



THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONIANS

Paul's second letter to his friends at Thessalonica likely was written very soon after the first (see the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians). Paul has heard additional reports of the situation in the church; he now has available to him more details about the false teaching the church is confronting, including the news that the false prophets purport to have a letter from Paul himself, which they claim gives support to their special theories (2 Thess 2:2). Therefore Paul quickly responds with this second letter. Second Thessalonians repeats themes that have been stated in the first letter, but it expands upon the doctrinal question that continues to trouble the church, namely, the teaching concerning the second coming of Jesus Christ.

We should not be surprised by the atmosphere of argument and dispute in the early Church concerning such vital doctrines as the second coming of Christ, especially with reference to the chronology of future expectations. Christians argue because they care and also because the Christian fellowship has always faced the problem of false or confused teaching. It was the theologian Karl Barth who noted, "There are no New Testament letters that are written apart from the problems of the church."

Paul's pastoral approach to the problems of the church is to teach his way through error. Second Thessalonians gives us the continuation of this pastoral teaching approach.

Paul did not try to convert anyone to Christianity in the two letters to the Thessalonians, yet there is a persuasive quality to these letters. If you are a non-Christian who is watching this young church in action, you will make some very significant discoveries that will help you in making up your mind about the credibility of the Christian faith.

First of all, Paul's letters to the Thessalonians establish the fact that, whatever else Christianity is, it has to do with real people in real places. They live their lives in the time and culture in which they find themselves, just like all other human beings in

the human story. Christian faith is historical and concrete. Believers in Christ are not disconnected from historical life, with its daily cycle of work and play, of suffering and joy, of life beginning and life ending.

The second great discovery that readers make in these two letters is that there is no mistaking what the center of Paul's faith is. Paul is a man in Christ; it is Jesus Christ who has won Paul's respect and faith. We learn from Paul in these letters that the Christ of his faith is the Jesus of history: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again" (1 Thess 4:14). Paul's faith and hope are not directed toward a phantom redeemer or an inhabitant of the spirit world, but toward the concrete Jesus of Nazareth, who identified totally with humanity in the companionship of the road and even in the loneliness of death, and who shares his triumph over death with us as well.

—Earl F. Palmer

Salutation

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in
God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our^a
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving

3 We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters,^b as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

The Judgment at Christ's Coming

5 This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which

you are also suffering. ⁶For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. ¹¹To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, ¹²so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in

^a Other ancient authorities read *the*

^b *Gk brothers*

1:11–12 *To this end we always pray for you.* Paul's opening prayer in 2 Thessalonians asks for God's grace that the believers in Thessalonica will continue in their work of faith so that their lives will be congruent with God's intention. The word *axios*, translated "worthy," means the true balance that comes from congruence. This is a model prayer for any spiritual director. Although the Thessalonian believers (and we) have work to do in loving one another (v 3) and in remain-

ing steadfast and enduring persecution (v 4), it is God who is making them (and us) "worthy of his call," and it is God's power that accomplishes the transforming work of congruence in their lives (and ours). The result of this formation process is that the name of the Lord Jesus is glorified; and since the Messiah is most generous, his glory spills over upon them (and us). And all of this marvelous fruit is accomplished by divine grace.

you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Man of Lawlessness

2 As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters,^a ²not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.³ Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one^b is revealed, the one destined for destruction.^c ⁴He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God.⁵ Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? ⁶And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes.⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed.⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus^d will destroy^e with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.⁹ The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders,¹⁰ and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.¹¹ For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false,¹² so that all who have not believed the

truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.

Chosen for Salvation

13 But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters^a beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits^f for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.¹⁴ For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news,^g so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters,^a stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope,¹⁷ comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

Request for Prayer

3 Finally, brothers and sisters,^a pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you,² and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people; for not all have faith.³ But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the

a Gk *brothers* *b* Gk *the man of lawlessness*; other ancient authorities read *the man of sin* *c* Gk *the son of destruction* *d* Other ancient authorities lack *Jesus* *e* Other ancient authorities read *consume* *f* Other ancient authorities read *from the beginning* *g* Or *through our gospel*

2:1–12 *As to the coming of our Lord.* In chapter 2 Paul again speaks to the question of the return of Jesus Christ. He notes that some religious leaders are teaching that the day of the Lord has already come and this false teaching has troubled believers. He challenges this untruth and encourages believers to trust in the faithfulness of God to keep those who trust him safely in his hands. Paul's solid, steady teaching here is crucial for us today with so many end-time speculations polluting the atmosphere. Our hope is not in a theory of the future, but in the Lord who holds the future in his hands.

2:15–17 *So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm.* Paul assures his friends, "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself . . . strengthen [you] in every good work and word." With this confidence in God's faithfulness ringing in their ears, Paul calls them to be at work here and now and stay faithfully at their posts.



Responding

2:17 SERVICE. Try to name good works and words that will strengthen our hearts. What kind of strength do they give us and why? *See also* Spiritual Disciplines Index.

evil one.^a ⁴And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command. ⁵May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

Warning against Idleness

⁶ Now we command you, beloved,^b in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are^c living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they^d received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you,⁸ and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies,

not doing any work. ¹²Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³Brothers and sisters,^e do not be weary in doing what is right.

¹⁴ Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. ¹⁵Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.^f

Final Greetings and Benediction

¹⁶ Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.

¹⁷ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. ¹⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.^g

a Or from evil *b* Gk brothers *c* Gk from every brother who is *d* Other ancient authorities read you *e* Gk Brothers *f* Gk a brother *g* Other ancient authorities add Amen

3:7-9 *you ought to imitate us.* Paul unabashedly uses the principle of imitation repeatedly in his writings, because he knows that on its most fundamental level this is how spiritual formation works. The formation of habits (even holy habits) comes only by imitation until they become our own. This is why the formation of the leader into Christlikeness is so essential to leading. In this case the issue at hand is idleness, and Paul and his co-workers have modeled how believers are to “work quietly and to earn their own living” (v 12). Even here, in the most basic and ordinary of matters, spiritual formation pertains to our lives.

3:13 *do not be weary in doing what is right.* Paul is confident that Jesus has conquered death with the same realism and actuality that he endured death with. The death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is for Paul “total

help for total need” (Karl Barth). Just as we are real and live our lives in a real world, so the Lord Jesus Christ is real. All escapism from this reality of history is foreign to Paul in both his theology and his discipleship ethics. Paul also affirms throughout these letters that this same Jesus Christ of history is alive and reigns and will come again. He is the boundary of history at its end, as he is at its beginning and as he has radically entered at its center. The best part of Paul's letters are his sentences about the love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Paul believes that Christ's love and faithfulness are real and practical and therefore knowable by ordinary men and women. Though Paul did not set out in his letters to win over skeptics and non-Christians, his books do so because he was good enough to point on every page to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the center and the friend of the way.