

The Corrective Epistles

Part 5

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Duration	00:45:34
Online version	https://www.audioteaching.org/en/sermons/eb003/the-corrective-epistles

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[00:00:00] And chapter 17. Acts 17 verse 1.

Now when Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered and risen again from the dead, and that this Jesus whom I preach [00:01:02] unto you is Christ. And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas, and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few. But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down, are come hither also, whom Jason hath received. And these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, [00:02:01] saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people, and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go. First epistle to the Thessalonians, chapter 4, verse 13.

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say [00:03:03] unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent them which are 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. Then we which are alive and remain, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. And so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore, comfort one another with these words. But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, [00:04:07] as travail upon a woman with child, and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day. We are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others, but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep, sleep in the night, and they that be drunken, are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for an helmet the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, [00:05:01] but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Second Epistle, chapter 1, verse 7. To

you who are troubled, rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power, when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe, because our testimony among you was believed in that day. Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would [00:06:07] count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and he in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter, as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. And [00:07:04] this is the fifth of five sessions looking at the five corrective New Testament epistles which bear the name of the apostle Paul.

We looked at the Corinthian epistle first, where the difficulty to be resolved was disorder, grave moral disorder. We then looked, as the epistles come to us in the New Testament, at the Galatian epistle, where the local saints had been deluded into accepting evil teaching, and this caused for the grave rebuke of the apostle. We then looked at the Philippian letter, where the difficulty was local dissension, showing itself primarily [00:08:07] in two sisters who didn't seem to be getting on very well, and this was affecting in an adverse way the spiritual tone and state of the whole local assembly and everything they did. We then looked at the epistle to the Colossians, who were wrong as to doctrine concerning the person of Christ, and in each of those four epistles we noticed how, in taking up and dealing with the error, that the apostle did it in such a manner and in such a way that he was able to lead on to the positive statement of good doctrine, leading to good behaviour, and that this had its positive result in each local assembly. And tonight we turn to the epistle to the Thessalonians. [00:09:10] We read those verses in Acts 17 as a background to looking at the epistles, because it is the history of how the assembly was brought into being. When we read the epistles, particularly the first epistle to the Thessalonians, we certainly get the impression they were young believers, young in faith. They did not have a great amount of spiritual experience. And even then, having that impression, it is rather staggering to look back into the Acts of the Apostles and to find that when he wrote to them the first epistle, [00:10:08] and we gather from internal and external evidence, that it probably wasn't many months after that that he wrote, after the visit, that he wrote the first letter, it is rather staggering to realise for the first time that his visit, when he had imparted to them the major teaching of the coming of the Lord, was a visit which included three weekends. It so happens that by the time I leave Lowestoft a week on Monday, if the Lord will, and he hasn't come, I will have spent three weekends in this area of the country. Now when you say three weekends, [00:11:04] it may be, as I will have done, God willing, two weeks and two days, just before one weekend to just after another. At most, it can be almost four weeks if I arrive just after a weekend and leave just before a weekend. And without labouring the point, while it's almost double, whether it's just more than two weeks or just less than four weeks, not a very long time indeed. And as we know and recognise, if you're having meetings every night or almost every night for about a fortnight, the point comes where you say, well other things need to be done. We all have responsibilities and there's only a certain amount that we can take in [00:12:02] and we get to the point, if not spiritual stagnation, certainly we might get to the point of intellectual indigestion. Now this is recognisable and there's only a certain length of time and a certain amount that we can take in. Now when we consider that, we are amazed when we read the first letter to the Thessalonians and we see what Paul has to say about what they'd gained. Now before we look at that detail, I love, perhaps it's true to say, I covet, we could all covet Paul's style. There was an error to be dealt with, and in the Lord's mercy we'll come to that. But first

of all, let us marvel at his style. First of all, following the example of the Lord [00:13:01] in the addresses to the seven churches, Revelation 2 and 3, he gives them credit for anything that is worthy of credit. That's the first thing that he does. Then he provides ministry which is strengthening for the moment and also fortifies them for the future. Comfort and strengthening provided. And then, and only then, does he take up this vital matter and perhaps because they were so young in their faith, he was very careful not to stumble them by the way that he took up the necessary disciplinary action, because it was a form of discipline. Well, let us take account of that, take note of it, as we pass on, and let us just look briefly [00:14:04] at an outline of the chapters and see, first of all, in chapter one of the first epistle, the remarkable progress that they had already made. Remember, three weekends and the week in between, the weeks in between, at most maybe three and a half weeks, perhaps as little as two weeks and a bit. He spent the time with them, he'd ministered to them, he'd left them, they had been meditating on what he'd said for perhaps a few more months. Now, let us each, as individuals, as local assemblies, think back as to how much progress you and I would have made individually, collectively, if that had been our circumstance. Would it have been possible for the [00:15:04] apostle to give us the credit that he gave the Thessalonians? Verse one says, they knew God is their father. The same verse says, they acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Well, thank God! From earliest belief in the gospel, these were things that are common to all of us, knowing God is father, calling upon Jesus as Lord. By the time we get down to verse seven, we find that they were good examples to other Christians. Verse eight tells us, they were deeply committed to the gospel, and verses three, nine, and ten tell us that their very lives commended the gospel that they preached. Marvelous summary of their spiritual state after a few brief months of Christian experience, [00:16:09] and happily, the end of the chapter says, they were waiting for the coming of the Lord. Much food there when we meditate upon all those happy things in chapter one, but we must move on to chapter two. If I had to give a heading over one Thessalonians chapter two, I think I would recommend this chapter as the chapter which outlines the need and the provision of nurture.

I understand that this term nurture has become fashionable in Christian circles.

[00:17:01] Maybe it's a fashion, but it's nothing new. We can certainly go back to first Thessalonians chapter two, and we learn about the nurture of young Christian souls. And if you want a meditation on the features of Christian nurture, have a meditation on chapter two. I would only say, in passing, as we must move on, nurture necessitates someone who cares. Oh, how simple, but how essential. Not, as Peter says, lording it over the assembly, but as ensembles of the flock.

Uh, notice, uh, things to look for, that in this, this is the chapter which gives us the answer [00:18:03] to that regular quiz question. If you have quizzes, uh, which man was the best mother in the Bible? Of course, here he speaks of nurture as the function of a nursing mother looking after a new born baby. And we know the infinite momentary care that the nursing mother of her own little baby, we know the special care that's appropriate to that. And it is in this chapter, verse seven, he says, we were gentle among you. You see, there was a matter to put right, and he was the one to do it. But he doesn't go in frontal attack the way he did at Corinth or Galatia by necessity. Here, with these babes in Christ, he is gentle. He says, we were gentle [00:19:09] among you as a nursing, as a nurse, a nursing mother cherishes her newborn baby. And again, he says, in the same chapter, verse 11, he says, there are some things about the nurture of newborn babes, spiritual sense of the term, which demand not only the, uh, compassion of the nursing mother, it needs the protective care and the constant provision of every kind of necessary resource that is seen in a father in a well-regulated growing family. He speaks of himself as a nursing mother. He speaks of himself as a father. And having done that in providing [00:20:04] that balanced care that's seen in the aggregate of proper motherhood and proper

fatherhood, we find that he doesn't hesitate to tell them things that they need to know to warn them of potential danger and the steps that need to be taken. And of course, um, there's much more detail than that. We must move on to chapter three. Give them credit where due in chapter one. In chapter two, uh, he gives the elements of Christian nurture. Chapter three, to me, is so general that if it were my responsibility to give an address on that chapter as a chapter, I would have to think very hard as to the sort [00:21:03] of detail that I would want to draw your attention to. But certainly one question that arises in taking note that when there was something to be done and he wasn't in a position to go himself, he wanted to, he needed to see how the Thessalonians were getting on because he couldn't go himself. He sent Timothy. He delegated the job to Timothy. Now, let me ask myself, taking account of Timothy as a youngish believer with some experience and yet still some development in his own soul possible. The question arises with me, if Paul was here now and if there was [00:22:03] a local assembly at some distant point where Paul needed someone like-minded who would make a fair assessment without partiality or prejudice and come back to the apostle with a true report, I wonder whether Paul would have decided that you or I were suitable for that kind of responsibility.

That's a salutary question to ask ourselves. Am I in the sort of spiritual state? Have I the sort of impartial wise judgment that the apostle could draw upon as he was able in the case of Timothy? If we want to know, we have a plumb line. Start in Acts 14, as far as I remember, the first reference [00:23:01] to Timothy. Trace through the history of Timothy over the years, maybe 20 years, and see to what extent my spiritual progress has kept pace with the way the development that Timothy demonstrated in his own life. And then perhaps I'm able to say whether or not, in the grace of God, I would have been the sort of person that Paul would have called upon to make such an assessment on behalf of the local assembly. I'll turn the question round before we move away from chapter 3. If we were a local assembly, if the apostle Paul sent such a Timothy to our meeting [00:24:04] to our meeting, to spend time with us, long enough to know how we really are and not how wonderful we might appear to strangers who make one visit in a lifetime, long enough to know what the local difficulties are and how we meet them, how we serve the Lord together, the calibre of our service and worship, I wonder if we were such a local assembly. I wonder what sort of a report such a delegate, such a Timothy, would take back to the apostle Paul. Now, this is nothing to debate, something to meditate on, something to pray over as we move on, but just think about these questions whenever there is opportunity. And let us move on to this vital chapter 4. The breakdown [00:25:11] is very simple. Again, I leave it for your meditation. Chapter 4, the overall breakdown, the first eight verses, purity and how essential it is, personally, family-wise, assembly-wise, the need for pure, unadulterated transparency before the Lord, not a matter of exhortation, a matter of sole condition before the Lord.

Let us accept that before, again, before he gets to the detail of the problem, he presses the need for purity. Verses 9 to 12, a short section, and yet he says, [00:26:10] once this matter of purity has been established, there is then the matter of brotherly love. And he says there won't be brotherly love in the proper spirit of the term unless as individuals, as families, and as a company, this matter of purity has been established. Having done that with discretion, with proper compassion and care, true nurture, he then comes to the problem.

Oh, how right we can see it was not to stumble these young believers by charging in and putting them off. And so we get to chapter 4 and verse 13. I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren.

[00:27:10] Whenever you see that phrase, it comes about eight times in the New Testament epistles. Something important follows. Take note of the formula. It's an important one. I would not have you to

be ignorant, brethren. It's a negative way of saying this is important, take account of it and act upon it. Introduced in this negative way, I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren. And this was the problem. Not disorder like Corinth, not delusion like Galatians, not dissension as at Philippi, not doctrine concerning the person of Christ at Colossians. [00:28:02] At Thessalonica, they were in a dilemma concerning those who had fallen asleep. When he was with them, he had evidently spoken freely and happily about the coming of the Lord. Jesus is coming, sing the glad word. Indeed, exulted in the thought, the Lord Jesus was coming to take them to be with himself. Everything would be set right. Christ would set all things in order. The Apostle had gone, months had gone by, and some of the local believers had died.

They were distraught.

Have they missed the blessing? Are they missing out? Will they be deficient? [00:29:04] Have they been defrauded? Have we misunderstood the teaching concerning the coming of the Lord? Others said, well, the Lord's coming.

What's the point of going to work today? The Lord's coming at any moment. Let's just sit and watch and wait. The Apostle has to put both these things right, or perhaps...

With subtlety, we can see why chapters 1, 2 and 3 are put before chapter 4. There's much to be done in the service of the Lord. As long as we are left here living responsible lives, there's some aspect of the work of the Lord that we need to be and can be involved with, [00:30:08] directly or indirectly. No need to feel that our time of service is over. I have met many who are despondent and say, the Lord may as well take me. No one needs me any longer. It must be a terrible mood to get into to feel that no longer are you needed, family-wise or meeting-wise. There's no need to feel like that if the Lord leaves us here. There's some aspect of the work of the Lord that we need to be involved in directly or indirectly. The Apostle takes the matter up in two ways. First of all, he says, as far as the death of the believer is concerned, he said, let's use a different term. [00:31:08] He said, let's use a term which conveys the right idea. The death for the believer is different to the death of the unbeliever. For the believer, death is a condition into which we enter with For the believer, death is a condition into which we enter with the expectation of coming out of it in wakefulness. Let us look at death as a transient, a passing condition, nothing that's permanent or everlasting. And the Apostle says, the best word we can use for it is sleep. Not sleep in the sense of being [00:32:02] insensitive or insensible, but sleep in the sense of being transient, in the sense of entering into it with a view to waking in the morning. And then he says, now what I'm going to tell you now, he says, is extra special because it's a special revelation that I've got from the Lord. And then again, this formula that he uses, not unknown to us, verse 15, this we say unto you by the word of the Lord. As is well known, he uses this four times over in the order in which they come. 1 Corinthians 11, he uses it when he lets the brethren [00:33:03] into the secret of the manner in which the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated and the significance of it. When he speaks of the gospel in Galatians 1, he introduces it again as a special revelation from the Lord. And in Ephesians 3, when he speaks of the mystery, he speaks of it as something that he was passing on as a direct word from the Lord that he hadn't received from anyone else. Now here, with those other three, there is the truth concerning this problem as to whether or not those whom they said had died but were now advised that the death of the believer could be looked as going to sleep. It is with that in mind that the apostle takes up the teaching. [00:34:02] In passing, and it's worth studying, in the main, there are two words for sleep used in the New Testament. And if you check with the Greek Old Testament, you'll find that it's consistent there. One word is asleep, asleep, which is induced by the power of another.

The other word is asleep, which is entered into consciously and voluntarily.

And it's no surprise, when you trace it through in the text, that whenever the sleep, whenever the death of the believer is referred to in the New Testament by use of the term sleep, [00:35:02] it's the sleep which is induced by another, a sleep which is caused to come upon the believer. Or isn't this why the apostle, when he speaks of those dead believers whom the locals thought had perhaps missed the blessing, he says they are asleep through Jesus, subject to his sweet constraint. He has caused them to enter into this temporary transient condition out of which they would awake into his very personal presence. How happy then that this term sleep, which is induced under the constraint of the power of another, is the way the death of the believer is spoken of. What a consolation to the Thessalonian believers. [00:36:02] They thought that their dead relatives, beloved brethren, had missed the blessing of the coming of the Lord. Well, having dealt with that, having put it into perspective by saying that it is this special kind of sleep induced by another, he says, verse 14, for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again. Let us pause there. Do we believe that Jesus died and rose again? Of course we do. We wouldn't be believers if we didn't believe just that. The Lord Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world and because he loves us, he died for us and rose again. How basic it is. Worth bearing in mind that the truth that he's going on to unfold before them is something [00:37:05] which has the same parameters, the same boundaries, the same perimeters. What he's going to speak about, he's speaking about those who believe that Jesus died and rose again. Not speaking of any personal qualifications, not speaking of any personal endeavours or devotedness or special character of work that they have done for the Lord. What he says extends to those who believe that Jesus died and rose again. He says, even so, them also who believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, them also which sleep in Jesus will God reign with him. Now the sense here, he says, now don't concern yourselves. He says, when the Lord Jesus comes in glory [00:38:05] with the host of saints with him, as we read Jude 14, 15, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints. When he comes with his entourage, with all his saints with him, Paul says, those who've fallen asleep through Jesus will be with him. Don't concern yourself about them. And then, and then, the question perhaps arises, how is it possible that that might be so?

And so we get a little parenthetical portion, a little bit in brackets, verses 15 to 18, before he resumes. He's speaking about the coming of the Lord to set all things right [00:39:01] when he comes in power and glory, having his own with him. Chapter 5 verse 1 goes on with the details of that. But of the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need that I write unto you. Verses 15 to 18 of chapter 4 give us an amplification as to how it can possibly be that those who've fallen asleep in Jesus will be with him when he comes. And then we get the outline, how simple to us, how well known, but how necessary to refresh our spirits with the detail. He distinguishes between those believers who, when the Lord Jesus comes, will be alive on earth at the time, and those who, when the Lord Jesus comes, will have already fallen on sleep. Let us [00:40:09] again say, in case there's any doubt, when the Lord comes, in the detailed manner which is given in the next few verses, there will be only two conditions in which believers will be found. At the time of his coming, there will be those who have died, and there will be those who are still alive. Now, they are the groups that the apostle is considering, and he goes into the detail. He says, we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. Just pause there ever so briefly.

If you look at chapter 2, verse 19, well, let us do it now, how much he concentrates on the coming [00:41:09] of the Lord in this epistle. End of chapter 1, verse 10, he says, we are waiting for the coming. Chapter 2, verse 19, he says, there'll be joy at his coming. Chapter 3, verse 13, he says, we'll be established at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints. Take account of that, the first

use of the term in the epistle, with all his saints. Chapter 4, verse 18, there will be comfort. He is ministering comfort concerning the coming of the Lord Jesus. Chapter 5, verse 23, that they might be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. [00:42:05] Now, in chapter 2, verse 19, chapter 3, verse 13, and chapter 5, verse 23, there is the term coming, the coming of the Lord. Always take account of the context when this term is used in the epistles. It is a comprehensive term, literally his presence. It may be used for the term that we are coming to, the catching away, the snatching, the rapture. It may refer to when he comes and destroys the enemy with the brightness of his coming. It may refer to the time anywhere along that continuum between the rapture and the appearing [00:43:09] when there are his saints are in his personal presence and include other vital matters. So, let us not jump too quickly, too readily to any one conclusion as to whether it's the rapture or the appearing or somewhere in between without examining the context very closely indeed. But here in chapter 4 then, this term in chapter 4, verse 15, is the same term, the presence of the Lord, a comprehensive term as discussed. We who are alive and remain unto the coming shall not precede those who are asleep. Paul says, and we must keep on quickly, Paul says, you are concerned in case those who've fallen [00:44:09] asleep through Jesus, those who've died since I spoke to you about the coming of the Lord, he says, don't be concerned, they are not at a disadvantage. In fact, he says, they themselves will receive the first touch of power when the Lord comes. And he goes on to say, the Lord himself should descend from heaven with a shout, voice of the archangel, with the trump of God. Again, happy hunting ground for the Bible student. The dead in Christ shall rise first. They will receive the first touch of the power. And he says then, he says, when they have been raised, we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them [00:45:04] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. You remember the brief reference to some of us who feel we're no longer needed. It would perhaps be better if the Lord took us home. Good desire, but not the Christian hope. The Christian hope is never to go to be with the Lord forever.