

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

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Our second scripture is from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 2. Listen with me for God's word to us.

Brothers and sisters, we have a request for you concerning our Lord Jesus Christ's coming and when we are gathered together to be with him. ²We don't want you to be easily confused in your mind or upset if you hear that the day of the Lord is already here, whether you hear it through some spirit, a message, or a letter supposedly from us. ³Don't let anyone deceive you in any way. That day won't come unless the rebellion comes first and the person who is lawless is revealed, who is headed for destruction. ⁴He is the opponent of every so-called god or object of worship and promotes himself over them. So he sits in God's temple, displaying himself to show that he is God. ⁵You remember that I used to tell you these things while I was with you, don't you?

¹³But we always must thank God for you, brothers and sisters who are loved by God. This is because he chose you from the beginning to be the first crop of the harvest. This brought salvation, through your dedication to God by the Spirit and through your belief in the truth. ¹⁴God called all of you through our good news so you could possess the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to the traditions we taught you, whether we taught you in person or through our letter. ¹⁶Our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and a good hope. ¹⁷May he encourage your hearts and give you strength in every good thing you do or say.

There's always a story. If you've heard me preach even a few times, you'll notice that I'm drawn toward narratives, histories, parables, dialogues. Even poetry often tells a story in its own way.

I less often gravitate toward scripture texts that present abstract arguments or ideas. I do love ideas — don't get me wrong. My academic background focused on the history of ideas. But ideas are always rooted in stories, in relationships, in human experience.

So out of today's lectionary texts, why did I pick this epistle passage to share with you? Well, it's a strongly-worded teaching about standing firm in faith when false saviors and deceitful ideas seek your allegiance. To me that feels profoundly relevant. Not abstract at all.

And there must have been a story. Something attractively treacherous was happening that prompted a pastoral letter of this intensity. The faith community was being severely tested. "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way." Bible scholar Beverly Gaventa notes that the joyful tone of 1 Thessalonians is gone, replaced in 2 Thessalonians by a spirit of rage, even calls for God's vengeance.¹ So what was going on?

This short letter is one of the more cryptic and challenging New Testament books. Scholars can't be certain of its authorship — possibly it's Paul, but a lot of the letter's unusual features suggest that it's someone else writing in Paul's name and tradition.

¹ Gaventa, Beverly Roberts. *Interpretation: First and Second Thessalonians*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1998. p. 97.

On the surface, this is a second epistle written to the early church in Thessalonica. There's also reason to consider that the audience could be a church under severe persecution somewhere else, and the author is trying to shore up the faith of the suffering through a sort of encoded message.

Apparently the recipients of this letter are tempted to believe that the "day of the Lord" — the promised return of Jesus Christ — has already happened and they've been left behind to suffer. Among the New Testament's mysterious sayings about Christ coming again, this anxiety seems unique. But keep in mind the first-century context. As the Roman empire arrests and tortures and kills Christian believers, what if Jesus already has come and saved his faithful followers, leaving us unworthy ones to endure awful brutality? Such fears have sent the Thessalonian faith community into emotional and spiritual freakout. The empire is bad. Being left behind is worse.

That's not a typical fear among us *American* churchgoers, in my experience. Perhaps because of our relative comfort and privilege, not many of us have obsessed over Christ coming back and turning everything upside down. For white American Christians in particular, we've usually been more in danger from complacency and comfort than from violent oppression.

But for those suffering systemic persecution, like black churchgoers and justice workers during the Civil Rights movement, or like our Hispanic Christian communities here in Louisville in 2025 — if you are being terrorized, it can feel like a divine apocalypse will be required to finally break unjust systems and to convert oppressors into allies.

Roman soldiers with swords. Selma police with batons. ICE agents with masks, rubber bullets, zip-tie handcuffs, and detention cages. Where is God when brutality descends on God's people? The Thessalonians feared that Christ had already come and gone, a worry based on bad theology from opportunists trying to deceive the faithful.

So the author passionately reminds them to hold fast to the truth, to remember that in person and in writing they've been assured of God's saving love. He tells the readers that before Christ comes back some dark forces will rise to power. Especially someone identified only as "the lawless one," who "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."

That sentence feels like it preaches itself. If it reminds you of any deceitful, tyrannical, self-aggrandizing public figure, you're not alone. Bible interpreters in every time and place have claimed that 2 Thessalonians was warning us about this or that particular oppressor of the faithful: Emperor Caligula. Various popes. Martin Luther. Hitler. Satan personified. And maybe most of the interpreters were right. History is riddled with violent deceivers. On the other hand, in 1988 somebody published a book called *Gorbachev! Has the Real Antichrist Come?*²

But this epistle leaves it vague. Maybe for safety our writer intentionally avoids naming specific political figures. We simply don't know what spiritual threat the author was talking

² <https://www.deuceofclubs.com/books/086gormbachov.htm>

about, or why this prophesied sequence of events becomes so important. St. Augustine said of this passage, “I frankly confess I do not know what he means.”³

Our lectionary, the set of readings suggested for this day, omits verses 7-12, which sound even more strangely prophetic. That section describes more vividly the evil of this lawless one. “When the person who is lawless comes, it will happen through Satan’s effort, with all kinds of fake power, signs, and wonders” (v.9). The writer also makes clear that ultimately “The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath from his mouth” (v. 8). Don’t you love that Jesus finally defeats evil by speaking and breathing?

As the writer lays out this spiritual confrontation of truth vs. deception, verse 12 tells us, “The result will be that everyone will be judged who is not convinced by the truth but is happy with injustice.”

That’s a relevant affirmation for our own deeply anxious age. Not so much the calling down judgment part. Musician Bruce Cockburn sings, “Everybody loves to see / justice done / on somebody else.”

But what’s clarifying is this: If you love God’s truth revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, you cannot stay happy with injustice. Or if we refuse to let God be God, or we claim no need of God, we may find ourselves aligning more with the unjust ways of the lawless one.

So how do we discern what’s true and just? In the early church and in every age since, “Not all teachers who purport to be Christian may be trusted.”⁴

In contrast to white Christian nationalism’s loud false teachers, I found myself rereading this week Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written 16 April 1963, an apocalyptic time in the southern US. As King languished in jail with other Black protesters of segregation, he used the time to respond to moderate white Christian and Jewish clergy who had critiqued his movement for breaking laws, for being demanding, for asking for too much justice too fast.

King respectfully but authoritatively takes the theological high ground. He teaches his morally timid clergy colleagues — and all of us — how divine justice relates to human law. He writes:

Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.⁵

With the urgency of 2 Thessalonians, King lays out the stakes:

If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? [...] But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized

³ Gaventa. p. 108.

⁴ Cousar, Charles B. et al. *Texts for Preaching — Year C*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994. p. 592.

⁵ <https://letterfromjail.com>

religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been dismissed from their churches, have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.⁶

Like King offering thanks for a faithful few standing against evil, so in verse 13 our epistle author thanks God for the beloved Thessalonian believers. And he exhorts them to “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us” apostles and evangelists. That Greek word for tradition means “a gift given over.”⁷ What are some of those essential Christian gifts given over to the Thessalonians and to us?

Hold fast to the prophet Haggai proclaiming, “Take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.”

Remember Jesus distilling God’s law as “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

And crucified Jesus pleading, “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”

Hold fast to the Emmaus disciples recognizing resurrected Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

Cultivate the apostle Paul’s fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Remember Amos crying, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”

Hear Jesus promising, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.”

Together those traditions tell a story of God passionately in love with the created world, a story of divine love made human, a story of the Holy Spirit transforming death into life and brokenness into blossoming.

Remember these faithful traditions you’ve been taught, shoring you up to stand firm in the face of every lawless deception. Here and now, you and I are being equipped.

In the name of God the Creative,
God the Cruciform,
and God the Ecstatic.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17: Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World.” *Connections: Year C, Volume 3: Season after Pentecost*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019. p. 472.