

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

quickly around us. The moon was in Scorpio, Vega was in our zenith, and the great stars hung down out of the blue like lamps of fire.

Some of my companions took refuge in a cave excavated in the plateau; the roof of which was sustained by a central column of the living rock that had not been removed. Others stretched themselves on the bare ground with stones for their pillows, and all were soon audibly asleep.

I looked round on the wild-looking men strewed around me. We lay on the real Mount of Transfiguration, possibly on the very spot where the Saviour slept, with Peter and James and John, on the night before the representatives of the Law and the Prophets, Moses and Elias, committed to Him their trusts.

The Elder Brother himself slept on that bare mountain top. The thick dews of Hermon saturated His locks. He was then bracing Himself for the accomplishment of the great Redemption for which He had taken upon Himself the form of a servant, and he needed and received the sympathy of the beatified. It was a thought to repose upon that the memory of that night was still fresh with the Saviour, and that He looked down upon us as we slept.

WILLIAM WRIGHT.

*THE CONCEPTION OF CHRIST SUGGESTED TO
A HEATHEN INQUIRER BY PAUL'S EARLIEST
EXTANT WRITING.*

A STUDY IN 1 THESSALONIANS.

IN every age there have been sincere souls, peculiarly dear to God, who have turned their faces steadily toward the light; and in the early days of the gospel we may well believe there were many such amongst the heathen; seekers they were after truth, who looked to the new teaching with

something more than a mere Athenian curiosity; they hoped to find in it some sort of answer to their painful longings for light and peace.

One can conceive of a man of this order at Thessalonica. He would have nothing to do, one may suppose, with the sensuous worship and wild orgies which claimed so many votaries amongst his fellow-countrymen. Theologically, if such a term be allowed in this connection, such an one may have admitted that there were lesser deities, he might even not have been unwilling to sacrifice a cock to Æsculapius; but for all that he would hold that there was a Supreme Being, a God-Father, of whom—in some mysterious way—this world was an emanation, or to whom it was as a vesture in which He at once revealed and hid Himself. He would believe, further, that this great Being was not wholly indifferent to human life and character, and that in some way or other, how he could not define, he and all men would have to render an account to Him. He might have felt, further, that human nature needed mending, and may have looked more to philosophy than to religion, as he understood it, to do this great service. Yet, after all, his would be but a thin creed to live by, a sort of twilight that revealed objects and yet confused their outline. It supplied little guidance for practical life, and it made death a fearful leap in the dark.

Such an one had come across the Apostle Paul at Thessalonica, and his interest had been aroused, both by what that teacher of a new religion was and by what he had to say. He knew, for instance, that the Jews, in a general way, had no particular liking for the Gentiles, as they called all who were not of their nation; and he knew, further, that the strictly religious Jews were intensely exclusive, it being apparently part of their religion that they should separate themselves from all other peoples. He had been given to understand that they were stern Monotheists, believing in

one supreme God alone, so that they could scarcely frame language strong enough in which to denounce the lords many and the gods many of the Gentile world. And yet, here was this man Paul, a Jew, and evidently in his own way a religious man, actually going in and out amongst the Thessalonians as though he were one of themselves, and speaking strange words about one Jesus, who had been dead, and who—so he said—had risen from the grave and was then alive, and able to help men to lead good lives.

And whilst most of those who had taken Paul for their teacher were plain people, and much of their talk sounded to this man like a mere superstition, yet this much was clear, that they were pure and upright in their conduct above the common, and they seemed to love one another as those do who are bound together by a supreme common interest.

Such facts as these, as our inquirer reflected upon them, would deepen his desire to know more. What was it all about? Above all, who was this Jesus Christ? But, meanwhile, Paul had left Thessalonica, and of him he can make no personal inquiries. Presently it comes to his knowledge that a letter has been received from the Apostle, who was then at Athens. It had already been in the hands of the leaders of the little community of Christians in the city, and was to be read in a meeting of the congregation. To this gathering he obtains access, that he may hear it for himself. Greatly interested and yet not a little perplexed, later he obtains a loan of the precious parchment, for it contained so many startling ideas that even his trained and eager mind cannot take them all in at once.

Keeping these perfectly natural suppositions before us, let us ask, What conception of Christ would such an one gain from Paul's communication? That communication was simple and uncontroversial, the Apostle is neither condemning an error, nor developing a truth; he is just saying

what his anxiety and love dictate. He does not argue for a position, but takes for granted the things which he had already communicated by word of mouth. For the most part, any statements about God and Christ and their relation to these people, are made by way of implication rather than of direct affirmation; they were already the common property of the writer and his friends. Thus the letter contained them in solution, as they were already received and understood. In this way it would enable our inquirer to know more of what may be called the common Christian mind than he could have gathered from some later and more elaborate letters from the same pen. In them sublime conceptions are developed as a counterpoise to growing errors of belief.

Turning over the letter, then, with his mind almost a *tabula rasa*—a clean page—what would he learn concerning Jesus Christ, as Paul therein set Him forth? Arranging the substance of the letter as it related to that great person in some sort of logical order, the first thing that he would discover would be that :

Christ was a historical Person; that is, He had actually lived in this world. If it had been looked for, His name might have been found in the official records of the Roman Government in Syria, for it was said that the Jews had killed Him (ii. 15); and if the Jews had killed Him, then, almost to a certainty, He must have been a public character, who in some way or other had become obnoxious to them. Here, perhaps, our friend, as he read the passage, may have thought of Socrates, and the way in which he had been done to death by the Athenians. At any rate, it was certain that Jesus Christ was not a mythical person, a phantom, but one who well within the knowledge of people then living had walked this earth, and not so long ago had died (iv. 14).

Of course, so far, there would be nothing extraordinary

in this, that Paul should go up and down speaking about a dead teacher, and promulgating his views: that was a proceeding with which every intelligent Greek was familiar. The singular thing was to follow. For if this Jesus had lived and died, it was further said of Him, as though it were a well-known fact, that :

He had risen from the dead. In one passage (i. 10) it is said that God raised Him up; and in another it is said simply (iv. 14) that He rose again. How He rose, what He was like, what had become of Him, of all this nothing was reported, but the statement was clear that Paul held, and these Thessalonians had received, that the dead Christ lived again. This was not asserted with passion, or with marks of admiration, but soberly, as when a man speaks of that which no one denies.

Here was something the like of which our inquirer had never heard of before. He had, doubtless, his ideas of a life after death, a dim and ghostly life, as of a disembodied shade; perhaps He had felt in rare moments of exaltation that man cannot really die, but here was something quite different from such thoughts; for when it was said Jesus died and rose again (iv. 14) it must have meant that the person who had gone down into the grave, came up out of it, an awful thought, which, if not met by blank incredulity, would be likely to strike terror into any who witnessed the dead one living. So at least this heathen would think.

And yet it would become increasingly plain, as the reader pondered over what he read, that this belief, that the dead had become alive again, was fundamental. For in this letter :

Christ is spoken of as One who stands in such a relation to men now in this world as is only possible between living persons. It was not simply such a relation as by the aid of tender and sacred memories we maintain with

dear ones who have gone before. Paul speaks of the Thessalonians as having become followers of us and of the Lord (i. 6), indicating that the Lord lived and could be followed, as he himself, in some humble way, could be followed too. He calls himself and his companions apostles, *i.e.*, messengers of Christ (ii. 6), as though sent out by a living authority. He calls the gospel the gospel of Christ (iii. 2) just as elsewhere he calls it the gospel of God (ii. 2), which phrase seems to show that Christ stood related to the message in a way only possible to one who was alive, and very much alive.

Nor is this by any means all: Christ is spoken of as able to exercise functions, which, it is commonly supposed, belong to God alone. Thus it could not escape the eye of the reader that the letter opens with this salutation, "Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ" (i. 1). Nor that later, when Paul is telling his friends how exceedingly he desires to see them again, he shapes his wish thus: "Now God Himself, and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you" (iii. 11); and then goes on to say, "The Lord" (evidently meaning Christ) "make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men." Just as though Christ could actually lay His hand upon the secret hearts of men and change their tempers! And when the letter closes, it does so in this wise, "The grace" (*i.e.* mercy) "of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (v. 28), which would be a foolish and a meaningless ending unless He were alive and able in some way or other to alter men's lives by means of His mercy.

Here would be matter for astonished reflection on the part of our inquirer, for he must have known, if indeed he had any knowledge of such matters at all, that the Jews abhorred and detested any approach to a deification of mortal man. As a fairly informed person he might very

possibly have heard of the riotous proceedings at Jerusalem, which occurred because a foolish Roman Emperor set up his statue in the city, and desired divine honours to be paid to it; and he may have known that some of the most sacred Scriptures of the Jews were full of a fine scorn for the gods of Egypt and Assyria, of Philistia and of Tyre, not only because they were bestial, but because it was vainly imagined that they shared with Jehovah the attributes of deity. He knew these things, and yet here was Paul, a Jew, and proud that he was one, a keen, clear-headed man, actually speaking of Christ, whom the Jews had killed, as able, in a sort of co-partnery with the Father of all, to give grace and peace, and to direct the ways of men!

The reader's amazement would not be lessened as he took into his thought another series of passages in the letter he had before him. For if there is one idea more dominant in it than another, its ground idea, it is this, that:

Christ furnishes the sphere, the element, the atmosphere, in which men are said to live, and in which Paul, and even God Himself, work. The idea of men being in a supreme personality was probably not quite foreign to our inquirer's mind; he would have been ready to accept what Paul said to the wise men of Athens that in God we live and move and have our being, putting his own interpretation upon the words. It was not the idea itself that would have staggered him, but the present application of it to Christ, the same person who had lived in Syria and been killed by the Jews. But that it was applied to him in this letter, there could be no manner of doubt. Thus, the Church of the Thessalonians was said to be in the Lord Jesus Christ, as it was in God the Father (i. 1). The like is said of the Churches of Judea—they are in Christ Jesus (ii. 14). The conduct and moral character of the Christian

people were in Jesus Christ, for Paul says that he remembers continually their work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope, which were in our Lord Jesus Christ (i. 3). He held that his own exhortations were in the Lord Jesus (iv. 1), that fact gave them authority. The teachers of the Church were over them in the Lord (v. 12), and even the will of God was in Christ Jesus. "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (v. 18).

And not only does Christ dominate the whole field of life in this world, He is Master in that other world into which those who have died go. The dead are said to sleep in Jesus (iv. 14), they are the dead in Christ (iv. 16).

It may be said, without fear of contradiction, that this whole conception was a new thing to the Gentile inquirer, and a thing that would be likely to appal him. No teacher amongst his own people, in his wildest flights, had ever conceived that a person who had lived on this earth (and Paul had never hidden the lowly life that had been spent in Galilee and Judea) should so dominate all things, so penetrate all, so envelop all, as that men living and men dead could be said to be—in Him. And if he had inquired amongst the Jewish teachers, he would have found that such a conception was as alien to their minds as to his. Wherever Paul got it from, he did not get it by expanding and exaggerating an idea already to be found in germ in the faith of his fathers.

It would but give a rounded completeness to what he had already discovered, when the inquirer finds that Paul and his Christian friends in Thessalonica expected that Christ would come again to this world. What Paul called the coming of the Lord was a settled point in the great future toward which he looked. In his loving way he says that the people to whom he was writing were his hope and joy and crown of rejoicing, in the presence of the Lord Jesus

Christ at His coming (ii. 19). He hopes that their hearts will be established unblamable in holiness before God, even their Father, at the coming of their Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints (iii. 15). This same wish appears in another wording, when he says that his prayer for them is that they may be preserved blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 23).

Thus, then, as our Gentile inquirer read the letter, and reading, marked, learned, and inwardly digested its substance, such points as these would emerge. Jesus Christ had lived on this earth, He had died a violent death, and had risen from the grave; and, further, wherever He now was, He stood in such a relation to people in this world as is only possible to a living person, He exercises powers that are held to belong to the supreme God alone; He dominates all life, both in this world and in that world unseen into which the dead go, and one day He will come again, and human eyes shall see Him.

As he considered these things, would not the reader begin to ask:

Who is Jesus Christ, and why did He ever come to this world? To these final questions the answers given in the letter are brief, but they are sufficient. Near the beginning of it Paul says that everywhere people had recognised the great change that had come about in the lives of the Thessalonian Christians. They show these outsiders "what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned from idols to serve the living and true God"—so he writes; and then he adds a significant amplification—"and to wait for *His Son* from heaven, even Jesus" (i. 9, 10). That is, Jesus Christ was Son of God in such senses as are developed in the whole texture of the Epistle.

But if He were so great a One as to be Son of God, why did He die? How could it be possible that a Being so exalted, so powerful, so supreme, should ever suffer the ap-

palling ignominy of a violent death? To the man we have in mind, this would be a very serious question indeed, for he in his way was just as averse as was the Jew in his to the linking together of Deity and a cross; it would be foolishness unto him, an absurd *dénouement*, a transition from the sublime to the ridiculous, for to be weak was, in Greek eyes, to be ridiculous.

Why, then, did the Son of God die? Only one sentence in the whole letter supplies an answer to that critical question; but, short as it is, it is sufficient. *He died*, says Paul, *for us* (v. 10). This brief word is amplified a little by two other sayings. "God hath appointed us to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 9), "Jesus which delivered us from the wrath to come" (i. 10).

Would these answers satisfy the inquirer? Would they appear to him consonant with what had gone before? Would the whole conception of Christ hold together, or was it composed of irreconcilable fragments? Probably his own spiritual condition would give colour to his replies to these questions. But as a serious person of some intelligence, one or two things would surely suggest themselves to him.

The conception of Christ as one so completely man as to have been slain by rude hands, and yet as having risen from the dead, and as one possessed of powers active in the world, would be to him absolutely novel. He would be familiar with the idea of the gods coming down to this world in the likeness of men, paying short visits for their own purposes and then returning to Olympus. But there was really no point of contact between such apparitions and Jesus Christ. And as to a resurrection from the dead, it had never come into the mind of man in any such sense as it was affirmed of Jesus Christ. In his view, probably, the body was a sort of incumbrance, which in any future state of existence was to be got rid of. And as to the spiritual part of man, it could not be buried, and therefore

could not be raised from the dead; but it was said of Christ, that God raised Him from the dead. When the Athenians heard of this, and perhaps they heard of it at the very time that Paul's letter reached Thessalonica, they mocked.

If our inquirer had been as well acquainted with Jewish thought as we may suppose him to have been with Greek, then he would have found that in many particulars this conception of Christ raised from the dead was foreign to it too.

And then, further, this man must have been struck with the effect which belief in these statements, all taken together, had upon the Thessalonians and upon Paul himself; that effect was unmistakable and surprising. It had changed their lives, it had dissolved long-accepted and cherished beliefs, and it was, somehow or other, united with moral teaching of singular balance and sweetness. Was it not written, in this very letter, "We exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men; see that none render evil to any man, but ever follow that which is good both amongst yourselves and to all men" (v. 14, 15). Here was no wild, heady enthusiasm, but an outline of human conduct that would, if followed, change the world and bring on the golden age. And though they were by no means perfect, yet this was the pattern which these Thessalonian followers of Christ set before them. Thus the strange conception of Christ was linked in with decent, kindly, patient, and reasonable lives.

Whether this man would pursue his inquiries yet further, would very much depend upon his own personal sense of need as a moral being; for only then would his inquiries receive that intenser quality that comes from an awakened heart. The affections as well as the intellect must be engaged if men are to make the supreme quest.

We may permit ourselves to believe that he did receive Christ as One who died for him, who lived and exercised Divine powers. And though at that early stage he could not have said of Christ that "He was begotten before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made," yet he could have said—not going one inch beyond the teaching of this primitive Epistle—what implies and involves all these things, namely, that he had turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, even Jesus, which delivereth us from the wrath to come, and that Christ died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.

Nay, perhaps he could have gone further, and said, "The life that I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me."

E. MEDLEY.

"DOUBLE FOR ALL HER SINS."

A CRITICAL EXPOSITION.

"She hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins."—ISAIAH xl. 1.

"And that He would show thee the secrets of wisdom, that they are double to that which is."—JOB xi. 6.

THESE two passages invite attention for two or three special reasons. They are the only passages in the sacred Scriptures in which the Hebrew word occurs which is here translated "double." The word referred to is, however, dual in form, and, in order to be perfectly exact, it is necessary to state that it occurs elsewhere in the singular, though in one passage only, namely, in Job the 41st chapter, 13th verse. The two passages, moreover, present special difficulties, the one a difficulty of reconciliation with the religious instinct of mankind; the other a diffi-