



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 10 Commentary 1 & 2 Thessalonians
Lesson 11 Questions Galatians

THE EARLIEST WRITING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT 1 and 2 Thessalonians

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST BOOK OF THESSALONIANS

This first letter of St. Paul to his converts dates from the year 50 A.D. He had recently founded the Church in Thessalonica and he wrote the letter shortly after he had left them to bring the Good News to Corinth. He sent his trusted helper in the Gospel, Timothy, to the Thessalonians and received encouraging news about their loyalty to their new faith, particularly when the Jewish community there was vigorously opposing the Christian message. Paul instructs them on the usual problem with the loose morals of the Grecian-Roman culture, especially in regard to the right sexual conduct; cautioning them also to live in peace and to avoid idleness. Then the great Apostle turns to their serious problem: they were concerned about the Christians among them who had died. They knew they would rise, as Paul taught, but they regretted that their loved friends gone before them would not have the great experience of the Second Coming. To miss that seemed quite unfortunate! Paul's main teaching in this letter is on that event. It is helpful to us, too.

II. GREETING AND JOY OF PAUL (1 Thessalonians 1:1-10)

Paul uses the customary greeting of the Greek style; he adds the beautiful description: "Who belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The Greek word "kirche"—a society or a community of citizens, is the origin of our word "church." He describes his reaction to their positive attitude on proving their faith, working together in love, and their constant hope in "our LORD JESUS CHRIST" (1 Thessalonians 1:1-3). These are the three principal characteristics of Christians who are known to the "gentiles"—the people not Jews—by their values of faith, hope, and love of God and others.

Paul calls them "beloved of God," "imitators of us"—Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, who accompanied Paul to preach Christ to the Thessalonians. Paul also gives them this compliment: they imitate the Lord, even though they are being tried greatly by those who rejected Paul's teaching (probably the other Jews). They act with obvious

“joy coming from the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:2-7).

Looking back at these words of the great preacher of the gospel, we see that he mentions here each member of the Holy Trinity—a completely new knowledge of God that Jesus taught. In fact, the Thessalonians, writes Paul with gratitude, are a model for all whom Paul teaches throughout Greece and Macedonia. The Word of the Lord “resounds” from these new Christians even in other parts of the empire, “how you turned to God from idols, and how you await from heaven the Son whom God raised from the dead” (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Are we models of Paul’s teaching? After studying each of his letters and growing as Christians, we can be.

III. NEW TEACHING FROM PAUL (1 Thessalonians 2-4)

A. Paul’s Approach in Their Conversion (1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:1-20). It is interesting that Paul admits the great humiliation that he had received from their neighboring Greek city, Philippi, where he and Silas had been stripped, beaten and thrown into prison (Acts 16:16-24). After a miraculous intervention by God, they were released, converting the jailer and baptizing his whole “household.”

The Thessalonian Jews in their synagogue had given such attention to Paul that a number of them, this group to whom he is writing, were baptized and instructed in a manner as “gentle as any nursing mother.” Paul preached “God’s good tidings” to them, and yet worked day and night in his tent-making craft (1 Thessalonians 2:8b-9). Paul carefully drew the Thessalonians to a solidarity with the Christian Jerusalem Jews.

B. The Work of the Spirit. His preaching, says Paul, was not the cause of their blessings in the true faith; “For our gospel came to you, not only in word, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians

1:5). Such expressions recall Peter’s words in Cornelius’ house: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38), and Paul’s words to the Romans: “May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that through the power of the Holy Spirit you may have hope in abundance” (Romans 15).

“Full conviction” comes from the good of having the Holy Spirit who gives such power to Christians who preach Jesus. Knowing that we have this power should also bring us into a full conviction of it, that we may with confidence expect this divine working as we tell of our beliefs to unbelievers or uninstructed people. Have you found a way to do this effectively? Pray for light.

C. Receiving the Word (1 Thessalonians 2:17-20; 3:1-13). In this we, too, must “turn to God from idols” (1 Thessalonians 1:9b). Modern America and other countries need to look hard at the materialistic societies that lead their people to “idols.” Even sports can become our “idols.” Whatever takes precedence in our life instead of its rightful place in our time and interests must be regulated. Paul, after pointing out the giving up of idols, gave a short “creed” to us: “We believe that Jesus died and rose. We await from heaven the Son of God raised from the dead” (1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10).

Paul’s own approach to his call to evangelize the Gentile world is not “from error, uncleanness, not with a false reason”; neither, as the false teachers do, “with words of flattery, or a cloak for greed, nor glory from men” (1 Thessalonians 2:3, 5). The true evangelist does so in truth “before God and man,” and “without cost to you” (2 Corinthians 11:7). This last shows the genuineness of his mission to preach; today, it shows up also evangelists that amass a personal fortune from their ministry.

Some churches are organized as a corporation, even to advertising their church. Some ministers,

diplomas in hand, vie to advantage over others in job opportunities. But some others, as religious orders do, take a vow of poverty and live as “having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:10). Yet even here, the “possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:10), can be endangered by individual or community use of modern materialism in their lifestyle. Really living what Paul is saying here, involves much soul searching and vigilance! The zeal Paul showed, the energy he expended, the talents he brought to bear, the gifts of mind and heart he exercised, were all single-mindedly directed to one aim: that “the word of the Lord” sound forth and “your faith in God” go forth (1 Thessalonians 1:8). (Quoted from Paul, His Letters and His Theology, by Stanley B. Marrow.)

IV. BEYOND THE GOSPEL

A. The Lord’s Second Coming. The Thessalonians evidently had been taught about the resurrection of the dead; they and even Paul believed that this might occur during their lifetime and that they would have the advantage over their loved ones who had died first. They were grieving over their dead for missing this as well as for having lost their loved ones.

“We, who are alive at His coming” seems to say that Paul expected Jesus’ return within his lifetime. The question for the first Christians was: What happens to the Christians who die before that? Paul explains that those who died in Christ will rise first and the survivors “will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we shall be with the Lord always” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

B. Preparedness (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11). Jesus’ day of return will come “like a thief in the night, just when people are saying ‘Peace and Security!’” even though they are not ready to go to judgment. The first Christians, and we also, are warned to “be alert with faith and love within like a breastplate, and our hope in Christ like a hel-

met.” We are destined for salvation since Jesus Himself went through death for us and we shall live with Him forever. In our own Christian upbringing, we also have been taught of the necessity to be ready to be “caught up with Christ,” but first, to live in a state that is free of such a grievous sin that we will not be admitted to heaven, for death decides this by the choice we have already made. When that moment comes, our chance is over. Repentance of a serious sin and a change of life must be always present in our lives, or we might not “make it.” But let us remember that only “deadly sin” takes from us the life of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit (1 John 16b-17). This sin requires absolution from a priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, according to the Church, to prevent any of us dying suddenly and not being united with God at death. A sudden death or one otherwise may cause in that moment before we die, an act of sincere, strong contrition. But this is a great risk to live in.

C. The Better Way (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12; 5:12-22; 2:12-13)

1. Chastity. “It is God’s will that you grow in holiness: that you abstain from immorality” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Since we also have the Holy Spirit, the very Person of God, within us, we have a great source of good, and much light from within. “Immorality” here probably meant sex outside of marriage, giving way to the passions, as so many unchurched (and the churched also) of our youth do. Today, this is considered normal and even necessary to develop adulthood. Such people are far from “guarding his member in sanctity and honor” instead of “in passionate desire as do the Gentiles who know not God.” Paul is probably dealing with former pagans who knew no better than the Roman society practiced.

At a meeting in Dallas, February 7 1991, Archbishop John Foley, president of the Vatican’s Council for Social Communications told U.S. bishops “if TV daily portrays divorce, adultery, fornication (sex outside of marriage), contraception,

abortion and lying as normal and acceptable ways of coping with life, how can Sunday sermons not seem irrelevant and restrictive?"

2. Love for Others (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12). Even though these new Christians are known to be strong "all through Macedonia," "Make even greater progress," asks Paul, "make it a point of honor to remain at peace—attend to your own affairs." We get an idea of the class of citizens there that Paul has converted in his advice to "work with your hands... so that you give good example to outsiders and want for nothing" (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

3. Respect for Authority (1 Thessalonians 5:12). Who are those that Paul says "whose task it is to exercise authority in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them with the greatest love because of their work"? As with the Jewish faith, each Christian community was governed by "elders" who dealt not only with the practical side, but also taught and governed. Paul describes these in several of his letters. Translations call them attendants, assistants, ministers, deacons. The two words "episcopoi" and "presbyteros" are the origin of our "bishop" and "priests." They were appointed by the Apostles or their representatives, e.g. Titus. These roles developed into our diocesan clergy and bishops as early as the time of St. Ignatius of Antioch, martyred in 107 A.D. He was taught by one of the Apostles, was appointed bishop of Antioch in Syria. Finally, he was taken to Rome and martyred by wild beasts in the "public games." (If you have never read the life of any saint, you really should, especially those who died for our faith.) On his way to Rome, Ignatius stopped at each port and left a letter for the Christians there. These have been preserved and are of the greatest value for the light they throw on Christian belief and practice after the Apostles. One of the great truths they teach is that of the Eucharist as we believe it, and which requires a priest ordained by a bishop, a successor of an Apostle. This is a long line of authenticity and the Church has preserved it in each generation.

4. Peacemakers. "Be at peace among yourselves." To do this, leaders, parents, or whoever, have to "admonish those who are undisciplined; encourage the fearful, support the weak, and be patient with everyone" (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

5. Joyful, Prayerful, and Thankful Christians (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18). These verses have had an enormous influence on Christian spirituality. St. Luke, who was a companion of Paul on his journeys, tells us in his Gospel of Jesus telling a parable "about the need to pray continually and never lose heart" (Luke 18:1). In Paul's letter to the Romans he writes: "Be joyful in hope, keep praying regularly, persevere in hardship" (Romans 12:12a). These and similar teachings go on through the Letter of Paul.

6. "Do Not Stifle the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). This teaching implies that the Spirit of God given to us speaks to our lives, our hearts, our consciences; even in daily life. He does not fail; this may be not only the pricks of our conscience, but also calls, inspirations to do good, which prompt us to an act, a decision, that will be a step in further holiness and approval by God, etc.

The key word in these last few verses of Paul to the Thessalonians is the word "stifle." We do not outrightly say no to the Spirit; we stifle Him. With what? With our busyness, our radios, TV's, our running around, our telephones, our talkativeness. Arrange some time of silence in your days to keep these teachings of this great Apostle: "Pray, Do not stifle the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19), "hold on to what is good, shun every form of evil." A quiet time in our days would give us a chance to check on ourselves before God as these most important final words of Paul to his new Christian community suggest. Then, for us, too, Paul will ask: "May the God of peace make you perfect and holy; and may your Spirit, life and

body, be kept blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:12).

I. INTRODUCTION - THE SECOND BOOK OF THESSALONIANS

The “Parousia,” a classical Greek word for an “active presence” and later used to name the visit of a ruler or an emperor, becomes in the New Testament one of the foundation stones, the very cornerstone, of our theology. “This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). But before this wonderful event, Paul explains further to his Thessalonians, who are so wonderfully growing in mutual love, that the enemy will “flaunt the claim that he is God, even ‘appear openly’” (2 Thessalonians 2:4-8).

“But you, whom the Lord loves, God chose from the beginning to be saved by the Spirit who makes us holy and keeps us in the truth by our faith” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). One of the helpful teachings of the Church is stated here in chapter 2: “Keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.”

II. SACRED TRADITION

The Church passes down Sacred Tradition, some of which even pre-dated the gospels which

had not been written at this time. The Bible as we know it was not available to Christians until it was completely written and accepted, around the end of the 300’s A.D. Many in those centuries and after, could not read and even when the printing press was invented, Bibles were scarce.

III. THE BIBLE

The Church continued copying the Bible laboriously, mainly by the monks who chose as their “one” (mono) occupation for a lifetime the serving of God. Sacred Tradition and the Teaching Church taught the faith and passed it on. “The Bible is the only rule of faith,” a saying by some Christians, cannot be true.

“May,” writes Paul, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself, and God our Father who has given us his love and his grace and ceaseless encouragement and hope, strengthen you in every good word and deed” (2 Thessalonians 2:15-17).

Paul ends with “You can rely on the Lord, who will give you strength (2 Thessalonians 3:1-3) and guard you from the evil one. The Lord be with you all. This greeting is in my own hand—Paul.” This great Apostle upbuilds his people in his closings.

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 11
Galatians

Day 1 Quote from the notes two sentences that helped, interested, or informed you.

Day 2 Read Galatians 1, and 1 Timothy 2:6.

- a. From Paul's first four sentences, what do you learn about him and about Galatia? About God and Jesus?

- b. On what does Paul base his teaching and his authority? (2 Corinthians 11:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 2:3-4)

Day 3

- a. When did God "set Paul apart"? (Galatians 1:15).

- b. Read Galatians 1:13-16a, Acts 7:54-60; Acts 8:1-3. What can we learn about God in his relationship to a persecutor or an oppressor of Christians today? What can we learn for ourselves?

- c. What do you learn from Galatians 1:15-19?

Day 4

- a. Read Matthew 16:13-19 and Galatians 2:1-10. From these texts, what is the Church structure from the beginning?

- b. Read Galatians 2:15-21 and Philippians 3:8-9. What does “to be justified” mean?

- c. Read Galatians 3:19-29. Quote one sentence that is important to you and say why.

Day 5

- a. Read Galatians 4:1-7 and its footnote and 4:17-20. What impresses you in the truths Paul teaches here?

- b. Read Galatians 5:13-15. What fact in verse 13 of this passage is important to stress for teens just flexing their “adulthood”? If young people give “free rein to the flesh” (Galatians 5:13), what will the results be?

- c. Read 1 Peter 2:11. What does bodily indulgence do to the soul?

- d. Describe “war on the soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

Day 6

- a. Read Galatians 6:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15. Quote words which help you and explain how.

- b. In Paul’s conclusion to this letter, what speaks most to you?