1 Thessalonians 1:1–5

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

> *Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.*

The Character of This Epistle

This is probably one of Paul's simpler epistles in certain respects. One feature to note is the repeated use of *Lord Jesus* throughout. The full title is *Lord Jesus Christ.* The order *Christ Jesus* speaks of position in glory above. But *Lord Jesus* — the order used so frequently in this epistle — touches the affections. It is the personal name used alongside the title of authority, in a way that expresses something tender. This epistle has the character of a people waiting for the Son from heaven — and that waiting is deeply personal, affectionate, and alive.

The state of the Thessalonians stands in striking contrast to that of Corinth. Paul had laboured at Corinth for perhaps a year and a half; he was with the Thessalonians for only about three weeks. Yet what emerged at Thessalonica was an assembly genuinely waiting for their Saviour from heaven, characterised in

their walk by that expectation. At Corinth, the flesh was occupying the saints in its many manifestations, chapter after chapter. Here the object is outside them and above them — the Lord Himself — and that occupation is having a real, practical effect on their walk and service. It would be hard to picture the kind of things said here being said to the Corinthians.

Three Names — A Unity of Testimony

The epistle opens with three names: Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus. Most of Paul's epistles come from two or three persons together. To send this letter in three names means there had to be oneness of mind between them. If Paul alone had written it, one might say: that is what was on his heart, and by the Spirit he expressed it. But three names joined together means that God gave this unified thought and will and intention to multiple hearts — a testimony of spiritual unity that carries its own weight. As a three-fold cord, it is not easily broken.

The Assembly in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ

The description of the assembly is striking: *in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.* Darby observed that this shows the sphere of their communion — founded on the relationship in which they found themselves with God Himself in the character of the Father. Compare the end of verse 9: *how ye turned to God from idols.* Their former sphere of religious communion was the worship of demons — lumps of stone, pieces of wood, things that could neither see nor hear nor speak nor do anything, with only the demons beneath them. What a profound difference the gospel had made: from the worship of demons to communion with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace are given to the assembly — not mercy. Mercy is for the individual, never addressed to an assembly in the epistles. Grace speaks of what flows from God as its source; mercy speaks of the character of what comes to

those who deserve nothing. Grace and peace together are the double greeting that is the portion of the assembly of God.

From Idols to the Living and True God

Acts 17:1-4 describes Paul's visit to Thessalonica. He was there for three Sabbath days in the synagogue, reasoning with them from the Scriptures — opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered and risen again, and that this Jesus whom he preached was the Christ. Some of the Jews believed, along with a great multitude of devout Greeks, and of the chief women not a few. So the assembly was a mixture of Jewish believers and Greeks, all together recipients of this epistle. The gospel goes out to whosoever will.

The Bereans, just after Thessalonica, were more noble in their reception of the word — searching the Scriptures daily to see if those things were so. That comparison is recorded in Acts so that we might learn from it. There are different kinds of reception even among those to whom the gospel comes.

Work of Faith, Labour of Love, Patience of Hope

Verse 3 gives a three-fold description of the Thessalonians' walk: the work of faith, the labour of love, and the patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. These answer in order to the three great Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope — the same three that close chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, though there the order differs. Here hope is last, because it is the great theme running through the epistle.

The labour of love deserves particular attention. The world tends to think that love and labour are in tension — that when someone falls deeply in love, they become absent-minded, unable to work, distracted. But this love was one that put the saints to labour. It was not a sentimental thing without content; it was a love that worked. There is a great deal of false love in Christendom that lacks

precisely this quality. True love has labour in it.

The patience of hope — Darby renders it the *enduring constancy of hope.* The word enduring means it was not evolving into something else, nor was it expected to be revised or developed. From the first three weeks of apostolic ministry, it was set before them: wait for His Son from heaven. And that hope was to have an enduring constancy. This is not the place for an evolving eschatology — the hope set before the saints of God is to be held with patient steadiness, not exchanged for a different and supposedly more sophisticated version. Endurance may also carry the thought of holding fast to hope in the face of persecution — of which they were forewarned in chapter 3.

Election Known — and How

Verse 4 states a remarkable thing: *knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.* Darby translates: *brethren beloved by God, your election.* The love of God and the election that was theirs are joined together as something that was known. The word for knowing here is the knowledge of inward consciousness — not information received from outside, but an inward awareness.

This is connected to verse 3 — they were walking before God and our Father, walking in faith and love and constancy of hope. And it is in walking with the Lord, before Him, that one has this inward consciousness of being loved of God and of being His. When a soul drifts from the Lord and lives for the world, certainty tends to slip away with the drift. But here, walking in the light with the Lord, the consciousness is clear: we are beloved by God, we are elect. That is not the pride of the flesh — it is the fruit of genuine communion.

The Gospel in Power and in the Holy Ghost

How did Paul know of their election? Verse 5 gives the answer: *our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance.* There are those who hear something of the gospel and it is in word only — it finds no operative power in their souls. Such was not the case at Thessalonica. The gospel came to them in power, in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance. The three divine persons are present in this verse: the Father, from whom the gospel of God originates; the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour proclaimed; and now the Holy Spirit, the power by which it is conveyed into the soul and sealed there.

There is also something to observe from what is *not* said here. In 1 Corinthians 1, the apostle gives thanks for what God has given the saints — their gifts, their enrichment in every word and knowledge. He does not commend their walk or conduct. In Galatians he reaches his condemnation quickly, without even speaking of what God has conferred on them, because their Galatian state raised questions about whether the grace was really operative. Here, the state is different — the apostle can speak of their work of faith and labour of love. Every word of commendation is appropriate. And what is appropriate in one epistle may not be in another, because the Spirit of God inspires each to match the state of those to whom it is written. Every scripture is perfect in its place.

— Study ends —