

The Epistles of Paul

Week 9: II Thessalonians

Purpose:

The final epistle in the “disputed” group, II Thessalonians completes the transformation of the Pauline legacy from one of theological aid to one of practical local theology. The epistle focuses on how the new church movement can maintain its forward motion, avoid disagreements, and most importantly, uphold each other through difficult circumstances.

1. Have you read II Thessalonians before? Have you studied it? What did you think?
2. How does it compare to the earlier disputed epistles we read?
3. What stands out to you most about II Thessalonians?

Key Verse(s) of the Week, II Thessalonians 2:3

³Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction.

Opening Prayer:

Through your gracious love, living God, guide us now as we study and read your word. Let your truth be revealed and your love pour forth. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction and Background:

Fitting into the “disputed epistles” category, II Thessalonians is a straightforward. This does not discount importance or theological assertions, but rather is a scholarly statement regarding authorship and date. There is little consensus by scholars as to when, who, and where the letter was written. However, the style, language, and theology so mirror Paul that it is debated as to its origins. Some of these debates include:

- Date:
 - Paul: around 65
 - Not Paul: between 75 and 100
- Author:
 - Paul
 - A disciple of Paul writing in his style
- Location:
 - From Paul to the church at Thessalonica
 - Disputed: likely either within the Thessalonian church or from a nearby community

No letter in the disputed epistles is quite as fought over as II Thessalonians. The themes are strongly connected to I Thessalonians, but there has been a substantial change in the eschatology (theology about Jesus’ return) by the writer. No longer is it imminent but is viewed rather as a long off occurrence. This could be a reaction to the Jewish-Roman War (66-70) and numerous “false messiahs” who had arisen during the conflict.

Theologically, the epistle focuses on false teaching and leaders, taking people off the path of Christ. In the focus passage for today, the writer admonishes the community and reader regarding their work for the kingdom, making sure to keep the things of God first.

1. How does a war change theology?
2. Why do you think this letter is the most fought over of the three?
3. Assuming for a moment that Paul wrote the letter, why do you think his own view of eschatology changed?

Today's Focus Passage, II Thessalonians 2:1-3, 3:6-9

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, ²not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. ³Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction...

...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. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. What does it mean to "work" in this context? How is that different than our secular work?
3. How does the church today fall into idleness?

Discussion:

The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians is one of the most hotly debated works in the New Testament. Arguments of authorship and eschatology abound as there is a complete and total shift from I Thessalonians. This epistle completes the transition from a belief of Jesus' imminent return to a belief of a "far and distant" eventual return. This is later further codified in the Gospel of John with a "kingdom is now" theology as well.

In today's passage, the imperative of the faithful to be unified despite ongoing conflict within the Roman world is paramount. Whether this is a reaction to or foreshadowing of the Jewish-Roman war is inconsequential. What we find pushes the reader to a more and more active faith. No longer is it only "faith", but faith that leads into action and work for the kingdom. Salvation is still from faith but is not completed without more.

The passage concludes with warnings against idleness and selfishness, stating that the people of faith must work "toil and labor" so that they may not be a burden to others. This is the extension of Jesus' ministry that was mentioned in Ephesians. It is born out here with a continued statement to imitate Christ.

1. How does this epistle vary wildly from I Thessalonians?
2. How did the early church survive the conflicts of the 1st century? What can we assume about their priorities?
3. What is the work we should be doing?

Conclusion:

II Thessalonians serves as a fitting, if not controversial, ending to the disputed letters of Paul. It marks the final establishment of the church as an ongoing entity continuing despite Jesus' delayed return. The important part of the church is now beyond a simple statement of faith but moves into more and more action for the early church. They must make disciples if they are to survive. They are to go forth into all the world, trusting Christ, and doing the work (sometimes the toil) that must be done.

Close in prayer