

# **II THESSALONIANS**

**The Second Letter of Paul  
to the Church in  
Thessalonica**

## Did Paul write Second Thessalonians?

The letter which we are about to examine is presented as being written by Paul. The opening address, the personal allusions and reminiscences, the expressions of personal feelings and the final signature make this abundantly obvious. In all the early church records it is included among Paul's letters. However, for the past two hundred years, doubts have been raised concerning the author, and today about half the scholars claim that it is composed by Paul, while half claim that it is composed by a disciple under Paul's name. We refer the reader to the Introduction where we discussed the general question of pseudonymous writings, and where we observed that there is nothing inherently problematic about such a work belonging among the inspired works of the New Testament.

As regards Second Thessalonians, exhaustive studies of vocabulary, style and content have failed to bring about consensus. The two main arguments put forward by those who claim that Paul is not the author are the difference in tone between First and Second Thessalonians and what they claim as evidence of literary dependence of Second Thessalonians on First Thessalonians. I find the argument of literary dependence to be overstated and quite unconvincing. As for the difference of tone, it is possible to envisage a situation which would account for the difference in tone as well as for the repetition of certain themes and expressions without postulating a different author.

Let us imagine that the problems which concerned Paul (1Thessalonians 3:5), and which were reinforced by Timothy's report (1Thessalonians 3:6), were, in fact, more deep seated than Paul realised when he composed his earlier letter. Alternatively, perhaps the undisciplined members of the community (the *ataktoi* of 1Thessalonians 5:1) had become more convinced of their ideas and more determined during the months between Timothy's visit and the arrival of Paul's response. Let us suppose that this group within the Thessalonian church was unhappy with his letter and even spread the idea that it was not really from Paul but was a forgery. Caught up in their own enthusiasm they were seriously distorting the gospel message. When news of this came to Paul, he hurried off this second letter.

There is no need to state again at length his gratitude for the lives being led by the bulk of the community or his expressions of affection. They already know this from his earlier letter and a brief statement is all that is needed in this follow-up note. In his summary expressions of these sentiments he uses many phrases from his earlier letter. Perhaps he does so precisely to set what he is saying here within the framework of what he had already written, as well as to demonstrate that the earlier letter was in fact his and that he meant to write what he had written in it. It was not, as some were saying, a forgery (see 2:2). This could also be why he takes so much trouble at the end to draw their attention to his handwriting in the final greeting which functions as his signature. He is inviting them to compare it with the earlier letter in which, as is Paul's custom, the concluding words were also written with his own hand, though in that letter he felt no need to stress the fact. His own writing was sufficiently distinctive (compare Galatians 6:11) not normally to need a special comment.

His main aim in writing is to demonstrate the error of those who are claiming that the day of God's judgment is already upon them. He wants them to be in no doubt that this is not his teaching and not the gospel. How could the parousia have already occurred when there is still so much evil around? Since his first letter was unsuccessful, this time he takes a firmer stand against those who are disrupting the community through their undisciplined behaviour: they are to be ostracised (3:6). Paul hopes that this will bring them to their senses, so that they will repent and be able to rejoin the community. The virus cannot be allowed to spread (3:14). The difference in tone between this and the previous letter can be explained by the need to be very clear in alerting the community to the seriousness of the danger inherent in the wrong ideas being perpetrated by the dissident group.

We must also be careful not to exaggerate the differences. Much of this letter indicates that Paul is very happy with the life of faith and love of the Thessalonian community. He is, however, very concerned about one issue, and he expresses his concern with appropriate urgency.

Of itself the traditional titles 'First' and 'Second' attached to the letters are an indication only of the order in which the letters were published when they were brought together in book form. The letters were arranged according to length not according to chronological priority. However, everything points to Second Thessalonians coming *after* First Thessalonians. Besides the logic inherent in what has already been noted, there are statements in Second Thessalonians which are best understood as the referring to previous communication in writing (2:2; 2:15; 3:17). There is nothing like this in First Thessalonians.

I find no persuasive reason against accepting this as a genuine letter composed by Paul himself and sent from Corinth to Thessalonica as a follow up to the letter we have just studied. Its absence from the papyrus codex P<sup>46</sup> (c.200AD) can be explained by the fact that the last seven sheets of the codex are missing. Some of Second Thessalonians is contained in another papyrus manuscript (P<sup>30</sup>) from the early third century, and it is found complete in a number of early parchment books, including Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus from the fourth century and Codex Alexandrinus from the fifth century. In the middle of the second century Marcion includes Second Thessalonians in his list of Paul's letters. It is also included in the canon of the New Testament by Athanasius (367AD) and Pope Damasus (382AD).

The problem concerning the timing of the final judgment which was preoccupying the young community is not likely to be of central interest to many today. Perhaps of more interest is the light which Paul throws on a question that is always relevant. When people claim to be speaking in God's name, how are we to test whether or not they are genuine? It is interesting to see Paul's earliest attempt to confront this problem, and there is much that we can learn from the principles which he lays down. We must be attentive to the experience of the Spirit in the community and, at the same time, we are to be faithful to tradition.

### The Structure of II Thessalonians

Opening address and greeting	1:1-2
1a. Paul expresses his thanks for the way the community is progressing in faith and love in spite of persecution	1:3-4
1b. He explains that on the day of judgment they will be vindicated, while their persecutors will be excluded from life	1:5-12
2a. Paul explains why they should not be deceived by the pseudo-charismatic claim that they are already experiencing the end of history	2:1-15
2b. He prays for them	2:16-17
3a. He requests their prayers and adds some observations	3:1-5
3b. He gives instructions on how to deal with those disturbing the community from within	3:6-12
3c. Some exhortations	3:13-16
Signature and final prayer	3:17-18

### The liturgical readings

1:1-5,11-12	21st Monday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:6-10	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
1:11 - 2:2	31st Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
2:1-3,14-17	21st Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year II
2:4-13	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
2:16 - 3:5	32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
3:6-10,16-18	21st Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year II
3:7-12	33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
3:13-15	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

The opening address is almost identical with that in the previous letter. We refer the reader to the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:1-2 and the references given there for reflections on God as ‘Father’ and on Jesus as ‘Lord’ and ‘Christ’; also for ‘grace’ and ‘peace’ as used by Paul in his greeting. Paul will return to the subject of peace towards the end of the letter (see 3:16). The reasons for this will emerge as the letter unfolds.

It was normal practice to follow the greeting with an expression of thanks. Paul does so in what in Greek is one long and very convoluted sentence, from verse three through to verse twelve. He begins his expression of thanks by focusing on two areas of growth: their faith, and the love which they have for each other within the community. He spoke of both at some length in his earlier letter. After recalling their experiences while the missionaries were among them, and his own concern for them when he was separated from them, Paul went on to write:

Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love.

– 1Thessalonians 3:6

He then spoke of their faith:

We have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

– 1Thessalonians 3:7-10

And then of love:

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

– 1Thessalonians 3:12

Paul has received news that his prayers are being answered. He has also been reassured that the Thessalonians are remaining steadfast in their faith through the continuing persecutions and afflictions that they are enduring (see 1Thessalonians 3:3), and he gives thanks to God also for this.

**<sup>1</sup>Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:**

**<sup>2</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

**<sup>3</sup>We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.**

**<sup>4</sup>Therefore 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.**

**<sup>5</sup>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 suffering.**

**<sup>6</sup>For it is indeed just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you,**

**<sup>7</sup>and to give rest [NRSV 'relief'] to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels**

**<sup>8</sup>in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not acknowledge [NRSV 'know'] God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.**

Paul sees their growth in faith and love and the way in which they bear their afflictions as 'evidence' of where they stand in relation to God's 'just judgment'. They are being tested in the crucible of suffering and it is evident that they are truly living in communion with 'God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. Their fidelity shows that God's saving love is reigning in their community, and they can be confident of being part of God's kingdom (see 1Thessalonians 2:12) when 'the Lord Jesus is revealed'.

For the background to this passage we refer the reader to our commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:10, where we examined the theme of the 'anger of God', and of God's 'judgment' and 'punishment' of evil; and also to our commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:6, where we examined the link between suffering and Christian joy in the Spirit.

Paul introduces the rich scriptural theme of 'rest' with its connotations of a long and difficult journey ending in the Promised Land. He speaks of the goal of the just as a sharing in the 'glory' of the exalted Jesus. We recall Jesus' own words about the Son of Man coming 'in the glory of his Father with the holy angels' (Mark 8:38). Paul thanks God for their perseverance amid persecution. They will share in the radiant beauty of Christ when they experience the splendour of the life promised to those who have put their faith in him.

What is especially striking about this passage is Paul's description of the punishment which those who are causing the affliction will receive. The image of 'flaming fire' and the notion of divine 'vengeance', occur frequently in the Jewish scriptures.

The Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire.

– Isaiah 66:15

Those who 'do not acknowledge God' (see Jeremiah 9:6; 10:25) will have to suffer the consequences when God 'deals out retribution to his enemies' (Isaiah 66:6). Paul 'updates' the language of scripture by speaking of 'those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus'. God's saving love has been revealed in Jesus. Those who stubbornly reject him are rejecting salvation.

The consequences of obstinate rejection of God's will and God's love are described in the starkest terms: 'eternal destruction' and separation from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might'. Paul seems to be drawing upon the refrain of Isaiah about those who 'hide in the dust from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty' (Isaiah 2:10,19,21). These consequences are the exact opposite of the salvation and communion with Jesus which was the main theme of Paul's first letter (1Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11). We are reminded of the last words of the Book of Isaiah:

They shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

– Isaiah 66:24

When speaking of the 'unquenchable fires of hell' (Mark 9:43), where 'soul and body are destroyed' (Matthew 10:18), Jesus referred to 'gehenna'. This is the valley to the south of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:30-33; 19:1-15; 32:35), where the fires of the enemy camps during the siege of Jerusalem, and the fires of fever suffered by those left to perish there on the field of battle, made a lasting impression on the psyche of the people of Jerusalem. Gehenna became a symbol of the fire of divine judgment on those who 'have rebelled against me'.

Jesus speaks of hell for there is no love in failing to alert us to the consequences of rejecting God's love. It is important, however, that we note that in the same breath Jesus tells us not to be afraid of God. Hell is not a punishment inflicted upon us from the outside by God. It is what we do to ourselves when we obstinately reject God's saving love. Let us listen to Jesus:

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell [*gehenna*]. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

– Luke 12:4-7

Punishment for sin is always self-inflicted. God's judgment cannot but declare things to be the way they really are, but we are to imagine God making his judgment as Jesus did when he wept over the city that he loved so much (Luke 19:41-44).

**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 in his saints, and to be marvelled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.**

‘Eternal destruction’

The possibility of our destroying our life by our refusal to listen to God is a frequent theme in the Gospels:

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

– Matthew 13:41-42 (also 8:12, 22:13, 25:30)

Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell [*gehenna*] of fire.

– Matthew 18:7-9 (also 5:29-30)

Then the King will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ... And these will go away into eternal punishment.

– Matthew 25:41-43,46

We are exhorted to look carefully at the direction our life is taking, at the decisions we make and decline to make, and at our priorities. God’s unconditional love does not take away from us the possibility of our refusing his love, nor does it remove the consequences that follow from such a refusal. We can create a hell here for others and for ourselves. There is no reason to suppose that death will automatically reverse this. It matters what we do. It matters now and it matters eternally:

For what will it profit you to gain the whole world but forfeit your life? Or what will you give in return for your life?

– Matthew 16:26

Three times in his first letter, Paul referred to God's call. He spoke of his time among them when, like a father he was: 'urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory' (1Thessalonians 2:12). He reminded the Thessalonians that God called them 'in holiness' (1Thessalonians 4:7), and he reminded them: 'the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this' (1Thessalonians 5:24). Here he prays that they will remain open to the grace of God, for it is God alone who can 'fulfil by his power every good resolve and work of faith'. Paul will write later to the neighbouring church in Phillipi: 'it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Philippians 2:13).

Jesus told us that he is the vine; we are the branches (John 15:1). We need 'good resolve' and we need 'work of faith' (see 1Thessalonians 1:3): a faith that issues in the fruit of love. The fruit, however, though it appears on the branches, always comes from the vine. Our resolve must be to cling to the vine. Jesus promises to remain in us, and it is his Spirit that will produce the fruit. Seeing the fruit of love in the lives of Jesus' disciples, others will be drawn to desire the same intimacy with Jesus, and they will be drawn to join the community which manifests by its life the reality and the active presence in the world of the living and true God, the God of love. In this way is the glory of the risen Jesus revealed. Paul will write to the Corinthians:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:18

We read in Isaiah: 'Let the Lord be glorified, so that we may see your joy' (Isaiah 66:5). We are reminded of the promise of Jesus: 'The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' (Matthew 13:43). As Paul will write later:

When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

– Colossians 3:4

Because of the lack of an article before 'Lord' in the Greek, it is possible that in verse twelve Paul is referring to Jesus as 'our God and Lord'. If so this would make this text the earliest example of a practice of referring to Jesus as God (though see 1Thessalonians 3:11) – a practice which becomes common in the period immediately following the New Testament.

**<sup>11</sup>To this end we always pray for you, that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith,**

**<sup>12</sup>so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and (the) Lord Jesus Christ.**

**<sup>1</sup>As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters,**

**<sup>2</sup>not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, purporting to be [NRSV 'as though'] from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.**

**<sup>3</sup>Let no one deceive you in any way;**

We come now to the main point of the letter. It concerns the 'coming of our Lord Jesus Christ' and 'our being gathered together to him' (see 1Thessalonians 4:15-17; Mark 13:27). The Thessalonians are in a state of panic because they are being told that the day of judgment is upon them. This is the first example of a phenomenon that has recurred throughout the history of the church. In our own day we have witnessed terrible examples of the extremes to which people will go when convinced by some 'charismatic' leader that the end is upon us. Jesus himself warned us: 'Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and, "The time is near!" Do not go after them' (Luke 21:8). Paul is not sure of the source of the idea, but whatever its origin, it is a deception.

In his earlier letter he had told them not to 'despise the words of the prophets' (1Thessalonians 5:20). The Spirit of Jesus can choose to speak to us through the medium of such words, uttered in prayer and in openness to the Spirit. However, he also warned them to be discerning: to 'test everything' (1Thessalonians 5:21). Are there some in the community who are claiming prophetic inspiration in announcing that 'the day of the Lord is already here'? If so, they are mistaken and the community is not to be deceived. In his earlier letter Paul had advised them to esteem those graced with organisational responsibility in the community (1Thessalonians 5:12-13). If it is they who are the source of this pronouncement, they are in error.

Perhaps those responsible for the pronouncement that is causing alarm are claiming the authority of Paul. If they are using a written document to support their claim, Paul asserts that it is not from him. We will see that he goes to some lengths later (3:17) to draw their attention to the handwriting with which he concludes the letter. It is his 'signature'. If a letter claims to be from him and lacks it, they should ignore it. On the other hand, since the letter which we know as First Thessalonians does not contain the teaching that is causing disturbance, it may be that some are saying that that letter was not from Paul, and Paul wants them to know that it was, indeed, from him, and so draws attention to his handwriting so that they can check the signature of the earlier letter and reassure themselves that it is genuine. It is also possible that they were taking some of Paul's statements from his earlier letter out of context and using them to support their claim. He did say that 'God's wrath has overtaken them at last' (1Thessalonians 2:16), and he kept stressing the need to be alert (1Thessalonians 5:1-10), and spoke as though they might still be alive when the Lord comes (4:15,17). If they are basing their claim on these statements, they are distorting Paul's intended meaning. Whatever the source of this idea, they are not to be deceived!

Paul has told them not to get carried away and alarmed at the thought that the day of the judgment is upon them. Such talk is deceptive. Before making his main point, he offers a number of signs that should persuade them. To do so he draws on the kind of imagery that one finds in the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the day. There was an expectation that prior to the final realisation of God's design in history there would be a state of wholesale disorder or rebellion (Greek: *apostasia*). The following from the closing years of the first century is typical:

Behold, the days are coming when those who dwell on earth shall be siezed with great terror. The way of truth shall be hidden, and there will be no faith upon the earth. Injustice will multiply beyond anything which you have thus far experienced, beyond anything you have heard of previously.

– 4Ezra 5:1-2 (compare Didache, 16)

The one leading the rebellion, called here the 'lawless one' would be 'revealed' (Greek: *apokaluptō*). Paul wastes no time in stating that this leader of the rebellion is 'destined for destruction'. He will make this point again powerfully at the conclusion of his argument. He describes the arrogance and the religious posturing of the leader of the anti-God rebellion. We have already noted that Thessalonica was the residence of the Roman proconsul of Macedonia. Undoubtedly the Christians would have been under considerable pressure to involve themselves in the cult of the emperor and the public state festivities honouring the Roman gods.

Paul draws his description of the action of the lawless one from the Book of Daniel. The Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, tried to force the Jerusalem inhabitants to worship the statue of Zeus which he had introduced into the sacred precincts of the Temple. 'He shall exalt himself and consider himself greater than any god' (Daniel 11:36). Pompey dared to enter the inner sanctuary of the temple in 63BC, and the emperor Caligula threatened to have a statue of himself erected there in 40AD (see Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2,184-185). Jesus also warns about the 'desolating sacrilege' (Matthew 24:15) in the setting of persecution and of attempts to deceive the community.

Paul appeals to their memory. He has already spoken to them about this while he was still with them. His argument is simple: whatever troubles they are experiencing, this wholesale assault against order has not yet happened, so the final judgment, the day of the Lord, cannot be already here.

**<sup>3b</sup>for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first, and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction.**

**<sup>4</sup>He 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.**

**<sup>5</sup>Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?**

**<sup>6</sup>And now you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes.**

**<sup>7</sup>For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it withdraws [NRSV 'is removed'].**

**<sup>8</sup>And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.**

Paul makes a second point. They know what is holding back the revelation of the lawless one. At this point many scholars begin to speculate. Some identify whatever it is that is restraining the rebel and his rebellion as some present negative force. Perhaps Paul is alluding to the persecutions being suffered by the Thessalonians, or, more probably, to the disturbance within the community that is holding some of them in its sway. The point behind this line of argument is that the presence and activity of these or other evils is a sign that the cataclysmic evil of the final days cannot be happening yet. When the final darkness descends, lesser shadows will vanish. Others seek to identify whatever it is that is restraining the rebel and his cosmic rebellion as some positive force. The apostolic mission of Paul himself, perhaps. One thinks of Jesus' words: 'the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations' (Mark 13:10). In this sense every act of faith and love can be seen as delaying the general apostasy.

However, since Paul does not take the trouble to focus on what are, after all, only symptoms, why should we speculate about them? They know what is restraining the lawless one: it is *God's will*. The lawless one can be revealed only 'when his time comes'. In the Book of Revelation it is God who commands his angels to hold back the destruction (Revelation 7:1), and to bind Satan in chains (Revelation 20:1-3). In other words, Paul is drawing their attention to the truth of faith that everything comes within the providence of God. They and the whole of history are in God's hands. Rather than allowing themselves to be distracted by thoughts of the end, they should focus on the ways in which the 'mystery of lawlessness' is now working in Thessalonica. It is evident within the community itself. However, the final judgment cannot happen till God withdraws his restraining will. They should not let themselves be alarmed.

Paul's conclusion is simple and powerful. They have nothing to fear from the final revelation of evil on the earth. There is no cosmic battle between evil and good. All power is on the side of good. Paul may be looking to the future to the manifestation (*epiphaneia*) of Jesus' 'coming' (*parousia*, see 2:1). He may also be referring back to Jesus' life on earth and especially to his love-giving on the cross in which Jesus has already shown evil up as having no power against love. If evil was conquered by love in Jesus' earthly ministry, imagine, says Paul, what will happen at the coming of the Lord Jesus. All opposition to grace will be destroyed simply 'with the breath of his mouth' (see Isaiah 11:4). God created the world with a word. In the final analysis, his 'breath', his Spirit, will conquer all. We are reminded of Jesus' words: 'Take courage; I have conquered the world!' (John 16:33). If they are with Jesus, there is nothing to cause them alarm.

The community in Thessalonica has become a battle ground between forces of good and forces of evil. Paul sees this struggle against a larger cosmic background. On one side are the powers of good: God himself, the Lord Jesus in whom God's divine power is focused, the apostolic ministry which is the instrument of God's saving power now at work in the world, and the believing Christians who are heeding the gospel and will be saved. On the other side are the powers of evil: Satan, the lawless one who is the instrument of Satan and who stands against Jesus as the epitome of the incarnation of evil, the mystery of lawlessness which is at work in the world, and those who refuse to believe in the gospel and are caught up in behaviour that is contrary to God's will. Satan's power to deceive is great, but those only will be deceived who have rejected 'love of the truth'.

Paul unites 'love' and 'truth' in a simple genitive construction. He wants his readers to reflect on the many links that hold them together. We looked at some of the depths in the word 'love' when we examined Galatians 5:6. Paul has already given thanks to God for the level of love in the Thessalonian community (1:3). In his letter to the Galatians Paul speaks twice of 'the truth of the gospel' (2:5,14) and he asks the Galatians who prevented them from 'obeying the truth?' (Galatians 5:7). The idea here is the same.

The ultimate reality is God. Truth (Greek: *alētheia*) exists when who God is has not been swept away in a river of forgetfulness (Greek: *lēthē*), but is apparent for all to see. Jesus is the revelation of God as love, and the gospel is the proclamation of this revelation. Those who are committed to this truth and who are committed to allowing this truth to bear in their lives the fruit of love will be able to resist the deceptions of the evil one and experience the salvation offered by God through Jesus. Only those who reject the gospel will fall prey to the lying attractions of Satan. As Paul writes to the Galatians: 'the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6).

The Thessalonians are to concentrate on this in their daily lives, and not allow themselves to be distracted or alarmed by empty speculations about the timing of the end.

**<sup>9</sup>The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders,**

**<sup>10</sup>and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.**

They have not believed the truth

**<sup>11</sup>For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false,**

**<sup>12</sup>so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.**

Care must be taken to understand properly Paul's words about the judgment of God on those who reject God's love and so refuse salvation.

There are two fundamental truths that are basic in both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures. One is that God's initiative is always merciful. The other is that in a limited but real way we are free and responsible. Paul's statement cannot be understood in a way that contradicts either of these truths.

Paul has already stated that those 'who are perishing' are doing so, 'because they refused to love the truth and so be saved'(2:10). It is the refusal of God's love that leads automatically and necessarily to delusion; indulging in injustice leads necessarily to condemnation.

Since God is the author of reality, we may say that God is ultimately responsible for this being the way things are. However, the bad effects of our bad actions are precisely that: we cause them, not God, whose mercy is always at work drawing us to repentance and so to forgiveness. If we obstinately refuse this offer, the effects of our refusal will come upon us with divine necessity.

Paul returns to the theme of thanksgiving. He wants to reassure the Thessalonians that in his concern for them because of the alarm caused by some of their members he has not lost sight of the wonderful things that God is doing in their community. They are loved by the Lord Jesus. They have nothing to fear from the coming of the day of the Lord. They have been chosen by God himself (see 1Thessalonians 1:4) from the time that they first opened their hearts to the gospel. God is gracing them 'for salvation' (see 1Thessalonians 5:9) and they are being made holy by the Spirit who is transforming their lives. They have put their trust in God's love and are living accordingly. Our Lord Jesus Christ wants to share with them his glory.

He is offering them two criteria for discernment. The first is the quality of Christian living (2:13): they are to be attentive to the action of the Holy Spirit in the community. The second is consistency with authoritative teaching (2:14-15; see 2:5; 3:6): they are to 'stand firm' (see 1Thessalonians 3:8) and 'hold fast to the traditions that you were taught'.

In our day, through hard experience, we have become very conscious of limitations and abuse in the exercise of human authority, in states, but also in churches. We have been liberated from naive and blind obedience and have become wary of following directions just because they claim authority. While this reaction is obviously necessary, and in itself healthy, it ceases to be good when it leads us to the opposite situation in which we presume to make up our own mind on everything, and dismiss all authority except that which convinces our own limited intelligence.

The text on which we are reflecting warns us that if we do not worship the true and living God, we will create our own; if we do not believe the gospel, we will find ourselves putting our faith in things other than the gospel; if we neglect the wisdom of authentic tradition, we will find ourselves prey to all kinds of deceptions. Jesus advised us to be 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16). Let us pray for the wisdom to perceive when authority is being abused, and for the honesty not to follow such authority as an excuse for avoiding the truth. Let us pray also for the innocent docility that is grateful for the genuine authority that comes from centuries of wisdom in the human political community and in the churches.

**<sup>13</sup>But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.**

**<sup>14</sup>For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news,**

**so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ**

**(or 'so that you may be the glorious possession of our Lord Jesus Christ')**

**<sup>15</sup>So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.**

## Scripture and tradition

True wisdom is the fruit of sanctity. It does not contradict reason, but it does go beyond it, opening us to receive the revelation of God. While we grow in discernment, let us never lose the docility of a child who expects to learn from authority.

Paul's words here assist us in our reflections on the relationship between the written scriptures and tradition. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy had shared their faith-experience with the Thessalonians in many ways before this or the previous letter were composed. The missionaries had lived with them, worked with them, prayed with them and reflected with them on the significance of God's revelation in Jesus. Together they had found ways of celebrating their shared faith, and had worked out various implications for their manner of living (see 1Thessalonians 4:1). All of this is part of what Paul refers to as 'the traditions that you were taught by us'. Paul is writing his letters and they are being read from within this living tradition. As Paul wrote in his first letter:

When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

– 1Thessalonians 2:13

The written words of Scripture must always be read within the context of the inspired words of the praying and faith-filled community, for the Spirit of Jesus remains active among Jesus' disciples, guiding us into the fullness of truth (see John 16:13).

To be distinguished from tradition, which is the handing on of wisdom, faith, prayer and the Christ-life from one generation to the next, are the human traditions which inevitably develop when the faith takes root in human culture. Some of these give expression not to the essence of faith but to various limited and passing views. Such traditions need renewing and revitalising from one generation to the next and from one culture to another. Stephen had hard words to say of some Jewish traditions (see Acts chapter 7), as does Paul on many occasions. They are but mirroring the attitude of Jesus who complained:

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition ... You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!

– Mark 7:8-9

We can learn from the past, but we must constantly test the past. We have to keep revitalising traditions to ensure that we are in touch with the faith of those who have handed the faith on to us, and not just with their practices. We must also have the courage to exercise the freedom given us by the Spirit to find new ways of giving expression to the life of Jesus in the changing circumstances of our lives. We must be 'like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old' (Matthew 13:52). There is always an element of surprise in the action of the Spirit which 'blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit' (John 3:8). 'New wine must be put into fresh wineskins' (Luke 5:38).

This is a pastoral letter. Paul is concerned that the persecutions may prove too much for them. He sees, too, how vulnerable they are to the temptation to escape into the unreal world of those who are getting all excited and alarmed about the day of the Lord. He has attempted to settle the minds and hearts of the Thessalonian Christians by the clarity of his teaching, and especially by recalling what he has said about the central place of faith and love in their lives. The negative experiences that threaten to overwhelm them are trials. If they persevere they will survive them and be purified by them.

His sentiments are echoed by Ignatius of Loyola when he prays to God: ‘Your love and your grace are enough for me’. They are echoed also by Teresa of Avila:

Let nothing trouble you  
 Let nothing frighten you.  
 Everything passes. God never changes.  
 Patience obtains all.  
 Whoever has God wants for nothing.  
 God alone is enough.

Paul realises, however, that teaching is not enough. His prayer is that they will find comfort from the one to whom they have committed their lives, and from God who is their Father. God alone can give them a comfort that is ‘eternal’, a comfort that is not dependent on the chance circumstances of this world. We are reminded of Paul’s words to the Galatians:

The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son  
 of God loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:20

As in that text, so here, the aorist participles are better translated by the present in English: God is ‘loving’ and ‘giving’. Paul is calling them to ‘hope’: to put their trust in God’s love and to leave the future confidently in God’s hands so that they can focus their attention on the call of Jesus, which is to live, here and now, lives of love. For a reflection on ‘hope’ we refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 5:5. It is also noteworthy that the verbs ‘comfort’ and ‘strengthen’ in verse seventeen are singular in Greek, not plural: ‘our Lord Jesus Christ’ and ‘God our Father’ are considered as one because of their complete love-communion (compare 1:12 and 1Thessalonians 3:11).

**<sup>16</sup>Now may our Lord  
 Jesus Christ himself  
 and God our Father  
 loving us [NRSV  
 ‘who loved us’] and  
 through grace giving  
 us [NRSV ‘gave us’]  
 eternal comfort and  
 good hope,**

**<sup>17</sup>comfort your hearts  
 and strengthen them  
 in every good work  
 and word.**

**<sup>1</sup>Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you,**

**<sup>2</sup>and that we may be rescued from wicked and evil people;**

**for not all have faith.**

**<sup>3</sup>But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one.**

**<sup>4</sup>And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will go on doing the things that we command.**

**<sup>5</sup>May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.**

We have a glimpse here into the heart of a tireless missionary, longing to spread the ‘gospel of Christ’ (1Thessalonians 3:2), which is ‘the word of God’ (1Thessalonians 2:13; Acts 13:48), so that everyone will see the wonder of God’s love. Sadly, not all believe (see Romans 10:16), but God remains faithful (see 1Thessalonians 5:24) and Paul is confident that God will strengthen the Thessalonians in the trials they are having to undergo (see 1Thessalonians 3:13 and 2Thessalonians 2:17).

There is a different feel to this letter from Paul’s earlier one. In the first letter there are many expressions of affection, and Paul uses words like urge, encourage and plead. In this second letter it is authority that is highlighted, as with the use of the word ‘command’ in verse four. Some scholars see this as an indication that we are dealing with a later letter from a disciple of Paul who is concerned to accent tradition and apostolic authority. However, Paul spoke of his authority as an apostle in his first letter (see 2:7), and he can command obedience because his exhortations come from the risen Christ who has commissioned him to teach with authority (see 1Thessalonians 2:13; 4:2,11). He has already assured them of his affection in his earlier letter. He assumes that they are confident in it.

Through his communion ‘in the Lord’, Paul is confident that the Thessalonians will follow his directions (compare Galatians 5:10). His prayer is modelled on prayers such as the following:

O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our ancestors, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you.

– 1Chronicles 29:18

The expression ‘love of God’ in verse five includes both the love which God has for them, and the love they are to have among themselves and for others, a love which is itself from God. Similarly with the expression ‘the steadfastness of Christ’. Paul is referring both to Jesus’ own steadfastness amid sufferings and trials, and to the share in this virtue which Jesus has given to his disciples.

The community as a whole is living the faith very well (compare 1:3-4). Paul is concerned, however, with the behaviour of some. They are described as 'living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work' (compare 1Thessalonians 4:9-12; 5:14). However, Paul's calling on the authority given him by Jesus to instruct the community to keep away from these people points to a more serious problem than laziness. There is a link between the undisciplined, insubordinate lives of these people and the whole issue of pseudo-charismatic utterances that are causing excitement concerning the day of the Lord (see 2:2). Are they saying that because the day of the Lord is upon them, they have no need to carry out their ordinary duties, with the result that they are, in fact, abusing the hospitality of the rest of the community?

Paul reminds the community of his teaching and example (compare 1Thessalonians 4:1). As apostles commissioned by Christ, he and his companions have the right to expect to be supported by the community (compare 1Corinthians 9:4-14; Luke 10:7), but they were determined not to use this right, and so they worked to support themselves (see 1Thessalonians 2:9).

The unity of the Christian community was one thing to which Paul was passionately committed. We must not overlook the purpose of this firmness. It is that the offenders may see what they are doing, experience a sense of shame and change their behaviour. Paul insists that those who correct them do not forget that they are correcting members of the Christian community. The correction must be done in a spirit of love. When Paul commands them to work 'quietly' (compare 1Thessalonians 4:11), he seems to be referring to their living now with the Lord and trustfully looking forward to being with him always (see 1Thessalonians 4:17).

**<sup>6</sup>Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness, and not according to the tradition that they received from us.**

**<sup>7</sup>For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; for we were not idle when we were with you,**

**<sup>8</sup>and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you.**

**<sup>9</sup>This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.**

**<sup>10</sup>For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.**

**<sup>11</sup>For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.**

**<sup>12</sup>Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.**

**<sup>13</sup>Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.**

**<sup>14</sup>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.**

**<sup>15</sup>Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.**

## Life in community

Paul exhorts the Thessalonian community to persist in ‘doing what is right’ (3:13). He uses a compound verb (*kalopoiēō*) made up of the word ‘to do’ and the word ‘*kalos*’ (compare Galatians 6:9). This points up an interesting and instructive contrast between Latin and Greek usage. Where Latin speaks of ‘virtue’ (related to the word for ‘man’ and ‘strength’), and of ‘right’ (related to the word for ‘law’), Greek speaks of ‘excellence’ (*aretē*), and of ‘beauty’ (*kalos*). In Greek usage, and in Paul’s understanding, to ‘do what is right’ is to do what is morally beautiful.

The strength of Paul’s words here and the obvious passion with which he confronts ways of behaving that are destructive of community invite us to take time to examine the quality of life of the various communities to which we belong. Let us do this in the presence of God and asking for the enlightenment of his Spirit.

Do we love enough to at least want to face up to the truth of what is happening in our marriage, our family, our church community, our work-place? We may not be ready to do anything about it; in which case we will have to wait. But waiting can turn into neglect. As disciples of Jesus we are called not to hurt others. But this is not enough: we are called positively to love them. This means that at least we should be on the look out for ways of helping them and ourselves search out the truth and do something about it.

How much better all of us would be if others loved us enough to correct us. How much richer would our communities be if we trusted each other enough to believe that we wanted to do something about the unloving habits into which we slip so easily. We spoke of the ‘anger of God’ in relation to 1Thessalonians 1:10. It seems that there is too little loving anger in our world, and in our communities there is too little passionate concern that we live the truth of the gospel.

Let us pray for the grace to be open to being corrected by others. Let us pray for the kind of concern that will cause us to seek out loving ways to help others change for the better. Where we come up against people who are destroying the community, let us pray for the kind of courageous determination commanded by Paul in this letter, and demonstrated by Jesus himself (Matthew 23:1-19).

Paul begins and ends both his letters to the Christians of Thessalonica by wishing them ‘peace’ (1Thessalonians 1:1; 5:13,23 and 2Thessalonians 1:2; 3:16). The Jewish term is not a negative one, concerned with the absence of noise or violence. It means ‘fullness in harmony’. It is rather like the experience one has in listening to an orchestra in which every instrument is vibrant with sound, but in perfect harmony with every other instrument. Or one may think of the peace enjoyed in a family in which every member is creative, full of life, and sensitive to every other member. Paul has expressed his delight in them (see 1:3-4), but with reservations (see 3:6-15). In wishing them peace, he is praying that the problems will be resolved and that they may experience the harmony of the Spirit of Christ. We are reminded of the priestly blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

– Numbers 6:24-26

As in his letter to the Galatians (6:11), he draws attention to his handwriting. The letter itself was written, as was the custom, by a secretary skilled in the craft. The final few words act as a kind of signature. He would have signed his earlier letter, but he did not feel the need to draw attention to the fact. Here he does so, both to assist them in detecting any writings that people might try to pass off as his (see 2:2), and to reassure them concerning the genuineness of his earlier letter. They can easily compare the two signatures.

His parting prayer is the same as in his previous letter. Some manuscripts include the word ‘Amen’ (compare Galatians 6:18). The letter would have been read out to the assembly, and the Amen invites the assembly, having heard the proclamation, to accept the words as their own.

**<sup>16</sup>Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.**

**<sup>17</sup>I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.**

**<sup>18</sup>The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you. [‘Amen’].**