

The Congregation at Thessalonica

*“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.”*

*—I Thessalonians
1:3*

EARLIER IN THIS MONTH’S issue, we examined some of the Apostle Paul’s exhortations given to the church at Corinth. He had established this ecclesia located in the region of Achaia, part of present day Greece, during the latter part of his second missionary tour. Earlier during

that same journey, Paul formed churches in the region of Macedonia, about two-hundred miles north of Corinth. They were among the first Christian congregations on the continent of Europe. One of these was a group organized at Thessalonica. —Acts 18:1-18; 17:1-9

Our opening text indicates that those who made up the church at Thessalonica abounded in faith, love and hope. Their faith worked, their love labored, and their hope enabled them to wait patiently for the return of their Lord, when all the precious promises pertaining to their share in his kingdom

would be fulfilled. It was because all three of these Christian graces were so well blended and manifested in the lives of the Thessalonian brethren that the Apostle Paul was able to write to them in such a complimentary manner.

The apostle loved all his brethren in Christ, especially those to whom he was instrumental in giving the Truth. Those at Thessalonica were among the many who first heard the Gospel from the lips of this inspired servant of God. This local group of Christians was composed mostly of Greeks, but there were a number of Jews also, these having been convinced by Paul's preaching that Jesus was their Messiah. When Paul and Silas went to Thessalonica following their imprisonment at Philippi, they first visited the Jewish synagogues in order to witness to their own countrymen. On three successive Sabbaths they proclaimed the Gospel, with the result that a few Jews were convinced and accepted Jesus as their Redeemer.—Acts 17:1-4

Paul and Silas' work among the Greeks, from the standpoint of numbers, brought greater results. We are told that "of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few" believed. The Jews of the city who did not believe as a result of Paul's preaching began to oppose the work. They succeeded in stirring up some of the citizens of Thessalonica, and with them sought to lay hands upon those who had become followers of Jesus.—vss. 4,5

Apparently the new congregation of Christians held more or less regular meetings in the home of one of the brethren named Jason. It was there that the crowd gathered to assault the house and force

the group to appear before them. Perhaps the brethren had been warned, because a majority of the ecclesia were not there at the time. Jason and a few others were taken by force, brought before the rulers of the people, and charged with conspiracy against Caesar. The rulers, however, did not press the charge too severely. They allowed Jason and his friends to go free under a bond to keep the peace.—vss. 5-9

Meanwhile Paul and Silas went to Berea to give the witness of Jesus Christ and him crucified. (Acts 17:10) Paul did not remain in Thessalonica long enough to observe the growth of grace in the hearts and lives of the new converts. As time went by he doubtless often wondered how the group was getting along and perhaps thought as to whether the seed he had planted there had fallen on good ground, on stony ground, or among thistles. He knew that some of the seed had started to grow, but only the test of time and circumstance could prove how deep-rooted it was in the hearts of the brethren.

Paul knew that the storms of persecution had burst upon the budding Christians at Thessalonica. He knew that these experiences would test their faith and love and hope. No wonder he was anxious to know about them! He endeavored to visit the Thessalonian brethren again, but, as he explains, Satan hindered him. Still anxious to learn of their welfare in Christ, he sent Timothy to serve the ecclesia and to bring back a report of the brethren's spiritual growth.—I Thess. 2:17,18; 3:1-5

Timothy brought a good report, and Paul was much pleased. (vss. 6,7) His first letter to this church seems to have been written, partly at least, as an

expression of his joy in learning that these dear brethren of his were standing fast in the Lord and in the Truth. In the letter he refers to them as his “glory and joy,” and his “crown” of rejoicing.— I Thess. 2:19,20

A TRUE BROTHERLY VIEWPOINT

Paul’s interest in the brethren at Thessalonica indicates how richly the Spirit of God filled his own heart. Nothing should bring greater joy to the Lord’s people than to know that their brethren are prospering spiritually. Proper love for the brethren prompts to sacrifice in order to serve them. Our hearts should reach out to all our brethren, wherever they may be. It may be proper to conclude that “true charity begins at home,” but a Christian who has the welfare of all the brethren at heart will not be satisfied to express love only on behalf of those who may happen to cross his or her pathway.

The brotherhood of the saints is international, and if we are members of this fellowship we will be genuinely and deeply interested in our brethren the world over. Paul was not satisfied to know that once he had preached the Gospel in Thessalonica and that some believed. He wanted to know how these believers were prospering spiritually. When he learned that they were holding fast the profession of their faith, he rejoiced.

From the apostle’s letter to them we can understand somewhat the nature of the report Timothy brought to him. Our text speaks of their “work of faith,” their “labor of love,” and their “patience of hope.” Evidently, however, the report was more specific than merely that they had faith, love and

hope. It indicated that they had a faith which worked, a love which labored, and patience which was the practical outgrowth of the hope with which they were inspired.

HOW FAITH WORKS

The Apostle James tells us that faith without works is dead. (James 2:17-20) However, the faith of the Thessalonian brethren was very much alive. “From you,” the Apostle Paul wrote to them, “sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.” (I Thess. 1:8) What a testimony of a working faith! They not only believed the Gospel themselves, but they believed in it so wholeheartedly that they were laying down their lives to let others know about it. Thus they were “ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.”—vs. 7

We may say to ourselves and to others that we have absolute faith in the truth of the Gospel, but is our faith working? Genuine faith always works. By faith “Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.” By faith Enoch “pleased God.” By faith Noah built the ark. By faith Abraham left his native country and lived in tents in a strange land. By faith he prepared to offer Isaac in sacrifice. By faith Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. Indeed, all the great things which were accomplished by these ancient servants of God were wrought by faith.—Heb. 11:4-29,39,40

Faith is a moving power in the lives of the Lord’s people. Faith in God and in his plan makes that

cause our own, one for which we are willing to die, and without asking how, when, or why. If we really believe in the divine purpose for mankind nothing can prevent us from talking about it. Belief that in the near future the Creator of the universe will use his power to establish upon this earth a righteous government which will bring peace and health and life to the people should lead all who possess such faith to sacrifice even life itself in appreciation of this knowledge.

LOVE THAT LABORS

The work of faith and labor of love are closely related and, in reality, inseparable in the true Christian life. However, the Apostle Paul's use of the two expressions helps to give us a more comprehensive understanding of the manner in which the zeal of the Thessalonian brethren was demonstrated in what they did for others. Their work of faith was an expenditure of energy along the lines of giving witness to the Gospel, while their labor of love was the practical evidence of their interest in the brethren. We get this thought from the apostle's language in Hebrews 6:10, where we read, "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister."

Timothy's report to Paul of the condition which prevailed in the Thessalonian church must have convinced the apostle that these brethren did indeed have a true love for all the Lord's people. He writes to them, saying, "As touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed

ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more.”—I Thess. 4:9,10

Just as the faith of the Thessalonian brethren had caused them to engage in the work of spreading the Gospel far beyond their own immediate vicinity, so their love prompted them to serve the brethren throughout all Macedonia. Evidently Jesus’ commandment to love one another had taken on a wider meaning to them than that of doing what they could merely for their own congregation. Their labor of love for the brethren had reached out and become a blessing to the saints in the entire region. The fact that Paul complimented the Thessalonian brethren for this all-embracing love indicates that without doubt he shared their attitude and was pleased with their efforts.

Could any other viewpoint be wholly pleasing to God? Were not the last words which Jesus uttered to his apostles in the nature of a command that they should go into all the world and preach the Gospel, making disciples from among all nations? (Matt. 28:19,20, *Revised Version*; Acts 1:8) Making disciples involves a great deal more than giving them the opportunity to hear the Gospel. Those who hear and believe need to be built up in the most holy faith. They need to be comforted and strengthened. They need sympathy, understanding, and the love of their brethren. They need to be warned, too, against the encroachments of the Adversary, who is ever on the alert to attack the saints through various means and deceptions.

All the opportunities of service thus represented are as universal in scope as is the command to preach

and make disciples. Our vision of them should embrace “all the world,” and our use of them should be limited only by circumstances which make it impossible for us to reach out farther in our labor of love. “All Macedonia” was a wide field of service for the one church at Thessalonica, and their labors in this field indicate that they took seriously the command of Jesus to serve in all the world within their reach.

In I Thessalonians 5:11, Paul writes, “Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.” The expressions “yourselves together” and “one another” are evidently intended by Paul as references not merely to the church in Thessalonica, but to all the brethren they so lovingly served. Paul admonished them to comfort all of these, not because they were failing to do so, but because he wanted them to know how pleased he was that they were doing it—“even as also ye do.”

Not only was their labor of love manifested in their comforting the brethren throughout Macedonia, but they were also to warn the unruly, support the weak, and be patient toward all. They were to see to it that none rendered evil for evil, and were to encourage the brethren to follow that which is good, both among themselves, and to all. It was the doing of all these things that constituted their labor of love.—I Thess. 5:14-23

PATIENCE OF HOPE

“For we are saved by hope,” wrote the apostle to the church at Rome. Yet, as he explains, “Hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not,

then do we with patience wait for it.” (Rom. 8:24,25) All the unfulfilled promises of God to the followers of Jesus combine to give them hope. Outstanding among these are the promises concerning the coming and appearing of the Lord Jesus. Paul speaks of this particular hope in his letter to Titus, saying, “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ.”—Titus 2:13

In both of Paul’s letters to the church at Thessalonica there is much to indicate the brightness of their hope in the return and appearance of Christ. Evidently their patience of hope was manifested particularly by their keen interest in the subject of our Lord’s return. However, their interest in the Second Coming of Christ was by no means unrelated to their Christian activity. Indeed, the outgrowth of their hope in the Lord’s return, and their patient waiting for the fulfillment of that hope, was their faith that worked and their love that labored. Paul wrote to them saying, “The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end that he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming [Greek: presence] of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.”—I Thess. 3:12,13

Brethren in the Early Church did not realize that the return of Christ would not occur until many centuries after they had fallen asleep in death. The Apostle James wrote that “the coming [Greek: presence] of the Lord draweth nigh.” (James 5:8) Peter and Paul understood that Christ would not come again until after their death, but how long

afterward they do not indicate. In Peter's second epistle he writes much about the Second Coming and explains that he wanted the epistle to be a means of establishing the brethren after his death.—II Pet. 1:15

A lack of patience in waiting for the fulfillment of this blessed hope could easily lead to an erroneous conclusion concerning what the apostle wrote to them. In I Thessalonians 4:16,17, Paul indicated to them that following Christ's return there would be a short period during which those who are "alive and remain" would continue here in the flesh. This, coupled with the further thought that Christ's presence would be unknown during this period to the world in general may have been misinterpreted to mean that the day of Christ had already come. It was an incorrect conclusion, but expressive, nevertheless, of their enthusiastic desire for Christ's return in order that their kingdom hopes might be realized.

FIRST, A FALLING AWAY

That some in the Thessalonian church did get this wrong thought from the Apostle Paul's first epistle is apparent from what he said in his second letter. He wrote: "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming [presence] of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition."—II Thess. 2:1-3

Paul did not say that the brethren at Thessalonica had misunderstood what he had written concerning the manner of Christ's coming and presence. The only argument he offers to counteract a wrong conclusion that Christ had already returned was that an important prophetic event must first take place. This was the development of the great system which he terms "the man of sin," "the son of perdition," "the mystery of iniquity," and which is depicted in the Scriptures under the figure of "Babylon." The apostle explains not only that this system would develop and become manifest before Christ's return, but also that the brightness of his presence would be the power which would destroy it.—vss. 4,7,8

Thus we are furnished with a helpful example of proper and improper interpretations of prophecy. All of us at times may become impatient in our waiting for the fulfillment of our hopes, and because of our impatience indulge in speculation concerning the date for the glorification of the church and the establishment of Christ's kingdom. Our position with relation to the prophecies is, of course, somewhat different from that of the Thessalonian brethren. We believe the fulfillment of prophecy shows that our Lord Jesus is now invisibly present. The great falling away and the development of the mystery of iniquity spoken of by Paul are matters of history. The bright shining of the Master's presence is even now exposing Satan's evil order in all its various forms and preparing for its complete destruction, to be supplanted by the peaceable and righteous kingdom of Christ, which will bring blessings to all people.—Isa. 25:6-9; Zeph. 3:8,9; II Pet. 3:12,13; Rev. 21:3-5

It is given to us to be of those who are “alive and remain.” Nevertheless, we still need to exercise the patience of hope. Not until we are faithful unto death and exalted to be with our Lord in the spiritual phase of the kingdom will our hopes be realized. (I Thess. 4:17; Rev. 2:10) We long for that consummation. Some would hurry it if they could; but we should remember always that our times are in the Lord’s hands, and we should be willing to leave them there.—Ps. 31:15

We know that we cannot actually change God’s times and seasons, but there is a temptation to speculate concerning them. It is well to be watchful, to be alert, and earnestly to desire the speedy fulfillment of all our hopes. However, let us not run ahead of the Lord by attempting to decide dates and events of which he has given us no certain knowledge. To do this, it seems, would indicate an impatient waiting rather than patience of hope.

It is well to remember that we have dedicated ourselves to the Lord for all eternity. Whether it is his will for us to serve on this side of the veil or on the other side should not be permitted to weigh against our endeavor to make our “calling and election sure.” (II Pet. 1:10) It is a privilege and an honor to serve God in any capacity and under all circumstances and conditions. How blessed indeed is our lot, while patiently waiting for the realization of our hopes, to have the opportunity of proving our faith by our works and of laying down our lives in a labor of love on behalf of our brethren!

Well might we all take to heart Paul’s admonition to the saints in Thessalonica, “Be not weary in well doing.” (II Thess. 3:13) Even though we now live

during the closing period of the Gospel Age, until we are glorified with him we must still patiently wait, just as the “husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it.”—James 5:7

While waiting, we can rest in the assurance that there is no actual tarrying of the divine program. Hence in God’s due time, if we continue faithful, we will hear the words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou has been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.” (Hab. 2:3; Matt. 25:21) We will hear these blessed words of reception into the kingdom if we have been “good and faithful” servants—if we have shown our faith by our works; if we have laid down our lives in a labor of love; and if we have manifested the patience of hope. ■