

1 & 2 Thessalonians

I hope that you read 1 & 2 Thessalonians before coming to class, so I can assume you are acquainted with Thessalonians. Fortunately, these two books are not very long, so let us begin. From the outline of Paul's life, you remember that I have just mentioned that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians from Corinth. He wrote 1 Thessalonians around 50 to 51 A.D. He is looking back to a church that has recently been planted. We have the description of the founding of that church in the area around Acts 17, and Paul writes back to them concerning the Gospel that they have received. He has heard some reports about the Thessalonians. What is so significant here is that, in the beginning section of 1 Thessalonians, Paul thanks God for the work that He has done in their lives. Chapter 1:1 to 3:13 is a lengthy section on thanksgiving and encouragement. If you are like me, you might skip rather quickly over those sections of Paul's letters and get to the controversial part where he says, "I cannot believe you did this. Do you not remember how I taught you the Gospel?" and so forth, rather than spend time on these lovely introductions that seem to be friendly pats on the back. However, I believe that Paul, as the messenger and the apostle of God, is not merely going through a literary routine of beginning his letters with thanksgiving and encouragement. It is true the ancient literary format did have some positive statement in the beginning of the letter, but Paul fills it with so much significant meaning.

I believe the reason for a thanksgiving section at the beginning of the letter is that Paul respects the work that God has done among the Thessalonians. Although they are infants in the faith, immature Christians who need a lot of instruction to become stabilized and mature in Christ, Paul does not come to them first with a statement of what the problems are, what the needs are, and how they need to become mature. Rather, he first acknowledges the immovable and clear fact of God's work in their midst. If you are like me, if you see a problem, I suspect that one or two of you besides me is tempted to tear into the issue and say, "Look at this problem in this marriage, family, church life." You want to tear into the problem and ask, "Why are you so immature? Why did you do this?" and so forth. We do not approach the issue and say, "Let us step back. Let us see what God has already done." Then, on that basis of what God has done or what He is doing, I can also bring in the factors of growth, challenge, admonition, and difficult interaction and interchange. It is not a routine. It is not a habit of praise. It is acknowledging the fact that God is at work, and Paul will not violate the integrity of God's work with this young Thessalonian church to which he is writing from Corinth.

It is all the more disheartening that in Galatians we do not have that. There, he seems to skip the praise and worship. He comes very much to the point, but that is the exception to the rule. Most other letters that we have in the New Testament from Paul have this section of praise, describing what God has done, how the witness has gone out from that church or that group of churches to the neighboring villages, and so forth. I believe that the section of thanksgiving and praise is a discipline of Paul to acknowledge God's work. If we could just do that in our lives with our spouses, with our friends, with our children, with our co-laborers—if we could step back and say, "Wait a minute, first I will give account of God's work in that person's life, in that situation, and after that I will carefully, under the instruction of Scripture and with kindness say, 'You know, there is a question here, there is a problem.'" It took me many years to bring that godly approach to difficulties into my marriage, but it is so healing and wholesome, because I am not in charge. God is in charge. I am not straightening situations out. God is doing it, and if He gives me the eyes to discern something and if I have removed this huge plank from my own eyes and actually see a speck and feel that it is necessary for me to take a step in that direction, then praise God. The basis, however, is that God is in charge. God is the one doing. You see, even the apostle Paul does not take center stage. He is a bondservant of the living God; he serves and ministers to these churches as a bondservant. And he knows very well that the birth of the Thessalonian church is not his work, and therefore he acknowledges God's great work in their midst. He acknowledges the maturing

that does happen, or that has happened, and so Paul writes this thanksgiving and encouraging section here.

Then there is an admonition section, 4:1-12, followed by an instruction section concerning the coming of the Lord, 4:13 through 5:11. That is a very rough outline of the first letter to the Thessalonians: lengthy thanksgiving, some admonition in conduct, and instruction concerning the coming of the Lord. We need to look at 2 Thessalonians also. I have put these two letters together because 2 Thessalonians also contains a reference to the coming of the Lord. Somehow, the young church in Thessalonica had a real preoccupation with the coming of the Lord. As far as I can see, putting these two letters together gives us this situation: in 1 Thessalonians, the problem is that some of the young Christians are saying, "I do not see Christ coming back. It seems like it is taking quite a while, so let us settle in." Let us call it this attitude: "far expectation." In 2 Thessalonians, there seem to be young Christians who say, "You know, it is going to happen sooner. You must be ready. You have to plan right now." There is a great excitement, a sense of urgency—an extreme "near expectation." As far as I can see in reading 1 Thessalonians, these are these two major extremes. I am aware that you could modify this picture, particularly in the sense that perhaps there are some also addressed in 1 Thessalonians who have this extreme near expectation. This is the same church. Paul writes to them within a time span of about half of a year, so we see that there is something percolating in that church that seems to move into these two extremes.

The interesting thing is that both of these extremes feed human nature. The first one says, "Let me live. Let me have my fun. Let me plant a tree. Let me marry. Let me have my job, let me live my life, and then come back, Lord. You have put me into this world to enjoy it, so let me enjoy it, and then bother me later with this question about the coming of Christ." This is actually a human-driven delay and pushing away in saying, "The Lord is not coming quite yet; let us have our life." The extreme near expectation—I feel justified to say it in this extreme way on the basis of 2 Thessalonians—says, "Great. Christ is coming back, so I do not have to work, find a job, get education, or study. This is great. This is a deal. I believe in the very near expectation of the coming of the Lord." You see how these two extremes are driven by human nature.

Paul assesses the situation of the young Thessalonian church and says, "Your theology is driven by human nature. I will tell you the Gospel, and the Gospel is neither this extreme nor that extreme. The Gospel is, 'live your life as if Christ comes tomorrow, but work today.'" So Paul teaches in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians that we must have a life of engaging responsibly in daily life by engaging in the responsibilities of jobs, marriage, and community involvement, from the perspective that Christ is coming back and His return is near. We must not live as if nothing is going to happen, and we must not live as if it were going to happen right now. This perspective guards against the extremes of saying: "I want to live my life" and "I do not want to have responsibility," offering instead the perspective of "shaping today by what is going to happen tomorrow." Paul argued with the Galatians that, on the basis of the finished work of Christ in the past, their lives now need to be in accordance with that finished work of Christ. In Thessalonians, he argues from the basis of the future. You see that there are two demarcation positions Paul works with in helping the Christians mature. One is the finished work of Christ, and the other is the sure truth of His return as judge, the one who brings justice, the one who will seek to find His bride. On the basis of that, live a pure life. In Galatians, Paul works from the past forward. Here, in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, he tells them to watch out that their lives are lived by the vivid and lively expectation of Christ; to not count on it necessarily happening today or tomorrow, but to live their lives so that they are ready for the surprise.

Paul is not helping them to say, “I know He will come in exactly five years and two months.” That would be a wrong guarantee. Paul does not give times; he simply tells them to live their lives today, not with the desire to have it all their way, all in their design, but to live their lives around the fact that Christ will come back. How should their lives look today if that is true? To those with extreme near expectation, he basically tells them they need to apply for a job today, but apply for it knowing that Christ is coming back—that this will affect them.

Paul does not dwell on finding a job; he dwells on our moral life. He says that the future needs condition, inform, and influence our present. Live toward the day of reckoning. Live toward the day of light. Live toward the day of the coming of the Son of God in greatness and in glory. Let that shape your moral decisions today. Do not cheat. Be sexually pure. Formulate your life from that future truth today. That is the purpose of thinking about the coming of Christ, not speculating about the time or the exact circumstances of His coming, but knowing that it is so real that it cuts my heart to the quick, and it shapes my life today.

This is the wonderful message, then, in the middle part of 1 Thessalonians, in 4:1-12. This section is basically a description of living a life dedicated to God, under the authority of God, and morally charged by the glory of God. The Thessalonians do not have room to stray into either of these extremes. They are challenged to see that the Gospel faces them today in their moral life. That is where they cannot turn to the left or the right; they cannot have their theology based on their needs. They had tried to base their theology on their needs, so if their need was, “No disturbance, please,” they had the theology of far expectation, and if their need was, “Please, no responsibilities anymore,” they had the theology of near expectation—“Let the day of the coming of the Lord be today, so that I will not have to work anymore.” Paul does not allow that. He says, “Work; earn your money.”

I think this is very important and very significant: we cannot really say that the early church had a near expectation of the coming of Christ in terms of days or hours or time, but rather, they all held to a living expectation that Christ was near, which is a little different. A living expectation of the nearness of Christ is as alive today as it was 2000 years ago. Every year, every day of these 2000 years, Christians have been challenged to live alert, alive, and awake, because He comes like a thief. That is the principle, not “For 400 years, people can sleep and then for the last five years before the coming of Christ, you need to be really alert.” There seems to be a pattern established of expecting the coming of Christ throughout the ages until He finally does come. My life needs to be so directly influenced by the reality of His coming that I make my decisions today based on His coming, so that I do not build little imaginary castles in my dream-world and pray that God would bless me. That does not work anymore. I have to build a life that reckons with, counts on, and includes the fact that He is coming and that I must be ready to let go of all. If I am really concerned about that expensive thing that I “need” to own before I die, I have to think about that in light of the coming of Christ. In this way we are trained into people who are wise stewards of possessions and money, because tomorrow we may need to let go of it all. However, we are not just saying that because Christ comes tomorrow, I can squander it all. That is the extreme; that is the problem. You need to live tentatively. You need to conduct your business, your relationships, and indeed your whole life, with the anticipation that everything is going to become new. Christ is going to come back. Do not cling to what you have, but also be a steward of it. Do not abandon it. That is the message of this, and that is hard because either we want to possess it all or be monks or martyrs. It is very difficult to have it and not really possess it, but just to be stewards of relationships, of opportunities, of careers, and of challenges in our lives. That is so difficult, and that is the call to live in light of the coming of Christ, so that when I am called tonight, I will be ready. I will have awaited His coming, and I will be gladly joining whatever His purposes are when He comes back. I will not look back and I also will not have regrets. That is the really difficult part: we do so many wrong things in our

own lives and relationships that keep us from being ready. Everything in our lives is influenced by the coming of Christ, not only in terms of living a life of stewardship in what we have, but also in terms of living a reconciled life. We need to be people who are living with a vivid expectation of the coming of Christ, but we should not waste our time in speculating about days and hours.

It is true that in 2 Thessalonians Paul says, “Those of you who have this extreme near expectation, let me tell you something: before Christ comes, there is going to be a principle of lawlessness that is going to smolder under the blanket. It is going to be just under the surface, and there is going to be a restraining principle that holds this smoldering at bay.” Let us look at that briefly: 2 Thessalonians 2:6-8. There will be a restraining power and this principle of lawlessness will smolder underneath the cover. It is already there; Paul says when he writes to the Thessalonians that the principle of lawlessness is already there. Christ has been established, and anti-Christian movements and forces are in place. They are moving, they are smoldering along, and they are seeking their impact in society and life. Verse 7 tells us that when the restrainer has removed himself or has been removed from their midst, then there will be expansion of the lawless one out into the open. He will be revealed. The antichrist will be known, and then the day of the coming of the Lord Jesus will be here. He will cut to the quick that which has been appearing: namely, the antichrist. There is something described here which I am still trying to understand myself, but I think I have a certain hunch as to what direction this is going: namely, that there is a pattern of lawlessness in the world. This lawlessness seeks to influence the church. It is that resistance against God's purposes, it is that anti-Christian strength and power—both satanic and in terms of earthly powers—resisting the purposes of God. However, these powers are kept at bay, and I believe the restrainer in verse 7 is God Himself. God is the restrainer who holds this at bay, perhaps by means of angelic beings, perhaps by means of the presence of the church. Then, when God removes Himself, when He moves out of the midst of this restraining, the cup of unrighteousness and injustice comes to the fore. And what has been there smoldering, like cancer, becomes apparent. The evil that has been lurking, just underneath the surface like a skin disease, comes out. Then, when it appears, it will be cut to the quick by the word of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We do not need to go into detailed sequences of all this. Paul does not do that here. He simply wants to tell the people with an extreme near expectation of Christ's coming that they need to be aware of something that is happening in God's design of the sequence of events. The result of knowing that brings forth the necessity for both the Thessalonians' and ourselves', as listeners to the letter to the Thessalonians, to be very aware of the fact that we are under a certain influence. There is a lawless principle moving about, seeking to lead us into lawlessness. That is why Paul calls us to simple things such as moral purity and being involved and engaged in work. We must live a life that is in accordance with the principles and purposes of God so that we will not in any way participate in the principle of lawlessness.

You see how Galatians fits in here perfectly. Paul encourages the Galatians not to fall into legalism or lawlessness, but to pursue the godliness that comes from the finished work of Christ. Here Paul is encouraging the Thessalonians with the coming of Christ with that same purpose, because the struggle against the flesh and the struggle against the principles of ungodliness are magnificent. They are great and they are strong. Because of this, we need to see that we are called to follow the work of Christ, the steps of Christ, and the life of Christ. We need to claim that righteousness which He has made possible for us, so that we do not participate in the smoldering principles of lawlessness.

This is the main thrust of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Now I would like to look at 1 Thessalonians in a little more detail. What does Paul do with the Thessalonians as they deal with some of these issues, and primarily the sins of far expectation? He encourages them. That is a very important point. He encourages

them in various ways. He encourages them that they will have hard times. There is suffering. We obviously do not have the time to develop the whole theology of suffering in the New Testament, but if you come from a tradition of victorious Christian living that is devoid of any suffering, you may have to think again. There are some aspects in Scripture that make it very plain that suffering is a part of the Christian life and the process of Christian maturing. So in verse 2:13 and following, and 3:2 and following, Paul mentions that. He also commends their faith and their love in 1:2 and then again in 1:8. Suffering, faith, and love are elements of the encouragement that Paul offers. He reminds them that God has replaced their idols. You may remember that I have said before that man is a perennial worshipper. As a man who is worshipping idols is turned to worshipping God, the idols go. That is the effect of the change in life: the secret idols in our lives are sacrificed and given over to God so that we can worship the living God. You cannot worship idols and God simultaneously. This is wonderful encouragement that Paul gives to the Thessalonians.

There are a few other encouragements I will not go into here. The main thing is that Paul encourages them that they have insight into last things. Actually, then, what I have just said about the expectation of Christ's coming is part of Paul's encouragement. It is part of his helping them to see their lives in the right perspective, look at things from the point of view of Christ's coming, and sort out their decisions now from that vantage point.

Another point that is predominant in 1 Thessalonians is that Paul confirms that these believers belong to God. I think it is significant that Paul uses various vantage points in saying that God chose them. Let us look at a few of these. 1 Thessalonians 1:4 tells us that it is not that the Thessalonians made the decision for Christ as much as God chose them. God was the one who helped them hear the Gospel, we read in 2:2-5. Verse 13 of chapter 2 tells us that God is the author of the message that they received. So there is a strong emphasis on what I come back to over and over in Philippians 1:6—that God began a work in the Thessalonians, and Paul wants to remind them of that. It is a wonderful form of encouragement to say that God began a work. When we come into times of doubt and questioning, we are reminded that God began a work. When we have dark times, when we have times of depression, we are reminded that God chose us. He enabled us to hear the Gospel and it is the message of God that we have received. In 2:14, he encourages them and confirms their belonging to God by saying that God is the head of the church. Then, to conclude his statements of the confirmation that they belong to Christ, in 4:3-8 Paul says that it is God's will that each person's life is conforming to His purposes. There is punishment for those who violate the ways of God. It is God's will that each life be conformed to the purposes of God. There is not a neutral area of "just being a Christian." There is only the call to follow in the purposes of God. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 would summarize, in many ways, the confirmation to these young Christians and the encouragement for them to move forward.

Let me say a few words about 2 Thessalonians. In the outline I have given you of 2 Thessalonians, you see the main parts are instructions concerning the coming of Christ, thanksgiving and admonition—2:13 to 3:5—and then some practical instructions and consequences. Perhaps you see there is some difference of themes compared to 1 Thessalonians. The thanksgiving and admonition follows the instruction on the coming of Christ. In 2 Thessalonians 2:9 to 2:12, we have this danger of extreme near expectation. Paul is concerned in 2 Thessalonians that the believers are not misled. You see, some people in the Thessalonian church would want to move the entire church into this near expectation. I am sad to see young Christians who are so excited about the coming of Christ that they forget the main purposes of the Christian life. It seems like in the Thessalonian church there were those who said, "Watch out, Christ is coming; are you ready?" Then they gave particular instructions. This particular error always comes with a long catalog of rules—things to do and not to do. When there is this excitement, this restlessness, you are robbed of calmly living your life today, in a lively expectation of the coming of Christ, but still

contributing today to what God has laid before you. You miss that every day when you are so excited about whether it is today and if you have gotten everything ready. You are preoccupied with yourself. That is the sad thing that this extreme near expectation leads to. I think this is a very important guard and test to godly growth: are you preoccupied with God's purposes, or your own life? Even in the garb of Christian instruction, if it preoccupies you with yourself, you may be misled. You may be distracted from what God is actually doing, because He wants to draw you away from your self-focus to a God-focus. Thus it is very much the burden of Paul in 2 Thessalonians that they not be misled, as we read in 2:1 and 3:2 and following, to give some examples.

There are some instructions on how to deal with those believers who are very moved by the wind of the occasion in 3:6-15. Then there is a major section of encouragement in 1:4-10, which teaches that there is an eventual victory over this entire struggle. That is the wonderful comfort that Paul can give to the Thessalonians: that while there is a battle, while there are principles of lawlessness at hand, while there are distracters in and outside of the church, the one who has begun this work will bring it to a victorious conclusion. The call, to the Thessalonians and to us, is to yield to the purposes of God today. Lean into the purposes of God today. Do not be distracted to the left or to the right, but faithfully and prayerfully execute that which God has laid before your hand. Then you can have the confidence that is given here in 1:4-10, that there will be eventual victory, eventual justice, and eventual reward. This is the main message of Thessalonians, so if we had to say what the approach to ethics, to morality, is in 2 Thessalonians, we could give a simple answer: "Live with the vivid expectation of the coming of the Lord." A morally clean and purified life is the fruit of a right understanding of the coming of Christ. If there is no effect on your life by thinking of the coming of Christ, you may simply be speculating. You may be feeding your own curiosity, but you are not really seeing it biblically. To see it biblically means it will affect your life today. There is an ethical and moral dimension to the expectation of the coming of Christ.