

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5 and 13-17

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, ² not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. ³ Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness^[a] is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴ He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

⁵ Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?

¹³ But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits^[a] to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings^[a] we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

¹⁶ May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, ¹⁷ encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Pilgrims into the Future

Thessalonika was a crossroads town in Macedonia. That made the town multicultural and cosmopolitan, as Corinth also was. In his two letters to them, Paul nurtures and encourages the church there — saying how he 'always gives thanks for them, as their faith and love is increasing'. And his letters revolve around two key themes to that end — **imitation** and the **end times**.

I don't know why, but they seem to have had a lot of questions about the end times — the 'Day of the Lord', and what will happen. 'Has it already happened? Did we miss the boat, like those unfortunate unicorns Noah left behind?' (I'm kidding about the unicorns).

No, says Paul, you haven't missed it. Things will get worse before the Lord comes again — but they will also get better! But the point is that the future belongs to the Lord: whatever crisis they faced, or we face, none of this takes God by surprise, and none of it wrong-foots his plan of salvation, for us as individuals and for the earth as a whole. As alarm about the climate crisis deepens — not to mention other major crises we face — this is a comfort we should hold onto.

This talk of end times he shares with the church in Thessalonika creates in them a future-focussed drive. He is asking them to be pilgrims, marching onwards towards a goal.

Learning that the future is in God's hands, some might be inclined to slack off — God's got it sorted! But Paul condemns that kind of thinking, with the nice line that such people 'are not busy, but busybodies!' (2 Thess. 3:11) For Paul then, God's good future is something *we* work towards. The future is in God's hands, but *we* are God's hands!

Taking the two letters to the Thessalonians together, there is an interesting focus on *imitation*. In his first letter Paul praises them for *imitating* him and (even better) imitating Jesus. He later

praises their *imitation* of the churches in Judaea who are in Christ Jesus, and so becoming a model for others to *imitate*.

This is what I said in my sermon and reflection last week — Jesus is the perfect model — perfect in relationship with the Father, perfect in kindness, goodness and self-giving. We should *imitate* him, and we should be *inspired* by the people whom we see living in a Christlike way.

This is what pilgrims do. They enjoy the journey, but they have a destination — they go together, and going together they share each others' burdens and encourage one another.

What Paul encourages amongst the Thessalonian Christians, let us also practice — be encouraged! You are doing well! Now, look to encourage others, to lift them, strengthen them and share with them. God holds the future. Let us walk confidently together towards the promised land.

All blessings,

Tim.