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APRIL-JULY 1990

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# Homiletical Studies

## Epistle Series A

### THE SECOND-LAST SUNDAY IN THE CHURCH YEAR

November 18, 1990

1 Thessalonians 1:3-10

The lectionary has several pericopes from the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians. For this Second-Last Sunday of the year we want to preach in the context of the Old Testament lesson with its stern warnings (Jeremiah 25:30-32) and the gospel predicting the last judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). In end times God's people need to be built up in faith, love, and hope. Faith and works are, in justification, mutually exclusive; they unite in sanctification. The commentaries discuss the difference between work and labor. A parallel occurs in Revelation 2:2.

We want to join Paul in comforting people with reassurance that they are chosen as evidenced by the Spirit's fruits. In verse 5 "power" is the same Greek word as in Romans 1:16. The gospel has both explosive and sustaining power. Not only did the gospel explode into the lives of the Thessalonians during the brief time Paul had with them before Jewish persecution drove him out of town (Acts 17:1-10), but it will continue to sustain them in the coming wrath. The gospel is the powerful tool of the Holy Spirit to do the humanly impossible, to work deep conviction.

How often have we preached on the one lost sheep? The text begs us to address the ninety-nine. What a joy for Paul to be able to commend the Thessalonians as imitators of himself and of the Lord, and as models to other believers, in the face of severe suffering. We can look for the imitation of Christ among the people we serve. They too are needed for holding to *sola scriptura* in the face of "enlightened" humanism. What other persecutions do they endure?

The word which the NIV translates as "model" in verse 7 is translated as "form" in Romans 6:17. The word means a "pattern" or "mold," being derived from the verb meaning to "strike" an image or imprint. Like Paul, we can point to examples without fostering spiritual class-consciousness.

There is strength in the ringing of verse 8—not tinkling bells, but sounding trumpets, booming thunder, reverberating echoes. When the proclamation of the gospel rings out from the pulpit, the gospel rings out in the daily lives of God's people. Our people too have plenty of idols—money, cults, man—to tempt them from the living and true

God. At year's end, in these times, we do not wait and do nothing. Rather, like the Thessalonians, we wait and serve the coming Lord.

The goal of the sermon outlined here is to encourage joyful living. The problem is that God's people suffer. The means to the stated goal is the proclamation of the gospel that God loves us.

*Introduction:* Christian living is joyful living. But at the end of the church year we recognize the wrath our just God must visit on sinful people when He comes again. The Holy Spirit and Saint Paul encourage the Thessalonians and us too:

### SMILE! GOD LOVES YOU!

- I. Smile! God gives gifts to you (v. 3).
  - A. You need special gifts to face suffering (v. 6b). (One can cite particular persecutions of this congregation.)
  - B. You have special gifts as evidenced by special fruits.
    - 1. Your faith produces work.
    - 2. Your love yields labor.
    - 3. Your hope engenders endurance.

The fruits of the Spirit in your life prove God chose you.

- II. Smile! God chose you (vv. 4-5a).
  - A. God loves all people (John 3:16).
    - 1. Love is why Jesus lived perfectly for them.
    - 2. Love is why Jesus died perfectly for them.
    - 3. Love is why Jesus rose for them.
    - 4. Love is why Jesus rules for them.
  - B. God loves you personally (Isaiah 43:1b).
    - 1. Love is why Jesus lived perfectly for you.
    - 2. Love is why Jesus died perfectly for you.
    - 3. Love is why Jesus rose for you.
    - 4. Love is why Jesus rules for you.

Having chosen you, the Lord considers you His great pride.

- III. Smile! God boasts of you (vv. 5b-9a).
  - A. We are reluctant to brag about ourselves.
  - B. The Lord calls you His special treasure (Exodus 19:5, Malachi 3:17; 1 Peter 2:9).
  - C. Jesus boasted of the Ephesians (Revelation 2:2).
  - D. As your pastor, I boast of what God does through you. (One can cite accomplishments of members without naming names.)

What the Lord has started, the Lord shall complete (Philippians 1:6).

- IV. Smile! God rescues you (vv. 9b-10).
  - A. Christian living in these last times is a hassle.

1. Many people call our message foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18).
  2. Many people call our lives foolishness (1 Corinthians 2:14).
- B. The gospel rings out in your life (v. 5; Romans 1:16).
1. The gospel is dynamite.
  2. The gospel is a dynamo.

*Conclusion:* When we see a bumper sticker which says, "Smile! God loves you," we may think the idea superficial. But it is true! Our Lord continually plasters us with happy faces. Smile! God loves you!

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## THE LAST SUNDAY IN THE CHURCH YEAR

November 25, 1990

2 Peter 3:3-4, 8-10a, 13

The Apostle Peter's goal in this pericope, and preferably the goal of pastors preaching thereon, is to strengthen the faith of Christians in the parousia. The problem is the innate human desire to experience immediate gratification, especially in modern America. Thus, the only way to accomplish the goal stated above is God's promise—the second coming is the necessary consequence of the first coming of Jesus Christ.

The "last parts of the days" in verse 3 ("the last days" in the KJV) refer to the New Testament era and not to any specifically late period within it. That already the apostolic period falls within the scope of this designation necessarily follows from Jude 17-19. Jude (18) clearly quotes the prophecy before us and then announces the beginning of its fulfilment, verse 19 using the present indicative of the copula with a present participle: "These are the ones who are causing divisions."

In other words, *ep' eschatōn tōn hēmerōn* corresponds precisely to the *be'aharith-hayyāmim* of the Old Testament, the phrase which the prophets (the "holy prophets" of verse 2) often used (with variations) to foretell the second part of human history—the Messianic era intervening between the first and second advents of Messiah—which we ordinarily call the New Testament era. In Isaiah 2:2, for example, the English versions generally render the phrase "in the latter days" or "in the last days." A literal translation of the construct phrase would be "in the latter part of the days." The use of the article prefixed to *yāmim* is presumably demonstrative. (Even if a generic use were

preferred, the same interpretation would obtain in the end as via the demonstrative route.) The scope, then, of "these days" without qualification is all of human history in uninterrupted continuity with the days of the prophets (as opposed to the eternity to follow the parousia and as opposed also, of course, to the imaginary future millennium of the chiliasts). Thus, "the latter part of these days" represents the second of the two main parts of human history—namely, the New Testament era, following Messiah's first coming (Genesis 49:1, 10-12), as opposed to the Old Testament era. The Septuagint translates *'ah<sup>a</sup>rīth—hayyāmīm* in differing ways in different places. The rendition of this phrase in 2 Peter 3:3 (which occurs as well, in some cases, in the Septuagint) is a relatively literal translation in comparison with some others. Cognate expressions in the New Testament include "the last days" (Acts 2:16); "the ends of the ages" (1 Corinthians 10:11); "later times" (1 Timothy 3:1); "last days" (2 Timothy 3:1); "last part of these days" (Hebrews 1:2, the most literal translation in the New Testament); "end of the ages" (Hebrews 9:26); "last days" (James 5:3); "last time" (1 Peter 1:5); "last part of the times" (1 Peter 1:20); "last hour" (1 John 2:18); "last part of the time" (Jude 18, slightly paraphrasing 2 Peter 3 in the direction of explication but under Hebrew influence).

The "lusts" of the mockers in verse 3 are any desires contrary to God's will, especially the desire to live without divine interference. The *ktisis* of the following verse is not the act of creation, but simply the universe, whatever its origin may be. Thus, the characterization of verse 4 embraces also the modern mockers who use the theory of evolution to exclude divine intervention from history altogether—generally relying on the uniformitarian presuppositions of modern "science," averring "all things remain as" they were. The application of Jude 18 cited above rules out the common identification of "the fathers" with the first Christian generation since Jude himself belonged to this first generation. In addition, the mockers are scarcely speaking as Christians would and so, as unbelievers, have no fathers in the faith. The reference is, therefore, to any and all ancestors—to use the language of contemporary evolutionists, "all the way back to Lucy."

Verses 8-9 are the evangelical heart of this pericope, locating the delay of the parousia precisely in the grace of God operative in the gospel ("the promise"). The point of verse 8 is that God chooses the right time for the accomplishment of His purposes, whether it be tomorrow or in another millennium or whenever. (Completely inadmissible, therefore, is the appeal of some moderates to this verse to justify an "age-day" interpretation of Genesis 1; cf. "The Length of the Days of Creation" [*CTQ*, 52:4 (October 1988), p. 269]). The application of this principle to the parousia finds literal expression

in verse 9 and figurative in 10a. This figure (even more than the one in 1 Thessalonians 5:2) is an abbreviation of the analogy used by Jesus Himself, with which Peter's readers would have been already as familiar as we (Matthew 24:43-44; Luke 12:39-40; cf. Revelation 3:3; 16:15). Eschewing, therefore, the "signs of the end" which the chiliasts seek, we must be ready to see the parousia at any moment (cf. the discussions of Luke 17:20-30 and 24:25-36 in *CTQ*, 52 (1988):2-4, especially pages 170-171 and 302).

Despite, too, the confusion of many modern exegetes, there is no incursion of the end into history ahead of time. The parousia is a single event, exclusively in the future, which we are expecting (verses 12-13) and, indeed, awaiting eagerly (verse 12, where both the context and Scripture elsewhere require us to choose the second sense of *spoudō*, "be eager or zealous," in place of "hasten"). In the meantime, we rely not on any experience of the glory to come, but purely on the word of the gospel ("His promise" in verse 13, where *epaggelma* seems to emphasize even more than the usual *epaggelia* [verses 4, 9] the divine objectivity of the promise).

Verse 13 speaks of the purified universe which will issue from the parousia. The newness of this universe will consist above all in the exclusive indwelling of righteousness. That is to say, all the inhabitants will live in complete accord with the will of God—God Himself, the holy angels, and human beings (the believers of this world) perfected in holiness. All sinners (men and devils) will be swept away to eternal perdition. Indeed, even the non-spiritual creation will be purified from all the effects of sin and so transformed into a dwelling-place befitting the righteous (Romans 8:19-22). Nothing here suggests an annihilation of the present universe and another *creatio ex nihilo*. The word which verse 13 uses twice to speak of newness ("new heavens and new earth") is *kainos*, not *neos*; the emphasis is on a qualitative, not a chronological, difference (the *paliggenesia* of Matthew 19:28).

The purification itself which, in connection with the parousia, is to produce the new universe is described in verses 7, 10, and 12, but in only a very partial way. Also these verses prophesy a transformation of the world, rather than its dissolution. A forthcoming study of the epistle appointed in Series B to the Second Sunday in Advent will expound these verses.

*Introduction:* Modern Americans dislike waiting. A television advertisement makes the point that a business is likely to lose customers who must wait more than a minute on the telephone to reach its number. Americans expect to walk into a shop and buy clothes or shoes immediately, without waiting to have them made.

Americans hate waiting for the meal or the bill in a restaurant. But most people even today would admit that some things are worth a wait—because they are so beautiful or so delicious or so enjoyable. The Apostle Peter speaks of the end of this world in the same way:

### WELL WORTH THE WAIT

- I. The end requires a wait.
  - A. God sets the time on the basis of omniscience and grace.
    - 1. His omniscience: God knows precisely the right time.
      - a. It could be in the distant future.
      - b. It could be in the next second.
    - 2. His grace: God is showing men patience.
  - B. Man reacts in several related ways:
    - 1. Impatience and frustration.
    - 2. Doubt and despair.
    - 3. Unbelief and ridicule.
- II. The end is worth the wait.
  - A. It brings the destruction of all ungodliness.
    - 1. Removing all unbelievers.
    - 2. Removing all effects of sin from earth and heaven.
  - B. It brings the bliss of believers.
    - 1. Who will see the fulfilment of God's promise.
    - 2. Who will be confirmed in eternal righteousness.

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