

The Church at Thessalonica

by John Gifford Bellett

The sermon explores the different measures of attainment in the churches of old and the Thessalonian church, highlighting the importance of understanding the hope of the resurrection and the reunion with Christ in the air.

Scripture: Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 3:1

Topics: "Church Growth", "Eschatology"

Description

John Gifford Bellett preaches about the different measures of attainment in knowledge and grace among the churches of old, highlighting the unique conditions and teachings of each church. He emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between correction of errors and feeding with wisdom, drawing parallels between the churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Rome, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica. Bellett discusses the need for mutual understanding, patience, and trust in God's timing, focusing on the hope of the saints' rapture to meet the Lord in the air before His descent to the earth, and the subsequent stages of ascension to the Father and the final glorious return with the Lord for judgment and reign.

Transcript

We easily perceive different measures of attainment, both in knowledge and grace, in the churches of old. The elevation, for instance, of that at Ephesus was much above that at Corinth. At Corinth the apostle had to occupy himself with the corruption of various errors and abuses, and was thus hindered from bringing out to the disciples the strong and rich meat of the word. He kept from them that "hidden wisdom" which he had in store for the "perfect," because they were "carnal . . . babes in Christ." (1 Cor. 3: 1.) But at Ephesus his course was free; he had not to stop in order to correct abuses and errors, but could go on to feed the church with wisdom and knowledge, and reveal to them "the mystery" or "hidden wisdom," which he had to keep back from the saints at Corinth. (Eph. 3) At Corinth the Holy Ghost, by the apostle, had to take care of their own things, and show them to them for correction; but at Ephesus He could do His more blessed work of taking of the things of Christ and showing them to them for edification and comfort.

So that, in distinguishing the condition of these two churches, I might say that the priest was trimming the lamp at Corinth, using the golden snuffers there for correction of evil; while at Ephesus he was feeding the lamp, pouring in fresh oil for the filling and brightening of it with increase of light and grace.

The other churches under the care of Paul occupied, as I judge, certain standings between Corinth and Ephesus; that is, they did not call for the same measure of rebuke as Corinth ' nor did they stand so much beyond the necessity of all personal notice as Ephesus. But in the epistles to them we discern a mixed

action of feeding and trimming the lamps. Indeed, I might class the churches in Galatia with that at Corinth, for there such error had entered that the apostle had little to do but to correct and rebuke it, and thus, as it might be, restore the minds of the disciples. But whether it be at Rome, Philippi, Colosse, or Thessalonica, we see the apostle applying himself both to the evil and the good that was among the saints there; and I would shortly look at each of them.

Thus at ROME he has in view to bind Jewish and Gentile believers together, as among the disciples in that city there appears to have been the retaining of their several prejudices, which were threatening to divide. A great deal of blessed truth is brought out in the epistle, but the present practical end of it all seems to be to secure the union and forbearance of the saints one towards another. But there is not any great amount of evil or mischief recognised by him.

At PHILIPPI the church was beautiful for much grace, and for grace, too, that was peculiar to herself. Yet the apostle, in his epistle to that church, evidently alludes to symptoms of disunion which had appeared among them; but because of the other grace that was there, he alludes to this evil with marked tenderness and reserve, often expressing the comfort wherewith he was comforted in them. And this tender style of the apostle, while noticing the evil among the Philippians, should tell us, when we see much of the grace of Christ in a brother, we should remember that when dealing with evil that may be in him also. It is not that the apostle overlooked the evil at Philippi, but he remembered the grace that was there; and this imparted a chastened and affectionate tone while addressing himself to the evil.

At COLOSSE the apostle, it is true, feeds the saints with most precious knowledge, with the richest thoughts of Christ and His fulness. But this evidently was because he feared the entrance of Judaizing principles among them, for which fear he gives us clearly to see that he had good reason; and the only divine corrective of that evil is the knowledge of the sufficiency of Christ for all the necessity both of the sinner and of the saint.

At THESSALONICA the coming and kingdom of the Lord Jesus had been especially received through the apostle's ministry; and in the epistles to the church there he still feeds them with further light upon that great doctrine. But while he does that, he has also to correct a certain practical error which was peculiar to them.

Thus we clearly discern different conditions in the grace and knowledge of the different churches. And all these things happened unto them for ensamples, as much as the things that happened to Israel in the wilderness; and they are here in the same way written for our learning. (1 Cor. 10) And we may bless God that we have this His own inspired answer to so many anxieties and questions that might arise in our hearts while walking one with another.

In what I have said I may not have altogether rightly discerned the standings of the several churches; but I have no doubt of the fact that they were different. I speak of the churches as known by the epistles addressed to them severally. Into some of these lamps of the sanctuary more oil had been poured than into others.

The fact which I have already noticed so clearly shows us this -- that the apostle withheld from the Corinthians the revelation of the mystery which he so fully makes known to the Ephesians. And this at once shows how impotent and unwarranted the requisition is, that the minds of all the disciples should be found exactly according to one measure and standing before the fellowship of the church can be allowed or administered. Nay, so far from this, I am free to believe that if a member of the church at Ephesus had

visited Corinth, he would have found them so concerned with questions and strifes which had never troubled him or his brethren at home, as might have left him in doubt respecting them. And so one going from Corinth to Ephesus would have found them so occupied with such truth which he had never heard of at home, that he might have suspected, in modern language, that they were all in the clouds at Ephesus. I can thus suppose, from their different measures of light and attainment in Christ, that they might not well have known what to do.

Now, I believe we see among the saints at present what we thus might have seen among the churches of old; we have our Ephesian and Corinthian difficulties still. The truths received by some disciples are treated as mere speculation by others, and the condition of some is low and doubtful. The large and blessed mind of God, which filled the apostle, could of old survey them all, and provide for them all, and feed them at Ephesus and trim them at Corinth. But we are weak and narrow-hearted; and the only result commonly is, to walk in mutual distance and suspicion. Thus we do not understand one another's speech, and we are scattered. But better is it to be scattered than to be brought together on the terms of any bond short of God's own bond in the Holy Ghost. Whereto we have already attained, in that let us walk by the same rule, hoping for more. But let us not force beyond that by any fleshly compacts. The fear of God must not be taught by the commandment of men.

And in connection with this, I would notice the state of Job and his three friends; for I believe that it illustrates the same thing which this state of the churches does. Job could not understand the truth which was in their thoughts, nor could they allow that which he had of God's mind in his; they were but partially in the light, and, through the remainder of darkness that was in them, they mistook the way and jostled each other. And the correction lay only in God, and in the end He applied it. They were all accepted -- God proved Himself the adequate Healer of all their divisions, as He will, by-and-by, join the whole of the heavenly family in one body in the mansions on high, and unite the two sticks of Ephraim and Judah in the earth below.

The largeness of the mind of God contains the remedy, but nothing else does. That mind may express itself forth from the whirlwind, or by the ministry of an apostle; but, however that, be, it bears the remedy with it,. The Lord who can with one hand separate the chaff from the wheat, with the other can gather up all the scattered grains that are now strewing His field in shameful disorder, and find room in His garner for them all.

And this comforts, while it admonishes. It is not that we are to confound the chaff with the wheat. It is as much of the Spirit of God to say, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema," as to say, "Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity." It is as much of the testimony of God to say, "He that hath not the Son of God hath not life," as to say, "He that hath the Son hath life" -- "If any man preach any other gospel . . . let him be accursed."

But still let us know there have been different measures of attainments among the saints, and let our personal and individual care be so to walk in light and grace ourselves as not to give occasion either to the enemy to speak reproachfully or to our brethren to speak doubtfully of us. And let us have our hearts and consciences in lively exercise before God with a purpose to follow our light, lead us where it may, in the grace and fear of the Lord. But when these are the springs of the personal movement and course of each of us, we have, though in many things differently minded, the materials of both safe and blessed communion.

Among the several churches of which we read in the New Testament I have lately been led specially to meditate on the character and standing of that at Thessalonica. To understand it rightly we must look first to the nature of St. Paul's preaching at Thessalonica, and then to the purpose and bearing of his epistles.

He visited the place immediately after his sufferings at Philippi; but it was only to renew his sufferings. (Acts 17) However, a people were gathered out, and in this place gathered out not only to the knowledge of God's salvation, but eminently to the hope of His "Son from heaven." (1 Thess. 1: 10)

On visiting the synagogue at Thessalonica, the apostle sought to prove to the Jews that their promised Messiah was both to die and to rise again; and upon this he asserts, in the first place, that Jesus was the promised Messiah. And having thus claimed for Jesus identity with the Messiah, he asserts, in the second place, that this Jesus, the Messiah, was also King. This we gather from the challenge of his accusers. (Acts 17: 7) And the scriptures of the prophets had already testified this, as well as the former: "the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow."

But these things did not contain the full mystery of Christ. He felt there was something lacking in their faith which he desired to supply (1 Thess. 3: 10), for his ministry among them had been interrupted. The enmity of the Jews had forced him suddenly out. (Acts 17: 10) This, with many other reasons, gave him special concern for them. The grace that was among them was so abundant; they were so excellent for work of faith, for labour of love, and for patience of hope; the tone of their faith was so honest and decisive, also the purpose of heart with which they had come forth to own, as far as they had learnt it, the hope of the gospel: all this drew out his pastoral anxiety for them. And he had spent so much labour and care upon them, and they themselves were so exposed to such trial of faith and to so much that might naturally tempt them to give up Christ, and yet withal they had made so fair a promise of being his joy and crown in the day of our Lord Jesus, that the apostle was specially jealous over them; and under all this anxiety he had already sent Timothy to them, consenting to be left at Athens alone, desiring greatly to see them himself, and attributing the hindrance to Satan.

Now out of all this care for them the epistles flow. All this is not merely the apostle's but the Spirit's care. The Spirit, who had wrought among them by the apostle, now yearns over them in the apostle.

In their present state of knowledge their minds were tried and troubled. They had fallen, as I judge, under the power of two distinct apprehensions which were very painful to them, one of which concerned the sleeping saints, and the other the living saints.

(1) They feared that their brethren who had died would come short of the kingdom on the Lord's return to the earth. (1 Thess. 4)

(2) They feared that those who were alive would meet the terror of the day that was to accompany that return and usher in the kingdom. (2 Thess. 2)

This, I believe, was their present condition; and to comfort their hearts respecting these two fears and apprehensions appears to me to be the chief purpose of his two epistles to them.

His first epistle was soon after Timothy's return from Thessalonica. Timothy had brought back (1 Thess. 3) most comfortable intelligence about them; but it is likely that he had also told the apostle of their anxiety touching their sleeping or dead brethren. To remove this he at once writes to them that they might no longer be ignorant of this, that the saints, whether sleeping or alive, should be caught up together to meet

the Lord in the air at His coming. (1 Thess. 4: 13-18)

His second epistle was drawn from him on hearing of their other anxiety touching the living saints. It matters not how that had arisen, whether from the false suggestions of others, or from an imperfect interpretation of his own first epistle; but to remove it he writes to them, as I judge, his second epistle that they might know that "the day of the Lord," in which they feared the living saints would be involved, could not come till "the man of sin" was revealed, and that man of sin, and all departed from the truth with him, would be the due objects to meet the terror of that day, and that therefore they might put away their fear. (2 Thess. 2: 1-9.)

These I judge to be the occasion and the principal purpose of each of these epistles, the apostle by them meeting the apprehensions of the Thessalonian disciples; teaching them that by the power of Him who raised Jesus from the grave, the sleeping saints were as sure of the kingdom as the living ones, and by the gathering together of all to the Lord in the air, the living saints were as free of the terrors of the day that was coming on the earth as the sleeping ones. Neither life nor death, things present nor things to come, could separate them, for that they were to ascend with equal certainty from the grave or from the earth as the Lord should descend from heaven, and thus all of them meet Him before He reaches the earth in the terror and judgment of His day.

This I receive as the divine instruction of these epistles: it is important to the standing and hope of the saints. I say not that I have surely discerned aright, but I have had this long in my thoughts and heard nothing that leads to a questioning of it. But we know nothing but in part, and as the Lord may give to others, so may I, and each of us, beloved, receive either for confirmation or correcting. It is more as suggestion and calling other souls into holy exercise that I would now give forth this. But the Lord meeting His saints without any necessary cause of delay, without their being subject necessarily to wait for any of the troubles that usher in the glory, I do judge has been from the beginning the promise and hope of the dispensation, and to present that is my desire here.

The descent to saints is to be "with a shout," the voice of gladness; the descent to the earth, or world, is to be in "flaming fire," the minister of righteous wrath. (Cp. 1 Thess. 4: 16 and 2 Thess. 1: 7.) There would thus be two stages in the Lord's descent, as there had been before in His ascent. For as He went up from the grave to the highest heavens, He stopped on the earth by the way there, to meet His remnant and talk with them of the kingdom (Acts 1: 3); so, as He comes down from heaven to the earth He will stop in the air by the way, there to meet His church, or heavenly household, fashioned like unto His own glorious body, to conduct them to the Father's house.

But this day, or descent to the earth in flaming fire, shall find out its object. This will be the spirit of the Lord's mouth consuming, the brightness of His coming destroying the wicked -- the sword out of the mouth of Him whose name is called "The Word of God." The Lord shall then meet the lawless one. The brightness of Him who comes in the glory of God shall meet him that comes according to the lying working of Satan, and set him aside for ever. But those in whom the truth dwells shall shine from above in that day. They shall be to the glory and admiration of the Lord in that day. (2 Thess. 1: 10) They are to be brought with Jesus in that day. (1 Thess. 4: 14) It is the day of the Lord, the day that brings Him forth to the judgment of darkness. It will be as the surprise of daylight upon night. The place of the Lord will be the day then; the world, the place of night and of darkness; and what communion can they have?

The contact must be in judgment, and not in concord. But the saints, who even now are the spirit of the day, must be then in the place of the day. They are "children of the day." (1 Thess. 5: 5), and will be in the sphere out of which the day is to rise, and not in the sphere upon which it is to fall. The full power of the day will not be poured down without their presence.

They belong already to the truth, having believed the testimony (2 Thess. 1: 10 and 2: 13), and thus will appear in the train of Him who is called "Faithful and True," when He comes forth for the judgment of those who received not the love of the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (Rev. 19)

Thus the separation of the saints from the scene of judgment, or the place which the day of the Lord is to surprise, will be like that of Enoch's from the flood, and that was different from Noah's. Noah was carried through it, so that not a hair of his head was wet; but Enoch before it came had been translated to a place which the waters could not reach, or rather out of which the waters came. The Lord, accordingly, when speaking to the Jewish election, takes Noah for his text (Matt. 24); for the remnant, like Noah, are to be carried through the judgment. But our apostle in addressing the church takes his language rather from the translation of Enoch. (1 Thess. 4: 17; 2 Thess. 2: 1.) And this was what the anxiety of the Thessalonian saints, touching themselves as the living saints, craved.

The apostle after this proceeds to describe the object of the righteous wrath of the day. He speaks of "the man of sin." "the son of perdition" -- titles expressive of the character and the doom of the great enemy of God in the latter day -- and I would shortly now consider that object.

This form of evil has been in some sense under the nurture of every age of corrupted Christendom; for from the beginning "the mystery of iniquity," as we here learn, has been at work. But he has not yet been manifested. Wickedness is in the ephah still, with the talent of lead upon it. (Zech. 5: 8) But ere the day of the Lord shall visit the earth the wicked one shall be revealed in the full form of Satan's creature. (2 Thess. 2: 9, 10) For Satan's beauty shall be upon him, his power in him, his seat given to him, and his captives shall serve him. He will thus, in a special and awful sense, be the workmanship of Satan, and he will exalt himself above every god (Dan. 11: 36), be like the Most High (Isa. 14: 14), set his heart as the heart of God (Ezek. 28: 6), and sit in the temple of God, as the apostle describes him, showing himself that he is God. He will say in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps. 14), and being such an one as this, it remains for the spirit of independency of God to bring him forth to perfection. A mere dark and superstitious system could not do this; there must be more than that, for he is to be king of all the children of pride. And there is nothing more signalises this present day of ours than this spirit in man which affects independency of God. There is abroad at present much that is like the getting ready of a temple wherein man may show himself to be God.

"See what manner of stones and what buildings are here!" is the language of every day, as man is now displaying to his fellow the art and workmanship of this busy age, the report of which now rapidly flies all the world over, promising, as men hope, to form all into one great confederate body.

Indeed, I do believe that Satan has now many and many a hand employed in erecting a suitable temple for the man of sin. I speak, of course, only of the spirit of it, and one knows not how long the building may continue, or how long the infant, who in spirit is now preparing to sit in it, may be in attaining his manhood, or (to which the heart turns from all this in sweet relief) how long the forbearance of God may wait on the repentance of sinners. For both the longsuffering of God is to have its blessed measure, and the tower which the children of men are building must again rise to its due elevation. The longsuffering of God,

which is salvation, will lead all known to God to repentance (2 Peter 3), and the iniquity of the wicked be as a breach swelling out in a high wall.

The triumph over the wicked must be displayed in the moment of his fullest pride. The invitation to the banquet was given, not only for the first day, but for the second also, ere Esther made her request, to let Haman's heart be filled with thoughts of his greatness, so that he should fall before the righteous in the height of it all. But when the building shall be completed, and Satan's creature seated in it; when Satan, after his own manner, shall have fulfilled his own promise, "Ye shall be as gods" (Gen. 3: 5), then, upon his consummation, this full-grown form of evil, this manhood of iniquity, the doom of God will come, and the man of sin shall become the son of perdition. It will be the due and righteous mark for God's vengeance, the creature that shall draw down the lightning from the throne, and call forth "the brightness of his coming." (2 Thess. 2: 8), as the apostle here speaks, raising up the Lord again out of His holy habitation, to see and to confound the tower which the children of men have builded.

But it is not our immediate concern to know how long all this will go on. We have to do immediately with the Lord's descent from heaven to the air. And Paul frequently presents His appearing as the immediate object before the hope of the saints (Rom. 8: 23, 30; Rom. 13: 12; Rom. 16: 20; 1 Cor. 1: 7; 1 Cor. 11: 26; 1 Cor. 15: 23, 58; Phil. 1: 10; Phil. 3: 20; Phil. 4: 5; Col. 3: 4; 1 Tim. 6: 14; Titus 2: 13; 1 Thess. 1: 10); and in like manner the other apostles. (James 5: 7; 1 Peter 1: 5; 2 Peter 3: 12; Jude 21.) And so the apostle speaks of himself and of those to whom he was writing as remaining alive for the coming of the Lord, for we are drawn forth to that hope. We wait every moment, as it were, for redemption, having the earnest of it already. (Rom. 8: 23; Eph. 1: 14; Eph. 4: 30.) We wait for the coming, as the coming waits for our fulness. But nothing but that fulness, which is God's salvation (2 Peter 3: 15), do the apostles appear to me ever to contemplate as necessarily delaying it.

Thus (1) as to sufferings and persecutions: it is true they were to be, but they always address the saints as ever being more or less in them. (2) As to death: they speak of it as that through which the saints have already, in some sense, passed (Col. 3: 3), but never present it as the hope of the saint. (3) As to corruptions within the church: they certainly anticipate them, but still they guard that generation against them, speaking of corruptions even of the last days as having already appeared. (4) As to revival of the church: they never, I believe, promise it, or offer it as the hope of the saints. And (5) as to revolutions and political changes in the world: they never allude to them or instruct us about them. If in any sense Paul makes us acquainted with politics, it is with millennial politics; for, while he says nothing to us about the affairs of the present kingdoms of this world, he does tell us of the affairs of the kingdom of the Son of man, how all things are to be subdued to it, and then how it is itself to be delivered up. (1 Cor. 15: 24-26.) But till that kingdom come, he gives us no place in, or dependence upon, the changes in the nations. He would have us be subject to the powers of them, and to pray for their peace; but our heavenly hopes he does not suspend on any such earthly circumstances. In the exhortations even to patience, there is still the drawing nigh of the Lord. (James 5: 8; Heb. 10: 37.) In the old dispensation there was necessarily a delay, because they without us could not be made perfect. But now in our dispensation that needful perfection is come. (Heb. 10: 37; Heb. 11: 40.)

I therefore judge that our immediate hope, that of meeting the Lord in the air, does not necessarily wait for anything. His coming to the earth, I surely know, must wait for much. But that is not our first prospect. I do not say when the rapture will be. It may be more distant than our hope would have it, and hope deferred should make the heart sick. But the delay is not for the purpose of sickening the hearts of saints, but for saving the souls of sinners. "The longsuffering of God is salvation." We should remember that every

moment of the delay, be it long or short. And our patience should be uncomplaining, as God's patience is saving and gracious. But I do not judge that the apostles teach us that there is a necessity for some events taking place before that patience ends in the rapture of the saints. There will be strange and awful events, trials and distress of nations such as never have been. And how soon we know not.

The saints, too, may be left here for much of all this (I say not otherwise); but their eye is not to be towards such things as their due object. Revolutions in the earth may go on without further delay, and help to show that the Lord is beginning to think of Israel, to pluck His hand out of His bosom, and to break His long silence towards His ancient people. But I do not judge that the saints necessarily wait on earth for any stage in that great and interesting action. Their rising into the air to meet their descending Lord is independent of it; an event, too, which is not, as I further judge, the subject of signs and tokens. The hour of it rests in the accomplishing of the number of the elect, and that is the Father's secret, of which no movements among the nations are the sign, or the harbinger. It waits for nothing necessarily, I believe, but the Father's pleasure touching His heavenly family, not even for the manifestation, much less for the destruction of that last and full form of evil, which is to bring the Lord, as we have already seen, in judgment down to the earth.

Something is to hinder this manifestation. (2 Thess. 2: 17) It has been an inquiry among the saints what this let or hindrance is, and no doubt it belongs to such a department of the revelation of God as must have us prepared to find a difference of judgment upon it. But such differences never touch, nor can they touch, "the unity of the Spirit." And it should be our desire, in the love of the Spirit, both to bear with one another in full peace, and to help one another's joy in the further knowledge of these, and all the ways of our blessed Lord.

Were I to speak particularly on this, I should say that it appears to me that we have to judge of the nature of that which hinders by the nature of that which is hindered. It was the presence of "the accursed thing" which in old time let or hindered the manifestation of the power of God, and, till it was removed, that holy power could not display itself. I refer to Achan in the camp of Israel. (Joshua 7) So the presence of the traitor hindered the Lord's expression of His own glory (John 13), but "when he was gone out," that glory was declared.

Now according to this it must be the presence of something good, something that is of God, that is now hindering the manifestation of the full power of Satan, and till that is "taken away" the wicked one cannot be displayed. It is not the way of evil to restrain evil, or of good to restrain good; each rather nourishes its own likeness, while it hinders the full operation of its opposite. It must therefore, I judge, be something good, something that God can own, which is to; katevcon, the letting thing here. But I say no more; for it may be more according to the mind of the Spirit to leave this alone as a secret. The Spirit of God leaves this letting thing, perhaps advisedly, undefined. But even that is enough to show us that the saints are not necessarily delayed here on earth. If that which hinders the revelation of the man of sin is not now to be known by the saints, they may know, even from that, that they do not necessarily wait here for such revelation; and that is all that I am pressing. It may be, I grant, that the letting thing is thus advisedly, in the wisdom of the Spirit, left as a secret.

But this I again say (having slightly noticed it before), that the heavenly people are a people not left like Noah but taken away like Enoch - taken away, too, not by the day of the Lord or by judgment, as the antediluvian generation, but before that day or judgment like that heavenly man who "walked with God." For Enoch was a heavenly man; a man, I mean, of a heavenly destiny. And he was not on the earth when

the judgment of the Lord visited it: he knew of it and prophesied of it (Jude 14), but he was not in it. Ere it came he had gone to heaven. And all this, I believe, savours of us and of our calling. We are a people destined to be taken away from the earth at some undefined moment, though instructed in its subsequent judgment. And when that judgment comes, we shall be in the train, and not before the face, of Him who executes it.

Enoch, as one taken away, is surely our pattern, and not the sinners in the days of Noah. For Enoch was taken away to heaven because "he pleased God"; they were taken away by judgment because "all flesh had corrupted his way" before Him.

Simple, happy, and yet serious lessons!

And surely we can have no doubt that the saints are not to wait on the earth for the coming of the Son of man. They wait for the "Son from heaven" (1 Thess. 1), that is, for the Son of God's descent from heaven to the air, and not for the Son of man's descent to the earth. All this persuades me more and more of the saints being removed before the day of the Lord visits the earth at all. It is not only that they shall be saved out of it, or taken away during it, but taken away before it surprises all them that are on the earth in the day of the coming of the Son of man, who is then to come as a thief.

Such are the great matters taught, I believe, in these epistles, the fear of the Thessalonian saints, as I have noticed, calling for the special comfort of these truths. And as connected with these truths, they show us also the path of the saints into the kingdom. And in that path there is something that is truly blessed. But it is a wondrous and divine subject, and we should remember, as with unshod feet, on whose paths we are treading. May the Lord ever keep and guide our thoughts!

The first stage in the glorious journey is the ascent of the saints, as we have seen, whether dead or alive, in their bodies of glory, to meet the Lord as He reaches the air in His descent from heaven. (1 Thess. 4) This is the coming which the saints now look for, and of which their Lord has said to them, "Behold, I come quickly." It is at this meeting with Him "in the air" that we shall (1 Thess. 2: 19) be presented to Himself, His own glorious and ransomed saints. This will be the redemption of the body. (Rom. 8) The vile body will be fashioned like unto His own glorious body. (Phil. 3) And this meeting will be in the gladness of a jubilee, for the Lord shall descend from heaven with a shout, and the church shall ascend with a responsive song: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15)

And after thus meeting the Lord, and being thus presented to Himself, the next stage in the blissful way will conduct us to the Father. (1 Thess. 3: 13) The path of life will then be ours, beloved, as it has already been His, the path that leads to the Father, and thus to fulness of joy and everlasting pleasures. (Ps. 16) And this will be the full owning of the saints as children, as the next scene into which they are to pass, and which we will look at presently, will be the full owning of them as heirs. For the divine order is, "if children, then heirs." (Rom. 8)

But before I pass to the next stage in these paths of glory, I would observe that these stages in the way of Himself and the saints, the Lord in His own teaching had already presented to the faith of His disciples. For He had told them, that though they could not follow Him at that time (and He was then going to the Father), yet that they should follow Him afterwards, when He had prepared mansions in the same house of the Father for them. But before they should follow Him into that house, He told them also that He would come again, and receive them unto Himself -- as the apostle speaks, meet them alone in the air. (John 13: 36; John 14: 3.)

So that in these words and promises the Lord in John's gospel had already opened these paths to the eye of faith: His own path to the Father, His coming back again to meet His saints, and then their all going together into the Father's house. They were to see Himself before they went into the prepared mansions of the Father's house, as here our apostle presents them meeting the Lord immediately on their ascent into the air, and then, when thus joined with Him, but not till then, going into the Father's presence. (1 Thess. 3: 13) And I know not what language can more clearly express this than our Lord's own words, in the place I have referred to. Speaking of the Father's house, He says, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." He would first receive them to Himself, or meet them alone, and then conduct them into the Father's house. And these are the ascending paths of the saints. We shall have to trace a descending one presently; but in either direction they are still glorious, and the Lord is with them for ever.

And it is now, after the saints are at home with the Lord in the Father's house, I believe that, according to the language of the Jewish prophet, the Son of man comes to the Ancient of days and gets dominion (Dan. 7); or, according to the vision in the Apocalypse, the Lamb takes the book out of the right hand of Him that sits on the throne, and the church rejoices at the prospect of their speedy reign on the earth. (Rev. 5)

Then, in due season, the third stage in the path of glory will be trodden. Jesus, thus in power, will come down with His mighty angels in flaming fire to put away the wicked from the presence of His glory, and to be glorified in His saints. This we have also in our epistles. (2 Thess. 1: 7-10) This will be His coming in clouds -- the clouds of heaven -- not alone as when He met the church in the air, not yet with His saints in the character of the children of the Father, when He took them to their mansions, but with them as the "armies of heaven." He now comes with ten thousand of His saints, as the rider on the white horse, the heaven opening to let down the descending hosts of the Lord to execute judgment on the corrupters of the earth, and then to vindicate His title to the kingdoms of the world. (Matt. 24: 30; Matt. 26: 64; Jude 14; Rev. 1: 7; Rev. 19: 14.) And this will be the redemption of the inheritance. For the glory of the Lord shall survive all the scene of judgment, and the lovers of the truth shall have their place in it when the last lie and darkness of Satan and the world shall be set aside (2 Thess. 2: 14) for ever.

Then shall Jesus be seen as the king in His beauty. Every knee shall bow to Him. He shall sit on the throne of His glory, and His saints receive power with Him, according to their service. (Matt. 25: 31; Luke 19: 17.) This shall be the promised appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ, which He shall show "who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords." (1 Tim. 6) And then shall one enemy after another be subdued to Him, till all close in the delivery up of the kingdom to the Father, that God may be all in all. (1 Cor. 15: 28.)

Thus, beloved, our happy feet will first tread the heavenward way to meet the Lord Himself, and then by His own hand we shall be guided first to the home of love, and then to the throne of glory -- the house of the Father, and the kingdom of the Son of man. And like these were the ways of Joseph and his brethren after their reconciliation; for Joseph first revealed himself to them in the secret of his own presence, commanding every one to go out from him but themselves; then he brought them in and presented them as his brethren to Pharaoh, seated in the seat that was higher than his; and finally he led them forth into the scene of his power and glory, and gave them the richest portion in the inheritance, above the people of the land. (See Gen. 16-47) And let me add that nothing will be lost as we go onward. The joy of the Lord's own presence and the fulness of the Father's house will still be ours after we have entered upon the rule of the kingdom, and ours, beloved, for ever.

Surely we may say, in a deeper sense than even David, our God has spoken to us of our house for a great while to come, even for ever. And again, in a deeper sense than even he, may we not also say: What are we, that we should be brought hitherto? (2 Sam. 7: 18, 19) For His word's sake, and according to His own heart, He has done all these things. (2 Sam. 7: 21) His own love must account for it all; nothing else can. The lowest are exalted the highest. Angels are passed by, and the seed of Abraham taken up. (Heb. 2) The separated Jew is passed by, and sinners of the Gentiles taken up; the tattered prodigal gets the best robe, and he that ate swine's husks, the fatted calf; for grace, the riches and glory of the grace must be displayed, and these are its ways, its blissful ways. It is only for us, beloved, to tread softly here where all is defiled, till our feet travel these paths of joy and glory without fear of thorn or stain for ever.

These great things of God's counsels are thus noticed in these epistles to the Thessalonian saints. They had come forth from an idolatrous world to own the living God in the midst of it, and to wait for His Son from heaven, and the Holy Ghost here feeds their enlarging desires.

But the apostle had to notice also some evil that was among them. He had to admonish as well as comfort, and to pray not only that their hearts might be comforted, but established in every good word and work. (2 Thess. 2: 17) For some of them had ceased "to labour with their hands." It may be that this had been the fruit of some corrupt view of their great distinguishing doctrine, the coming of the Lord. For it is Satan's way, if he cannot rob us of truth, to corrupt it while it is still in our hand. The Thessalonians were zealous, they had come to meet the Lord with purpose of heart, but this had become connected with a desertion of their quiet, industrious, private walk. But he does not condemn this zeal, or seek to correct the evil by withdrawing the Lord's coming from their view. We have seen that it is rather his great subject; but he desires for them that they might be in patient, and not disorderly, waiting for it, and urges this duty upon them by reminding them of his example and his precepts while he was among them. For he had been a labourer for his own support at Thessalonica, this having been so ordered in the provisional wisdom of God, who now by His Spirit uses that fact for the admonition and guidance of the saints there.

Such, I judge, was the standing and character of the church at Thessalonica, with their peculiar doctrines and anxieties, and the apostle's teaching upon them. Eminent they were for simplicity of faith, brotherly love, and desire for the return of the Lord; but withal, as we have seen, needing further light on the ways of the Lord, and also rebuke and admonition for some of their own ways. But above all that, I would again, in closing, press on the thoughts of my brethren, as it was that which was the chief point of attraction to my own mind, this -- that we have here the doctrine of the rapture of the saints, whether "sleeping" or "alive," to meet their Lord "in the air" before He touches the earth.

This rapture into the air may be called resurrection, but it is ascension as well as resurrection, and the church's history is included between the resurrection or ascension of the Lord, and this her own resurrection or ascension. The one gave her life and sent her on her wilderness journey, a stranger on the earth, the other will close her wilderness journey, and take her to her home in heaven.

But these resurrections of the Lord and the church are peculiar. They are resurrections from the dead. It was Sadducean pravity to deny resurrection of the dead, and that doctrine is numbered among Jewish principles in Hebrews 6. But a resurrection from the dead was something quite beyond a Jewish measure of faith. The disciples questioned what it could mean when the Lord spake of it (Mark 9: 10), and an allusion to it quite crossed and passed by all Martha's thoughts, though she presented a fair standard of the nation's faith. (John 11: 24-26) When she spoke of a resurrection at the last day, the Lord told her of a power of resurrection in Himself which would not wait for the last day, but would act in a manner that

should gloriously forestall all other resurrections, by a resurrection worthy of Him who is "the resurrection and the life." And this alone is a resurrection in the power of the presence of the Spirit of God. (Rom. 8: 11) This was the resurrection of the Lord Himself, a resurrection from the dead, and this will be the resurrection of those that are His not "at the last day," as Martha or the Jew might once have spoken, but "at his coming," as the Spirit in the church now speaks. (1 Cor. 15: 23)

The patriarchs of the Jewish family all put special value on their dead bodies; they were religiously laid up in Machpelah, and this care and zeal of theirs was the confession of their sure and certain hope of resurrection. But they connected resurrection with the land of Canaan. And therefore Jacob and Joseph, who died in Egypt, provided that their bones should be carried over and laid in Canaan, thus telling us that their hope of resurrection was the same as their hope of final possession of the promised land. All this, it is true, was perfect in those who had but earthly resurrection hopes.

But the church has a higher hope. Heaven and ascension into the air are now before her; Canaan and resurrection from the grave of Machpelah were before the patriarchs. She has already in spirit gone on high with Christ, and is looking for the day when she shall ascend after Him to meet Him in a glorified body. And this alone is perfect in her as her former hope was perfect in them; for each is in season with the enlarging mind and grace of God towards us. The patriarchs were to die, and they looked for resurrection and the land under God. (Gen. 1: 24, 25) The church is risen, and looks for ascension and heaven with the glorified Lord. (Phil. 3: 20, 21)

And this resurrection or ascension of the saints is, as I have already observed, that which is to close the dispensation of the church, as the resurrection or ascension of the Lord opened it; like the two passages which opened and closed the wilderness to Israel.

And we stand, beloved, on the banks of Jordan. It is the wilderness still, and the Manna and the Rock are wanted still. But it is also the skirts of the glory; our salvation is nearer than when we believed. "The night is far spent, the day is at hand." The Holy Ghost, sent down already from heaven, is in us (1 Cor. 6: 19), the harbinger of approaching daylight. He makes us already "children of light, and the children of the day." (1 Thess. 5: 5) "It is high time to awake." Let us only rise and look out, and we may see the streaks of the morning. The spirit of the day is in us, the pledge that it will itself soon break in glory on our heads.

But there was, it is true, a lingering on the banks of the Jordan. The host of God waited till a certain mission into the defiled land of the Amorites was over. Certain spies went into the land of judgment. (Joshua 2) The sin of the Amorites was then full, and Joshua's sword might have entered at once. But there was a moment of respite, and it proved salvation. It was a standing at the very door of the doomed house, and knocking, if haply any one would even then open the door. And so it was, a poor defiled sinner of the place arose at the bidding, and moved with fear prepared an ark for the saving of her house. She was in the place of death and judgment; but mercy was made to rejoice there, and her house with the scarlet thread hanging from the window became another blood-sprinkled lintel, and the angel of destruction again passed on.

And so do we now wait. The glory has not yet broken, but waits for the appointed mission of grace to go and do its work. The longsuffering of God is salvation, He being not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3) We wait till the body be completed in all its holy and appointed measure, till all have come in the knowledge of the Son of God to a perfect man. Then the power of death shall give way before the feet of the priests again. (Joshua 3) "For if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus

from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you." (Rom. 8: 11) If we thus, as sons and priests of God, carry the ark of the Lord, the waters shall not withstand our passage. We have the hidden life, and that is above the power of death.

These, and richer and better than these, or than heart can conceive, are the ways of Him who hath loved us. They are telling, and will still tell us, that God is love, and that in blessing He is doing His work, and in manifesting grace to the unworthy, showing Himself. We now learn what grace is in all its varied resources, and our feet shall by-and-by tread one path after another, that we may learn what glory is. Since Jesus rose we have found every path in the desert a path of grace; but glory is still before us. Its paths we do not yet tread, as Joshua said to the people on the banks of Jordan, anticipating their speedy passage through it: "Ye have not passed this way heretofore." (Joshua 3: 45)

But, surely, we need not fear the dazzling paths. The hand that divided the Red Sea will, with equal ease, divide the Jordan. He that raised up Christ from the dead, will also quicken our mortal bodies to the same glory. It is as yet an untrod way, it is true; but the hand of the Lord is the same. It is not the glory of Christ that is the great thing. It is the cross of Christ that is the great thing, and that is ours already. If God has given us His suffering Son, it will be found a small and easy thing (to speak after the manner of men) to give us His glorious Son. If we know that Jesus, bowing His head on the tree, is ours, we may well know that Jesus, exalted in highest glory, will be ours; the pledge is sure, and then as there was the pillar of twelve stones, a stone for every tribe, so will there be the abiding praise of all His saints to speak the riches of grace and glory for evermore.

"Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever."

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