

NOTES FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF II THESSALONIANS - PART FOUR

Paul had begun in the first chapter of this letter with nothing but encouragement about the faith and love of the Thessalonians which continued to grow. He had hinted at what was now missing in their hope based on the future return of Christ. In the second chapter he explained his concern about the wrong teaching which they had somehow received according to which Jesus had already returned unnoticed by most. While showing them clearly that this had to be wrong because Jesus' return would be a dramatic event leading to the judgement of those who were currently persecuting them, he still encouraged them that he was confident of their salvation because they so obviously belonged to Christ. He did not write them off because they were wrong in one aspect of teaching. Finally in this last chapter he shows them how wrong teaching leads to wrong behaviour and urges them on a path back to fruitfulness.

He begins chapter three by asking them to pray for his ministry. He has firmly explained in other places that his effectiveness and protection depends on God's faithfulness not the prayers of others. (Rom.8:31-39; Phil.4:13,19) His purpose in this request for them to pray is more subtle. If they are to pray that the word will spread rapidly through Paul they will surely want that same ministry through them to resume. If they desire that Paul is rescued from perverse and evil men they will also want to be rescued themselves from those whose false teaching has for the moment made them ineffective. As we expose our hearts to God for others we allow Him to strengthen and protect us also. The first effect of our prayer is to keep us on God's track for us. The 'steadfastness of hope', (I Thess.1:3) will be restored. (3:1-5)

The first step in dealing with an epidemic of disease is to try to limit its spread to others. Paul wants the Thessalonians to separate themselves from those who had allowed the wrong teaching that Christ had returned to cause them to live in a disorganised way. The 'tradition', frequently repeated and accepted principle, they had received was one of hard work to provide for themselves and their families. Sitting back doing nothing is an attitude which is highly infectious. Even Paul as a missionary had worked with his hands to support himself rather than expecting others to feed him. (Acts 18:3; 20:34,35; I Cor.4:12) He knew God could provide his every need miraculously but he worked to be an example. It is sometimes necessary to be tough on the lazy so that finally hunger will lead them to work. One of the effects of doing nothing ourselves is boredom which is readily filled with gossip, and telling other people how to run their lives. Paul wants them instead to occupy themselves with the kind of Christian service for which they had once been famous. (I Thess.1:6-8) It is better however for a change in behaviour to come from within as the result of teaching. For this reason Paul has, in the previous chapter, dealt with the wrong teaching before its life consequence. (3:6-13)

Having tried to limit the spread of laziness based on wrong teaching by dealing first with those who were not doing this but could easily be led astray, Paul finally directs his message to the troublemakers. We are not to judge motives but we are still to recognise wrong behaviour and not copy it. We are not judging when we see someone drunk or

stoned and choose not to join them. We can separate ourselves from the influence of those who have got it wrong without ceasing to care for them and to reach out with love and truth. 'Admonish', *noutheteo*, means to 'put into the mind' and is about teaching not simply rebuking. The older brother of the prodigal son could still have reached out in care and compassion without joining his brother in the pigsty.(Lk.15:25-32) If we avoid and condemn those we regard as sinners we will be religious hypocrites. If we join them we will be drawn into the same mistakes.(3:14,15)

When we are under pressure from all sides as the Thessalonians were the first casualty is peace. Our inner agitation with the behaviour of others, whether unbelievers who attack us or Christian brothers who undermine us, renders us ineffective. We will so often be inclined to attack the consequence rather than dealing with the cause. Paul demonstrates beautifully in this letter how to do this well. His secret was joy which led to gentleness, and prayer instead of anxiety, which resulted in peace.(Phil.4:4-7) In joy the presence of God is overwhelming.(4:16)

In the previous chapter Paul had recognised that one of the sources of wrong teaching could have been a forged letter supposedly from him. He wanted them to notice carefully the mark of authenticity in this letter. He had emphasised the same thing before when he had had to deal with wrong teaching and he wanted there to be no mistake about from whom the letter came.(Gal.6:11) In case they had missed the point the simple secret of dealing with every challenge in our Christian lives is the same, the immeasurable riches of the grace of Jesus Christ.(3:17,18)