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## The Foundations of an Exemplary Christian Life

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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*"Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 1:9,10).*

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, divided into five short chapters, can be read entirely in about ten minutes. As we take it up, we find ourselves in the presence of two or three quite clearly defined things. First of all, we find ourselves in the presence of Christians at the beginning of their Christian life. These Thessalonians were comparatively new converts, and the apostle speaks much about their beginnings - how they started, and how they had got on so far - and so it is a message about the beginnings of the Christian life.

Then we find ourselves in the presence of the apostle saying that these comparatively young Christians were most exemplary. He had no fault to find with them, but everything to commend. He said that he gave thanks to God *always* for them all; and he went on to say that they had become an example to all that believed (1:2,7).

And then we find that the apostle is defining the Gospel that he preached, which produced such Christians. He uses the word "our" Gospel, "the gospel which we preach", speaking about "his" Gospel; and then he gives us an epitome of his Gospel, his great Gospel, in a few concise statements. It is a good thing to be able to have the whole wonderful Gospel, in all its great range and content and potentiality, gathered into the compass of about four clauses. It needs a master hand to do that. We are going to look at them quite simply and briefly. They occur, as you see, at the end of the first chapter.

### **Turning to God from Idols**

*"Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God."* That is the first stage of the Christian life. Now, although they were pagans formerly, in a pagan world with all its system of idol worship, and you might think that it is not quite right and hardly fair to compare people of a 'Christian' country with those pagans and to class them all together, I want to point out that in principle and in fact the classing of all unsaved people with those pagans is quite right. "Ye turned unto God from idols to serve" - or "to worship", for that is what the word here means - "a living and true God". Now, the principle here, a principle which has many forms in many different times and ages and parts of the world, is just the same. These people had been giving the "worth-ship" - for that is the meaning of worship - of their lives to other objects than God. Who is getting the worth-ship of your life - God, or... whatever else it might be? If you are not giving it to God, then you are giving it somewhere else, to something else, and that is idolatry. So the first stage of a true Christian life is this - the realisation and recognition that God is worth your giving everything to Him. He is worthy of having the worth-ship of your life, of having laid at His feet all that you have and are.

Now, when Paul and his companions - you notice he speaks in the plural, "we give thanks" - came to these people, he set forth in the first place the worthiness of God to have their lives, and to have them and their all; and as he set forth the true and living God, they perhaps suddenly came to realise - "Oh, how different from what we have been doing! How unworthy has been the way that we have been going in comparison with this!" It is the seeing of the worthiness of God in Christ. We sometimes sing, as we seek to emphasize and reiterate the all-captivating worthiness of the Lord Jesus -

"Marvel not that Christ in glory  
All my inmost heart hath won."

That is where it begins. Anything less than that, anything other than that as a beginning will find us out sooner or later. Here is One who, by reason of His self-manifestation and of the great work that He has done for our redemption and salvation, is worthy to have everything that we count worthwhile in life. That is very fundamental.

As we go on in the Christian life, it is upon that very thing - our foundation, our beginning - that we are tested again and again. It comes up repeatedly - Is Jesus Christ worthy of this? Is God worthy of this? Is this something that is too valuable to give up to Him, for Him? What place does He have in comparison with this? And if at the beginning there is any faultiness or weakness about that, we shall find ourselves sooner or later held up, until we have got through on the sheer and pure question of whether He is worthy.

These people made such a good start, and went on so splendidly, and became the kind of exemplary, praiseworthy Christians that they did become, because they settled it very thoroughly in their hearts at the beginning - "There is nothing in all the world worth feeding with our worship in comparison with this One." It indicates the deep and large place that the Lord took with them from the start. And that is the ground of testing all the way along: How large a place has the Lord got in our hearts? Some of us know that, even after many years of the Christian life, we are challenged - Is the Lord worthy of this? Is He big enough even for this? Can we stand up to this test as to His worth-ship?

And so it all comes back - I was going to say, to the simple question, but it is not a very simple question sometimes - Has He got us, has He got us captured and captivated, has He taken the full place in our hearts? You go bounding on if it is like that. You do not bound on if it is not like that. When we have controversies and questions, any kind of reserve, wanting our own way and our own

interests, to serve our own ends and do our own wills, and we are up against the Lord, we do not go on; we are held up. You will see people going right on when there is no division of heart between the Lord, themselves, and other things; when He has got them altogether. The Lord would make an appeal to us to look to the very foundation of our lives.

After all, the Lord does not accept our head knowledge of Christianity and all its aspects. The Lord does not accept all our informed mind about the church and the cross and what not. The Lord looks right into our hearts, and says, "How much have I got of you? How much are you still holding on to your own way and your own will, your own course and your own programme and your own interests? I do not ask how much you have got into your head, but how much have I got of your heart?" That was very precisely settled by these Thessalonians; and so it was possible for the apostle to say about them: "I thank God always for you." How good it would be if those who are concerned for our spiritual lives, and have us on their hearts, could look at us and say: "Thank God there is no reserve in that life, there is no hold-up there; they are going right on. The Lord has got His hand on them, they are right out for the Lord."

"A living and true God". That is only a little qualification or characterization. After all, if we give our lives and pour them out in any other direction than for God, we are pouring our lives into the sand. There is going to be no return. It is death, from which there is no coming back. It is an end. Sooner or later we shall find that out, that that kind of thing leads nowhere but to a dead end. We shall see something more of the meaning of that in a moment. "The living and true God". That is the appraisal of God. He is the *living* and the *true* God, and everything else to which we might give our lives is false - it will prove itself to be empty. He is the living God, He is the true God, and we shall find that to be so. If there is one thing about true Christian life, it is the absolute reality of God. Sometimes that reality is not a pleasant thing to come up against, but it is at least reality, and we would sooner come up against God, in reality, in an unpleasant way, than not know where God is or is not. Far better to have a living God who checks you up, who deals with you and chastens, than to have no God at all, or to be in question or doubt as to whether God takes any notice. No, to a true Christian, God is very living and very true, very real.

### **Waiting for His Son From Heaven**

"Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, *and to wait for his Son from heaven.*" Many people have failed to recognise that that is a part of the foundation of the Christian life, and that it is a part of the Gospel of our salvation, and it is fundamental to a really right kind of Christian life, such as is here. "To wait for his Son from heaven." What did that mean for them? We know what Paul has to say about the coming again of the Lord Jesus. Amongst a great many other things, it means this one thing, that everything of hope for us and for this world is bound up with the *kingdom* of our Lord Jesus Christ. Apart from His coming and bringing in His kingdom, there is no hope. For the Thessalonians it implied that all the natural pouring out of their lives had been a hopeless thing; that they had no future really for which to live; that life and the world was a great enigma.

But when they came to the Lord they did so on this basis: God's Son is coming again, and that will put everything right. Everything is bound up with Christ's kingdom which is coming. It is, of course, one of those strange enigmas that the world still has false hopes of putting itself right. Someone has said that "all that we have learned from history is that we have learned nothing from history", and that is just what is happening. We are learning that we have not learned anything, and yet men hold on for a better world. They are getting into deeper and deeper mire and perplexity, they do not see any way through, and yet all the time they are seeking expedients to save the situation and save the

world, but it is a counsel of despair. The Word of God makes it perfectly clear that there is no hope for humanity and for this world apart from Jesus Christ being in the place of absolute Lordship in His kingdom. And these Thessalonian believers came to see that. They did learn something from history. What they learned was that it gets you nowhere - except into more and more trouble, more perplexity, more and more despair. Then they saw that God's Son is coming from the Heavens to set up His kingdom, introduce His reign, and all will be well.

That is fundamental. Let us get it settled right at the beginning - not as something further on in the Christian life, and not as merely the study of prophecy about the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus - that the foundation that our hope does not rest upon anything of prospect in this world. We have no hope at all for this world as it is, apart from Jesus Christ, but we have a solid and firm hope and confidence that He is coming, and when He comes all will be well. We shall be lifted above all that which keeps us back, holds us up, makes the going so hard. He is coming! We have often said something like this: Is it not remarkable that, when we Christians sing a hymn about the coming of the Lord, something happens? It is not just that we have a lovely idea, and as we think about our lovely idea we feel better. No, it seems that the Holy Spirit comes in on it, and when we sing about Jesus coming again, we go home feeling better just for having been reminded of that, just for having entered into the spirit of that. I believe that this is true to law. The Holy Spirit is managing everything in the light of that day, and when He sees the people of God occupied with that glorious day, He says, "That is what I am after", and we feel in ourselves a wonderful sense of uplift and life and deliverance. How many poor souls in their sufferings and afflictions and trials have been lifted clean out and up by just being reminded - The Lord is coming - it will be all right when the Lord comes!

Many years ago I used to visit an old couple, poor as church mice so far as this world is concerned, living in one room. The old man had never moved out of his armchair for twenty years. He could not be left, and his wife was with him, pottering about, very rarely going out. They had nothing in this world. Twenty years, you know, is a long time to sit, in weakness and limitation, in an armchair in one room - the same old scene, surroundings, pictures, ornaments and everything else every day for twenty years. Were they very, very unhappy, miserable people? No, not a bit. I used to pay them a regular visit every week, and they were always a rebuke to me. A smiling welcome: "Come in, Mr. Sparks, and talk to us about the Lord! We heard what you were preaching about last Sunday, and we have been enjoying it so much", and so on, and so on. They were just above it all. And what was their hope? To the end their hope was - The Lord is coming! It was their sustenance. Now, it was no false hope with them. He did not come in their lifetime, but it was not therefore a false idea, a misplaced expectation. No, the Holy Spirit bore witness in them, in their lives and in those circumstances, that, whether they lived to see it or not, the coming of the Lord Jesus would put everything right. It was a mighty inspiration to them.

These Thessalonians, if you read the little letter again, knew something of adversity. "You received the word in much affliction", the apostle says. They knew ostracism, they knew persecution, they knew what it was to be frustrated in business transactions because they had become Christians. They knew physical suffering and temporal suffering, but they went on. They were examples. Why? Simply because they knew - The Lord is coming! "To wait for his Son from heaven" was something settled right in their very foundations.

### **Faith in Christ Raised from the Dead**

And thirdly - "his Son from heaven, *whom he raised from the dead*". What did that mean for them? The only One, after all, who can raise the dead is God. Now if God, who alone can do it, raised Jesus from the dead, that implies - nay, that declares and attests - that the purpose for which He died has been

accomplished. Jesus died. Why did He die? In His death He accomplished a perfect salvation, a perfect redemption. He died to deal with the whole sin question, the whole question of condemnation. It was a finished work, and God, who would never have raised from the dead otherwise, raised Him, and in so doing attested the work for which He died as being a completed and perfected thing.

Now the Thessalonians saw that. We know that from Paul's teaching. "He raised Him from the dead." Therefore the whole sin question is a settled thing: forgiveness is secured, salvation is established, God is satisfied. Oh, that we got that into our foundations! The thing that we are constantly up against in Christian lives is condemnation, accusation - this undermining of the fundamental fact that God is satisfied in Christ for us. There is no meaning in justification by faith if that is not what it means. We make mistakes, it is true, we blunder, we default, we err, we sin. Then all the forces of hell rush in, with their ever-determinate purpose, to say that Christ's death was unavailing, it has not accomplished the work that is claimed for it, you are still a sinner under condemnation.

What awful devastation these evil forces make when we let them have ground. What is the result? Ours is a very jerky kind of Christian life. We go on for a little while perhaps fairly well, and then down we go. We come up and go on. A little further on, down we go again under some further condemnation, because of some fault, real or imaginary. We make ourselves the playground of the devil. Now the settling of all this is right in the very foundation of our Christian life: that Jesus was raised from the dead by God as the universal declaration that this whole matter of sin and condemnation has been settled in His cross. Until you have got that, you will never go on steadily and become exemplary, and those who are concerned for you will not be able to look at you and say, "Thank God for them." But even there, if you have been like that, do not let what I have said become the very occasion of condemnation. If you have been like that, get out of it. God has not only raised Him from the dead, but also, says the apostle, "raised us up with him" (Eph. 2:6). Therefore we have no right to be down. Don't you argue with the devil or let him talk to you. Our place is up there, because God has set His seal to the mighty death of Jesus Christ. No wonder there can be such Christians as these Thessalonians, if there is a foundation like that.

### **Delivered from the Wrath to Come**

And then finally, "whom he raised from the dead, *even Jesus, who delivereth us from the wrath to come*". Now here, a shadow steals in, a shadow we do not like even to take account of; but we should be unfaithful if we did not look at this other side, this dark side, and face it fairly and squarely. For the Word of God declares again and again that wrath is coming: there is a day of wrath, what Paul here calls "the coming wrath"; something quite precise, quite definite. It is *the* coming wrath. There is a thing which is on its way, and that is what is called "wrath". It is something clearly defined, clear-cut, settled, unavoidable. It is coming, and it cannot be escaped, except by one way.

Let us look into this. What is that day for? Why does it exist? Why has it been appointed and settled and defined? Let us be clear as to one thing. It was never, never appointed for man. It was appointed for Satan and his whole kingdom. After all, in this universe there are only two gods. The one may have many representations, in the countless forms of idol worship, but behind them all there is only one person: it is Satan, and Satan's object from the beginning has been to displace God in the worship of man, to set God's Son aside, put him out of His place. Satan's determination is to be in the place of God.

The number of those in this world who would deliberately claim to be Satan-worshippers is probably comparatively small. But it does not matter how we put it. There are two gods, there are two objects

of worship, one of which is receiving the “worth-ship” of our lives. One of them is this rival to God, who would take God’s place, who would supplant the place of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, as Lord. He has many, many subtle and beautiful ways as well as many awful ways. Satan’s first way is always the beautiful - do not forget that. He was more beautiful than all the creatures that God had created (Ezek. 28:12-15). “Even Satan”, says the apostle, “fashioneth himself into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). That is how he comes to capture God’s place. It is hardly believable, but he does. Satan does not come in the first place in the traditional form, with the tail and horns and pitchfork, and horrible leer, and belching fire. He can get your life very much more easily and quickly by offering you his baits - prizes in this world, and so on, as substitutes for Jesus Christ. If you repudiate him, if you do not take that way, then he will try to force himself upon you by cruelty and destroy you.

Now, for that one, be he the horned, tailed monster, the awful dragon, or be he the angel of light - he is the same being, the same person - for him, and for all his hosts who are with him in his foul work, God has stored up wrath, the day of wrath. If that one is receiving our “worth-ship” and not God, then the day of wrath will find us, will include us. That is the terror of the Gospel. God never meant it for us. For this is the wonderful, wonderful fact: that every man, woman and child in God’s creation is redeemed - not has got to be redeemed, but *is* redeemed. *You* are redeemed. You may not have accepted your redemption, you may not have entered into the blessings of your redemption; but Christ’s work on the cross was for all men, His redemption was for all. God has not got to redeem you, He has not got to do anything more for your redemption; He has done it all and offered it to you. But if you spurn it, do not accept it, refuse what God has done, you are tacitly taking sides with the other one, you are involved with him and with his object of not giving God his place. And so the day of wrath will overtake us - not only Satan and his angels, but us - unless we have come to this One, Jesus, God’s Son, “who delivereth us from the wrath to come”.

These Thessalonians were delivered from all fear of the future, all dread of the day of wrath. Those terrors had no meaning for them. Their faith in Jesus Christ meant complete deliverance from anything like that in the future. No day of wrath for them! All wrath, all judgment, all condemnation, all death, all punishment had been emptied out for them on God’s Son, and they had come to accept that. They were free people. They did not dread the future, they did not fear the afterward. Upon their horizon there was no dark cloud of coming judgment. “Jesus, who delivereth us from the wrath to come.”

If we can get settled on these four things, we shall have a very sound foundation, and, blessed be God, we shall have a very exemplary Christian life. It remains for us to decide where we are. No child of God, however advanced they may be, should be displeased at having had this brought before them. All the way along we need to see exactly where we stand: what is our position and what is our hope, and to keep it always in view. For any who do not know the Lord, it is an immense challenge, with immense consequences involved. The Lord help us to do what the Thessalonians did: “turn to God” ... “to wait for his Son... whom he raised from the dead... who delivereth us from the wrath to come.”