

PREFACE

*“The love of Christ was so strong in the heart of Paul. This book of Thessalonians is different from the other books in the epistological section. Thus far, Paul had been fighting with the Jews about doctrines. Paul had to assert his special ministry which God has given to him. But this book is different. It is because of the context and background of the Thessalonian Christians. They were a relatively young Gentile church under persecution and suffering afflictions. Some of them even suffered to the point of losing their lives. Paul was so gentle and loving and even in his salutations here to the persecuted Gentile Christians, instead of saying, ‘I, Paul the apostle of God’, he says, ‘Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus unto the church of the Thessalonians’. The Gentile church was trying to understand the difficult doctrine of the election of God. Paul did not speak high and lofty doctrines to them but mentioned that he was persuaded of the election of God in them. He saw the way the Christians had endured afflictions and the way they received the Word of God. It is beautiful to see the relationship between the preacher and the receiver of the Gospel. On one hand, there is the audience, the Thessalonians who respected Paul and respected the word of Paul as the Word of God, the truth. They loved him so much. You witness their character, in the midst of the most severe afflictions they continued in the patience of faith and labour of hope. On the other hand is the preacher. Preachers do not just preach but their lives are a testimony of the Gospel they preach. Paul is sharp in bringing Justification by Faith and his life matches it. Paul laboured day and night by tent-making while he was ministering to them. In chapter 2, Paul was not there to take (material things) from them but to give, in preaching and in his life. He supported himself so that both the Gospel preaching and the testimony were powerful. If you have the right preacher, doctrine and reception, there is then a beautiful connection between the preacher and hearers, the ‘face-to-face’ Gospel, that is, the hearers have the desire to meet the preacher, and the preacher also has the desire to see them. The ‘see-see’ Gospel. We need to see each other face to face. This organic link is beautiful as seen here. The love of Christ is strong. It is magnified because of their afflictions. Paul himself was also afflicted, running from persecutions. Paul lived his life to spend and be spent for the Kingdom of Christ. I felt very touched by that and by the testimony of the Thessalonian Christians. Paul could not go to the churches so he sent his deputies. It is not alien to us. Pastor cannot go to China but he sent his deputies to encourage them in their afflictions and difficulties especially when they were persecuted by the false prophets etc. The deputies are sent so they (the hearers) don’t depart from the Gospel because of their afflictions. I felt it was filled with the gentleness of the shepherd. This Paul in some other epistles, was rebuking and reproofing strongly but here he was also gentle and patient. From chapter 4 onwards, Paul warned them: ‘Don’t live in fornication!’ Thessaloniki was a modern city for the times and its inhabitants lived a fornicatious lifestyle. In his love, Paul directs them to walk in the light in the sanctification of the spirit. Pastor said you hardly see doctrines in this book. But Paul winsomely and skillfully brought out the doctrine of Resurrection, to comfort them in the midst of their afflictions, especially when they saw their fellow Christians pass away. Those who die in Christ, they don’t die, they sleep; there is the hope of bodily resurrection. Not the rapture or sensational Dispensational theory. But when Christ comes again, there is the resurrection of the dead and those in Christ will rise. So in that stroke, I felt pastor confounded the doctrines of the Dispensationalists. We do not sorrow as others do. Finally, I am surprised also that in this book there is the eschatological aspect to warn them to be sober and to watch and not be asleep because Christ is coming back soon. It is very practical to us. Paul said the false prophets are preaching peace. Today, it is no different. When I was listening to the whole message I felt overwhelmed by the love of Christ in the way Paul related to them and the way they related to Paul. As for me, why do I not have an organic link with the servant of God? I could not sleep last night. I realised that it has to do with the fact that I do not have the marks of the elect; **I am not justified** so I do not have the love for the servant of God (and his message). Instead, I am taken up by the false peace I assure myself with. I understand nothing of persecution and affliction and the difficulties the Thessalonians speak of. I felt ashamed of myself. My religion is technical. These 4 chapters of Thessalonians are filled with the love of Christ, the Shepherd. I see it in pastor’s love and concern for those going through afflictions. I pray God help me understand this spirit. Like Paul, pastor is pastoral to bring the doctrines of Christ to everyone differently and effectively. Thank God for the brethren and their responses.”* Response of Esther Ng (Singapore) to pastor’s exegesis of I Thessalonians, Cameron Highlands, Pahang, Malaysia; 15 December 2018 AD