

The Epistle to the Thessalonians.

Introductory.

We come, now, to the last of the seven Text-books prepared and provided for our instruction by the Holy Spirit. And before we have done we shall see why, though written earlier than those to any of the other six churches, it is placed last in order.

It stands out by itself. There is no other Epistle which answers to it. The other two primary Epistles (Romans and Ephesians), written for "doctrine and instruction," are each followed by two others, one for "reproof" as to practical failure, and the other for "correction" as to doctrinal departure, with respect to the special teaching of each respectively. But Thessalonians is followed by no other church-epistles. The other six epistles make two perfect and complete sets of three each;⁹⁵ but Thessalonians stands alone. It is full of doctrine, as are the other two but, unlike the two pairs (Cor. and Gal. on the one hand, and Phil. and Col. on the other), there is an entire absence of reproof and correction, both as to practice and doctrine. There are a few exhortations, it is true, but there is no blame: nothing but unqualified thanksgiving and praise for their faith and love and hope from beginning to end. Indeed, we have here

A MODEL CHURCH

—the only one of all the seven which is specially spoken of as a church—"the Church of the Thessalonians," as though it were the only one worthy of the name; the only one which exhibits the full results of having learnt the lessons taught in Romans and Ephesians.

95. The number *seven* is generally divided into *four* and *three*; but sometimes (as in the Golden Candlestick) into *six* and *one*. In these seven epistles we have both these arrangements.

The saints of "the Church of the Thessalonians" could have passed an examination in the doctrines taught in those two Epistles. Hence, their wonderful character; individually and collectively.

The Apostle had no occasion to say, as he said to the Corinthians, "I fear when I come I shall not find you such as I would . . . and lest when I come again my God will humble me among you, and I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed" (2 Cor. xii. 20, 21).

There was no need to say, as he said to the Galatians, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another Gospel" (Gal. i. 6), or, "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal. iii. 1).

There was no occasion to say to the Thessalonians as he said to the Philippians, "Many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you, even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ; whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things" (Phil. iii. 18, 19).

There was no need to say to the Thessalonians, as he said to the Colossians, "Beware lest any man spoil you through vain deceitful philosophy" (Col. ii. 8).

All these four epistles contain reproof and correction: but in those to the Thessalonians, we find the very opposite. Not only no blame, but continuous praise.

The first epistle is stamped (after the epistolary portion) by the opening words, "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God, even our Father; knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God" (i. 2-4).

This is followed by "Ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia" (i. 7).

"For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God,

which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (ii. 13).

"For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God?" (iii. 9).

The second epistle is characterised in the same way. It opens with the words, "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth; so that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure" (2 Thess. i. 3, 4).

"We are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (ii. 13).

The epistle closes with the expression of the assurance: "We have confidence in the Lord touching you, that ye both do and will do the things which we command you" (iii. 4).

There was no need of laboured argument to prove the fundamental doctrine of resurrection, as in 1 Cor. xv.

No fear lest he had bestowed upon them labour in vain, as in Gal. iv. 11.

No tearful warnings against strife and vain-glory, as in Phil. i. 15, 16; ii. 3; iii. 18, 19.

No need of asking, "if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?" as in Col. ii. 20.

True, in one place, and only one, he has to say "We hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work and eat their own bread (2 Thess. iii. 11).

With this single exception—which is all the stronger, not merely because it is the only one, but because of its character when compared with the reproofs and corrections of the four other epistles—with this single exception, there is one devout note of praise and thanksgiving throughout the two epistles.

But not only is "the Church of the Thessalonians" a model

church in this respect; it is a model also in that it was most remarkable for its missionary activity. Sound doctrine produced fruitful service for God.

From this assembly in Thessalonica sounded forth the word of God throughout Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess. i. 8). A tract of country as large as Great Britain was evangelised by this little flock. How they did it we do not know: for they had no railways, no printing-presses, no great missionary societies; but all we know is that in some way they sounded forth the word of God throughout that vast region.

And we know also that this is what other churches then and since have not been remarkable for, and for which they are not noted in our own day.

There must be therefore some cause for this great difference: some secret, of which other churches were, and are not, possessed.

What that secret was we learn through a fact which is strongly emphasised. Three times the Apostle calls attention to it; and lays stress upon "the manner of his entering into" Thessalonica. In 1 Thess. i. 5, he says, "Ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake." In verse 9, "They themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you." And in chap. ii. 1, he says, "For yourselves know, brethren, that our entrance in unto you was not in vain."

The question arises, What was there so peculiar or remarkable in that "manner" to which he thus three times so pointedly refers? The answer is given in Acts xvii., where we have the historic record of his arrival at Thessalonica: and we read, "Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures."

How refreshing it is to read these simple words! Here was Thessalonica, a city of some 70,000 inhabitants, far worse than any city with which we are acquainted to-day. The Gentiles sunk in all the awful abominations of heathen idolatry, and the Jews hating the very name of Christ, and persecuting the saints of God (2 Thess. ii. 14-16). Some were religious, some were profane; some were moral, some were vicious; but all alike were ignorant of Christ, and all alike sinners and transgressors before God.

Yet the Apostle had no need of bands of music, sensational announcements, musical services, or solo singers; none of the tricks or contrivances of the present day; none of the modern methods or new fashions of the nineteenth century! Why? *Because he had not lost faith in the power of God's Word!* And this, because he had not lost faith in its *truth!* He believed that the word of God was able to accomplish all God's purposes of grace: that it must prosper in the thing whereto God sent it, and accomplish that which He pleases (Isa. lv. 11).

He believed that the Gospel was "the power of God unto salvation" and, therefore, needed no "handmaids" or "helpmeets." His one aim was not to "get the people in," but to *get the Word of God in*, and leave that to work effectually by the Holy Ghost in the hearts of those whom He had gathered together by His almighty power.

We are already arriving at the secret of the vast difference between the purity, holiness, and zeal of that model church, which makes it stand out in such marked contrast with the corruption, error, and worldliness of modern churches. But there was more than this.

Not only did the apostle reason with them out of the written Word, but he preached the Living Word—the Lord Jesus Christ,—“opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus whom I preach unto you is the Messiah” (verse 3). This, we learn from verse 7, meant that He was coming again, “another King.” Thus He proclaimed a complete Saviour:— *a suffering* Saviour, a *risen* Saviour, and a *coming* Saviour. In a word, he preached Christ to them, and did not separate Christ and the Scriptures. He had one Gospel. Not one for Gentile idolators and another for religious Jews; not one for “men” and another for “women only,” but a gospel for *sinners*. For all alike are under sin, whatever may be the natural privileges of birth or education.

It is most important, in learning the secret which produced this model church, to note that the apostle did not go to Thessalonica with religious ordinances, ecclesiastical ceremonies, or sacraments: not with plans for self-improvement, called “Christian science,”

secular education, social reform, the sanitation of Thessalonica, or the “duties of citizenship.” He did not aim at making “reformed characters,” but at converting sinners by the power of the Holy Ghost. Still less did he go to amuse the ungodly, or to provide entertainments for the goats. He went to seek out lost sinners, to lead them to the knowledge of the Saviour.

He laid his axe at the root of the tree. He planted the cross of Christ before them. He proved that they were lost, and needed a Saviour: and not that they could do something themselves, and needed only a helper. He taught them that Christ had died for His People, and that they had died in Him (Romans); that Christ had risen again, and that they had risen in Him, and were “seated in the Heavenlies in Him” (Ephesians); that Christ was coming again, and they were coming with Him (Thessalonians). Hence their *faith* was in Christ; their *love* was rooted and grounded in Him; and their *hope* was anchored within the veil. All their Christian graces were in fullest exercise, and were all developed and increased in due proportion. The reason of the thanksgiving is given and shown by a comparison of 1 Thess. i. 3 with verses 9 and 10:—

Their “work of faith” (verse 3) was seen in that they had “turned to God” from every idol (verse 9).

Their “labour of love” (verse 3) was seen in that they now served the living and true God (verse 9).

Their “patience of hope” (verse 3) was seen in that they waited for God's Son from heaven (v. 10).

Their Christian character was complete: and no Christian character can be complete unless these three Christian graces are present in due and proper proportion.

But the majority of Christians to-day are practically destitute of these three Christian graces. Their *faith* in the *truth*, of God's Word is going, and therefore their faith in *its power* is waning.

Their *love* is not “the love of God shed abroad in the heart;” and therefore it is of self: and, not knowing the truth as to the members of the one body in Christ, love as expressed in true Christian charity is almost unknown, and though admired as “the greatest thing in *the world*” is the *least* of all things *in the Church*.

And as to *hope*; well, the majority of Christians are waiting for

many things which God has not given as objects of hope; while the one thing which He has definitely given as the object they not only are not waiting for themselves, but condemn those who are!

Some are waiting for *death*, which is not an object of hope, for people die without waiting for it.

Some are waiting for an outpouring of the Spirit of God, and not for the Son of God.

Some are waiting for the world to be converted, and not for it to be judged by the Son of Man at His coming.

Some are waiting for the return of God's ancient People to their land, instead of the return of God's Son to this world.

Some are waiting for the revelation of Antichrist, instead of the revelation of Christ.

While others tell us that the Lord's coming was fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem, in spite of the fact here stated that these saints at Thessalonica were not waiting for Titus to come with his armies from Rome, but for God's Son to come with His holy angels from heaven.

Some are content with Christ crucified; and, though knowing and rejoicing in the benefits of His death and passion, are ignorant of the truths connected with a Risen Christ, and our new resurrection life and walk in Him.

Still more ignorant are the great mass of Christians as to His coming again, and the fact that this is the great and "blessed hope" which is the portion of all who are in Christ.

So great and general is the ignorance that, when professing Christians boldly avow that they "take no interest in the coming of Christ," they do not even know enough to see that they are exposing their ignorance as to their very *standing*, which God has given His people in Christ.

No wonder, then, that there is this difference between the Church of the Thessalonians and the churches of this day!

No wonder that, being ignorant of the great Mystery of the "one Body" in Christ, they are taken up with their own and other so-called "bodies," and are striving in controversy about them, as the Corinthians.

No wonder that, having begun in the spirits they are seeking to

be made perfect in the flesh, as the Galatians.

No wonder that, losing sight of the fact that the members are "all one in Christ Jesus," they are not striving together for the faith of the Gospel with one mind and one spirit, but doing many things from "strife and vainglory," as were the Philippians.

No wonder that, "not holding the head," they are not increasing, "with the increase of God;" and are "subject to ordinances . . . after the commandments and doctrines of men," as were the Colossians.

Such was not the condition of the Church of the Thessalonians: and the secret is laid open before our eyes.

The Epistle to the Thessalonians.

II.—THE FIRST EPISTLE (i. 2—iii. 13)

This model Church—"the Church of the Thessalonians"—was now in a position to receive further detailed "doctrine" and "instruction" respecting the Lord's coming again, as none of the other churches had been).

Not until we know subjectively all the blessings which God has given His People in Christ dead and risen again, in and with Him, and seated in the Heavens, not only in Christ personal, but in "the Christ" Mystical or "Spiritual," can Christians be in a position to learn further details concerning His return from heaven.

True, they had been taught "to wait for God's Son from heaven," and they waited. That formed their character; that satisfied and increased their hope; that influenced their walk; that purified their life as nothing else in this world could do.

But note: all this was the action of the *heart*, not of the *head*; and by *faith* they reckoned themselves to have died with Christ, and risen to a walk in newness of life in Christ, and to be seated in heavenly places in Christ; hence their *love* was drawn out to Him who had done such great and wondrous things for them, while their *hope* was set upon Him (1 John iii. 3 R.V.), and they waited for God's Son from heaven. This, therefore, was part of their standing as Christians. And this completeness of Christian character was the secret of their holiness of life and of their missionary activity.

The reason why we see so little of either in the present day is that Christian character is not thus complete, through ignorance of what the Holy Spirit has written for our instruction. And the sad result is, that false and vain methods are resorted to in order to procure both holiness of life and missionary zeal.

The new gospel of "consecration" and "surrender" has been vainly invented to supply one defect while all sorts of devices are resorted to in order to supply the other.

A missionary spirit is supposed to be produced by fictitious methods, by exhibiting to the eye in some of many ways the proportion of Christians to heathen; by working on the feelings and exciting compassion; "missionary missions," and "missionary exhibitions," in which sometimes "living pictures" are introduced, and modest English girls are stared at while they are dressed up so as to represent an Eastern Zenana (otherwise known as a "Harem"!); these are among the modern inventions, the result of which is supposed to create what is called a "missionary spirit"!

Not so was the missionary zeal of the Thessalonians produced. Not in this way were they made to sound forth the word of God through Macedonia and Achaia. Not by *sentiment*, but by *truth*, was all their "labour of love" produced, by which they served the living and true God; and this was the spontaneous outcome of their complete Christian character, which no barriers could hinder, and no artificial devices create.

Some Christians already see these evils, and think the remedy is to be found in witnessing more faithfully to the neglected truth of the Lord's second coming. But this is really only another attempt to remove the effects without touching the cause.

What is the cause of this truth being neglected? We reply, Ignorance as to the teaching which the Holy Spirit has given to us in the Church Epistles through Paul! Ignorance, therefore, as to our standing in Christ!

What is needed then is to return to "the old paths" which have been forsaken; to study subjectively, and learn spiritually, and understand experimentally, the text-books of the Christian profession: to know first of all the Epistle to the Romans, to master the fundamental teaching of the first eight chapters, and to go on through the other Epistles.

What would be the result? Why, that holiness of life, and true missionary zeal, would be seen in blessed activity as *the spontaneous outcome* of true doctrine; and this without an effort; without aiming at it, without trying to be, or to do, or to accomplish this or that.

The *walk* would be holy, without vows and resolutions, and surrenderings and "re-consecrations;" and the *service* would be

according to knowledge, and full of holy zeal, without the "urgent appeals" to the feelings or the pocket.

This, we repeat, was the position attained by this model church, as the irrepensible result of the Spirit's teaching. To-day, Christians are seeking for the Spirit's power and "endowment," not knowing that it is not to be obtained in this way, or out of the Divine order in which alone it can come.

The first work of the Holy Spirit is declared to be, "He shall guide you unto all the truth." And it is not until after this that the promise is given, "Ye shall be endued with Power from on high."

Christians want to have the power without the truth; and in seeking for the one apart from the other, they lose both. Hence it is that we see to-day what we do see—confusion, darkness, and misdirected zeal, both in the teachers and the taught; for when the blind lead the blind, both fall into the ditch.

The Thessalonian saints had other teachers; and they had "not so learned Christ."

They had "learned HIM;" and hence they waited for Him—a crucified, risen, and coming Saviour, because of all that that meant for Him and for them.

Now, therefore, the Holy Spirit can proceed to instruct them in further detail as to the coming of Him for whom they waited.

This brings us to consider these two Epistles in order; and first we have to look at each, as a whole, in order to earn the scope. We are at once struck with the same phenomena that we noticed in the structure of Romans and Ephesians, as contrasted with the four other Epistles viz., the large portion occupied with doctrine. And, in this case, it is doctrine concerning the Lord's coming again.

More than a quarter of the whole is taken up with this one subject. Twelve separate references to it in these two brief Epistles which occupy about two leaves of an ordinary Bible. More than in whole volumes of modern sermons or religious periodicals. These for the most part are taken up with man, and self, in some of the ten thousand forms in which self shows itself. Man's "great thoughts"; man's service for man; man's controversies with man; man's plans for raising the masses; man's schemes for making the ungodly temperate or pure, and yet leaving them still "far off" from God;

man's methods for making reformed characters, etc. But there is one thing we do not see: and that is man's concern to know God, and to know and teach God's Word and God's Truth.

Let us now look at

The First Epistle as a whole.

- A | i. 1. Epistolary (Introduction).
- B | a | i. 2-iii, 10 Thanksgiving, Narration, and Appeal: in four members, alternate. (See expansion of "a" below).
- | b | iii. 11-13. Prayer, in view of the Lord's coming,
- B | a | iv. 1-v.22. Instruction and Exhortation: in four members, introverted. (See page 195).
- | b | v. 23-35. Prayer, in view of the Lord' coming.
- A | v. 26-28. Epistolary (Conclusion).

It will be at once noticed that, as in Romans and Ephesians, by far the larger portion of the Epistle is occupied with "Doctrine" and "Instruction." And, though this is more like an Epistle than those, yet how small a portion is epistolary: one verse at the beginning, and three verses at the end!

It will now be necessary for us to examine the details of this structure more closely, and first the

THE EXPANSION OF "a" (i. 2—iii. 10).

Thanksgiving, Narration, and Appeal.

- a | c | i. 2-10. Paul and the Thessalonians: concerning their spiritual welfare and condition.
- | d | ii. 1-12. Paul and his Brethren. Their teaching and conduct while present; referring to time past.
- c | ii. 13-16. Paul and the Thessalonians: concerning their spiritual welfare and condition.
- | d | ii. 17-iii.10. Paul and his Brethren. Their feelings while absent; referring to time present.

Of these four alternate members, "c" and "c" are the most important (though "d" and "d" are beautifully constructed). We will first exhibit them in brief, and then in full, with our own