

*THE ESCHATOLOGICAL SECTION OF
1 THESSALONIANS.*

IN this paper I propose to consider the section chapter iv. 13-18 of 1 Thessalonians.

We cannot tell with positive certainty why the subject of this passage—the share of the departed in the blessings consequent on the coming of the Lord—came to be dealt with in this Epistle. The Apostle introduces the subject somewhat unexpectedly with the words: “But we would not that ye should be ignorant, brethren, concerning them that sleep, so that ye may not sorrow even as the rest who have not hope.” It is hardly likely that St. Paul would have entered upon the question, as he here does, unless there had manifested itself in the Thessalonian Church a certain hopelessness at the death of some of its members; and it seems justifiable to suppose that news, brought possibly by Timothy from Thessalonica, had reached the Apostle which made the exhortation here given necessary. It cannot reasonably be argued that the interval of time that had elapsed since the Thessalonian Church was founded was too short for any of its members to have passed away. The implication in the section under consideration that some had died has, it is true, been used as an argument against the genuineness of the Epistle, but the earlier part of the Epistle is so obviously genuine, betraying as it does so strongly the depth of the Apostle’s feeling, and his anxiety for the Church from which he had been prematurely separated, that it is unreasonable not to accept the present section as genuine too, and to explain its genesis as due to information which St. Paul had received. Certainly in the months that had elapsed since he had left Thessalonica there had been time for deaths to occur among the members

of the Church; and this seems the simplest explanation of the introduction of the subject into the Epistle.

1. Now in order to understand the passage before us, we must keep in mind the purpose for which it was written. This was to inspire the Christians of Thessalonica with hope respecting the dead who had been members of their community. For these they were sorrowing even as those who were outside the pale of the Church would have sorrowed. The Christian hope, associated with the coming of Christ, was not thought to be applicable to them. Death was considered to be a bar to its realisation. The Apostle here teaches that this view of regarding the matter was all wrong, and that the dead in Christ would be at no disadvantage at the Parousia, in the blessings of which they would share quite as much as those who would be alive when that great event occurred.

We must not in the passage under consideration look for a treatise on eschatology. It obviously is not that. The Apostle's aim is to dispel a certain lack of hope, and all that he says here is directed to this end. The hope that was theirs that were Christ's in this life was to be extended to those who had died in the faith of the risen Jesus.

To be without hope for the dead was to forget the fundamental facts of the Christian faith, that Jesus had died and had risen again. "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so also those that fell asleep through this Jesus (*τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*) God will bring with him."

We must examine this phrase *τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*—those that fell asleep through the Jesus—that is, the Jesus just mentioned as having died and risen. The first time the name *Ἰησοῦς* occurs it is without the article, the second time, the article is appended with the obvious intention of referring back to the Jesus already spoken of as having died and, according to Christian belief, risen again.

We note that the aorist participle (τοὺς κοιμηθέντας) is used in the phrase before us, whereas in the previous verse it is the present participle that occurs (περὶ τῶν κοιμωμένων). There is plainly a distinction to be made here. οἱ κοιμώμενοι = those that are sleeping, those that are asleep, the fact of death, and not the act of dying being prominent. But οἱ κοιμηθέντες διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ = those that fell asleep through the (risen) Jesus, there being no reference to their present condition as sleeping or dead, but to their condition at the moment of death—they fell asleep διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

What, then, are we to understand by διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ here? I agree with Lightfoot that the words must be taken with τοὺς κοιμηθέντας, and not with the following ἄξει σὺν αὐτῷ; but I do not find myself in agreement with him as to the force of διὰ. The difficulty, Lightfoot says,¹ is to assign "its proper signification of instrumentality to the preposition." It is true that he allows that the διὰ may not be that of the instrument but "the διὰ of passage." He says, having in mind the phrase οἱ κοιμηθέντες ἐν Χριστῷ of 1 Corinthians xv. 18: "As a state of spiritual condition is ἐν Χριστῷ, so a transition from one state to another is διὰ Χριστοῦ." But his note leaves the impression that he prefers to bring out the force of instrumentality in the participle. "The justification of διὰ is probably to be sought in the fact that κοιμηθῆναι is not equivalent to θανεῖν, but implies moreover the idea first of peacefulness, and secondly of an awakening. It was Jesus who transformed their death into a peaceful slumber. "According to this, then, the phrase τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ would practically mean "those whose death was through Jesus turned into a sleep."

This interpretation would have more to commend it if death had not been called a sleep in pre-Christian times

¹ Notes on Epistles of St. Paul.

both by Jewish and heathen writers. Moreover it appears to me to read into the phrase what is not really contained in it. It directs attention too much to an act of Jesus, and does not sufficiently emphasize the state of those spoken of as *τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*. Their state or condition when they died or fell asleep was *διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*.

Nor does Lightfoot's alternative interpretation whereby *διὰ* is "the *διὰ* of passage" satisfy me, and I think some other explanation of the preposition must be sought for. Nor is it far to seek. May not *διὰ* here be what the grammarians call, the *διὰ* of "attendant circumstances?"¹ Such a use of the preposition we found in 2 Timothy ii. 2: *ἃ ἤκουσας παρ' ἐμοῦ διὰ πολλῶν μαρτύρων* = the things which thou didst hear from me among many witnesses; and again in Rom. ii. 27: *τὸν διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς παραβάτην νόμου* = who with the letter and circumcision art a transgressor of the law. A similar use of *διὰ* is to be found in Romans xiv. 20, *κακὸν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ τῷ διὰ προσκόμματος ἐσθίει* = it is evil for that man that eateth with offence; and again in Romans iv. 11 *εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν πατέρα πάντων τῶν πιστευόντων δι' ἀκροβυστίας* = that he might be the father of all them that believe when (or though) they are in a state of uncircumcision. In 2 Corinthians ii. 4 we read *ἔγραψα ὑμῖν διὰ πολλῶν δακρύων*, which we should translate, "I wrote unto you with many tears," though the phrase *διὰ τῶν δακρύων* might be rendered "through many tears."²

The interpretation of *διὰ* as the *διὰ* of attendant circumstances gives excellent sense to the passage we are considering. The Apostle is speaking of those who had fallen

¹ This interpretation is given by Dobschütz in his recent Commentary on the Thessalonian Epistles.

² Most of these examples are given by Blass, *Grammar of N.T. Greek*, p. 132.

asleep in the faith of Jesus, who was raised from the dead. For we have already drawn attention to the force of the article before *Ἰησοῦ*. It is the same Jesus of whom it has just before been said that, according to Christian belief, He had died and risen again. The phrase *τοὺς κοιμηθέντας διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ* comes, then, to mean those who fell on sleep in this atmosphere or surrounding of Christian faith. They were in a certain relationship with the risen and living Jesus when they died. They had fallen asleep *διὰ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ*, of whom it is said: *ἀπέθανεν καὶ ἀνέστη*. As He was risen, so those who were His and had died through Him would God bring with Him. The return of Jesus to earth was a real hope of the Thessalonians (i. 10), what they needed assurance of was that with Him would be brought those who, having themselves shared this hope, had fallen asleep. These, they had to learn, were in no sense losers by death.

The Apostle goes on to enforce this point by an appeal to the word of the Lord: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive that are left unto the coming (*παρουσία*) of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first."

There has been considerable difference of opinion as to what is here intended by "the word of the Lord." Some have thought that the Apostle is himself uttering an original prophetic message, spiritually revealed to Him. Some have argued that the reference is to some spoken word of the Lord Jesus, whether or not that word be recorded in our Gospels. Others, again, led by Steck, have found this 'word of the Lord' in 2 Esdras v. 40, 41. This last explanation must, however, be rejected, for it is impossible to accept it if we allow the genuineness of 1 Thessalonians. Moreover,

it has nothing in itself to recommend it, as the reader will probably readily grant if he refers to the passage. It remains, then, to consider the other two explanations.

In favour of the first of these, namely, that the Apostle is speaking prophetically, we have the fact that *ἐν λόγῳ κυρίου* is the Old Testament phrase in connexion with such prophetic utterances. It has always seemed to me, however, that a serious argument against this interpretation is that the Apostle is not here speaking specially for himself. He does not say, "This *I* say unto you by the word of the Lord"; but "This *we* say unto you, etc.," so associating with himself Silvanus and Timothy in whose names as well as his own the Epistle is written (i. 1). Here surely if the appeal were to some prophetic word revealed to St. Paul himself he would have employed the singular first personal pronoun. I am unable to take the view that the 'we' of St. Paul's Epistles is merely an author's 'we,' and I hope in another paper to shew that the 'we' of the Thessalonian Epistles is most naturally explained as a real plural, and that there is a reason why in certain places the Apostle speaks in his own name and uses the first person singular.

I come, then, to the conclusion that the reference is to some word of the Lord Jesus. Whether or not that word is, like that in Acts xx. 35, one not recorded in our Gospels, is a matter for consideration. We have to inquire whether in the Gospels we have any word of Jesus parallel with what we find here. But we must first examine how far in our present passage there is a conclusion based upon the word of Jesus, and to what extent it may reasonably be thought to contain the actual word spoken by Him. I should myself certainly at once understand the words "we that are alive, that are left (or survive) unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are asleep" as a deduction from some word of the Lord Jesus. I see no reason for

supposing that Jesus ever uttered such a saying as this : Those that are alive and survive unto My coming shall in no wise precede those that are fallen asleep.

So far as we have in the passage under consideration any quotation of actual words of Jesus, as distinguished from deductions drawn from them, I should say that they must be those contained in the next verse (*v.* 16). I do not for a moment mean by this that the *ὅτι* of *v.* 16 is to be linked with *λέγομεν*, and that the intervening words—that we who are alive, etc.—are parenthetical. The *ὅτι* of verse 16 must be translated “for” and not “that.” But the passage can be quite well interpreted in some such way as this : This we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, etc., shall in no wise precede them that are asleep—this being deduction—for—and here in substance is the word of the Lord Jesus—the Lord Himself with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God, shall descend from heaven, etc.

Now there is no saying of Jesus in our Gospels corresponding exactly to this. But there are certain sayings which bear a striking resemblance to it, e.g. St. Matt. xxiv. 31, St. Matt. xvi. 25, St. John vi. 39 ; and it is easy to believe that there were other sayings of Jesus current among the early Christians which came even more near to the words of 1 Thessalonians iv. 16. The mention of the trumpet here and in St. Matthew xxiv. 31 is remarkable, and we recall St. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians xv. 52 : “For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” We see how in St. Paul’s mind the sounding of the trumpet is associated with the raising of the dead, and it seems to me exceedingly probable that this association is due to the language and words of Jesus.

I take it, then, that what St. Paul says here “by the word of the Lord” goes back to the words of Jesus, who

had given His disciples to understand that at His coming He would raise the dead, and that the dead no less than the living would have a share in His kingdom.

For this is, as we have already said, the whole point of the passage under consideration. The Thessalonians were sorrowing because, as it seemed to them, those Christians who had died were excluded from the blessings of the Parousia. St. Paul would heal their sorrow by telling them that the dead in Christ had lost nothing by death. God would bring them with Jesus at His coming. In no way would they be behind the living; on the contrary, their resurrection would precede the glorification of those who were alive. The dead in Christ would rise *first*.

It is important to observe that there is not in this passage any distinction made between the dead in Christ and the other dead. The latter are not mentioned at all. The word 'first' stands opposed to the *ἔπειτα* of the sentence: "Then we that are alive that are left shall together with them be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." There is no suggestion here, at any rate, of a first and second resurrection. First, the dead in Christ will rise, then the Christian living, the survivors on earth, will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and both alike will be for ever with the Lord.

The error of the Thessalonians who were sorrowing without hope for their dead arose from a misunderstanding of the future kingdom. They seem to have regarded it as of the earth, and they thought that Christ's coming would be a return to earth. The Apostle here corrects this wrong idea. He tells them that those Christians who are alive at the Parousia will be taken up from the earth. In the first Epistle to the Corinthians St. Paul teaches that those who are yet alive will have to be changed, for "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." The same truth is

implied in the passage before us. The future kingdom is not to be a mundane one, but supramundane (*eis áépa*)

We have, then, in this passage a very important Christian truth—the supramundane character of the future life. Resurrection for Christians will not be for them, any more than for their Lord, a return to the conditions of earth. The Lord's coming will not be such a return. He will come to receive His own, that they may be with Him where He is. And when we speak of the future state as supramundane we need not interpret the *supra* locally. Local interpretations are quite out of place. What is 'above' in one part of the earth is 'below' in another. Before the discovery of the rotundity of the earth this, of course, could not be understood, but permanent truth may be contained in an imperfect expression of it. The being caught up to meet the Lord in the air may suggest a future local habitation above the earth, and thus, in their simplicity, some of the first Christians may have understood the matter. But the essence of the matter is that the future life with Christ is not of this world nor on this world, but far above it; not locally above, for such an idea is no longer intelligible.

It is important for us to interpret spiritual truths, which were expressed for the first Christians in language they could understand, according to their essential meaning and not according to the literal statement of them. The spiritual world is indeed past our comprehension, but our Christian belief is that the material is not the measure of everything, and that it is possible to cast off "flesh and blood" and yet be ourselves, nay, we may say, to become more than we can, with our present limitations, know ourselves to be. We can still find comfort for ourselves, and, as we find it, supply comfort to others in these words of the Apostle, which he wrote to remove the hopelessness of his Thessalonian disciples, who needed an escape from the material measure of things.

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