

The First Letter to the Thessalonians



*"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."
(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)*

This is the earliest surviving letter from Paul that we possess, possibly written in Corinth in 51 CE. Paul's second missionary journey, according to Acts, had brought him to Thessalonica, an important port city situated on the Via Egnatia, a key trade route to Italy from the Aegean Sea.

Acts 17:1-15 recounts that the Jews gave Paul a hard time in Thessalonica. But Paul chooses to focus on the positive reception to the preaching of the gospel on the part of this small Gentile community who up to this time did not believe in the one God.

Paul is sensitive to the fact that he comes as a stranger and that the Gentile Thessalonians do not know the Hebrew Scriptures. So, he speaks directly to their circumstances from his experience of gratitude at encountering the good news of Jesus Christ. Yet despite their unpromising background, he tells how they accepted his message 'not as a human word but as the Word of God.' Impressed, he celebrates their faith and the community life they have developed. So inspired was Paul by this community and so grateful for the way they responded to his preaching that he writes not one but three thanksgivings to God in the first part of the letter (1:3-10, 2:13-16, 3:9-13) and does not reach the body of the letter until chapter 4.

Paul feels supported by them in his own ministry while being aware of the potential danger they face from Pagan and Jewish opposition. Paul was concerned for their safety and that persecution might destroy the work he had done among them, but because of his affection for the Thessalonian community and the closeness he felt for them through their common suffering, he longed to see them again: '... we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face...' (3:10). This was impossible as Paul was now in Athens and had to remain there.



ROMAN FORUM OF THESSALONIKI

*"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."
(1 Thessalonians 5:11)*

The main problem the Thessalonian community faced was that some of their members had died since Paul was with them, so they were worried that these believers would not now rise from the dead. Paul had passed on Jesus' teaching about the Second Coming or Parousia when his faithful disciples would be welcomed into heaven. Here he re-affirms hope in the salvation Christ will bring to the living and the dead and (4:17) and at the same time the need for always being alert and vigilant in this 'in between' time.

The early Jesus Movement expected this return of the risen Jesus to be imminent hence we find an emphasis in Paul's teaching on being ready above all else. As the time stretched and it became clear that the eschaton, the final day, might be further off, he engages at a new level with the ongoing life of the church, and with the daily reality of families and marriage. Here, Paul reiterates his teaching in such a way as to relieve the concerns of the community without encouraging complacency if there is a delay in Jesus' coming.

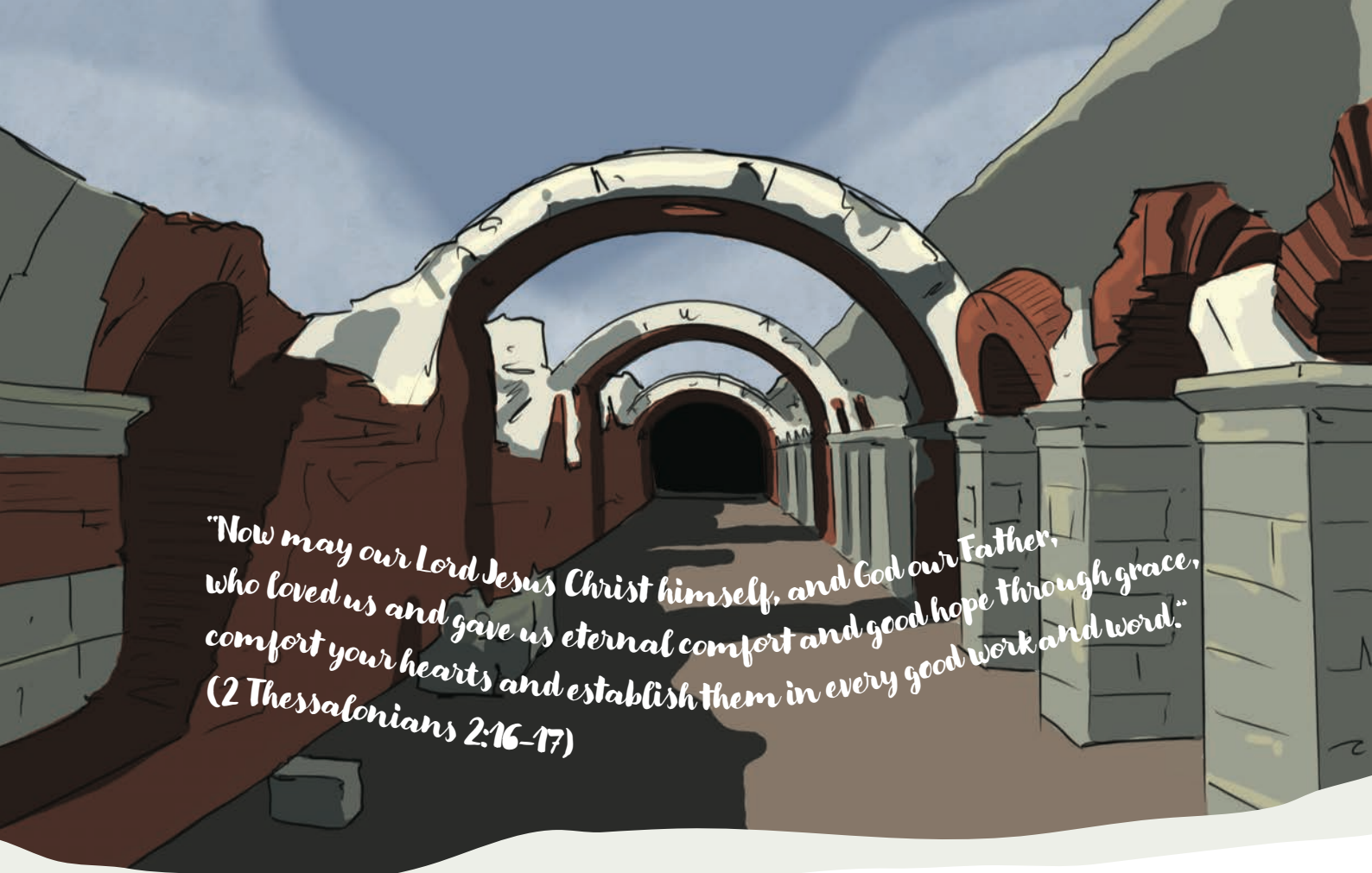
The Second Letter to the Thessalonians



2 Thessalonians differs in style and vocabulary from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Although it ends in 3:17 with a claim that it is written 'with my own hand', many scholars think it was more likely to have been written by an anonymous disciple of Paul after his death to maintain Pauline traditions, perhaps in the last two decades of the first century (cf. 2:13).

On the other hand, there is a continuity of theme that unites the two letters and supports Pauline authorship. It is not unknown for a writer to adopt a different style and vocabulary at a different time or in different circumstances. In continuity with the first letter, Paul holds this community in high esteem, commending particularly their resilience in faith despite persecution and suffering, and their resistance against those (Gentiles) who would lead them astray.

The major problem that Paul responds to in both letters is the date of the Parousia, the final coming of Jesus which the community awaits (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:10). The Greek word Parousia literally means 'presence'. In secular language Parousia could refer to the visit of the emperor or an important political personality. In the first letter Paul reassures those whose relatives have died. They fear that their loved ones will not be able to experience Christ's Second Coming. The background to the second letter is that the persecutions have increased and intensified, to the extent that many of the community believe that the wrath of God which was expected to immediately precede the Parousia of Christ had already arrived. The wrath of God (1 Thessalonians 1:10), an aspect of divine judgement, is an apocalyptic image found in Isaiah 66:14-16. God's saving of his servants will be experienced by his enemies as his anger.



*"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word."
(2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)*

Paul's main message is that the Parousia has not yet arrived (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2), but the community are not to be alarmed about this apparent delay. Drawing from images used in apocalyptic Jewish literature, he explains that certain things must happen first, especially the coming of the 'the man of lawlessness' (2 Thessalonians 2:3), an Antichrist figure who will claim to be God (2 Thessalonians 2:4). Lawlessness is already at work on earth, in the deceptions of Satan (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10), but these figures who oppose Christ will ultimately be defeated by his power (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

Paul therefore counsels the community to hold fast to what they have been taught, have confidence in the Lord Jesus, and have nothing to do with those who are so inclined to cause trouble that they have given up any daily work. These people are described as 'idlers' but the Greek *ataktos* and its cognates can mean a people or an activity (or lack of) that is out of order or is destructive. Such people, however, are not to be treated as enemies but as believers who need to be warned and encouraged (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). The concluding verses encourage the community to discern the Spirit of God at work within it (or them), and to continue building up one another in love and peace until the Lord does return.



Question for Reflection

How do you sustain your faith amid both trials and in the ordinary everyday moments?

The First Letter to the Corinthians



CORINTH

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Corinth was a large cosmopolitan city with two ports controlling the land bridge - the Isthmus, between the north and south of Greece. Many of Paul's community must have benefitted from the wealth that came to the ports and the sense of independence that it gave them. The inhabitants of the city were notorious in the ancient world for their independent spirit, ambivalent attitude to authority and widespread promiscuity cultivated in the devotion to their main goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The Greek verb 'Corinthianise' came to mean to live a promiscuous life.

Compared with the community at Thessalonica, the disciples at Corinth were a difficult group for Paul to handle. They were mostly Gentiles with some Jews and were socially divided by wealth and status. That characteristically Corinthian sense of freedom and independence also created divisions among themselves as they fell under the spells of rival preachers who proposed more attractive doctrines than did Paul. Gradually, these problems were reported back to Paul.

Paul responds around the year 56 CE to several ethical and practical issues that had arisen in Corinth, including incest and other forms of sexual immorality (chapters 5 and 7); community members taking out lawsuits against one another (chapter 6); the participation of some members in practices associated with idol worship (chapters 8 and 10); the role of women in the church (chapter 11); proper celebration of the Lord's supper so that divisions between social classes are not highlighted or reinforced (chapter 11); and the misuse of spiritual gifts (chapters 13 and 14).

Paul's theological starting point for his advice is that Christ is risen and alive in the community (1 Corinthians 15:3-28), and therefore, all members of it are touched by divine holiness. When they act in a way that is not loving towards others or that shows disdain towards those who are poor and weak, they are desecrating the holy Body of Christ. Paul opposed the opinion of some within the church, shaped by the wider Greek culture, that the body is inferior to the mind and therefore any sexual activity or extreme asceticism was lawful because the body did not really matter.



TEMPLE OF APOLLO, CORINTH

In chapter 12 he develops his theology of the community as the Body of Christ by unpacking a metaphor that was often used by ancient philosophers. He applies the harmony of the whole body, with its many parts to the church. In effect he is saying: 'You have already been made holy by Christ. Be what you now are by conducting yourselves in love'. Paul sums up his pastoral strategy in the beautiful 'Hymn to Love' in chapter 13 '... love is patient, kind, not envious, boastful or arrogant...'. This approach is evident in his response to all the ethical issues he discusses. In the case of eating meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols, for example, he treads gently, aware of the fact that much of the food available in Corinth would have come from the local temples. Eating it, therefore, was for many people neither a moral nor immoral act, but a necessary part of life. What he asks of those members of the

community who feel free to eat such meat, then, is sensitivity to others who may be worried that this involves participating in idolatry (1 Corinthians 8:7-13). It is this loving concern for the whole body that must guide all the actions of the believer: 'But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.' (1 Corinthians 8:12).

**"... love is patient,
kind, not envious,
boastful or arrogant..."
(1 Corinthians 13)**

The Second Letter to the Corinthians



By his own acknowledgement Paul wrote three letters to the Corinthians - (1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Corinthians 2:3-9 and 7:8-12 - known as the 'tearful' letter) before writing this one, perhaps in the autumn of 57 CE. Whereas the focus of 1 Corinthians was mainly on helping the community overcome their rivalries with one another and develop their understanding of the message of Christ, in this letter Paul is on the defensive. Hostility to Paul had already been in evidence in chapter 8 of the first letter when he had to defend his claim to be an apostle and his freedom to refuse to take any money for himself from them, although he would have been fully entitled to do so. This fraught relationship between Paul and some influential members of the community at Corinth continued, despite his two visits and previous letters to them (2 Corinthians 2:1-4).

The thanksgiving section (2 Corinthians 1:3-7) sets the tone for the letter. Paul addresses God as 'the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation'. He acknowledges the pain suffered on both sides, and the process of consolation that God has already begun which is the ground of his hope for reconciliation. Referring to the great jeopardy caused by this breakdown of relationships, he describes the experience on his part as a 'sentence of death', 'so that we could rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead' (2 Corinthians 2:9). Paul sees the death and resurrection of Christ not merely as an event in the past but as a dynamic principle at the heart of the life of the church as it goes forward. In his first letter Paul had written, 'The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:18). Perhaps by now, some of the Corinthians were beginning to understand the implications of the truth that Christ 'died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them' (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).



*"Put things in order, listen to my appeal,
agree with one another, live in peace,
and the God of love and peace will be with you"*
(2 Corinthians 13:11)

In the course of the first seven chapters Paul continues to assure his audience of his sincerity (2 Corinthians 1:12 - 2:11) and to persuade them of his authority to preach and teach as an apostle of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:1- 6:13).

In chapters 8 and 9 Paul asks for funds for the mother church in Jerusalem. His appeal to the Corinthians' generosity is based on the generosity of God and Jesus Christ, who 'though rich, became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9). It was in humility that Jesus exercised his divine status, not in the seeking of riches and power (cf. Philippians 2:5-11).

In the final chapters Paul again seeks to refute the criticisms made of him by his opponents at Corinth and explains his plans to make another visit to them, at which point these issues can perhaps be straightened out (2 Corinthians 12:14-13:10).

He concludes this difficult letter with the words, 'Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you' (2 Corinthians 13:11).



Question for Reflection

How does Paul help us to be inclusive in our worship so that everyone can share in the Body of Christ?