

THOSE WITH CHRIST AT HIS COMING

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scriptures for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

At the end of last week's lesson (2:17-20) Paul began his defense against the opinion of some of the church members that he did not return for a visit to encourage them because he was not deeply concerned about the welfare of their church. Paul wrote this letter to tell them that he loved them dearly and wanted to visit them. In fact, he tried several times to return, but Satan hindered him. He was so concerned about their spiritual welfare and his inability to visit them that he resorted to sending Timothy in his place to establish them in the faith and to encourage them in their afflictions. After spending some time with them to spiritually strengthen them, Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth with spiritual good news from the church in Thessalonica. They were strong in their faith, spreading the good news of the Gospel wherever they went and desired to see him. This news greatly relieved Paul and he took this occasion to pen this letter to them, expressing his joy and thanksgiving concerning their steadfast faith. At the close of this chapter, he expressed another aspect of the coming of Christ in the Rapture of church believers.

I. Paul's Decision to Send Timothy – 3:1-5

3:1-2 – When Paul could no longer control his longing to see the Thessalonian believers to learn of the condition of their faith, he thought it good to be "left . . . alone," literally "abandoned," at Athens by sending Timothy to them. It appears that Paul also sent Silas to Philippi to do for those believers what Timothy was to do in Thessalonica.

3:3-5 – Paul explains his purpose in sending Timothy. He was to establish them in their faith, to insure that the persecutions they were undergoing would not impair their testimony, and to generally assure Paul that the church was still thriving. He feared that persecutions would undermine their faith and his work in Thessalonica would "be in vain" (cf. 2:1).

II. Paul's Delight in Timothy's Report – 3:6-10

3:6 – Paul calls the report from Timothy, "good tidings," the Greek word for "gospel." This is the only place in all of Paul's writings where this Greek word for "gospel" is used in any other sense than the good news of God's saving grace. This indicates how great this spiritual good news from Thessalonica was to Paul. It demonstrates how refreshed Paul was by Timothy's report. The content of Timothy's report was good news and is reflected by Paul's letter in four areas: (1) their work of faith in turning to God from idols; (2) their labor of love in serving the living God by their fervent and faithful witness of His gift of grace; (3) their steadfast hope in waiting for the coming of Christ to save them from the wrath of God; and (4) their remembrance of Paul with a strong desire to see him again. The first three areas of good tidings in Timothy's report are seen in Paul's glowing account of the Thessalonian believers in chapter one.

Luke records this meeting of Paul and Timothy in Acts 18:5. It seems that Paul and Silas (with Timothy) were sent from Thessalonica to Berea by night (Acts 17:10). They ministered in that city until the Jews from Thessalonica learned of their whereabouts and went to Berea to stir up the Berean citizens against them. Then the Berean believers sent Paul to Athens accompanied by some Berean believers (Acts 17:13-15), but Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea. When the Berean believers were about to return to their city, Paul commanded them to send Silas and Timothy to him immediately while he remained in Athens (Acts 17:15). Apparently they met Paul in Athens, but soon after Paul sent them

back to some cities in Macedonia, particularly Thessalonica and Philippi and he was left alone in Athens (1 Thess 3:1). While Silas and Timothy were ministering in other churches, Paul went to Corinth to preach the Gospel to those people. When Silas and Timothy returned from Macedonia, they found Paul at Corinth. Silas brought a gift of money from the church in Philippi (2 Cor 11:9; Phil 4:14-15) so that he could devote himself totally to preaching the Gospel (Acts 18:5). Timothy gave Paul a good report about the solid faith of the church at Thessalonica and their love for him. This good report affected Paul in four ways (3:7-10).

3:7 – First, it gave him comfort in all his "afflictions and distress." Since the believers in Thessalonica were holding their faith in spite of their persecutions, it gave Paul needed encouragement. "Distress" literally means "necessity," i.e. physical deprivations.

3:8 – Second, it gave him life, that is, renewed strength to serve the Lord. As long as he heard that they were standing firm in the Lord, he could go on with renewed vigor to serve the Lord, because his work with them was not done in vain.

3:9 – Third, it gave him great joy to hear the report that Timothy gave to him about their zeal for the Lord in spite of the persecution that they suffered from their own countrymen. Paul was so blessed by this good news that he found it difficult to find the words to thank God enough for the joy that it brought to him.

3:10 – Fourth, it caused him to pray exceedingly with renewed energy to see them face to face. He had been praying for them "night and day" and attempted to return to see them on at least two occasions, but Satan had hindered him from making that return trip. Now he prayed specifically for two requests: (1) to see them again, and (2) to perfect their faith.

III. Paul's Desire for the Believers – 3:11-13

3:11 – Paul prays that God Himself, his Father and his Lord Jesus Christ direct his way to them. Notice, Paul prays to both his Father and his Lord Jesus Christ. Why would he pray to two persons? He should pray only to his heavenly Father as Jesus taught His disciples unless he believed both of them are in the Godhead. Evidently that is what he believed, because he addresses both of them again in another prayer in 2 Thessalonians 2:16, but in this instance he addresses the Lord Jesus Christ first.

Paul prays that God might "direct" his way (make a straight way) to them, clearing all the obstacles that Satan has used to hinder him from coming to them. He knew that he was not able to open the way to his converts in Thessalonica. Only God could defeat Satan. This shows the importance of prayer in doing God's work.

3:12 – Paul prays that their love may abound and increase. Believers are to grow more and more like Jesus Christ in their spiritual life. The love that Jesus has shown to us in salvation is beyond our ability to attain in this life, so there is plenty of room for improvement. Paul loved them in bringing the Gospel to them under heavy persecution, and these believers had done well in showing their love to others. But Paul encourages them to abound and increase in their love to other believers and to all men, even to their enemies that were persecuting them as Jesus taught His disciples (Mt 5:44-45).

3:13 – Paul prays that they might be established in holiness before God when Jesus Christ returns with all His saints. Godly love (*agape*) makes holiness possible. Without godly love, one cannot be holy. Holiness is the expression of godly love. God's holiness is expressed in His love to us (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8). 1 Corinthians 13 defines godly love and as we abound in godly love, we will be established in holiness. Holiness will prepare us for the coming of Jesus Christ with His saints.

"The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" is taken in two ways by Christians. Some think that it refers to Christ's coming to rule over His Millennial Kingdom (Mt 24-25; Rev 20:4-6). This coming is called the "second coming of Christ." This coming occurs when He comes to the earth as He did when He came the first time. Other Christians believe this coming of Christ refers to the Rapture of the Church (1 Thes 4:13-17; 1 Cor 15:51-54). This coming occurs when Jesus comes in the air to bring His Bride, the Church (Eph 5:25-27, 32), to Heaven to marry her (Rev 19:7-9). Since the time of the Rapture is in view throughout this letter of Paul (1:10; 19-20; 4:13-17; 5:1-11, 23), it seems that 3:13 is also referring to the Rapture of the Church before the Tribulation and not His Second Coming after the Tribulation.

What does it mean that the Lord Jesus Christ will come "with all His saints?" "Saints" means they are "holy ones." Since the good angels are holy ones, some Christians believe that "saints" refers to angels and they will come with Jesus Christ as He said they would when He comes back to earth to defeat Antichrist and establish His Millennial Kingdom (Mt 16:27; 24:31; 25:31). However, "saints" most often refers to the believers in the churches that have been made holy by the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 1:2; 6:2; Eph 4:12; Phil 1:1). This meaning for "saints" fits the context of Paul's message best because he refers to the Rapture of believers in the very next chapter.

What Church "saints" will come with Jesus Christ at the time of the Rapture? Those Church "saints" that die will go to Heaven and receive a body not made with hands eternal in the heavens. This body is given to them so that their spirit will not be naked (2 Cor 5:1-3). This is not the resurrection body. They will receive their resurrection bodies when they come with Jesus Christ at the Rapture.

Will all of the believers in the Old Testament and in the New Testament be given their resurrection bodies at the Rapture? It is not likely. The purpose of the Rapture is to give the Bride of Jesus Christ a body like His and bring her to Heaven for His marriage to her. The Old Testament believers and those that receive Jesus Christ as Savior after the Rapture will receive their resurrection bodies when He returns at His Second Coming. Then they will live and reign with Christ in His Millennial Kingdom on earth for 1000 years (Zech 14:9; Rev 20: 4, 6).