

Salvation in Relation to the Coming of the Lord

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the theme of salvation in relation to the coming of the Lord, using 1 Thessalonians as a basis for understanding the Christian life and the importance of faith, hope, and love.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-7, 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Topics: "Second Coming", "Christian Salvation"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the background and remarkable features of the Epistle of 1 Thessalonians, highlighting the theme of the Lord's coming in relation to various aspects of the Christian life. The opening salutation emphasizes the believers' position in Christ despite their state of persecution, with Paul praying for grace and peace to manifest in their lives. Paul expresses gratitude and remembers the Thessalonians' work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope, commending their transformation and steadfastness in the face of affliction. He also touches on the believers' election by God, the assurance of their salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit, and their resulting life of testimony that spread the Word of God far and wide.

Transcript

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Background of the Epistle

Thessalonica in the time of Paul was a thriving commercial town astride an important trade route. It had been founded in 316 B.C. by Cassander, King of Macedonia, who named it in honor of his wife, Thessalonica, the half sister of the famous Alexander the Great. Like Esther and Ruth in the Old Testament, the Thessalonian epistles trace their name to a famous woman.

When the Apostle Paul accompanied by Silas and Timothy entered Thessalonica, it was probably the first gospel witness ever given there. Acts seventeen records the amazing results of their ministry of less than a month. In those few short weeks, a small group of Thessalonians came to know Jesus Christ as Savior. Persecution that broke out almost immediately forced Paul and his companions to leave after ministering for three Sabbath days. Some months later, after he had heard of their continued faithfulness to Christ in the midst of persecution, Paul sent them this communication known to us as his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, in which he gives them encouragement and reminds them of his love and faithful prayer for them.

Remarkable Features of the Epistle

There are a number of reasons why First Thessalonians is of special interest to believers in Christ today. One of the important reasons is that it is the first inspired letter written by Paul. As a letter addressed to young Christians, it is significant of the rich doctrinal content of Pauline teaching. Many important truths pertaining to the Christian life are unfolded in the letter, and in every chapter the theme of the coming of the Lord is prominent.

The first chapter unfolds the great theme of the Lord's coming in relation to salvation. In Chapter 2 the Lord's coming in relation to Christian service is presented. Chapter 3 relates sanctification to the Lord's coming. In Chapter 4 the Lord's coming is revealed as the surety of resurrection of our loved ones who have died in Christ. Chapter 5, which concludes the epistle, deals with the safety of the believer in the days of the wrath of God preceding the second coming of Christ. Throughout the epistle the theme of the coming of the Lord is related to practical Christian living.

The richness of the teaching of the Apostle Paul is evident as we study First Thessalonians. Though the Thessalonians were young Christians with less than a year of Christian experience, nevertheless they were familiar with the great and deep truths of the Christian faith, such as salvation, sanctification, assurance, the Trinity, the nature of man, resurrection, and the Day of the Lord. It is hard to realize as one reads First Thessalonians that the Christians to whom it was addressed had no New Testament. It is doubtful if they had any large portion of the Old Testament. They were immature Christians, with many trials and difficulties, and enduring much persecution. In the midst of their tribulations some of their number had gone on to be with the Lord, and with this in view Paul is writing them this letter of comfort, exhortation, and instruction.

Opening Salutation

Chapter 1 opens with a very simple salutation: "Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians." It is noteworthy that here, just as in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, there is an absence of all apostolic titles. There are only the simple names, Paul, and Silvanus--which was just another name for Silas--and Timotheus, which was another name for Timothy. The three of them had been the ones who had given the gospel to the Thessalonians. Timothy later had made one trip back to Thessalonica and had reported to Paul concerning what he had discovered (1 Thess. 3:1-6). The report was an epic of the steadfastness and faithfulness of the Thessalonian Christians. Paul was told that in spite of persecution the Thessalonians had a good testimony for Jesus Christ and were bearing high the gospel message.

Grace and Peace

In the first verse of First Thessalonians there is quite a contrast between what the church at Thessalonica was as far as state is concerned-- that is, persecution, uncertainty, and trouble -- and the position that they had in Christ. Paul addresses them as the church of the Thessalonians which is "in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ." Nothing could change their position--it included everything that was theirs because of being in Christ. It was true no matter what happened. But they needed more than this position.

Paul prays for them: "Grace be unto you, and peace." How rich are the simple words "grace" and "peace." Those without grace and peace are in utter poverty though they may possess all the riches of the world. Those with grace and peace are infinitely rich, though enduring persecution and sorrow, like the Thessalonians. Grace expressed the whole of God's love and favor in Christ. Peace with God and the

peace of God is the priceless possession of the child of God. What richer jewels from God's treasures could be asked for anyone than "grace" and "peace"? While in a sense they already had grace and peace, they needed its manifestation, its experience, its triumph.

Thanks to God Always

The Apostle begins with a burst of praise, more or less the theme of the whole epistle, his thankfulness to God for saving these Thessalonians through faith in Christ. He breathed out from his very heart in verse 2: 'We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.' Again something of the faithfulness of the prayer ministry of the Apostle Paul is indicated: "We give thanks to God always." In the days and the months which had passed since he left this little band of Thessalonians Paul had been faithful in prayer. What a rebuke it is to many of us who serve the Lord that often our hearts are not burdened with the needs of God's people nor thankful for the Lord's grace in their lives, especially when they are out of sight and out of mind. But Paul gives his testimony: "We give thanks to God always for you all."

This expression "for you all" is a very significant one. "You all" is used in the southern United States as an expansive, general expression referring to one person or many. Paul, however, uses it very accurately here. He was thanking God for all of them. In each life and heart the Spirit of God had wrought His work in such a way that souls had been saved and were now bearing a faithful testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not thank God for only some of them, but he thanked God for all of them. As we consider our own life and testimony, do our pastors and our Sunday school teachers--those with whom we work in Christian service--thank God for us always? Certainly there is a challenge to be like the Thessalonian Christians and so to live before God and our fellow Christians that they may thank God always for us.

Remembering Without Ceasing

As Paul thanked God he prayed, "making mention of you in our prayers." As he prayed for the Thessalonians he rehearsed some of the great realities that comprise the salvation of the believer. The remaining verses of Chapter 1 constitute a simple outline. First of all, in verse 3, Paul remembers what God has done through them and in them. Second, in verses 4-9, on the basis of what God has done, Paul knows certain things. Third, in verse 10 he expresses the hope of Christian salvation.

As he recalled his experiences with these Christians at Thessalonica, he states in verse 3: "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 and our Father." There are three famous words in this verse, "faith, hope, love." Paul is not thanking the Lord simply because in the Thessalonians there was faith and hope and love, which certainly ought to characterize every Christian. He is thanking God for what these three things had produced.

It is impossible to see faith, or love, or hope; they are immaterial things. But they can be manifested in a very definite physical way. It is this of which he speaks. "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith." Sometimes works and faith are contrasted, but here they are one and the same. A true faith is manifested in what we do. A true faith produces works. That is why James writes that faith without works is dead. It is not that works is a substitute for faith, but true faith in Christ will bring a real salvation which will in turn change the works of the believer in Christ. Not only was there a work of faith, but there was a labor of love. Love is more than a sentiment. It is a driving force in the heart of the believer who loves the Lord, and because he loves the Lord he is willing to labor; he is willing to work where it is difficult; he is willing to bear the burden.

Added to the labor of love was hope, and not simply hope, but hope that produced patience. What kind of hope is it that produces patience? The kind of hope that produces patience is a calm, sure, trusting hope. The reason that Christians can have patience in hope is because they are sure that our hope in Christ will be fulfilled. Thus it was in the Thessalonian church. They not only hoped in God but hope wrought patience in their hearts even in the time of trial and affliction which had overtaken them.

Verse 3 concludes with something that is most significant. It tells us that Paul regards their work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ not simply as he saw these things, but as they were in the sight of God and our Father. This brings us to a very pointed question which every one of us can ask ourselves: "What does God see in our hearts?" A real trust in Him? A real love for Him? A real hope for that which is a part of our Christian faith? Paul saw the outward evidence of these things, but God looks at the heart. Paul was able to commend these Christians in Thessalonica as he remembered not only what he saw, but what he knew that God saw in their hearts and lives.

Knowing Your Election

The second great theme of Paul's thankfulness to God was what he knew about them. There were some things that he knew about these Thessalonian believers because they had trusted in God and received His wonderful salvation. In verse 4 attention is called to this: "Knowing, brethren beloved of God, your election" (A.S.V.). How can a person know that somebody else is one of the elect of God? It was amazing that the Thessalonian Christians had been instructed in this doctrine of election, considering the short time that Paul and the others had ministered to them. Many Christians who have gone to church all their lives in our modern day know very little about the doctrine of election. The Bible indicates that God not only saves us, but that He chose us before the foundation of the world. It is a doctrine often not understood completely but believed because the Bible teaches it. Christians are the elect of God because God chose them before they chose Him. But how can anyone know the elect of God? Who of us have ever seen the Book of Life? How can one really know that his brethren are the elect of God?

Basis of Assurance

The verses which follow give the basis of Paul's faith in connection with the Thessalonian Christians and, at the same time, give the basis for our faith and assurance that God is able to save those who trust in Christ. In verse 5 Paul writes: "Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance." In other words, one of the reasons why he believed that they were really saved and why he knew their election was of God was the way the gospel came to them. It came in power and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance--literally, "in full measure." It had not been simply an emotional experience nor had they been swept off their feet by Paul's oratory. This was unmistakably the power of the Holy Spirit at work. Further, it had been confirmed by the way Paul and his companions had lived among them. He reminds them of this when he goes on, "as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake." The power of God had been clearly manifested in their lives as well as in their testimony.

The crowning evidence was in the way the Word was received. It is one thing to preach the Word; it is another thing to receive the Word. In verse 6 there are three things noted concerning the way they received the Word. First, they received it in such a way that they became followers of Paul, "Ye became followers of us, and of the Lord." Second, they received the Word in much affliction. They did not receive the Word because it was easy to receive; they received it in spite of the persecution they knew would

follow. Third, they received the Word with joy of the Holy Ghost. In other words, in spite of affliction, in spite of trial, there was the evidence of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. They had the unspeakable joy of the Holy Spirit. The Word was received in such a way that they knew and Paul knew that they were really saved.

Resulting Life of Testimony

Then, we have the capstone of it all. The Thessalonians not only had the Word come to them, they not only had received the Word of God, but their salvation was manifested in their life and testimony. In other words, as they had really trusted in Christ, it resulted in such a transformation of their lives that they became examples to all who believe. Verses 7 and 8 summarize it, "So that ye were ensamples [literally, types or examples] to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia [that was the area in which they lived], but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing."

In other words, Paul was not required to tell people about how wonderfully God had been working in the Thessalonian church. The testimony went out everywhere without his help. One of the reasons for this was that Thessalonica was on a trade route, and people passing through Thessalonica came in contact with the aggressive evangelism and testimony of these Christians who lived in Thessalonica. In our day many folks come and go in our cities and towns and never come in contact with any vital Christianity. That apparently was not true in Thessalonica, for as the word spread it was widely known that God had done a wonderful work. The Thessalonians were preaching the Word, and everywhere the testimony of their faith to God was spread abroad.

Turning to God From Idols

Paul was told how God had worked in the Thessalonians. It had resulted in their turning to God from idols to serve the living and the true God. This is a very accurate expression and one that we should understand. It does not say that they turned from idols to God. Rather, they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. It was not reformation first and faith in Christ second, but it was faith in Christ first with the result that idols were forsaken. The tense of the word turned, as it is found in the Greek New Testament, is in the aorist which means that they turned once for all. It was a single, definite act. In a single, deliberate choice, they turned to God from idols. It was not simply that they were trusting God but the result of it was that they served the living and the true God. As Paul thinks on the faith and testimony of these Thessalonian Christians, young as they were, ignorant of many truths that we know today, there was, nevertheless, assurance in his heart that they were really saved. He knew that they were brethren beloved of God; he knew their election of God by the evidence of the transforming work of salvation manifested in their changed lives.

Waiting for His Son from Heaven

Not only did these believers have salvation in this wonderful manifestation, but they also had a glorious hope. One of the most precious things about the Christian hope is that it goes on and on and on. It is not something only for the present, but it is something for the future. In verse 10 the truth of the Lord's coming is introduced--a truth prominent in First Thessalonians in succeeding chapters.

It is significant that Paul in such a brief period of ministry not only led them out of darkness into the light in the gospel, but also faithfully preached to them the truth of the coming of the Lord. By contrast today,

some folks who go to church year after year never hear the precious truth that Christ who came to Bethlehem so long ago is coming again and that we can be looking for that wonderful return of the Lord for His own. So in verse 10 he reminds the believers in Thessalonica that they not only have turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God--a present work--but they also have a new hope for the future: "And to wait for His Son from heaven." The word "wait" is in the present tense. They had turned to God in one act, but there remained the constant, day by day expectation. In other words, they were constantly looking for the return of the Lord, the coming of the Lord for His saints.

Delivered From Wrath

The chapter closes with the reminder that the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who is coming, the one "whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus," the Savior, "delivered us from the wrath to come." In one short verse there are gathered the great doctrines of the second coming of Christ, "waiting for His Son from heaven"; the resurrection of Christ, "whom he raised from the dead"; and the salvation that Christ wrought in His first coming when He died on the cross, "which delivered us from the wrath to come."

Wrath is coming! The closing chapter of First Thessalonians brings this very graphically before us. There is a day of judgment coming. There is a time when God is going to judge this sinful world. Christ on Calvary nineteen hundred years ago delivered us from the wrath to come, that is, He delivered all who would trust in Him, all who would receive the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior. These Thessalonians who lived so long ago had come into the glorious truth that Christ had died for them. They were delivered from the wrath to come. For them the coming of the Lord was a glorious event to which they could look with keen anticipation and with hearts that were filled with expectation.

The Challenge

This first chapter of First Thessalonians constitutes a real challenge to every thinking Christian. It is first of all a challenge for us to ask, "What do people think of us when they pray for us?" Do they remember our work of faith, our labor of love, and our patience of hope? When they think of us, are they assured of our salvation? Do they see in our lives the evidence that the Word of God has come in power, that we have been transformed, that we have been made followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we exercise our faith in the midst of affliction, that we have the evidence of the joy of the Holy Spirit and a transformed life so that our testimony is spread abroad? Is that true of us? And is it true of us, like the Thessalonians, that there is the living hope of the coming of the Lord, the same one who loved us, who died for our sins that He might deliver us from the wrath to come, and who was raised in victory over the grave? Yes, this letter was written many years ago, to Christians who long since have left the earthly scene, but the truth lives on. May the truth of this chapter not only live in the written pages of the Word of God, but may it be manifested in our hearts and in our daily lives.

Questions

1. What do we know about the background of Thessalonica and the situation there when Paul arrived?
2. Why is 1 Thessalonians of special interest?
3. What five words characterize the five chapters of 1 Thessalonians?
4. How would you contrast the state and position of the Thessalonians?

5. How is Paul an example to us in thanksgiving and prayer?
6. What was the basis of Paul's assurance of their salvation?
7. What did Paul reveal to them concerning the nature of their hope?

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