



07. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-18

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1 Thessalonians 4:3-6 – human sexuality

³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honour, ⁵not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter

Paul begins by reminding his readers that it is God's will that their lives be transformed by the Holy Spirit, and purified of all that inhibits their sharing in Jesus' communion with God. This is the goal of their consecration as Christians (see 3:13). The social environment calls for a special stress on sexual behaviour (compare Galatians 5:19). They must learn to control their own body (literally, 'instrument' (σκεῦος) – probably a euphemism for the male sexual organ). Paul is not calling for stronger will-power, as though we have in ourselves the capacity to achieve virtue in this matter. Rather, he is calling for them to open themselves to the power of grace. Control over sexual urges that are insensitive to the dignity of others and to their real needs, and that **'wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter'** is one of the fruits of submitting one's life to the inspiration and the power of the Spirit of Jesus. It is one of the fruits of love.

God alone is the source of 'holiness' (ἁγιασμος), and the only 'honour'(τιμῆ) that is real is the radiance of an inner beauty that is itself the result of the sanctification that is brought about by the Spirit of God. To follow their natural urging without opening themselves to grace and to love is to behave 'like the Gentiles who do not know God'. Paul is speaking as a Jew, brought up on prayers like the following: 'Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name' (Psalm 79:6; see Jeremiah 10:25).

1 Thessalonians 4:6-8

⁶The Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷For God did not call us to impurity, but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Paul reinforces his message by recalling solemnly the warning he gave them when he was with them: ‘**the Lord is an avenger in all these things**’. The language is traditional: ‘O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth!’ (Psalm 9:1), and belongs to the theme of the ‘anger of God’, which we examined in relation to 1:10. It matters how we behave. Our actions have results that we cannot pretend away, nor can God pretend that things are other than they really are.

At the same time Paul reminds them that God ‘gives his Holy Spirit to you’. Sexuality is about love. It is God’s gift of the Spirit of Jesus that makes sexual purity possible. The Spirit of communion that binds disciples to their Lord sanctifies the deepest recesses of our being, and purifies sexual desire to be a sacrament of God’s own creative love, creating communion between people committed to journey together in love.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-10

⁹Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia.

We reflected on love in relation to 1 Thessalonians 1:3.

Saint Augustine writes: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you' (Confessions, 1.1.1). Do I realise the connection between this most profound longing and my sexuality? A linking of sexual desire to our ultimate goal could help us avoid the distractions that come from our insecurity, and so help us to love others in a clearer way. It is the pure of heart who see God (Matthew 5:8). It is the pure of heart who see themselves and others truly. They can truly celebrate love.

Having spoken of sexuality, Paul moves naturally to speak in more general terms of the love they should have within the Christian family. He has already referred to their love (1:3 and 3:6), and has already expressed the wish that they continue to grow in love ‘to one another and to everybody’ (3:12). Here it is love within the Christian community that attracts his comment. He is pleased with what he has heard in this regard, but exhorts them to keep on growing in love. There are no limits to God’s grace, and we are never to put limits on the love to which we aspire, for it is God’s love that is poured into our hearts by the Spirit of Jesus, and it is this love which flows between us. It is by this love that we recognize disciples of Jesus (see John 13:35).

In the opening address Paul spoke of them as ‘beloved by God’ (1:4). He now speaks of them as ‘**taught by God**’. It is God who teaches them this love, through the teaching of the missionaries (see 3:4; 4:2), but especially through the intimate action of the Spirit of Jesus within the community. It sounds as though Timothy has heard about their reputation for love and hospitality from members of the communities in Philippi and Beroea.

1 Thessalonians 4:10-12

¹⁰But we exhort you, beloved, to do so more and more, ¹¹to aspire to live quietly, to put into practice the kind of life that is proper for you, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹²so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and not be lacking in anything.'

Paul appeals to them to 'live quietly'. Paul insisted on supporting himself through his work. The bulk of the community seem to have come from people who, like himself, worked with their hands, people whom he met in the course of working at his trade. Paul encourages them to go peacefully about their daily lives. He also exhorts them to put into practice all that they should be as disciples of Jesus so as to attract those outside the community to the way of salvation (see 2:16).

1 Thessalonians 4:13

¹³We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those sleeping, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

In his report to Paul, Timothy must have informed him that the Thessalonians were worried about those members of their community who had put their hope in Jesus and had been looking forward to Jesus' coming to take them with him into glory, but who have died. What might they have expected to have been so disappointed?

Though the Christian community in Thessalonica seems to have been composed mainly of Gentiles, we need to remember that Paul, 'as was his custom' (Acts 17:2), began his preaching in the synagogue. The first Gentile converts came largely from people who had some connection with the synagogue. It is important, therefore, to have some idea of Jewish notions of resurrection, for they provided the language which Paul would have used in proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus, and in holding out to Jew and Gentile alike the hope that nothing, even death, would separate from Jesus those who were united now with him.

Traditionally, the Jews, like their Gentile neighbours, assumed that at death a person went to the underworld (Sheol: the Greek Hades). Here the dead person had an existence that was shadowy and lifeless. There are indications of this idea in the sacred Scriptures:

‘My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.

I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;

I am like those who have no help,

like those forsaken among the dead,

like the slain that lie in the grave,

like those whom you remember no more,

for they are cut off from your hand’ (Psalm 88:3-5).

‘The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor do any that go down into silence’ (Psalm 115:17).

Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you;
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.
The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day;
fathers make known to children your faithfulness’ (Isaiah 38:18-19).

Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades
in place of the living who give thanks?
From the dead, as from one who does not exist,
thanksgiving has ceased; those who are alive and well
sing the Lord’s praises’ (Sirach 17:27-28).

At the same time, they longed for an enduring relationship with God, who would somehow, and against all the evidence, preserve them from death and the underworld:

‘My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore’ (Psalm 16:9-11).

‘God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me’ (Psalm 49:15).

‘I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever’ (Psalm 73:23-26).

The notion of resurrection from the dead, at least as an image, is found in two texts from the exile (Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Isaiah 53:8-12), and in a post-exilic, apocalyptic text included in the scroll of Isaiah, the author writes: 'The dead do not live; shades do not rise — because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them' (Isaiah 26:14).

However, he goes on to say: 'Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead' (Isaiah 26:19).

It was faith in the fidelity of God that grew into an explicit belief that God would raise to life after death those who put their trust in God and were faithful to the covenant. The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the Syrian persecutions (168-165BC). It seemed impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

‘At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt’ (Daniel 12:1-2).

‘Our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God’s covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance’ (2Maccabees 7:36).

In the middle of the first century AD, the Pharisees were among those who espoused the notion that God would in some way raise the just to fullness of life. Some seem to have expected this to happen when history attained its final goal and God's reign would be fully realised. Others were perhaps thinking in terms of the end of the space-time universe which we know, though this seems less likely. In either case the dead would experience a delay. It was as difficult for them as it is for us to think of after death without thinking in temporal terms. The whole idea of life beyond death was rejected by the Sadducees as a notion not found in the Torah (see Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8).

Besides the notion of the resurrection of the dead, there were the extraordinary stories of Enoch who 'walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him' (Genesis 5:2), 'He did not experience death' (Hebrews 11:5). There was also Elijah who 'ascended in a whirlwind into heaven' (2Kings 2:11). Popular legend led to other famous people being thought of as having been taken up into heaven without dying.

The Book of Wisdom picks up the idea: 'There were some who pleased God and were loved by him, and while living among sinners were taken up. They were caught up so that evil might not change their understanding or guile deceive their souls' (Wisdom 4:10-11).

It was into this world that Paul, the Pharisee who had become a follower of Jesus, came, proclaiming that God had already raised Jesus to life and taken him up into glory as the first fruits of those who would believe in him. Jesus had destroyed death. Furthermore he would come and gather up his disciples to share his glory. The dominant image seems to have been that of Enoch and Elijah, and Christians hoped that God would come and sweep them up into life with Jesus without their having to die. Obviously this would not happen to those in the community who died, so this gave rise to the question: what would happen to them? When Jesus came - and they expected it to be soon - and gathered the living up into glory, would the dead remain dead and be separated from the rest of the community while they awaited the general resurrection? Or would God do to them what he did to Jesus: bring them back to life and then take them up into glory?

1 Thessalonians 4:14-15

¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have fallen asleep.

Paul uses a common euphemism for death when he speaks of ‘**those who have fallen asleep**’. However, in the context of Christian faith, it is more than a euphemism. It is, rather, an expression of faith in the fact that death does not end the life of communion with God. He goes straight to the heart of the gospel, reminding them of something that would have been also at the heart of his preaching: ‘**Jesus died and rose again**’.

He does not go on to draw the conclusion that the faithful will consequently also rise again. This he takes for granted, and it is not the subject of the question which is concerning the Thessalonians. He speaks, rather, of the ‘**coming of the Lord**’ (παρουσία, see 2:19; 3:13). He assures them that when Jesus comes, and they are assumed into heaven to meet the Lord (see Matthew 25:6; Acts 28:15), ‘**God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep**’.

The Thessalonians need not be troubled by the thought that their dead will miss out and have to await a general resurrection imagined as being in an indefinite future.

1 Thessalonians 4:14-15

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The words ‘**through Jesus**’ may, as in this translation, be saying that it is because of what Jesus has done that God will bring the dead with him. It may, however, go with ‘**those who have fallen asleep**’, referring to those who have died in faith because of Jesus. Either way, reference is being made to the redemptive power of Jesus’ self-giving love on the cross. Both the question and the response are concerned with Christians who have died.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of God's trumpet [Exodus 19:10-18], will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds [assumption model] together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul reassures them that the dead will not be forgotten. Indeed, they will be the first to accompany Jesus in glory. Paul's language picks up the experience of the festive welcoming of a dignitary into the city. He may also be drawing on the account of God's coming on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:10-18).

This text is sometimes interpreted as though Paul was expecting to be still alive when Jesus comes (see, however, 5:1-11). Whether or not this is so, the essence of his message is that the Thessalonians have nothing to fear because **'we will be with the Lord forever'**. This is all that matters to Paul. It is in this communion with Jesus that real life consists.