



"We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:2,3).

How The Second Coming Helps

Some of the most comforting messages in Scripture are found in the letters to the church at Thessalonica. When we read these letters, we are drawn to the people in that church. It is difficult to understand why, since Paul was only there for a week or two then he was chased out of town.

Yet, a marvelous church was born. Not a perfect church; if you're looking for a perfect church you will probably use up a lot of your life looking for it, because the Saints have not yet been glorified, and they make up the church. Still, that doesn't stop some people from their search. To put it another way, if you could chase all of the "less than perfect" people out of the church, you would have no one left. As a minister, that idea doesn't appeal to me. To be sure, there were some difficulties at Thessalonica. I suppose we're all difficult at times. We have our bad times and we have our good times; **it is worth waiting for the good times.**

There were some lazy folk at the church. They wanted other people to take care of them even though they were able-bodied. There were also some folk in the church who tended to meddle, poking their noses into other people's business. It is amazing what some folk think they have a right to ask. It is because of this that Paul wrote, "But we urge you, beloved, ...to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one" (1 Thessalonians 4:10,11). In addition, they were mixed up about the time of the Lord's coming. The Scriptures teach that the Lord could come at anytime; they took this to mean that he would be coming in the next week --or so. Maybe he will, but we don't know that. Because of their views, many quit their jobs so they could witness more. Of course, after a while they ran out of food and other things, like toilet paper, so they started eating over at the neighbors. You can see the problem.

Not a perfect church, but a very good church. This is the only letter containing the command that it be read in all the churches. That charge is in chapter 5, verse 27. It is an assuring letter; the word "know" appears 9 times. It is a good word for our own day, where no one knows anything for sure --and where some people think they know everything!

The teaching, encouragement and exhortation within the letter is all based upon the doctrine of the second coming of Christ.

For example:

In the first chapter there is the assurance that, by means of His coming, Christ will "rescue us from the wrath that is coming" (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Our **calmness** in this world is based upon this. Nothing bad is going to happen to us, **the Lord will rescue us before things become their wicked worst**. It is not the job of the minister to incite the saints to fear, paranoia and riot.

In chapter two, Paul declares that our "hope or joy or crown" at the Lord's coming will be the very people we have ministered to (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). Here, our **compulsion** to witness, serve and minister to people is based upon Christ's coming.

In chapter three, he makes an appeal to God to "strengthen their hearts and preserve them at the "coming of our Lord" (1 Thessalonians 3:13). The encouragement to **continue** is thereby based upon the second coming of Christ. So it is, "Occupy until I come" (Luke 19:13).

In chapter four, Paul encourages them to "**comfort** one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18) about the second coming of Christ. Especially those who have lost family or friends through death; they will be reunited with them at the second coming, at which time Christ will raise them from the dead --in some way..

In chapter five, the "day of the Lord" will come as a surprise. Because of this, we are to be all the more watchful, sober, and work the harder in building each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:5, 5:23). Here, the second coming is seen as deepening our **commitment**.

It is the doctrine of the second coming that connects the church with eternity. Certainly this one doctrine is expected to have a tremendous impact in all areas of Christian life. Jesus gives an example of what happens when people fail to recognize that Christ will come. He said, he who "says to himself, my master delays returning, ...begins to beat his fellows, ...and eat and drink with drunkards" (Matthew 24:44-51). In other words, our seriousness about the doctrine of the second coming could have an effect on the way we treat other people and the way we behave. The doctrine has bearing upon the way we live and treat people. The doctrine of the second coming says, we expect to be held accountable for all our behavior. **It is an incentive toward responsibility.**

Now, let's look at the beginning text of chapter one. The letter opens with *grace* instead of *greetings*. Not a bad idea. Then, he wishes them peace. **Where there is no grace, there can be no peace.** In verse two, Paul recounts the *pleasant memories of his visit* with them. He remembers: "the work of faith," "the labor of love," and "the steadfastness of hope," that they had in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Look at the descriptive manner in which words are combined --work of faith --labor of love --steadfastness of hope. No wonder we all feel so at home with our *mental conception* of the church at Thessalonica. No wonder Paul had pleasant memories of these people; he remembered the evidence of their faith. These church people had a faith that made them different, motivated them, changed them, and made them quite active. All of this was driven and supported primarily by the doctrine of the second coming of Christ. Again, that is the doctrine that connects the church with eternity.

Look first at "work of faith." Where there is faith, good works will spring forth from it. James said, "faith without works, is dead." So it is, that the faith of the church has produced the good of the people. The church has worked to educate, to heal, to clothe, to feed, to comfort, and elevate mankind toward God. There can be no mistake, the faith of the church has produced a multitude of works from which we continue to benefit, including: art, music, architecture, science, schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, and care for the elderly. It must not be forgotten that **most of the benefits of our modern world sprang forth from the faith of the church.** That faith extended out to their hands and deep down into its pocket. The church has been a worker in the world and continues to be.

God commands good works in the world. The church is to comfort the sick, feed the hungry, and give cold water to the thirsty as if it were doing it toward Christ himself. I think the church has been serious in this. --"Work of faith." Our duty is to win the world --not antagonize, polarize, and pick a fight with everyone with whom we disagree. We are to be *healers and reconcilers*.

But look again, this benefit comes not from pure duty; it springs from the *heart* of the church.

It is a "labor of love." "God so loved the world." You would never guess it by the behavior of some of His followers. There is a force and power that drives the church to industry that is beyond ordinary explanation. It is the power of the Holy Spirit. The first fruit of the Holy Spirit is love. The work of the church is multiplied a thousand times because it has been, for the most part, driven by love, not duty. Love demands expression. The evidence of our faith, our devotion to a real Christ, who therefore can "come again," is our "labor of love." We do our work as if there is a God who loves the world.

I like the way "Holy Spirit love" and human labor are connected together in one phrase --"labor of love." The word labor is not so popular as it once was. It is a wonderful word; it forms a contrast with some present Christian teaching which seems to say, "Let Jesus do all the work, while we enjoy." However, the Bible is full of words like press, run, strive, strain, struggle, and "fight the good fight of faith." Which, by the way, does not mean to slay your opponent as some Christians are teaching; but to be "slain for" your opponent as demonstrated by our leader, Jesus Christ, who was raised, by God, from the dead. Labor is a word that brings a picture of exhaustion to our minds. They who know the word, know about slipping into bed exhausted at the end of the workday.

There is no force that can drive labor, like the power of love. When the church is driven by hate and fear, it is driven by the same force that drives the devil. No wonder Jesus said, "All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Galatians 5:14). Remember, hate is the force that destroys, while love is the force that builds. There is no such thing as a love that is not connected to a labor. Paul remembered their "Labor of love."

Look at what sits beneath and supports the church in its "works of faith," and "labors of love" -- **"steadfastness of hope."** Paul remembered their "patience born of hope." Certainly there must be some good reason to continue in work and labor, **and there is** --it is "hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." My hope is not in my ancestral lands of England or Czechoslovakia, or in my new land of the United States;

my hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is it that keeps anyone going? It is hope. People get married in hope. They live and work in hope. They stop or slow their work when they perceive there is no hope. Homes break up when people see no hope. People give up work, business, friends, and they give up on life, when they see no hope. This is part of what "middle age crisis" is all about --diminishing hope. Research tells us that people remain healthier and heal faster **when they have hope**. It is so true that "giving up" is the point where the pain of the past meets the fear of the future. It is where hope is gone.

What is it that keeps parents at the task of changing diapers, cleaning food off the floor and walls, getting up and staying up through the watches of the night, sacrificing all private time to the demands of babies? Do they like listening to crying or changing diapers? Do they like food all over the sofa and walls? Do they like staying up all night? No! What keeps them at it is hope. They hope the kid will grow up and take his or her place in society. **They manage by hope**. All the labor and all the work continues because there is a "patience born of their hope."

This is what made the church at Thessalonica so warm and comfortable. It was the hope that came from the doctrine of the second coming. This doctrine connected them with eternity; it gave them hope. Hope is a warm light on a dark winter night. Paul said, "if in this life only we have hope, we are of all men most miserable." They knew that it would be worth it all, when they would see Jesus. How do we manage Christian work over the long haul? How do we tolerate some of the things we do in our service toward Christ in the world? **We couldn't, if it were not for hope.**

Faith accepts, looks up and appropriates.

Hope expects, looks ahead and anticipates!

Take another look at the power of the doctrine of the second coming. There is no clearer message in the Bible. Jesus said, "I will come again." Without the second coming the Gospel is a "story without an end." **The second coming is a reminder that God always finishes His business. The second coming is a reminder that all will end well.**

This is the message that turns the black and white words on the pages of the Bible to life and action where people can see them. For this reason Paul went on to say, "because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in: (1) power and in, (2) the Holy Spirit, and (3) with full conviction; just as you know, (4) what kind of persons we proved to be among you **for your sake**" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). What kind of a person are you? A kind person? Are you kind to your opponents? Paul was all of these --for the sake of others.

The first chapter closes with these words: "and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead --**Jesus, who rescues us** from the wrath that is coming." How do we wait? Alert in the night watches --not in a rocking chair. Not meddling in other people's business; but with faith that produces works, love that materializes into labor, and a hope in Christ that leads to steadfastness. **That is how we wait!**