



How to Study the New Testament

The First Epistle to the Thessalonians

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By

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Preface

THE intention of this little volume is to put into the hands of the ordinary English reader, in a popular form, some of those results of thought and criticism which are commonly deposited out of his reach in bulky commentaries.

It may be thought that the lists of corrigenda which are appended to each chapter might better have been collected in one table at the end. But I have kept them in the place in which they originally appeared in the Sunday Magazine, having been informed by some of that class of readers for whom I especially intended the book, that they found it convenient for correcting the text of their Bibles, to have the mass thus broken up into portions.

The First Epistle to the Thessalonians

Introductory

THE Gospel, which was founded by deeds, is spread by NARRATIVE. Narrative, not yet written, but current in the mouths of eye-witnesses and of holy men. The journal of that diffusion runs thus: 'Such an one went down to the city of such a people, and proclaimed unto them THE WORD. And the Word was concerning Jesus of Nazareth: how that God anointed Him with the Holy Ghost and with power: concerning his life, and his words, and his death, and his rising again, and his going up into heaven.' 'I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you,' writes St. Paul to the Corinthians, speaking of the great facts of the Resurrection. And it is to be observed that, in what follows, he enumerates the many separate appearances of the Lord in order, and calls to their mind how that he had given them all these details while he was among them. This points to a care and precision as regards the completeness and order of facts, which we should hardly have been disposed to predicate of the fervid Apostle of the Gentiles. And it is most valuable, as pointing to the kind of foundation which was laid before the Gospel testimony was committed to writing.

Perhaps we do not sufficiently realize in our imaginations the state of the newly founded Churches during this first and deeply interesting period. And perhaps in consequence we do not appreciate the full significance of the apostolic Epistles, and their entire appropriateness to the work which was then to be done.

Let us, by way of introduction to the Epistles, take the case of one such church, in Asia Minor or on the opposite shores of Greece, and endeavor to enter into its state and its wants. Imagine a fair plain, with sheltering mountains. The scenery differs not much from that which some of us have seen in the south of Italy, save that the palm has somewhat, encroached on the cypress and the olive: which latter trees however are found prevalent, and in luxuriance. The plain is bestridden with the arches of aqueducts, which have for their center a fair group of buildings, whose columns are marked out by the fierce Eastern sun into lines of bright and dark alternating. That is the Acropolis—the temple fortress—the abode of the tutelary deities, whose images may be seen glittering in the sun, as we see to this day the saints on St. John Lateran glittering miles off over the Campagna at Rome. We are in a heathen land.

But let me enter the city: let me deliver my Christian note of introduction. The scene is very strange to me. Amidst a crowd of loungers, half-clad slaves, and children wholly naked, moves the heathen procession, with its ox adorned with garlands, and its sacrificing priest, girt at the waist, and his axe on his shoulder. It is plain who is in possession. But where is the little seed out of which shall grow the great tree, whose roots shall thrust out the plant that now fills the land? I deliver my letter: I enter into converse. What do I find?

A few months before, a holy man has taken his departure. He had been with them some weeks—golden weeks—weeks of blessedness to their furthest memory. It had been an angel's visit. They take me up the Acropolis; there he stood and prayed: there he told them this or that Christian truth: the very cornices of the temple, the very coincident points in the look-out over land and distant sea, are full of the good tidings which he brought. They walk with me under the bright green of the caroubas, and the heavy shade of the ilixes, by which the paved road enters their

city: there he walked up and down, and strengthened and comforted them: there first two or three of them who had visited Judæa, and seen that Countenance which none could forget, and heard Him speak like whom none else ever spoke, went forth on that memorable day to meet him—and here, under this Spina Christi, first fell his ‘Salaam,’ or ‘Eirené,’ or ‘Pax vobiscum’ on their ears. And by that other road, across whose long line of cypresses the mountain now casts its purple shadow, went he forth but the other day—all the gathered band with him: there, where we see the road rise bright over the knoll, he knelt and prayed: there they clasped their arms round him, and mingled their tears with his: there they stood and watched his little company lessen and vanish in the distance: and thence they returned home, sad indeed for a moment, but with a glorious hope full of immortality and joy.

But I re-enter the city with them, and in the shade of evening, and again under the moist dawn, I resort to their humble room of worship. Here is the Centre and focus of the light which has been poured upon them. Here, from day to day, the holy man poured out his treasury of golden words—doubly precious now that the tone of his voice has departed. All that they know of the Son of God sounded from that spot, where he has stood far into the night, telling his wondrous story. There, too, he broke the bread, having told how the Lord did the same: thence he gave the Body broken, and dispensed the Blood shed, to the eye and the taste of Faith. All this remains vividly depicted on the memory. Joy and affection will not let them forget it. Nay, the Apostle, before he went, on a solemn day of the weekly festival of the Lord’s Resurrection, laid his hands, and the hands of them that were with him, with prayer and fasting, on the heads of some among themselves; and they keep up now that which he had begun, and repeat that which he had delivered to them.

So far, all is well. But, as I said, some months have gone by. Man cannot live wholly on the past. Unless there be knit up a link between the past and the present, unless in some form we can look on the past as present, the past will fade, and fade, and fade: and the importunate present will by degrees take its place. And this, in spite of all helps of other kinds than the one mentioned. The living voice is not enough, if it have only the past to speak of. That which meets the ear, has no permanent record. There is no simultaneity in sounds; as one enters, another departs. In course of time it may become even a question, what the first teacher delivered: some may report him one way, some another. The great oral tradition of the Gospel narrative, in its various forms, needed at length to be written down in order to gain permanence: how much more the teachings and inferences of any single messenger of the good tidings. But who could be trusted to do this? From the first, two great parties prevailed in almost every infant Christian community. The one, mainly composed of those believers who had been Jews, would be likely to put into the recorded words more than they would fairly bear of the Judaistic spirit. With them, every saying which asserted the justice and holiness of the law would be taken as enforcing its observance on Christians. The other, the Gentile party, would be liable to report wrongly in the other direction, that of setting aside all the previous dispensation with its types and preparations for Christ, and perhaps also with some of those its moral sanctions and prohibitions, which are of eternal obligation, not because there enacted, but because they form portions of God’s revelation of His eternal truth and justice. To these two parties might sometimes be added a third, that of the learned or philosophers, who were for effecting a compromise between Jewish cabalism and Gentile philosophy, and making the words reported to subserve such a purpose.

In the face of these difficulties, the apostolic teachers were directed to the expedient of writing letters to the churches which they had founded, or which owed their existence to emissaries sent from themselves. And surely no plan could have been more effectual, whether for the present emergency, or for future profit to the church. The questions which would need determining would be just those which were likely to recur again and again during the spread of the Gospel, and during the progress of individual churches. The relations of Christianity to social life and to heathen practices,—the observance of days and the abstinence from meats,—and other doubts arising from circumstances, would furnish examples of the application of the commands and maxims of Christ, and would call up the mention of first principles in a way which, when once exemplified, it might be easy to continue. And such letters would naturally also be employed in taking notice of any points in the conduct of those addressed which required correction, and thus would be led to dilate upon the great requirements of Christian morality. And where the writer was conscious of certain doctrines having been but insufficiently explained, he would naturally enlarge upon them; and would establish and enforce the belief of such as were likely to be called in question.

This would be the ordinary description of the purely occasional Epistle, written to a church after short absence, to impress the lessons given during the missionary visit.

To those who take a fair survey of the apostolic work, it will I think appear, that Epistles of this first kind must have been very numerous. Four such alone remain to us: two to the Corinthians and two to the Thessalonians; not taking into the number those written to individuals, which are better reckoned under another head. But, considering that St. Paul preached the Gospel from Jerusalem round about unto Illyricum, and that his fervid spirit carried in its sympathies all the churches, it can hardly be but that he must have sent Epistle upon Epistle, now lost to us, to churches of which perhaps we know not even the names. Two such Epistles are mentioned in his extant writings: one to Corinth (1 Cor. 5), and one to Laodicea (Col. 4). One such is expressly asserted to have been written by St. John (3 John, ver. 9). It will hardly be credited that the idea, of any writings of Apostles being lost, has been by some, even in our own time, strongly objected to, on the ground that such writings would be inspired, and therefore cannot have been suffered to perish. The frivolity of this superstitious idea will at once be seen, if for 'writings' we substitute 'words.' Were not the words of the Apostles equally under the guidance of the Spirit who spoke within them? Would not they have been equally profitable to the Church in all ages? And yet where are the words of Paul at Antioch in Pisidia, the sum of which was that through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom of God? Where are the words with which he exhorted the assembly at Troas, when he continued his speech until midnight? This is the way in which the human probabilities in the course of the first preachers of Christianity have been lost in artificial theories, and their work divested of the reality and expansiveness of life. Assuming then that a number of these occasional Epistles once existed, and judging of their contents by those which are left to us, we can easily imagine how the personal influence and the teaching of the Apostles were perpetuated by such reminders. This will be evident more in detail, when we come to consider the four Epistles which have been mentioned.

The convenience of the epistolary form of communication between the teacher and the taught would naturally give rise to the adoption of other forms of Epistles besides the occasional. The general, or encyclical Epistle, was made use of as a means of explaining and inculcating some

special setting forth of the truth, and of warning against prevalent forms of error. Of this general Epistle we have examples from James the Lord's brother, from John the son of Zebedee, from Peter, and from Jude the brother of James. One remarkable Epistle of St. Paul—that to the Ephesians—seems, although addressed to a particular church, to partake of this catholic character: and under this head also must be set down the Epistle to the Hebrews, concerning which Origen, in the third century, could say, 'Who wrote it, God knoweth.' And we must not forget that, in its form, the Book of Revelation forms another such Epistle, addressed by the beloved Apostle, John the son of Zebedee, to the seven churches of Asia.

In proportion as these epistles are general, they depart from the true form of letters, and become more of pastoral allocutions or charges. Certain of these 'catholic' epistles appear to have at once assumed a position of authority as part of the Christian Scriptures. This may be inferred from their position in all the ancient copies of the New Testament; which is, next to the Acts of the Apostles, before the Epistles of St. Paul. In this number are comprehended the two of St. Peter (sometimes the first only, on which circumstance more will be said in another chapter), the three of St. John (though the second and third have no claim to the title 'general' or 'catholic'), and that of St. Jude. Next to these come the Epistles of St. Paul, no exceptional place being given to the Epistle to the Ephesians; and the Epistle to the Hebrews next before the Revelation; which last, in the ancient as in the modern copies, always closed the sacred canon.

There are yet some other kinds of epistles to be mentioned, neither occasional, nor general. From his prison in Rome the great Apostle of the Gentiles yearned for communion with those 'among whom he had gone, preaching the gospel of God.' And in this desire were included also others whom he had intended to visit, but had been prevented, 'who had not seen his face in the flesh.' We owe to this the Epistle to the Philippians and that to the Colossians. The latter of these was sent at the same time with the Epistle to the Ephesians, and probably during its writing had given rise to that more systematic exposition of the doctrine of the Christian Church. The Epistle to the Philippians was an outpouring of the Apostle's love towards a church of his peculiar affection, at a time when his own heart was full of sorrow, and his death seemed to be approaching.

Two of the greatest of St. Paul's Epistles have not yet been mentioned: the letter to the churches of Galatia, and that addressed to the congregation of Christians in the Metropolis of the world. Between these two there appears to be so intimate a relation that it is most natural to believe them to have been written at, or near about, the same time. And on examination it seems probable, as in the case of the two other Epistles, before mentioned, that the writing of the pointed and occasional letter gave rise in the Apostle's mind to the design of elaborating the more complete and systematic one. To the Galatians he wrote as their father in the faith, from whom they were rapidly seceding; to the Romans, who had never seen him in the imperial city, he wrote as the appointed Apostle of the Gentiles, hoping (as indeed proved to be the case) that his bodily presence among them might follow his pastoral treatise and exhortations.

The providence of God has not disdained to preserve, among the Christian canonical Scriptures, letters addressed to individuals. Of these, six have come down to us: four from the pen of St. Paul. The two to Timothy, and one to Titus, are precious to the Church in all ages, from being written on the subject of the choice, and duties, of the Christian ministry. The other, addressed to a private friend, Philemon, concerns a domestic matter, and exhibits to us a beautiful and

graceful specimen of the interweaving of Christian feeling and sympathy with the incidents of common life. The other two are from the pen of St. John: the one, most probably, to a Christian lady, otherwise unknown: the other to a certain Gaius. Both are hortatory and general in their character: the latter, however, bringing before us various incidents and persons.

This enumeration of Epistles properly so called, should close with the most mysterious, and, in one respect, the most remarkable of all: that addressed to the Hebrews. The uncertainty of its authorship has been before mentioned. The lateness of its date is evident, from the allusions regarding present circumstances, and the statement which it contains of the handing down of the Gospel history from its eyewitnesses to the then living generation.

One part, however, of the promised testimony of the Comforter to the Church was yet in great part wanting. He was not only to bring to remembrance all that Christ himself had taught (John 14:26, 15:26)—not only to enable the Apostles and apostolic men themselves to bear testimony (John 15:27), and to guide them into all the truth (*ib.*), but he was finally to show them things to come (*ib.*). And therefore the New Testament canon closes with that great prophetic testimony of the Spirit of Jesus, received by the beloved Apostle in Patmos, and addressed by him in the form of an Epistle to the churches of his own especial jurisdiction in pro-consular Asia.

Thus we have the epistolary canon complete. We have been hitherto speaking of its various members formally, with reference to their occasion and constitution: let us now regard the whole with reference to its contents,—and to the question, What has the Church gained by its possession?

First, What is to be expected? Proceeding, as of course we must proceed, on the hypothesis of Christian belief, here we have the writings of men under a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, an outpouring such as has never since been witnessed. We believe these writings to have been intended for what they have since proved, the doctrinal charter of the future Christian Church. Nothing could be less like a system, than the teaching of our Blessed Lord. In these Epistles, the true comments on that teaching, we may expect great steps to be taken towards systematizing it. The Lord's moral precepts, the Lord's mediatorial acts, are the seeds out of which, under his own direction, by his informing Spirit, the teaching of the Apostolic Epistles has grown. It is easy for any ignorant fellow to present to us a seed and a full-grown plant, and to argue, from their utter unlikeness, that the one is no development of the other. And just in this way has the comparison been made, by some calling themselves critics, between our Lord's teaching and the Epistles of his Apostles. As far as I have been able to study their arguments, they seem to me to amount to this: Were it not for St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John, St. James, St. Jude, and the Writer to the Hebrews, we never could have built up, out of our Lord's words and deeds, that system of theology which their Epistles enounce. To which I answer: Possibly not: certainly not, unless we were informed by the Spirit which informed them. The educing from the Gospels, and from those further sayings of the Lord which the writers of these Epistles had heard, of the great doctrines of our faith, was a special work of God's Spirit, not the mere achievement of human logic. The process involved, as it went on, fresh revelations, in the unfolding of the Divine scheme of human salvation. Still, these revelations were in aid, not in suppression, of the common reason of mankind. They issued, not in the contradiction, but in the exposition, of our Lord's words and acts.

When then I find the Apostles arguing systematically for certain great doctrines as inferences from the facts of the Gospel, I find exactly that for which I am prepared: exactly that forward step which it was natural that God's providence should allow, and cause, next to be taken. This being so, what has the Church gained by this addition of the Canon of Epistles to her historical sacred records?

I answer—First, the clear setting forth of the following great doctrines:—

1. The unity of three Divine Persons in the Godhead.
2. The person and office of the Son of God, incarnate in the flesh of man.
3. The inclusion and equality of all mankind in Him as its second and righteous Head.
4. The constitution in Him of a body, the Church, united to Him outwardly and visibly by sacramental ordinances, and inwardly and spiritually by faith and obedience.
5. As regards the outward and visible—the prescription, by divine command, or by inference, of these sacramental ordinances, symbolizing respectively the birth into, and the sustentation of, the new life of man's spirit,—and of an order of men to minister in sacred things.
6. As regards the inward and spiritual,—the effectual entrance of the individual soul by faith into the state of pardon and acceptance, and the progressive sanctification of man by the inhabitation and teaching of the Holy Spirit. Next,
7. The expansion and grounding of the doctrine of the Resurrection of the body, and its supplementing by various revelations concerning the last things.
8. Very numerous directions, too long to specify, concerning uncertain and difficult points of Christian practice in life: some, belonging of themselves to all ages of the Church: others, formally belonging to the times then present, but by analogy reflecting light upon corresponding difficulties in subsequent ages.
9. Warnings against error of different kinds, sometimes pointedly and antagonistically, sometimes conveyed in strenuous and detailed upholding of the corresponding dogmatic truth: thus furnishing an armoury, offensive and defensive, for the Church in all ages.
10. The concluding portion of the New Testament has also dowered the Church with a rich treasure of prophetic encouragement and warning, mysterious indeed, and awaiting future explanation in detail, but in its general scope and tendency of undoubted application: all pointing on to the second Advent of the Lord, and keeping the Church in an attitude of expectation of His appearing.
11. We may add to these particulars, the precious examples of the holy men who wrote the Epistles,—of which no page is destitute. No formal treatises could ever have had the effect of such letters, admitting us into the very life and heart of the writer. The Epistles of St. Paul, said by Luther to be 'not dead words, but living creatures with hands and feet,' edify and comfort the Church not only by the doctrines which they establish, not only by the direct words of consolation with which they abound, but also, and perhaps on the whole, principally, by the spectacle which they present to us of a man penetrated with the spirit of holiness, steeped in the love of Christ, living his life in the flesh by the faith of the Son of God: undergoing almost superhuman afflictions and toils in the midst of bodily infirmity and mental depression; with a thorn in his flesh, which is not removed, because Christ's grace is sufficient for him. In these matters the holy Apostles are the intensified pictures of ourselves: their little words and seemingly trivial remarks gain unexpected weight when the perplexed soul holds the balances of hope and fear, of desire and repugnance: their obscurest sayings leap out into sudden light, when the spirit is walking in dark valleys, where the Father's countenance is hidden.

12. The last use of the epistolary canon which I shall mention is, that of furnishing running comments on various points of the apostolical history as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. As I write this, I am quite aware that persons have in our own time been found, who deny that any such correspondence exists, as will make the Epistles confirm the history. I have read some of the arguments by which they seek to establish their hostile position. But it has ever seemed to me that common sense is all for the received Christian view, while the praise of ingenious subtlety, if worth having, may be fairly conceded to the impugners of that view. Take the arguments of Paley's 'Horæ Paulinæ,' and you may apply them to any sober piece of similar evidence in common life: they are the considerations by which we are convinced, and upon which we act, day by day. But take example from their arguments,—proceed in their way of attack, and you may thus in a few minutes demolish any plain matter of historical fact. This has been shown over and over again: by Whately, for example, in his 'Historic Doubts respecting Napoleon Bonaparte,' and by an ingenious American, cited in an article in the Quarterly Review for last October, who proved, on Strauss's method, that the Declaration of Independence was never signed. Such weapons may be convenient for partisans, but do not suit fairdealing people. We do not approve of the poacher's night-hooks and springes, however much game they may succeed in destroying. We look with abhorrence on an enemy who poisons wells and fountains. Give us the weapons of fair and honest men, and we are not afraid of the battle.

In my next paper I hope to begin at once to deal with the Epistles separately. My plan will be to proceed with them, as far as I am able, in chronological order. That adopted in the common arrangement of the canon has been chosen without reference to chronology. It proceeds apparently on consideration of the relative length and importance of the Epistles, giving, however, to St. Paul the preference. After his thirteen was placed the Epistle to the Hebrews, as being, if not by him, an appendix by some hand almost guided by his. Then followed the 'catholic' Epistles—then the Revelation.

This plan has the advantage of something like system, and is, perhaps, for convenience of reference, the best. But our purpose is a different one. It is, to set before the reader the circumstances under which each Epistle was written, and to try to bring about an intelligent view of the purpose and character of each. The chronological order thus becomes for us inevitable. The missionary journey last preceding: the character of the Apostle's visit among the people addressed, and its incidents, will be most important for us: and if we had to notice these, taking the Epistles in their present existing order, we should have continually to be going back and going forward, and breaking up the continuity of the apostolic progress. Giving, therefore, the first place to St. Paul, we shall proceed regularly through his Epistles. The first which will thus come before us in order will be the Letters written to the Church of the Thessalonians.

That portion of each article which takes note of erroneous and inadequate renderings in our Authorized English Version, will, in the treatment of the Epistles, assume much more importance than before. In fact, it will be very difficult to prevent it from extending beyond reasonable limits. In some of the Epistles, especially in their argumentative portions, the inferential connection is so disguised in our version, that nothing less than a recast of the whole sentence will at all represent the true meaning.

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So that, while the reader's pardon will sometimes have to be asked for, and his patience will be somewhat largely taxed, we must make up our minds to incur, as we have done before, grave reprehension at the hands of those who are for keeping the Authorized Version at all hazards; who think it safer to abide by the gloss of man, than to search into the mind of God.

I. The First Epistle to the Thessalonians

FIRST, who were the Thessalonians? And how came St. Paul among them? If you turn to Acts 16, you will find the account of his 'shameful treatment' and honorable dismissal 'at Philippi.' Then, in chap. 17:1, we read that, 'having passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they (Paul and Silas and Timothy) came to Thessalonica.' The former of these two, Amphipolis, is a mass of ruins: even the site of the latter is not known. But Thessalonica was then, ever has been, and is now, under the slightly abridged name of Saloniki, a great and flourishing city. The Apostle and his companions travelled to it through a beautiful country of lakes, streams, and mountains. The outlet of a ravine which they had been climbing gave to their sight wide plains and the blue Ægean; and over the edge of the slope which was between them and the sea, were visible the walls and towers of Thessalonica, itself built on the descent right down to the water's edge.

In the last town in which the Apostle had preached, the Jews were content with a mere place of prayer by the river side. But here there was a (or rather the) synagogue of the Jews. They dwelt at Thessalonica in great numbers, and have continued to do so all through the ages which have since passed. We are told that their number is now 35,000, half the entire population: that they have 36 synagogues: that the greater part of the trade of the place is in their hands.* I may remark to the reader, by the way, that this permanence and prosperity of the Thessalonian Jews may teach him a lesson, not to be too hasty in pronouncing the opposite features in a people's history to be a judgment from God. No Jews treated St. Paul worse than these: none have been more uniformly populous and prosperous.

But the Apostle and his companions enter the city. Whether they were at once lodged in the house of Jason, where we afterwards find them, does not appear certain. Whether there were believers in Thessalonica before the Apostle's arrival, we are not informed. We know that, while he was in the city, he labored night and day for his own subsistence. (1 Thess. 2:9.) Possibly he may have joined some company of workmen in the Cilician hair-cloth, the making of which was his trade. His exceeding unwillingness to be chargeable to any of them looks rather as if he were not at first any one's guest, but lodging somewhere on his own account. At once (he appears to have come late in the week) he sought the synagogue of the Jews. At once he opened his message regarding Christ. Three Sabbath-days his preaching was continued. And, doubtless, he was not idle during the week; for in his description (1 Thess. 1:9) of his preaching and its results, he reminds the Thessalonians how they 'turned from idols to serve the living God,' which could only be said of Gentiles, who would not be likely to be present in the synagogue. We have a very full description of the way in which the Gospel was announced by him. He spoke simply and plainly: not flattering the rich and busy city, but speaking his message 'with much contention,' 'not as pleasing men, but God which trieth the hearts.' And the reception which his message met with was remarkable. They received it, not as the word of men, but as the word of God. They who heard it formed themselves into a church, in which, though there were doubtless many Jews,

yet beyond question the preponderance was on the side of the Gentiles. It has been observed that in neither of these Epistles is there so much as one allusion to the Old Testament Scriptures: a significant fact, when we remember how steeped St. Paul's mind was in all their lore. This does not look as if the readers were to be mainly Jews. Some however of the Jews became believers, and attached themselves to Paul and Silas (Acts 17:4). But the great body of believers was composed of Greek proselytes: and to these were added, as indeed seems to have been the case everywhere else, many of the chief women of the city.

For upwards of three weeks the influence of the Apostle was on the increase. Each Sabbath-day, we may well imagine, he entered further into the nature of the "good tidings," and opened and alleged new reasons why Christ must needs have suffered and risen again from the dead; and why this Jesus whom he preached to them was to be received as Christ.

Such a course could not but stir up the hostility of those Jews who rejected the message. As usual, where argument was wanting, violence was resorted to. They gathered together the rabble of the market, collected a multitude, and rioted in the streets; directing their attack upon the house of Jason, with whom apparently the missionaries were lodging. Not finding them, they laid hold on the householder himself, and some of the believers whom they took there, and brought them before the magistrates.

And here let us pause a moment to notice a feature of genuine truth in the narrative. These magistrates of Thessalonica are called by an unusual name: viz., Politarchs, or rulers of the citizens. First of all, we might well suppose that some peculiar name would be used at Thessalonica; for it was what we called a 'free city,' i.e., not like Philippi, a colony, governed after the manner of Rome itself, a little miniature of the metropolis, but a town left to its own government and customs. So that, if the magistrates were called by some strange title, we might suppose that it was owing to local custom which had not been interfered with. So far we should be justified in believing that St. Luke had been faithful in his report, and we might conclude, from this incidental notice of the name, that it was in use at Thessalonica. That is, the believer in the Scripture narrative would give him this credit: the unbeliever would probably find in the name an occasion for denying the accuracy of the narrative. However, we have not been left in this case to mere inference. An inscription exists to this day on a triumphal arch at Thessalonica, stating that it was erected while Sosipater, Secundus, Gaius, and others were politarchs. It will be also observed that the three names which I have selected out of the list belong also to three of St. Paul's companions in travel; for Sosipater is only a longer form of Sopater (Acts 20:4), who was of the neighboring city of Berœa; and Gaius was of Macedonia (Acts 19:29), Secundus of Thessalonica itself (Acts 20:4). So accurate does research ever prove the Scripture narrative to have been. The reader is not indeed to imagine that the bearers of these names, as recorded on the arch, were identical with St. Paul's companions. The arch itself is probably of the age of the Emperor Constantine—250 years later. But the inscription proves that the magistrates were called by the very name which St. Luke gives them; and that the names of St. Paul's Macedonian companions were of current use in that neighborhood.

The immediate result of the appearance of Jason and his friends was to excite and harass the politarchs. The Apostle was charged with disloyalty to Cæsar, and with 'saying that some

one else was king, even Jesus;’ an awkward charge for a free city under the Roman empire to deal with. Not willing to commit themselves to a decision, the magistrates contented themselves with binding over Jason and his friends to keep the public peace.

Both for this reason and on account of the hostility of the Jews, Thessalonica was no longer a place for the Christian missionaries; and accordingly they were privately conveyed away by night to Berea. Such is the brief history of St. Paul’s visit to this city; about a month, more or less, was its duration: and it gave occasion to the two remarkable letters which we find in our Testaments. Let us now see how this was.

The charge brought against the preachers by the Jews is very instructive on this head. It is plain that the headship and the kingdom of Christ had been a main subject of their discourses. The rough and unjust treatment of St. Paul at Philippi had roused his spirit, so that he boldly and freely proclaimed the good news of a coming reign of one who should judge the world in righteousness, trying the hearts of men (1 Thess. 2:2). We find traces of this preaching of the kingdom and coming of the Lord in both the letters. Thus, for instance, in 1 Thess. 1:10, their conversion is described as having resulted in their serving the living and true God, and waiting for His Son from the heavens; and in the same (2:12) they are exhorted to walk worthy of the God who calleth them to His kingdom and glory. See also chap. 2:19, 20; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:1–11, and 23. The most remarkable of all these passages (4:13–18) appears to have been written in reply to a fear of the Thessalonians, lest their friends who had fallen asleep in Christ should be excluded from the triumph and glory of His second coming. That they had misunderstood the Apostle’s words, is plain from his remonstrance with them in the second Epistle (2:5) where, having set forth to them the things which must happen before the coming of the Lord, he says, ‘Do ye not remember that while I was yet with you, I was in the habit of telling you these things?’ Their enthusiasm had outrun even the Apostle’s plain speaking; they regarded the day of the Lord as actually upon them, and its glories as something which would be missed by those who died before the Lord himself should appear. As far as we can gather, there appear to have been two distinct phases of their misapprehension: the first, concerning their deceased friends; then, when that had been removed by a plain declaration that when Christ should come they would accompany Him, another mistake as to the immediate coming of the day itself, which it is St. Paul’s aim to correct in the second Epistle.

But we must now pass from notices of the message at first delivered, to the circumstances under which the two Epistles were written.

The Gospel at first made prosperous way at Berea: but from that city again the missionaries were driven out by the malice of the Thessalonian Jews, who came and raised a tumult there also. On this, the principal member of the mission, and the most obnoxious to the Jews, was sent away alone by the brethren: it would appear, with secret orders in the route to elude the vigilance of the enemy.

It is not our object now to dwell on the memorable visit of St. Paul to Athens. We accompany him thence to Corinth, where we have a notice (Acts 18:5) of his companions, Silas and Timothy, having rejoined him from Macedonia. It would appear, from comparing Acts 17:15

with 1 Thess. 3:2, that he had sent back by those brethren, who conducted him to Athens, a message to Timothy (and Silas) to visit the Thessalonian church, to establish them, and exhort them concerning their faith, and then to rejoin him as quickly as possible. The nature of the report brought him by his companions sufficiently appears in the first letter. It had been, on the whole, most favorable. The word of the Lord (i.e., concerning Christ) had sounded abroad from them, not only in their own country but everywhere: they were cause of great joy to their father in the faith. But there appear to have been some blemishes. There was a tendency to adopt or fall back into the immoral habits of the heathen world: there was some want of brotherly love and quiet earnestness, and a disposition to meddle and to be indolent: and there was the great mistake to which we have before made allusion, respecting those who had fallen asleep in Christ.

Under these circumstances the first letter was written. When the tidings from Macedonia arrived, they found the Apostle in an anxious and trying state. He was, we are told, constrained in spirit, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. It was the same kind of work in which he had had such conflict at Thessalonica, and the message brought up before him again all the fervour and love with which his preaching, though strongly opposed, had been there received. He employed his scanty intervals of retirement in pouring out his heart to his beloved Thessalonians. It was apparently the first time that the Divine Spirit had prompted him to preach the Gospel in writing. Of course we cannot be certain of this, because some of his Epistles have been lost; but at all events this is the first of his letters that has come down to us, and it is interesting in that light, as well as on all other accounts. We see from it what was the natural course of his feelings towards those among whom he had preached with success. We see how large a portion of his heart was given to love and gratitude, how rejoiced he was to praise and encourage, how unwilling to blame. There is no Epistle that shows us the spontaneous outflowing of the Apostle's mind to his converts so plainly as this. And it is all the more interesting, as also making it evident how the unfolding of the great doctrinal system of Christian truth was, even with the Apostles themselves, a gradual thing. In these earlier Epistles there is nothing of that deep dogmatic teaching which becomes so prevalent as time goes on, and almost pervades the later Epistles written during the Roman captivity: here all is affectionate remembrance, and fresh, fervid exhortation, grounded on the elementary facts and hopes of the Gospel. I have said elsewhere,* 'The earliest of the Epistles are ever moral and practical, the advanced ones more doctrinal and spiritual. It was not till it appeared that the bulwark of salvation by grace must be strengthened, that the building on the one foundation must be raised thus impregnable to the righteousness of works and the law, that the Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans were given through the great Apostle, reaching to the full breadth and height of the great argument. Then followed the Epistles of the imprisonment, building up higher and higher the edifice there consolidated; and the Pastoral Epistles, suited to a more developed ecclesiastical condition, and aimed at the correction of abuses which sprung up later, or were the ripened fruit of former doctrinal errors.'

It is remarkable that the one point as to which experience brought to the Apostle the greatest 'desire to change his voice,' was that very one which our Lord in solemn terms had left in uncertainty for all ages of his militant Church—even the day of the second coming. His teaching at Thessalonica had indeed been misunderstood. He himself protests against the sense

which had been put upon it. But even misunderstanding points to some tendency in the direction which it has taken. St. Paul's manner of dwelling on and describing the day of the Lord, without perhaps putting in the cautions which he afterwards gave against the idea that it was immediately at hand, had been interpreted as pointing to a very short interval before it should be upon them. 'We which are alive and remain' may represent a class of similar expressions not thus meant by the speaker, but capable of conveying the idea that the hearers should see the Lord's appearing in their own time. I again quote from the same Introduction as before: 'The time of our Lord's coming was hidden from all created beings,—nay, in the mystery of his mediatorial office, from the Son himself (Mark 13:32). Even after His Resurrection, when questioned by the Apostles as to the time of his restoring the kingdom of Israel, His reply is still, that it is not for them to know the times and the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power (Acts 1:7).' Here then is a plain indication, which has not, I think, been sufficiently made use of in judging of the Epistles. The Spirit was to testify of Christ: to take of the things of Christ and show them unto the Apostles. So that, however much that Spirit, in His infinite wisdom, might be pleased to impart to them of the details and 'accompanying circumstances of the Lord's appearing, we may be sure that the truth spoken by our Lord, 'Of that day and hour knoweth no man,' would hold good with regard to them, and be traced in their writings. If they were true men, and their words and epistles the genuine production of inspiration of them by that Spirit of Truth, we may expect to find in such speeches and writings tokens of their appointed uncertainty of the day and hour; expectations, true in expression and fully justified by appearance, yet corrected, as God's purposes were manifested, by advancing experience and larger effusions of the spirit of prophecy. If then I find in the course of St. Paul's Epistles, that expressions which occur in the earlier ones, and seem to indicate expectation of the Lord's almost immediate coming, are gradually modified,—disappear altogether in the Epistles of the imprisonment,—and are succeeded by others speaking in a very different strain, of 'dissolving, and being with Christ,' and passing through death and the resurrection, in the latest Epistles,—I regard it, not as a strange thing, not as a circumstance which I must explain away for fear of weakening the authority of his Epistles, but as exactly that which I should expect to find: as the very strongest testimony that these Epistles were written by one who was left in this uncertainty—not by one who wished to make it appear that inspiration had rendered him omniscient. And in this, the earliest of those Epistles, I do find exactly that which I might expect on this head. While every word and every detail respecting the Lord's coming is a perpetual inheritance for the Church,—while we continue to comfort one another with the glorious and heart-stirring sentences which he utters to us 'in the word of the Lord,' no candid eye can help seeing in the Epistle how the uncertainty of 'the day and hour' has tinged all these passages with a hue of near anticipation: how natural it was that the Thessalonians, receiving this Epistle, should have allowed that anticipation to be brought even yet nearer, and have imagined the day to have been actually at hand.

The nature of the contents of this first Epistle will have been already surmised. It was written because the Apostle wanted to fill up by exhortation and consolation the necessary defects of a teaching, which had been indeed most earnest and plain as far as it had gone, but had been broken off before it was complete. The earlier portion of the letter is spent in congratulating the Thessalonians and praising them for the simplicity and readiness with which they had

received his message, and for the eminence of their faith, which had become since then matter of notoriety: in reminding them also of the whole character of his own demeanour among them: his disinterested independence of them, and gentle, even mother-like, affection towards them. He next recalls to mind the hostility of the Jews, not so much to himself as to them, and draws a comparison between them and the churches of Judea in this respect (14–16). Then he touches gently his own case, showing how this same hostility had, since his departure, defeated one and another scheme which he had made for seeing them (17–20). The third chapter is occupied with a narrative of the circumstances under which the report of Timothy respecting them had reached him, and with expressions of thankfulness and affection resulting thereupon; concluding (11–13) with a wish for the possibility of his visiting them, and for their increase in love and holiness, that they might be blameless before God at the Lord's coming. And only now begin the practical exhortations and corrections of defects. These correspond to the order in which those defects have been noted above. Thessalonica seems, like its wealthy sister Corinth, to have been disgraced by the prevalent practice of immorality. The disciples there are, in consequence, exhorted to purity, and to the chaste adoption of that only method which God has provided for man's lawful use. Next he very gently touches on a want of brotherly love, blaming, where he seems to praise, as was often his habit. And thus he passes on to that which is in the mind of every Christian, the great passage in the Epistle: the revelation respecting the state and prospects of the dead in Christ. I have before spoken of the mistake which they had made; let us now see how St. Paul corrects it.

They who had, through the victory of Jesus, exchanged death for sleep (see below), are gone to Jesus, and when God brings Him back to us, they will also be brought together with Him. For the order which shall be observed—no device of the Apostle's own mind, but revealed to him by the Lord—will be this: the living will have no advantage over the sleeping, because the Lord himself shall come down from heaven and awake the dead, who, before anything else is done, shall rise—their spirits, which came with Jesus, being united to their bodies which were sleeping; and, this being done, the living, who remain behind on earth, will be caught up into the air to meet the Lord [and them]. Thus were they to be comforted, and not to sorrow as if their dear friends had lost anything; for, in fact, they had been the gainers: and supposing that day to come in their own time, would have the advantage over them.

And now he goes on to speak of that great day itself, in terms which doubtless they in their eagerness fastened upon, and interpreted of its too speedy coming. Now occurs the first of those afterwards often-repeated exhortations to walk in light, as children of the day (see also Rom. 13:12, 13; Eph. 5:8; Col. 1:12, 13); now is found the first germ of that description of the armor of God, or of light, which he afterwards expanded so gloriously (Eph. 6:10). Now also first we come to those short insulated admonitions which have been compared to strings of pearls,—with which in after years he was in the habit of coming towards the conclusion of his Epistles (see Rom. 12:9–18; 1 Cor. 16:13, 14; 1 Tim. 4:11–16; 2 Tim. 4:1–5). We may remark that he concludes the Epistle in full consciousness of its inspired and authoritative character. 'I adjure you by the Lord,' he says, 'that this Epistle be read unto all the holy brethren.' such vehemence would ill become the writer of any mere human letter. And this remark is important

considering it is the earliest among his Epistles. He wrote in full consciousness of his apostolic power.

The second Epistle is far too important, as to the explanation of one portion of its contents, to be included in the remaining short space allotted to this chapter. We hope to devote our next to its consideration. Meantime we may make an observation on a matter which is especially worth notice in this earliest Epistle. Though the Apostle, in the address of both, associates with himself Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, who had been his companions in preaching the Word at Thessalonica, and continues this method of speech by the use of the first person plural as far as ch. 2:18, yet there he explains 'we' to mean, 'I, Paul,' and when he recurs to it again, asserts that which was true of himself alone and not of his two companions (ch. 3:1). But he soon breaks away into the first person singular (ch. 3:11), and though most of the remainder of the Epistle is expressed in the plural form, yet in his final adjuration he confines himself to the singular. This serves to shew, that, though more names than one may be mentioned at the beginning of an Epistle, and though the formality of using the plural prevail through the greater part of it, yet it is the apostolic authority of St. Paul himself which is the sanction of the whole, and the individual thought of St. Paul that works out the arguments and enforces the exhortation.

We now proceed to the recounting of the more important varieties in reading, and corrections in rendering, necessary to be noticed in this Epistle.

Of the former, there are but few, and these not of the first importance.

In ch. 1:1, some of our oldest authorities omit the words 'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' And though other authorities almost as ancient contain the words, the omission seems to point to the original text. Elsewhere the corresponding words are not omitted, and it is probable that they may have been inserted here to conform this to those other places.

In ch. 2:19, 'Christ' is omitted in all our oldest authorities, and should certainly be erased.

In ch. 3:2, for 'and minister of God and our fellow labourer in the Gospel of Christ,' our ancient MSS. have very various expressions. The Vatican has only the words 'and fellow worker;' the Sinaitic and Alexandrine have only 'and minister of God;' the Claromontane MS. has 'and fellow-worker with God in the Gospel of Christ,' which is most likely to have been the original text, and to have been varied on account of the difficulty presented by the unusual expression. In verses 11 and 13, the word 'Christ' is omitted in all the most ancient MSS. 'The Lord Jesus' seems to have been at this time St. Paul's constant way of naming the Saviour. And it is to be noted, that he was charged at Thessalonica before the magistrates with proclaiming 'another king, one Jesus.'

In ch. 4:1, after the words 'please God,' all our most ancient MSS. insert 'even as also ye are walking.' In ver. 7, 'us' should be read 'you.' In ver. 13 all our most ancient MSS., instead of 'I,' have 'we.'

In ch. 5:3, at the beginning, 'For' is omitted by the Alexandrine and Sinaitic MSS., and in the ancient Syriac version and the most ancient Fathers: the Vatican and Claromontane MSS. read 'But.' In ver. 5, all the oldest authorities begin the verse 'For ye are,' &c. In ver. 20, 21, the

words ought to stand ‘Despise not prophesyings, but prove all things;’ i.e., on the one hand do not think lightly of any utterances of the word of God by whomsoever made: on the other, do not be led by everything so spoken, but put all things to the test. See on this place below.

We now come to what will prove, in the Epistles, the far more serious task, that of enumerating passages in which our English version fails to give the force, and very often the correct meaning, of the original.

In ch. 1:3, ‘hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’ is incorrect. The original has ‘hope of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ i.e., of his coming—the great subject of the Epistle. In ver. 4, ‘knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God,’ should be, ‘knowing, brethren beloved by God, your election.’ In ver. 8, ‘sounded’ should be ‘hath sounded.’ The Apostle is speaking, not of a thing long past, but of one which had just taken place, and was then continuing. In ver. 10, ‘delivered’ ought to be ‘delivereth.’

In ch. 2:1, ‘was not’ should be ‘hath not been.’ In ver. 2, for ‘was not’ should stand ‘springeth not’ or ‘cometh not.’ The Apostle is speaking, not of what his exhortation was when he was with them, but of its general character: compare ‘Even so we speak’ (not ‘spoke’), below. In ver. 4, ‘were allowed’ should be ‘have been approved.’ In ver. 7 the expression ‘even as a nurse, cherisheth her children’ is open to mistake, besides being an insufficient rendering of the original words. It may be supposed that the ‘nurse’ is a mere hired servant, and the children hers, merely as entrusted to her. But the original has, as if a nurse should cherish HER OWN children: and the best way of conveying the meaning in English would be to render, ‘like as when a nursing-mother cherisheth her own children.’ In ver. 8, ‘souls’ ought to be ‘lives.’ In ver. 10, ‘among’ should be ‘toward.’* In ver. 12, ‘hath called’ should be ‘calleth.’ In ver. 14, ‘followers’ is better rendered literally, ‘imitators.’ In ver. 15, ‘have persecuted’ should be ‘drove out.’ In ver. 16, ‘is come’ should be ‘came.’ The meaning is somewhat obscure, and therefore the original tense should be carefully kept. The present English version gives the impression that the destruction of Jerusalem had passed, whereas it did not happen till eighteen years after.

Ch. 3:2, ‘comfort’ should probably be ‘exhort.’ Ver. 13, ‘God even our Father,’ should be ‘God and our Father,’ i.e., ‘Him who is our God and Father.’

Ch. 4:1, ‘by the Lord Jesus’ should be ‘in the Lord Jesus,’ i.e. literally as the original. The expression is not a form of adjuration, but sets forth the holy element in which his exhortation was made. In ch. 5:26, the expression is quite a different one. In the same verse ‘have received’ ought to be ‘received.’ He means when he was with them and taught them. In ver. 4, ‘how to possess his vessel’ is a mis-translation. It should be ‘how to acquire his own vessel,’ and it means, how to take a wife who might be his own lawful vessel for that purpose which the sin in question carried out unlawfully. In ver. 6 again, the sense is utterly confused by a mistake of our translators, By rendering ‘in any matter,’ they have made it appear as if the sin of defrauding another, generally, were that against which the Apostle is warning: and thus the whole passage becomes incoherent, and loses its solemn force. The words which they have rendered ‘in any matter,’ stand in the original ‘in the matter,’ i.e., in this matter, which is now in hand, viz., the unclean lusts of the flesh. The Apostle is speaking in language somewhat veiled,

for decency's sake. In the same verse, 'have forewarned' should be 'forewarned;' and in the next verse, 'hath not called us' should be 'calleth us not;' and the next should proceed, 'for uncleanness, but in sanctification.' In the next verse, 'who hath also given' ought to be 'who also gave.' In ver. 13, for 'others' should stand 'the rest.' In ver. 14, 'sleep in Jesus' ought to be 'fell asleep through Jesus,' i.e., by his merits have had their death turned into sleep. 'Sleep in Jesus' is a beautiful and true expression: but it is not the one used here. In the same verse, 'with him' may be misunderstood. 'Him' does not refer to God, but to Jesus: will God bring, at the same time that He brings HIM, Jesus, through whom they fell asleep. It would be better, therefore, to express it, 'together with Him,' which can hardly be mistaken. In ver. 15, 'shall not prevent' would be much better expressed 'shall in no wise have the advantage of.' In ver. 17 it is necessary to notice that 'together' does not belong to 'with them:' it is not, 'shall be caught up, together with them, to meet the Lord,' but 'shall be caught up together, with them, to meet the Lord.' To make this plain, I have in my revised text inserted the word 'all:' 'shall be caught up all together, with them, to meet the Lord.'

Ch. 5:1: 'ye have no need that I write unto you' is literally 'ye have no need to be written unto.' The Authorized Version puts 'I' into too much prominence. It seems as if some one else might be thought of, who ought to write to them on this point. In ver. 5, 'the children' ought to be 'sons' (twice). Ver. 6, 'others' should be 'the rest.' Ver. 9, 'hath not appointed us' should be 'appointed us not.' In ver. 10, 'together,' again, is not to be joined to 'with Him,' but it should be read, 'should live together, with Him.' In ver. 15, the words should stand, 'both toward one another, and toward all.' The preposition is the same in both clauses. Ver. 22 as it stands in our version is undoubtedly wrong, and has misled many persons, who have thought it to be an injunction to abstain even from that which seems evil,—to avoid all chance of offence. The words mean nothing of the kind, but merely this: 'Abstain from every form of evil,' i.e., 'from every species,' 'every kind, of evil.' And they correspond with the former member of the sentence, which should be divided, further, by a comma only, 'Hold fast that which is good, abstain from every kind of evil.'

Alford, H. (1868). *How to Study the New Testament: The Epistles (First Section)* (pp. 25–52). Strahan & Co. (Public Domain)