

An Encouraging Letter

Exodus 33:12–23, 1 Thessalonians 1

My dad told me about “mail call” during World War II. All the sailors would gather expectantly on deck and hope for a letter from home. Whether from mother, wife or girlfriend, the letter would be opened eagerly and read carefully. Telegrams and cables were expensive, short and impersonal. Ship-to-shore phone calls were rare and expensive. There was no email or texting then; lonely shipmates yearned for letters—letters written by hand on paper, folded up and stuffed into envelopes with postage stamps affixed. When a man’s name was called, he hurried to get his mail. The letter was read and reread. It might have been written weeks before, but it contained news from home, so it was welcome.

Our New Testament text this morning is a *letter*—an encouraging letter, as we shall see. It is the first letter of the apostle Paul, and worthy of our study. Though we have read the whole chapter, we are going to focus on verse one. I have three points: *from an apostle, to a church and accompanied with blessing*. First,

1. From an apostle

The letter begins: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.” Clearly, Paul is the primary author. He is an apostle, a man called, not at the same time as the other eleven, but later, on the road to Damascus, where the risen Christ appeared to him in a blinding light as he journeyed to arrest the Christians.

What we read this morning is inspiring, but we must ask a question: why should we accept this text as authoritative? How can we be assured that it really *is* a word from God—that it accurately reveals God’s perfect will? “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” Whether this letter is truth or not is a life-or-death matter. If it is truth, then we must stake our eternal destiny on it. If it is error—no matter how plausible it might sound—it is to be rejected; it has no more authority than *Gulliver’s Travels* or *Huckleberry Finn*.

Think about this. The Bible is not the only book claiming to teach the truth about God. There are the *Koran* and the *Book of Mormon*, to name two. There’s the Apocrypha, and the books of the Dalai Lama. Why should we recognize any religious text as authoritative?

Only if it has the authority of Christ himself. Here is the Savior of the world, who repeatedly prophesied, “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.”¹ Here is an explicit, detailed prophecy, not a vague generality like *something unexpected is going to happen to you in time*. Here is Jesus the Christ, the only man in history to

¹ Matt. 20:18–19

rise from the grave, never to die again. Here is the man who confidently declared, “Because I live, ye shall live also”—and makes good on that promise. He makes sinners into saints. His Spirit transformed the murderous Christ-hating Saul of Tarsus into a tireless emissary of God’s love. The body of Mohammad lies in a grave. Same with Joseph Smith. Same with the last thirteen Dalai Lamas. But when Jesus’ followers went to his tomb on the first day of the week, it was empty. The angel told them, “He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.” The power of Christ is real! We are Christians, followers of Christ, God’s eternal Son, who took on himself our humanity and died in the sinner’s place.

First Thessalonians is a letter. We get fewer and fewer of these since the advent of email, but sometimes really important documents come to us in the postal mail. We evaluate printed documents all the time. When we go through our mail, some things get tossed without opening; they’re not worth our time. Some mail gets opened and read once. Bills get paid. But personal letters get more attention. If it’s a letter from a dear friend or lover, it may be treasured. I have a big file of letters my mother wrote to me over the years, and a bigger box of letters sent to me by Norma years ago when we were engaged. Often, Norma would send a letter every day. I looked forward to going to the mailbox. I could pick out her letters instantly: her clear, distinctive handwriting on a light-green dotted-Swiss envelope with a 4-cent stamp affixed. I would pull out her letter and take it to my room, where I would carefully slit it open and read her words written for me alone. She would tell me what she was doing, but also tell me how she missed me. When I thought of her, my spirit soared.

First Thessalonians is a letter. It begins: “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.” The noted apostle Paul shares equal billing with Silvanus and Timothy—men not as well known. Note Paul’s humility. He mentions his two traveling companions—fellow evangelists, men who went around telling people the good news of Christ. Silvanus is almost certainly the same as Silas in the book of Acts. “Silas” is the more common form, occurring 13 times (all in Acts); “Silvanus” occurs only 4 times, always in epistles (mentioned three times by Paul, once by Peter). “Silas” is a nickname (the short form of “Silvanus”), as “Will” for “William” or “Betty” for “Elizabeth.” “Silvanus” is more formal—literary; “Silas” was used in everyday conversation.

The man Silvanus is first mentioned in Acts 15, when the Jerusalem Council determined to send him, along with Paul and Barnabas, to carry the council’s letter to the Gentile believers. Silas, as he was called there, was a man of recognized piety and ability. He was Paul’s peer. Timothy, on the other hand, was younger; Paul writes two letters to him and refers to him as his “son in the faith.” Paul had led Timothy to the Lord. Humanly speaking, Timothy owed his salvation to Paul,

his father in the faith. Yet Paul did not save Timothy; no mortal can save another. We are all lost and dead in trespasses and sins and cannot get to heaven apart from Christ. There are other people whom we deeply love; something about them particularly attracts us to them. Some are Christians; others are not. We pray for them, that the Spirit might turn their hearts to the God. How we long to see them come to the Lord! Some might be our own children. How it grieves a Christian parent when a son or daughter resolutely refuses to confess Christ—or says, “Don’t talk to me about religion; my mind is made up.”

If you die without Christ, you die in your sins; you go to hell, the place of everlasting punishment. There is no reversing that; it is the final destination of the wicked. As your computer might tell you: “This operation cannot be undone.” This is why the Bible says, “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” We cannot be sure of tomorrow; today is all we have. According to Jesus there are only two classes of humanity: those who are blessed by the Father and go to eternal life, and those to whom the Lord will say, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.” There is no purgatory—that is a religious fairytale. According to Roman Catholic teaching, purgatory is “the state in which those suffer for a time who die . . . without having satisfied for the punishment due to their sins.”² No! If man is able to satisfy for his own sins, then Christ died in vain.

The Bible says nothing about a place of temporary punishment after death. Rather, it says, “Today is the day of salvation.” Today is the day to hear the gospel and be saved. Tomorrow will be too late. Our eternal destiny is fixed at death. Those who die without Christ go to everlasting punishment, from which there is no release. Oh, dear hearer, I plead with you to humble yourself and come to Christ. “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name”; “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out”; “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”

Here, then, is a letter from an apostle—the apostle Paul. This letter is apostolic. *Apostolic* means *from an apostle* or *from the apostles*. The true church is apostolic; the is, it is founded on the inspired teaching of the apostles—men sent out by Christ to teach the good news of his salvation. The whole church professes the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one holy catholic and *apostolic* church.” The apostles—the twelve chosen by our Lord after a night of prayer and fasting, and the apostle Paul, chosen by our Lord on the road to Damascus—were appointed by Christ to go into all the world and authoritatively preach his gospel. The apostles were given the power to perform miracles to authenticate their ministry. The signs of an apostle—signs, wonders and mighty deed—were performed by the hand of Paul (2

² Baltimore Catechism Q&A 1381

Cor. 12:12). His miracles authenticated his message; he spoke from God, and people reject the divine message at the peril of their lives.

The church has the apostolic witness in the Holy Scriptures. The church accepts the Old Testament on the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. He said: “These are the words which I spoke unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me” (Luke 24:44). Here, Jesus refers to the three parts of the Hebrew Bible—including the same books as the Protestant Old Testament: the *Torah* (the law of Moses), the *prophets* (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, the major and minor prophets) and the *writings* (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and the Chronicles). The church accepts the Hebrew Old Testament on the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church also accepts the Greek New Testament on the authority of Christ, because it is apostolic: that is, written by the apostles or by close associates of the apostles (Mark, Luke).

First Thessalonians is Holy Scripture—apostolic, written by the pen of the apostle Paul. It is inspired Scripture; it has the authority of Christ himself. You refuse its message to your own peril. Secondly, it was written

2. To a church

The text continues: “To the *church* of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

First Thessalonians was written to a church. The word for church (ἐκκλησία) means *called-out assembly*. In eternity past, out of the whole mass of humanity that were yet to be created, God called to himself a people for his name. Jesus referred to this in John 17 where he prayed to the Father, “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me *out of the world*: thine they were, and thou gavest them me” (John 17:6). Those that were given to the Son are called in Scripture the *elect*. Paul writes: “he hath *chosen* us in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). The word for “chosen” is the very word from which we get our English word *elect*. Some Christians get nervous when they hear the doctrine of election. They want to believe that “man chooses God” rather than “God chooses man.” It sounds so much more democratic! It makes the Christian religion more appealing: man is the master of his own fate. But the Bible does not teach that man chooses God; he *can't*, because by nature he is spiritually *dead*. A dead person cannot choose, or do any spiritual good. Scripture says that “when we were *dead* in trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Eph. 2:5). Salvation is all of grace; if you believe on Christ, it is because the Spirit has made you alive unto God.

The word for church (ἐκκλησία) can refer either to the whole church—the church invisible, made up of all who call upon the Lord in faith in every age and

every place—or to a particular congregation in a particular place. Paul famously says, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). There he speaks of the church universal, the invisible body comprising all the elect in every age, that will at the final day be visible in heaven. More often, the Bible uses the word “church” to refer to local church: “the church which is at Cenchrea,” “the church of God which is at Corinth,” “the church that is in their house,” or as it is in our text today, “the church of the Thessalonians.” The church at Thessalonica—one particular local church—is explicitly said to be “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” So what is true of the whole church—the church universal—is true of a faithful local congregation, no matter what its size: it is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a place of security: in the Father and the Son!

But notice: this letter to the church at Thessalonica is *from an apostle and to a church*—a particular church that is part of the universal, visible church. This is very important. This epistle to the church at Thessalonica is part of the canon of Holy Scripture, and what is true of this little book is true of the whole Bible: it is given to the *church*!

God did not give the Holy Scriptures to individual men and women with no connection to the church. He did not put the Holy Scriptures into a library somewhere where people could read it and decide for themselves what it means. God gave his written word to his church—his worshiping community. The Bible was given to the church to be used in the worship of God’s people. Christian worship is Word-centered. When the church gathers to worship it uses the Word: the church is called together by the Word, it hears the public reading and preaching of the Word by ministers of the Word. It is born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. It is sanctified and cleansed with the washing of water by the Word. It responds in obedience to the Word. The church prays, informed by the Word, using the language of the Word. It sings the Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs that are found in the Word or based on the Word. It sings and prays the words of Scripture that reveal and glorify the Word made flesh. The church’s confession of sin and assurance of pardon are based upon the Word. The church’s doctrine is the systemization of the Word. The church’s sacraments are those revealed in the Word. The church goes forth to serve, receiving the benediction of the Word. The holy Scriptures—both Old and New Testament—were given to the church to be used in Christian worship. The Word is not a dead letter but comes alive in the worship of the church. The true church *must* be Word-centered.

Christian, God did not leave you to figure out the faith on your own. He places you in a faithful congregation of his people to be taught his Word, to have your faith formed and informed by the Word.

This inspired letter was written by an apostle and sent to a church: “to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Thirdly, it is

3. Accompanied with blessing

Verse 1 of our text concludes with a blessing: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Here is the characteristic apostolic blessing. Here are Christian virtues: grace and peace. They come from the Father and the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Dear believer, we’ve heard this characteristic apostolic blessing over and over. Perhaps we’ve heard it so many times that our eyes glaze over and we skip over it with the attitude *I’ve heard this before, now let’s get on to the good stuff*. Brothers and sisters, we shouldn’t do that. What are this grace and peace?

Grace is unmerited favor. It is God’s kindness to us in Jesus Christ. When the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually, he determined to destroy the earth with a flood. The whole race of men would perish, drowned in a worldwide flood, except for one man and his family: “But Noah found *grace* in the eyes of the LORD.” When Lot was hastened by the angels out of the city of Sodom, which was doomed to destruction, he acknowledged: “Behold now, thy servant hath found *grace* in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast showed unto me in saving my life.” Lot was undeserving. If anything, he was too tied to Sodom. He had become too comfortable there. He enjoyed living with the citizens of Sodom and could not bear the thought that his beloved city be destroyed. He lingered there, so the angels had to take him by the hand and pull him out of the city. Lot was the recipient of divine mercy and grace. He did not merit it. It was purely the will and decision of the God who delights to show mercy. Lot found grace in the eyes of the LORD. So it is with the church in every age: it is God “who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and *grace* which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began” (2 Tim. 1:9).

Same with peace. The Hebrew word for peace is *שלום*, a beautiful word meaning *completeness, soundness, welfare*. The Greek word is *εἰρήνη*, from which comes the name Irene. Strong concludes that this word came from a primary verb meaning *to join*. The church is charged always to be “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the *bond* of peace” (Eph. 4:3). James asks, “From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?” Even converted men and women have difficulty living in peace. But the Lord Jesus is the Prince of peace (Isa. 9:6). He says, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not

your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” In the midst of a warring world where dangers abound, he gives peace. The gospel gives peace.

The letter to the church at Thessalonica is *from an apostle, to a church, accompanied with blessing*. It did not originate in the mind of man but in the heart of God. It is holy Scripture. It conveys the blessing of him who, in the words of our Old Testament text, said, “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.” Here indeed is an encouraging letter from the Lord of heaven, who sent his Son to give us his salvation. It is far more important than any letter received by a seaman during World War II. It is the inspired Word of God. It reveals Christ. Pay close attention to its message. You reject it at your own peril. Amen.