paul's teachings on sanctification highlight the call to live a life set apart for God, characterized by love, honesty, and diligent work.

Transcript

1 Thessalonians 3:1- 4:12

Background of Chapter Three

In the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, the great theme of salvation was unfolded. There is nothing in all the world that thrills the heart like a real experience of trust in the Lord Jesus, which the Thessalonians had experienced. Chapter 2 presented the challenge of Christian service. Paul speaks of his own service and the rules of ministry, as well as the service and faithfulness of the Thessalonian church as it will be recognized at the judgment seat of Christ in glory. Chapter 3, before us now, has the theme of sanctification, which continues into Chapter 4 through verse 12.

The Good Tidings from Thessalonica

In 1 Thessalonians 3:1-10 Paul relates the testimony of the Thessalonian church as it was brought to him. In a word, this is what happened: When Paul was meditating upon the need of the Thessalonian church and his heart was burdened in prayer for them, he had sent Timothy back to find out how they were getting along. He is described as "our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow-labourer in the gospel of Christ." Gracious words here from the great apostle! The purpose of sending Timothy was "to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith." Timothy was to do what Paul longed to do himself, but

could not. Paul wanted the Thessalonians to continue steadfast in spite of affliction of which Paul states, "We are appointed thereunto." He was concerned lest the trial uncover superficiality in their faith and "our labour be in vain."

Timothy had gone to Thessalonica and had brought encouragement to them, continuing to teach them the Word of God. Now Timothy has returned to Paul with the message that the Thessalonians were standing fast in the faith, that they longed to see Paul, that they were just as he had left them -- their hearts fixed upon the Lord Jesus Christ and looking for His coming. Paul's own heart overflowed as he contemplated the goodness of God in blessing his testimony there and working so abundantly in the lives of these Thessalonians.

Paul's Great Heart

There are a number of things that could be said about this portion of Scripture. Paul recites how he was comforted and how the tidings came. It is summed up more or less in verse 8: "For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord." More expressively translated, it states: "Now we are really living, if you are standing fast in the faith." In other words, his whole spiritual joy and happiness is linked with the experience of victory in this Thessalonian church. Consider for a moment the background of this statement. How interested and how concerned would we be if we had been in Paul's position? Paul had been there just a few weeks and had led these few souls to Christ, but now it seems that his very life depended upon the success and the prosperity of this church. His whole heart was wrapped up in the spiritual prosperity of these his children in the faith.

What a challenge this should be to us that we may have that same sensitivity of the soul, that we may have that passion, that love which was in the heart of Christ Himself for the sheep, for the people of God. In the Bible, men of God, men who really served God had a heart for the needs of souls. Too often in our modern life our theology is in one compartment and our heart is in another. We believe that souls are lost without Christ and recognize human suffering and human need, but it is never translated into prayer, or into helpfulness, or into doing what we can to meet the needs of others. What a contrast to Paul!

In verses 9 and 10 we get a picture of Paul's great heart. "For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?" Here is the compassionate heart of Paul toward the Thessalonian believers and his concern lest they lack something of completion of their spiritual faith and experience. Modern Christians are so prone to ignore a need like this. While recognizing that so many Christians are ignorant of the great truths of Scripture and are not going on with the Lord, they do not have a real prayer life; they do not give themselves to the study of the Word; they are not soul winners. It is a tragedy that in our hearts there can be such coldness and such a lack of response to spiritual need. What a challenge Paul is! In his own spiritual experience his heart is overflowing in praise to God for hearing his prayer. It was not just a few minutes or a few sentences of prayer, but he tells us here he spent hours, day and night, praying to God for the continuance and faithfulness of this little band of Christians. If we had prayer like that and if our hearts were stirred like Paul's, we would have a spiritual revival such as this nation has never seen. What we need is revival first of all in the hearts of the people of God.

The Challenge to Our Hearts

What does Paul say to us in this passage? He is saying that if we are really committed to the Lord--if we are really letting the Holy Spirit rule supremely in our hearts and lives--that there should be the evidence of the love of the Spirit and the compassion of the Spirit toward our fellow Christians as well as toward those who do not know the Lord Jesus. The challenge of this passage is to let the Spirit of God transform our hearts and make them tender, that we may not follow the pattern of this careless and indifferent generation which is unmindful of the spiritual needs of those about us.

Are we really concerned about souls? Do we pray for the salvation of that neighbor in the next apartment or in the next house? Are we concerned in our churches about the backsliders and the indifferent who are not serving the Lord as they should? Paul tells us that the secret is to pray. If we have a real burden of prayer we will have Paul's experience of the joy of answered prayer. Certainly these are important and most practical verses.

Increasing and Abounding in Love

In verses 11 and 12 Paul breathes another prayer that he might go back and see the Thessalonians again. "Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you." In other words, Paul said: "Let us go on in our Christian faith." The most dangerous thing in our spiritual experience is to ease off and to rest on our oars. Normal Christian growth brings with it an increase in love to each other and to all men. While the Thessalonians were a model church, there was still room for growth and improvement.

Perfecting That Which Is Lacking

The coming of the Lord is mentioned again in verse 13. In Thessalonians every chapter deals with the Lord's coming. The last verse of Chapter 1 dealt with waiting for the Lord's return. Chapter 2 spoke of the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming in verse 19. The last verse of Chapter 3 deals once again with the coming of the Lord. Paul, as he is praying for these Thessalonian Christians, has in mind not only their present holiness, but also that they should go on to perfection.

In verse 10 the word perfect is mentioned, "That we ... might perfect that which is lacking in your faith." There are some in our day who think that it is not possible to be saved unless one reaches a stage of moral perfection. They attribute to the word perfect ideas which are contrary to the Word of God. Paul was praying that "God might perfect that which is lacking." What did he mean? It seems clear that he was not doubting their salvation because he speaks of "knowing, brethren, your election" (1:4).

What Is Biblical Perfection?

There are two main ideas about perfection in the Bible. There is first of all the idea of perfection which is the thought of coming to the end of a journey or the fulfillment of a purpose or a design. It is fulfillment or perfection in the sense, for instance, of a perfect man, one who has grown through boyhood and youth until he has the full stature of a man. He is a perfect man in the sense that he has reached the goal of growth. He is perfect in the sense that he has completed the man. There is another word used for perfection which has the thought of equipment. It means to be completely equipped, in other words, the details are in order. A home, for instance, can be spoken of as being fully equipped. It has everything that a home ought to have: furniture, curtains, rugs, and everything else. It is perfectly equipped. This is what Paul had in mind here.

Perfection Never Means Sinless

Paul accordingly prayed that God might perfect that which was lacking in these Thessalonian Christians. Their faith needed to be enlarged. Their lives were not complete in their spiritual experience. Paul wanted God to deal with them and to bring them on to that further step of perfection. Nowhere in the Bible is the word perfect used to mean sinlessly perfect. In fact, that is not the idea at all. There is need for another word in English into which we could translate these words, because the word perfection in the ordinary sense is not exactly the idea. It is only the thought of completion or attainment but not the idea of sinless perfection. Paul is praying that the Thessalonians might be complete and in the end might stand unblamable in holiness before God.

Unblamable in Holiness

In verse 13 Paul's prayer for them is that they may abound in love "to the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints." Some may recall how H. A. Ironside, that great expositor of Scripture, in his early years struggled with the problem of holiness, seeking earnestly an experience of complete sanctification. The story is told in his book, *Holiness, the False and the True*, in which he says he thought he had to be completely holy in order to be saved. Accordingly, he would have some experience and would believe he was saved and completely sanctified. He would go on for a week or two and then suddenly be aware that he was not perfect after all. Then he came to the conclusion that he was not saved. So he would do the whole thing over again. In this difficulty, he discovered Hebrews 12:14 where he read: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." He reasoned correctly that when one follows he has not attained, but that it will be attained when we see the Lord.

This same thought is in 1 Thessalonians 3:13: "to the end that he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints." While we are imperfect in this life, constantly falling short and having to come to God in confession of our sins, the day is coming when we shall be perfect, absolutely unblamable, not only in our position before God but in our spiritual state. That day will be when we stand before Christ at His coming. We are rightly concerned about our imperfections, but, thank God, if He has saved our soul He will never let us go until He has brought us to perfection which will be realized when Christ comes for His own. This is the great expectation behind Paul's prayer that these Thessalonians may grow in grace and attain the ultimate goal of being unblamable in holiness before Christ at His coming.

Coming Events in the Prophetic Word

Verse 13 has attracted students of the Word from another standpoint in regard to the expression, "at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints." Many Bible teachers teach, as does the writer, that the Lord is coming for His church at any time. We believe in the imminent return of Christ, that 1 Thessalonians 4 is going to be fulfilled, that the dead in Christ are going to arise, and that living Christians will be translated without dying into the presence of God. We further believe that after this event there will take place a great time of trouble in the world, predicted by Daniel and Christ Himself, culminating in the great tribulation. We believe that at the end of the great tribulation Christ is coming back in power and glory from heaven with the saints and with the holy angels and that He will establish His righteous government on the earth as predicted many times in the Bible, which will last, according to Revelation 20, for one thousand years and ultimately will be followed by the eternal state after the judgment of the great

white throne.

Where does this passage fit into this background? Many expositors, in considering this particular expression, "at the coming [lit., in the coming] of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints," have distinguished His coming for His saints (the rapture) and His coming with His saints (the second coming to establish the millennial kingdom). While this is a bona fide distinction, it raises the question: "Just when will Christians be presented unblamable in holiness before God?" If we believe that Christ is coming before the great tribulation, we are going to be presented unblamable in holiness before God long before His second coming to set up His kingdom. If that is true, how can we explain this portion of Scripture?

Three Words for the Coming of the Lord

The secret of it is in the word coming. There are at least three great words in the New Testament used to express the truth about the coming of the Lord: epiphaneia, apokalupsis, and parousia. All three of these words are used of Christ coming for His church. They are also used of His coming to set up His kingdom on the earth. They are not technical words, then, but general words, and all of them have to do with the coming of Christ. One of them (epiphaneia) simply speaks of His appearing, that is, that we are going to see Him. We are told also that when Christ comes to set up His kingdom on the earth every eye will see Him.

There is another word (apokalupsis) translated revelation. It is the word used for the name of the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of Jesus Christ in the sense of the revelation of His glory. When Christ came the first time He came in humiliation. His glory was veiled except on the Mount of Transfiguration and perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the latter place, when those who came to take Him asked if He was Jesus and He said "I am," they all fell before Him to the ground, apparently struck down by a momentary flash of the glory and authority of Christ. For the most part, however, His glory was veiled even after His resurrection. When He comes the second time we will see Him in His glory and this will be a revelation.

The word that is found here in 1 Thessalonians 3:13 is the third word, the Greek word parousia, which means presence, but is usually translated coming. This word is derived from two words: a preposition (para) meaning along, and ousia which is a form of the verb to be; hence the word means, to be along side of, or to be present. While commonly translated in the Bible by the word coming, the word itself does not strictly mean coming and is used with other meanings. It means presence and is so translated in 2 Corinthians 10:10 and Philippians 2:12.

What does this word coming or presence mean here in Thessalonians? When someone is coming, we also speak of his presence. For instance, a visiting preacher might be welcomed with the words, "We are happy for the coming of the Reverend John Doe." What would be meant by that? How he came would not be important; the point would be that he is here. What is meant is that we are glad for his presence. His coming was just the means to the end. Even in English we use the term coming in the sense of presence. That is precisely the thought here. But when are we going to be in the presence of the Father?

In the Presence of the Lord

According to Scripture, Christians are going to meet Christ in the air. We are going to be present with Him at that moment. After we meet Him in the air, He will take us home to glory to be in the presence of the Father and the holy angels. After that we are coming back to the earth with Christ. This word coming here

may not refer specifically to the coming of Christ with His saints to the earth, but rather the coming to heaven when they will be in the presence of the Father. That is the same thought considered in 2:19, "in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming," literally, "before our Lord Jesus Christ in his presence." In 3:13, the verse, translated literally, reads, "before God, even our Father in the presence [italics supplied] of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints." There is a coming to the earth, but there is also the coming to heaven. What an event that arrival in heaven is going to be! All the holy angels will be in attendance on that day. When the dead in Christ and living Christians are caught up to be with the Lord and arrive in heaven as the trophies of grace, the marvels of God's resurrection power, they will be presented as a spotless bride, as a holy people, as those who are the workmanship of Christ. At the coming of Christ with all His saints to heaven, we will be "unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father." In that day we will not be "unblamable" because of any works on our part. It will rather reflect our entering in God's marvelous grace--unblamable because every sin is washed away, every unholy thing once and forever removed.

Sanctification the Will of God

Having held before them this glorious prospect, in Chapter 4 Paul goes on to deal with the great doctrine of sanctification: "We beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more." He was never content with past spiritual achievement. There was always the appeal to be growing, expanding, having more. In verse 2 he reminds them that this is the commandment he had given them by the Lord Jesus, "For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus."

In verses 3-8 the great subject of sanctification is discussed. Verse 3 reads: "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification." Too often when this verse is read, those reading stop in the middle of verse 3 and do not go on to study the context. Furthermore, there is a tendency to read into this word sanctification the thought of moral perfection. That is not what Paul meant. What he is saying is that the Thessalonian believers were already sanctified. In other words, they had already been set apart as holy to God.

Just what does it mean to be sanctified? Suppose one were living in the time of Christ and wanted to make a gift to the temple. He would bring his gift of gold coins and lay them on the altar. What happened to those gold coins? The moment they were given to God they became sanctified. They were set apart for holy use. The sanctification did not change the character of the gold coins, but it did change their use and the purpose for which they were directed. So, every true Christian has been set apart as holy to God, even though he falls short of perfection.

Sanctification Is Not a State of Sinlessness

Even a casual study of the Bible will show that holiness in the Bible does not necessarily mean moral perfection. For instance, consider the expression that is found in 2 Peter, that holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. Of whom is this speaking? Peter was referring to the Old Testament writers of Scripture and to prophets who spoke the Word of God. Were those men holy? Yes, they were. The Scripture says so. Were those men perfect? Certainly not. Was Moses perfect? Was David perfect? Yet Moses wrote the law and David wrote some of the most beautiful psalms. They were not perfect, but were nevertheless holy. God had set apart these prophets to His own holy use. Though they were not perfect, He guided them so that they wrote perfect Scripture. The Word of God as it came forth from them

was inspired of God. But they were still imperfect and had to strive just as we do for holy living.

Sanctification Is Practical Righteousness

Does this mean Christians should not strive for holiness? Certainly not. As Paul deals with these Thessalonians he says to them: "This is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication." The idol worship from which some of these Thessalonians had been saved included the most abominable and immoral rites. The Thessalonian Christians who were Gentiles had come out of that background, where immorality and religion were all mixed up. There is no holiness in heathen religion. Holiness was an entirely new idea. For the first time they were faced with the fact that worshiping God involved a holy life. Paul had to deal with them as he did with the Corinthians and others, reminding them that as Christians their bodies were set apart as holy to God.

In keeping with the high moral standards befitting Christians, Paul exhorts them not to give themselves to the lust of desire as the Gentiles do. In verse 6 he writes: "That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter." He has in mind here a man running off with another's wife. He forbids this, because God "is the avenger of all such." In verses 7 and 8 Paul adds: "God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit." Once again we are reminded that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore we are set apart as holy to God. How we need to enter into this! Do we realize that our lives have been bought by the precious blood of Christ? Do we realize that our bodies are a holy temple occupied by the Holy Spirit? That is true whether we recognize it or not. Paul is appealing to the Thessalonian believers to live a life of holiness, a life of being set apart to the holy things of God.

Christian Love Is Holy

In verses 9 and 10 Christian love is introduced in contrast to lust. What a difference! He tells them: "But as touching brotherly love [which ought to characterize the Christian] ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more." Love is a growing experience. We should increase more and more in our love. Do we love the Lord Jesus Christ more today than we did a year ago, or two years ago, or three years ago? We ought to. If we have been going on with the Lord we know more about Him, and the more we know about Him the more we are going to love Him. If we do not love the Lord Jesus it is because we are not very well acquainted with Him. He is altogether lovely.

Walking Honestly

In verses 11 and 12 there is a very practical admonition: "That ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing." These are words of sound wisdom. Sometimes Christians get so concerned with the coming of the Lord that they forget that there is a task to do right now.

Paul is a very practical man. He believed in the glory to come, but he also believed that we should lead a practical life. One of the things he commands is to study to be quiet. God honors the person who is quiet, particularly about his own exploits. We are exhorted also to mind our own business. No one gets into trouble minding his own business, but if he starts minding someone else's business, that usually causes a

lot of trouble. They were exhorted to mind their own business, and to work with their own hands. Honest toil is a good thing, and God's people need to work to earn an honest living.

There are many illustrations of this in the Bible. It is recorded of Haggai and Zechariah, the great prophets who exhorted Israel to build the temple, that they worked with their own hands. When Paul ministered the gospel and ran out of funds, he did not wring his hands and say, "Now God has not been faithful to me." Oh no! He made some tents. He worked with his own hands. That is perfectly honorable. Today the standard too often is to do as little as one can for as much as one can. The Bible standard is just the opposite. The purpose of it is "That ye may walk honestly," in other words, pay our debts. Sometimes Christians are not too careful in their business relationships.

The Call to Holy Living

This business of sanctification, this call to holiness, extends to every aspect of our life. May God challenge us. We have been sanctified by the blood of Christ, by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, by the purposes of God in our life in time and eternity. May we give ourselves to these things as the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts.

Questions

1. Whom did Paul send to Thessalonica and what report did he receive from him?
2. How did Paul's response to this report indicate his great heart?
3. What was Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians?
4. What does Paul teach about sinless perfection now and in the future?
5. On what prophetic note does Chapter 3 end?
6. What three important words are used for the Lord's coming?
7. What is meant by sanctification?
8. What is the difference between love and lust?
9. What practical advice does Paul give in verses 11 and 12?

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