

THE SECOND LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

The Concerns and challenges of 2 Thessalonians

Notwithstanding 2 Thessalonians is a short letter it presents a number of challenges and takes up again the teaching of 1 Thessalonians and clarifying the misunderstanding regarding Christ's return.

A primary issue is the authorship of the Letter. Because it is different in style and in theological details from the other Letters of Paul, most scholars today believe that it was not written by him.

Then when was it written? Many modern scholars suggest that 2 Thessalonians was written after Paul's death towards the end of the first century by another author writing in Paul's name and with his authority. If instead the Letter was written by Paul, then it could be dated about the year 52.

We may think that the author, knowing and utilizing some elements of the first letter, developed the same theme of the Second Coming of Christ, but in a different way, to respond to a different historical and spiritual situation of the Christian community.

To authenticate this letter as being from Paul is consistent with the situation at the end of the first century. At that stage Paul had become an important figure and to appeal to his authority was important in order to solve difficult matters.

Purpose of 2 Thessalonians

The aim of the letter is to instruct the Thessalonians against false beliefs about the coming of the Lord and to warn them against some Christians in Thessalonica who claimed that the coming of the Lord had already happened or was about to happen.

The hope of the Day of Christ, a powerful incentive for preserving the faith of the first Christians, was leading to an unhealthy behaviour. The Church of Thessalonica was the first example of those minorities and persecuted Christians whom the expectation of the end of the world made them stop working and distorting the normal development of Christian life.

The letter was written to face this concrete situation and therefore to strengthen the apostolic tradition so that the first Christians were not driven by the claims of more recent teachers.

The need to refer to authoritative tradition explains why the author used 1 Thessalonians as a model and attributed his letter to Paul.

The Central Theme of the Letter

The group of the Christians in Thessalonica lives in crisis due to the external and internal situation of the community. On the external side the believers, who have already welcomed the Gospel and the witness of Paul, are object of tribulations and persecutions from the unbelievers (2Thess 1:4-8).

From within the community is signed by a climate of spiritual emergency nourished by the apocalyptic expectations. There is a certain confusion provoked by the claim that "the day of the Lord is here". Some take advantage of this and live in idleness because of this conviction.

The author, an anonymous disciple of Paul, inspires himself to the 1 Thessalonians of Paul and writes this letter in order to correct the misunderstanding regarding the coming of Christ and to encourage the Christians facing the hostility surrounding them. He takes as model the first letter to this community where he finds useful elements to write the new text that can recall the authority of the Apostle Paul.

The central message of the letter therefore rotates around the dominant theme: the day of judgment of God linked to the coming of the Lord.

This event is not imminent since it will be preceded by the religious and moral crisis typical of the end of time. Even though there are some signs, the crisis has not yet reached its summit "for the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. But the one who restrains is to do so only for the present, until he is removed from the scene. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord (Jesus) will kill with the breath of his mouth and render powerless by the manifestation of his coming, the one whose coming springs from the power of Satan in every mighty deed and in signs and wonders that lie, and in every wicked deceit for those who are perishing because they have not accepted the love of truth so that they may be saved. Therefore, God is sending them a deceiving power so that they may believe the lie, that all who have not believed the truth but have approved wrongdoing may be condemned. (2Thes 2:7-10).

The Aim of the Letter

The aim of this letter is twofold: to strengthen in the Christians the certainty of the finale victory of God over the evil and to encourage their perseverance. The entire community is called to observe and help all its members to observe the practical dispositions regarding work in order to have a disciplined way of living.

COLUMN

Paul in His own Words

*To this end, we always pray for you,
that our God may make you
worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfilment
every good purpose and every effort of faith,
that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you,
and you in him, in accord with the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.
2 Thes 1:11-12*

*“The Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one.
We are confident of you in the Lord that what we instruct you, you (both) are doing and will continue to do.
May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ.
2 Thes 3:3-6*

The Structure of 2Thessalonians

1. Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-12)
2. Instruction about the Parousia (2:1-17)
3. Final Instruction (3:1-16)
4. Final Blessing (3:17-18)

EVENTS

To celebrate the Conversion of St. Paul: 25 January 2009

The Pauline Books & Media Centre

is planning a Talk by Sr. Bernardita Dianzon, FSP

The Theme: “**The Challenge of Living St. Paul’s Message Today**”

Details will follow

Venue: Pauline Books & Media Centre

181 Queen Street – cnr Cumberland Rd – Kensington

Tel: 011 622 5195

Open to all

TO GO DEEPER...

BOOKS

APOSTLE OF THE CRUCIFIED LORD

A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters

Michael J. Gorman

2004 610pp R410.00

AUDIO/DVD

THE STORY OF PAUL THE APOSTLE

The Man Who Turned the World Upside Down

Explores the life and legacy of the greatest missionary of the early Church.

70 minutes R165.00

THE APOSTLE PAUL AND THE EARLIEST CHURCHES

Paul's missionary journeys, enhanced with archaeological, artistic, geographic, and religious facts that brings to life the story of the apostle's struggles.

48 minutes R189.50