

# In His Letter to the Thessalonians

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The gospel is good news for Christians in difficulty, and it can help us to overcome our troubles and find the key to a more exemplary Christian life.*

**Topics:** "Faithfulness of God", "Perseverance in Suffering"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound impact of the Gospel on the Thessalonian believers, highlighting their exemplary faith, love, and perseverance amidst suffering. He notes that their acceptance of the Gospel was not merely intellectual but transformative, leading them to become a model for others in Macedonia and Achaia. Sparks encourages believers to maintain a pure heart and open spirit to receive God's truth, and to understand that suffering can lead to service and spiritual growth. He reassures that despite trials and the apparent triumph of evil, God's faithfulness will prevail, and believers should remain steadfast in hope. Ultimately, the message is one of encouragement, reminding Christians that God is faithful and will fulfill His promises.

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## Transcript

"...our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance (1 Thess. 1:5).

"...having suffered before, and been shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we waxed bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God in much conflict" (2:2).

"...we have been approved of God to be entrusted with the gospel..." (2:4).

"...being affectionately desirous of you, we were well pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls... For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: working night and day, that we might not burden any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God" (2:8,9).

"...we... sent Timothy, our brother and God's minister in the gospel of Christ..." (3:1,2).

"...rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus..." (2 Thess. 1:8).

"...whereunto he called you through our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2:14).

We see that the Gospel has quite a place in these letters. We seek now to discover the real meaning of the gospel, that is, the essential meaning of the good tidings, from the standpoint of these letters and the Thessalonian believers, and we shall be helped to that understanding if we take a look at the spiritual history, life and state of these believers in Thessalonica.

### The Thessalonian Christians an Example

You will at a glance see what a special regard Paul had for them. He reputedly uses words such as these: "We give thanks to God always for you all". Both in the first and second letters he speaks like that (1. 1:2; 2. 1:3, 2:13). "We give thanks to God for you". And then he says about them a very wonderful thing, which gives us a definite lead in this consideration. He says in the first letter, chapter 1, verse 7: "Ye became an ensample to all that believe in Macedonia and in Achaia". That is something to say about a company of the Lord's people, and it leads us at once to ask the question - How were they an ensample? It was evidently not only to those immediately referred to, in all Macedonia, and Achaia, for these letters remain unto this day, and they therefore represented that which is an example for all the Lord's people. If that was true of them, then the gospel must have meant something very much where they were concerned. It must have had a very special form of expression in them, and so we seek to answer the question: How were they "an ensample to all that believe"?

### A Pure Spirit and a Clean Heart

We find the answer in the first place here in this very first chapter. It was in their realism in reception of the gospel. "Our gospel came unto you not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance". And again: "when ye received from us the word of the message, even the word of God, ye accepted it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God" (2:13). Now that represents a very clean start; and if we are going to come to the place of these Thessalonian believers, if the gospel is to have that expression in us that it had in them, if it is going to be true in our case that we are an example to all them that believe, then it is very important that we have a clean start.

For us, of course, if we have advanced in the Christian life without becoming such exemplary believers, that may mean retracing our steps in order to start again somewhere where we have gone wrong; clearing away a lot of rubbish and starting at a certain point all over again. But I am thinking also of young Christians who have recently made the start. You are really at the beginning, and we are most concerned about you, because you may meet many old Christians who are not by any means an example to all that believe. I am sorry to have to say that, but it is quite true, and we do not want you to be like that. We want you to be exemplary Christians; those of whom the Apostle Paul, if he were present, could say, 'I thank God always for you'. It would be a great thing, would it not, if that could be said of us? 'Thank God for him! Thank God for her! Thank God that ever we came into touch with this one, and that one! I always thank God for them - they are an example of what Christians ought to be!'

Now, that is the desire of the Lord, that is our desire for you, and it should be the desire of our hearts for ourselves. Although we may not have succeeded, let us not give up hope that some may yet give thanks for us, that we may be an example, that in some things, at any rate, it may be true of us as it was of these. Paul says here: "Ye became imitators of us" (1 Thess. 1:6). The Lord help us to be such an example that we could invite others, in some respects at least, to imitate us, without any spiritual pride.

Well, if this is to be so, the start must be a clean one. You see, quite evidently, as these Thessalonians listened to Paul preaching the good tidings, their minds and hearts were free from prejudice. They would

not have come to the conclusion to which they did come if there had been any prejudice, if they had already closed down the matter in their minds, or come to a set position. They were open in heart from the outset, ready for whatever was of God, and that created a capacity for discerning what was of God. You will never know whether a thing is of God if you entertain prejudice, if you have already judged it, if already you have come to a fixed position. If you are settled in your mind, closed in your heart, harbour suspicions and fears, you have already sabotaged the work of the Holy Spirit, and you will never know if the thing is of God. You must be open-hearted, open-minded, free from suspicions and prejudices, and ready in this attitude - 'Now, if there is anything of the Lord, anything of God, I am ready for that, no matter through whom it comes, how it comes, where it comes. If it is of God, I am ready for it'. That creates a disposition to which the Holy Spirit can bear witness, and makes things possible for the Lord.

Now, as we shall see, that is exactly how these Thessalonians were. They received the word, yes, in much affliction, but they received it as the Word of God, not as the word of man. Because of their purity of spirit, they had the sense - 'This thing is right, this is of God!' That was a good start. As I said earlier, it may be that some of us will have to get back somewhere to make that start again. To any reading these words, who may be of advanced years in the Christian life, I would say: Dear friend, if you have anywhere on the road become in any way affected, infected, by prejudice and suspicion, you have closed the door to anything further of God. Let us clearly understand that. It is true that -

'The Lord hath yet more light and truth

To break forth from His Word'.

We have not yet exhausted all that the Lord has to show us in His Word; but He will only show it to the pure in heart. "The pure in heart... shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

These Thessalonians, then, had a pure spirit from the start.

### Mutuality and Maturity

The next thing that we notice about them, after their realism in reception, was their mutuality and maturity - two things which always go together. In both these letters, that which the Apostle speaks about perhaps more than anything else is the wonderful love between these believers. "The love of each one of you all toward one another aboundeth" (2 Thess. 1:3). He is speaking all the way through about their mutual love. And going alongside of that was their spiritual growth. You see, love always builds up (1 Cor. 8:1). This kind of love, mutual love, always means spiritual increase. We can see how true that is if we view it from the opposite standpoint. Little, personal, petty, selfish, separated, individual Christians, or companies or bodies of Christians who are exclusive and closed, and have not a wide open heart of love to all saints - how small they are, how cramped they are. It is true. And it is in this mutual love one for another, and growing and increasing love one for another, that spiritual growth takes place. Do not forget that. If you are concerned about the spiritual growth of your own heart, your own life, and that of others, it will be along the line of love, mutual love, and you are the one to begin it. Mutuality and maturity always go together.

### Suffering and Service

And then, in the third place, you will find that they were characterized by suffering and service, and this is a wonderful Divine combination. It is something that is not natural. The Apostle had much to say about it, as you will see if you underline the word 'suffering' in these letters, and note his references to their

sufferings and their afflictions. They "received the word in much affliction" (1 Thess. 1:6). He speaks about their sufferings, and he describes those sufferings. They in Thessalonica were suffering along the same lines and for the same causes as their brethren in Judaea, he said (2:14).

Now, in Judaea, that is, in the country of the Jews, you know how the Christians suffered. Christ Himself suffered at the hands of the Jews; Stephen was martyred at the hands of the Jews; the Church met its first persecutions in Judaea, in Jerusalem, and they were scattered abroad by the persecutions that arose there over Stephen; and Paul says, 'Now you are suffering in that way'. Evidently there was in Thessalonica much persecution, much opposition; threats and all sorts of difficulties - the kind of thing, perhaps, where it was very difficult for them to do business and get jobs, all because the business was in the hands of those who had no room for this Christianity and for these Christians.

But with all that severe suffering, and with all their "much affliction" they did not become introspective. That is the peril of suffering. If you are suffering frustration, opposition, persecution, or if the best jobs are given to someone else, and so on, the natural thing is to turn in upon yourself, to be very sorry for yourself, to begin to nurse your trouble and be wholly occupied with yourself. But here, suffering led to service.

The Apostle says that the Word went forth from them, not only through all the region of Macedonia and Achaia, but throughout the whole country (1:8). Their suffering - what did it do? It made them turn outwards, and say, 'There are others everywhere in need, in suffering, as we: let us see what we can do for them'. That is the way to respond to the gospel, is it not? That speaks of the glorious gospel! The gospel had become to them such good news that it had the effect upon them of delivering them entirely from all self-pity in the deepest affliction. Let us take that to heart.

#### Patience and Hope

Furthermore the Apostle speaks of their "patience of hope" (1:3), and that simply means that they did not easily give up. That counts for something, you know. You are having a difficult time; everything and everybody is against you. It is so easy to give up - just to give up; to draw out of the race, or drop your hands in the fight, and say, 'It is no use - better give it all up'. But no: these Christians had patience and hope. They did not easily give up, they 'stuck to it', and we shall see that they had a hope that kept them sticking to it.

Such were these who were 'an example to all that believe'. In them we see the constituents of exemplary Christians, and they are the true features of the gospel. You see, the gospel is for Christians in difficulty! It is not only for the unsaved, but for Christians when they are in difficulty or in suffering. It is still good news. If we lose the 'good news' element in the gospel, if it loses for us its keen edge as 'good tidings', we become stale; we come to the place where we 'know it all'. If we lose that sense, then when trouble comes we give up, we let go; but if to have come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus is still for us the greatest thing in all the world and all the universe, then we get through.

#### Difficulties Because of Temperament

Now, because difficulties always correspond to our dispositions, that is, what we are always gives rise to the nature of our trials, so it was with the Thessalonians. Nothing is a trial to you unless you are made in a certain way. Something that is a trial to you might never be a trial to me at all. Or it might be the other way round. What might be a terrible thing to me and knock me right off my balance, other people could go through quite calmly, and wonder what I am making such a fuss about. Our troubles and our trials very

largely take their rise from the way we are made.

Now I want you to follow this. The thoroughness of these Thessalonian believers led them into peculiar testings. And that is always the case. If you are not thorough-going, you will not have thorough-going difficulties. You will get through more or less easily. If you are thorough-going, you are going to meet thorough-going testings. They arise quite naturally out of your own attitude or your own disposition.

Now, you know that human nature and constitution is made in various ways. You know in general that we are not all alike. That is just as well! But we can to a very large extent classify human nature into different categories - what we call temperaments. In the main there are seven different temperaments, or categories of human constitution. I am not going to deal with that in detail, but there is a very useful point here on this matter. These Thessalonians were quite clearly of the 'practical' temperament, and the keenness of their particular sufferings was largely found because they were like that. I do not, of course, mean that other people do not suffer, but they suffer in other ways.

You see, the standard of life of the practical temperament is quick and direct returns. We must see something for our money very quickly! It is the business temperament, the temperament of commercial life. The things which govern this temperament are quick successes. 'Success' is the great word of the practical temperament. It is success that succeeds. The successful are the idols of this particular kind of make-up.

There is not much sentiment here. These people cannot stop for sentiment. Things that are not what they call practical are regarded by them as just 'sentimental'. They are not so, of course, but that is how Martha reacted to Mary. Mary was not sentimental, but Martha thought she was, because Martha was so pre-eminently practical. Again, there is very little imagination in this make-up. It rides roughshod over all sensibilities. It does not stop to think how people feel about what is said; it just goes right on.

And then it sometimes makes terrible mistakes - it confuses things. For instance, it mistakes inquisitiveness for depth, because it has always to be asking endless questions. The 'practical' people are always asking questions, questions, questions; they keep you going with questions all the time, thinking that this is an evidence of spiritual depth. They think that they are not just taking things at their surface value, they are being very practical, as well as deep. But there is a good deal of difference between inquisitiveness and depth. It is very possible to confuse things.

Now we want to get to understand these Thessalonians and the effect of the gospel. Can we not now picture them, in the light of what I have said? They responded quickly, and in a very practical way, and in a very thorough-going way. One of the major themes to which they responded was the coming of the Lord. Right at the beginning Paul says: "Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven" (1:9,10). It was a big thing with them, this coming of the Lord, and they had concluded that the Lord's coming would take place, at latest, in their own lifetime. That was their practical reaction to the gospel, and it was good in its way. But you know that these two letters of Paul are almost entirely occupied with correcting a false element in that reaction.

Now you find them in trouble - trouble springing out of their own make-up - in this matter. They had been saying to themselves something like this. 'The Lord is coming - we have been told the Lord is coming, we have accepted that "the coming of the Lord draweth nigh" and we have accepted that to happen any day; and we were told that, when the Lord came, all His own would be caught up to meet Him. We concluded that all believers would be caught up, be raptured, and enter into the glory like that, together. Oh, what a

wonderful thing - all going together into the presence of the Lord! But some of our friends died, yesterday, last week, and people are still dying. It seems to upset this whole matter of all being caught up together.' They were thrown into confusion and consternation because, instead of the Lord coming and gathering them all up to Himself, there were people amongst them going into the grave. It was a setback for their practical make-up, you see.

Now, the Apostle writes to them. He writes to them the gospel, the good news, for people who are in perplexity and in sorrow because of disappointment in this way, and he says: 'I want you to know, dear brethren, I want you to understand, that that makes no difference in the final issue. When the Lord comes, they will not have gone before us; and when He comes, we shall not go before them. It just does not make any difference. They that are asleep in Jesus and we who are alive and remain shall all be caught up together. You need not allow this thing to trouble you any more. You must not sorrow as those who have no hope, or who have lost their great hope - as those whose great hope of the coming of the Lord has been struck at by the deaths of these believers. There is really no place for any element of disappointment over this. It is good news for those who have lost loved ones - it is good news concerning the issue of life and death - that we shall all together go up "to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." It is just wonderful.'

So we see that here Paul was able to bring in the gospel - the good news, the good tidings - in order to get over a certain difficulty that had arisen because of their make-up, their disposition.

#### A Help to Know One's Own Disposition

Let us pause there for a minute. You know, we should get over a great many of our troubles if we knew what our temperaments were. If only we would sit down for a minute - and this is not introspection at all - sit down for a minute and say: 'Now, what is my peculiar disposition and make-up? What is the thing to which, by reason of my constitution, I am most prone? What are the factors, the elements, that make up my temperament?' If you can put your finger on that, you have the key to many of your troubles. Asaph, the psalmist, was having a very bad time on one occasion. He looked at the wicked and saw them prospering. He saw the righteous having a difficult time - himself included - and he got very downhearted about all this. But then he pulled himself together, he recollected, and he said: "This is my infirmity; but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High" (Ps. 127:10). "This is my infirmity"! This is not the Lord, this is not the truth - this is just me, this is my proneness to go down in times of difficulty. It is how I am made; it is my reaction to trouble.'

Now, perhaps that sounds a very naturalistic way of dealing with things. But I have not finished yet. If you and I will understand this thing - that a lot of our trouble comes because we are made in a certain way; it is really in our own constitution - we shall have a ground upon which to go to the Lord. We shall be able to go to the Lord and say: 'Lord, You know how I am made; You know how I naturally react to things. You know how, because I am made that way, I am always being caught in certain ways; You know how it is that I behave under certain strains. You know me, Lord. Now, Lord, You are different from what I am: where I am weak, You are strong; where I am faulty, You are perfect.'

Do you not see that the Lord Jesus, the perfect Man, is the perfect balance of all the good qualities in all the temperaments, that in Him are none of the bad qualities of any temperament, and that the Holy Spirit can make Christ to be unto us that which we are not in ourselves? That is the great wonder, the great mystery, the great glory, of the meaning of Christ as mediated to us by the Holy Spirit. It is the wonder of

His humanity: a perfect manhood without any of all this that troubles us. Look at Him under duress: He does not go down. Look at Him from any standpoint of testing and trial: He goes through. But He is man. He is not going through on the basis of His Deity. He is going through on the basis of His perfect humanity, and that is to be mediated to us.

Spiritual growth means this, that we are becoming something other than what we are naturally. Is it not so? Naturally, we may be inclined to be rather miserable people - always taking a miserable view, always going down in the dumps. Now, when the Holy Spirit takes charge of us, the miserably inclined people become joyful, although it is not natural for them to be joyful. That is the miracle of the Christian life. We become something that we are not naturally. Naturally, we would very quickly go down under some kinds of criticism or persecution, and nurse our troubles, but when the Lord Jesus is in us, we can take it and go on. We do not go down, we go on. He makes us other than what we are. That is the work of grace in the life of the believer.

These Thessalonians suffered very much because of their practical temperament. They expected that that of which they had been told at the first would come about immediately. They were saying to themselves: 'The Lord will come - He may come today, any day - and that will be the end of all our troubles. But time is going on, and people are dying, and things are getting more and more difficult. It does not look very much as though the Lord is coming...' They may have been almost at the point of breaking and scattering. And at that point a new presentation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus came in, bringing the hope of something different from what they were naturally.

What is true in the case of the practical temperament is true in all other temperaments. We may take this as a principle. If we only understood it, the Lord is dealing with every one of us like that. He is dealing with us according to what we are. It is no use trying to stereotype or standardise the dealings of God with people. God's dealings with me would perhaps not be very troublesome to you, but God's dealings with you might very well throw me right off my feet. He deals with us according to ourselves, in order that there may be that of Christ in us which is not of ourselves. I say again, that is the work of grace. That is the mediation of Christ - that is the very meaning of being conformed to the image of Christ. It is partaking of His nature - something utterly different. But it is a terrible process. Now we have got to get through as these people got through.

Is that good news? I think it is. I think that is the gospel, 'good tidings'. It is good tidings for the man who is always too ready to drop out and give up and be miserable. It is good tidings to those who, because of their own natural expectations and reactions, are disappointed in what is actually happening. It is good tidings that Christ is something other than we are, and that we can be saved from what we are by Christ. It is very practical, you see. How are we saved from what we are? By Christ! Not by Christ just coming and putting out His hands and pulling us up. That is what we are all wanting Him to do. We are appealing to the Lord to come and do something like that, literally lift us right out of where we are. What He is doing is displacing us, and putting Himself in our place in an inward way. It is a process, a deep process, and it is perhaps only over years that you can see more of Christ. That person used to be such-and-such a one, but there is a difference now, you can see Christ now; they are no longer what they used to be, they are getting over that. They are being "changed into the same image". That is good news: good news for the Thessalonians, and good news for us.

The Test at the End

But there is one other thing with these Thessalonians. Things in the world were becoming increasingly difficult; they were going from bad to worse. These dear people saw things happening, they saw forces at work, and they thought: 'This does not look as though the Lord is coming, as though His Kingdom is coming. It looks as though Satan is having it all his own way. Things are going from bad to worse; and as to things being changed, as to there being "a new heaven and a new earth" and a new world state, all this that we have thought would come with the coming of Christ and His Kingdom, we do not see any sign of it at all. Rather is it going the other way: the world is getting worse, evil men are waxing worse and worse. There seems to be more and more of the Devil than ever there was.'

Now, the Apostle wrote his letters on that, and he said: 'Look here, that does not mean things going wrong; that does not mean disappointment for your expectations. The Lord will not come until those things have happened and come to fulness. "The mystery of lawlessness does already work". Before He comes, two things must happen.

'First of all, there must take place a great falling away.' A great falling away? Christians falling away? Professing Christians falling away, going away from the Lord, turning back? That is not very practical for these people! Yes, that is exactly what will happen toward the end. The nearer the coming of the Lord is, the more the test will be finding people out. The sieve will be at work. There will be a falling away; there will be many people - professors - who say, 'We are not going with this, we cannot go on with this any longer'. They will go back from following the Lord. It always was so. It was so in the days of our Lord's flesh. At the end it will be like that. 'Oh, how disappointing!' Ah, yes, but understand that that is how it will be, and that it does not mean that everything has gone wrong. It is just going to be like that. When the Lord does take away a people, it will be a people who have gone on with Him to the end; and He is testing, testing. 'Now, you Thessalonians, understand that what He is doing is testing you as to whether you will go right on to the end.' It has to be made manifest whether the root of the matter is in believers, or if it is only profession. So do not misunderstand the signs of the times.

And then the second thing. Antichrist, that man of sin, the Devil, seems to be getting more and more of his own way, they thought. And it was so. 'But', said the Apostle, 'the Lord's day will not come until that man of sin, the Antichrist, has been revealed.' 'Oh, we thought Christ was coming, not Antichrist!' Ah, but Christ will not come until Antichrist has come. Do not misunderstand things. If there is a mighty movement in this world by Satan, the Devil seemingly incarnate, a great incarnation of him - it may be in man form or system form, whatever it is - that is dead set upon obliterating everything that belongs to Christ, that is not a bad sign. That is a good sign - the Lord is about to come! That is the good news in the day when the Devil seems to be carrying everything away. That is portentous. The Lord is at hand.

"But when these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads; because your redemption draweth nigh", said Jesus (Luke 21:28). So if suffering increases, if patience is tested; if Satan seems to be having it his way, and getting the power into his hands, do not be deceived - do not allow that to say to you, 'Well, our hope is not being realised.' Turn it round the other way, and say, 'These are the very things that say that our hope is about to be realised.' This is good news for the day of adversity, good news for Christians in suffering, good news when Satan is doing his worst. The Lord is at hand!

The Summing up of the Whole Matter

But where shall we sum it all up? We have always sought to find a little fragment in which it can be all concluded, and I think we have it here:

"Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it" (1 Thess. 5:24).

Here is the conclusion and summing up of the whole matter. Yes, beloved ones are dying, going to the Lord. Time is dragging on. The Devil is apparently gaining power and doing his worst. We, the Lord's people, are in suffering: nevertheless, God is able to see us through. "Who will also do it." What more do we want? Over against everything else - 'He will also do it.' That is good news! After all, and in the final summing up, the good news is that it is not left with us. It is the Lord's matter. What is left to us is to believe God, to seek to understand His ways, to be steadfast, to hope unto the end, and then the Lord takes over. "Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it" Good news!

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