

Stand Firm

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

We are approaching the season of Advent when we prepare, not for the arrival of the Baby Jesus, but the return of the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who will usher in the Reign of God, when all things will become new! The Apostle Paul had said that Jesus would be returning soon – any day! In our text Paul gives a message of comfort and assurance, encouraging us to stand firm. Specifically, the writer addresses a false teaching the Thessalonians had apparently received from another source that had greatly agitated them. This source, purporting to be Paul himself, had led many in the community to believe that the "Day of the Lord" was already occurring. This referred to the day when all righteous believers would be judged worthy and gathered up to meet the Lord upon his coming again. In his first letter to the Thessalonian community, Paul had stressed the nearness of the Day of the Lord and the nearness of the Thessalonians' salvation, so as to keep hope alive, given the hardships and persecutions they were facing. In this second letter, however, the emphasis is reversed and now they are reminded that, though still very near, the Day of the Lord has not yet arrived. The Thessalonians lived in a time of heightened expectation that the end of the world would be coming soon, so they were apparently worked up into a frenzy. The writer's insistence that the Day of the Lord had *not* yet arrived would have been reassuring.

Ironically, reassurance comes in the form of reminding them of impending evil: the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ will be preceded by specific events and a struggle between good and bad entities. An evil "rebellion" against God that will occur and a "lawless one" who will be revealed, will enthrone itself in God's seat and claim to be God. Later verses explain that ultimately the lawless one will be restrained by a good force, destroyed by Christ, and the faithful will be vindicated.

Many have attempted to figure out precisely the identity of the lawless one and the nature of the apocalyptic struggle; some have even tried to correlate the verses with certain

contemporary events so as to identify the forces in their lifetime predicting the second coming of Christ. They effectively attempt to decode what the text says about the end times to help believers get ready.

This text is to be read in late autumn, a time when our thoughts turn to supernatural spirits and their mysterious realm. The holidays we observe at this time—Halloween and the feasts of All Saints and All Souls— help us overcome some of our skepticism and unease with what is mysterious and unseen. These help us to take more seriously the very real evils we know *do* exist and our obligation to rage against evil. **Barbara J. Blodgett**

But let us return to our fears and why we must stand firm. Neta Pringle told that her husband once asked a particular congregation to identify one of their hardest times. Since the church was located in a port city, he expected them to talk about the changes in the church as various immigrant groups arrived and changed the nature of the town. Maybe they would go back to their early history and talk about their Revolutionary War experiences. The British had burned the church and shot and killed the minister's wife. No, none of those topped the list. The congregation said that the hardest time came in 1843, when a Millerite pastor persuaded members of the congregation to give away their homes and farms, to put on their white robes, and to wait on the hilltop for Jesus. They waited, but then they had to come back home and, shamefaced, ask for their property to be returned.

We may laugh at their naiveté, but there is something about the idea that God will step in to end the world that continues to draw us. Remember that police logs across the country in October 1938 chronicle the chaos of the people who had heard the Orson Welles radio program *War of the Worlds* and thought it was a true news story. A tremendous amount of energy and damage control had to go into getting folks calmed down and back on track. The same spirit is in this paraphrase from the passage: "Do not become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report, or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the Day of the Lord has already come" (v. 2). Imagine the anxiety early believers at Thessalonica must have felt when the rumor of the end times spread through their city. Daily life and worship were disrupted with concerns over how to wait, how to prepare, who would be

"taken up" and who would be left behind. Today such folk see signs of the end in global warming, in the mess of the Middle East. Earlier generations found it in Soviet empire. If we are determined, signs are not hard to find.

The appeal for some is that one-upmanship that comes from knowing things that others do not. For others, the idea that the world will end and they will be among the elect is a wonderful escape from a difficult situation. It may be bad here, but just wait! "I'm gonna put on my long white robe and walk the golden streets."

Whatever draws us to contemplate the end of the world, the Day of the Lord, the second coming of Christ is consistent throughout the Bible. The Old Testament prophets looked forward to the Day of the Lord. Jesus saw his own ministry as leading toward that day, and his followers eagerly awaited his return. But why do we look for Christ's return? Think about the logic of it. God is in charge of the world, yet God's people are so often the target of injustice, derision, and persecution. How can this happen? Should there not be a time for payback? Is there not a time when God will rise up and say, "Enough!" Yes! Someday it will happen. Evil will lose its power in the world. Sin and injustice, sickness and despair—even death itself—will come to an end. That is the promise.

So, how do you live for that tomorrow? Do you put on your long white robe and sit on the hill to wait? Apparently that was the thinking of the early church in Thessalonica. Folk were so sure that the big event was just around the corner that they quit working and moved to full-time waiting. Paul has to tell them it could be a long wait. Paul reminded them of Jesus' warning that even he does not know when the Day of the Lord will arrive.

The one thing that is clear from Paul's description is that there will be an accounting for those who rebel against God. Deep inside, each of us knows that there are times when, despite our best efforts, we do deny God's rightful place in our lives. Rather than speculate about the who and the when of Christ's return, we need to tend our own souls. Rather than try to identify the lawless one, we need to recognize our own tendency to play that role. We must ask: am I the gossip that keeps confusion going? Am I the thief that takes from others

or am I the selfish one who refuses to give when I see others in need? Or, am I busy doing the things that Jesus did?

There is also another way: to live as if the Day of the Lord has already come. A seminary theology professor used to say, "If heaven is like that, what are we doing in a mess like this? We need to roll up our sleeves and get to work." Knowing that God will triumph and the work of God's people will be vindicated is a powerful motive to work for justice and peace even in times of discouragement.

We do not hear Jesus trying to scare people into the kingdom. The promise is that evil will be defeated. Evil will not rule the world. That is a promise that is comforting, hopeful, and challenging. The work for justice and peace is too often slow and discouraging. There are times when evil seems to hold far too much power. If we can hang on to the promise that its power is limited, that it will not have the final say, then we can continue the struggle. Knowing that God's favor will fall on those who do feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned, clothe the naked, can sustain us in the hard times.

The story is told that one day back in early Puritan New England there was a major eclipse. The sun was blotted out, the day turned dark, and people were terrified. "The world is going to end. What shall we do?" One insightful man replied, "Let us be found doing our duty."

Think about it. As a parent, was it not wonderful to leave the kids alone for a few hours and come home to find things in order? You took pride in the fact that all was well. I think God is like that. When the Day of the Lord does come, when God no longer limits God's power in the world, when evil is finally banished, God wants to find us at work for those things that are dear to the heart of God. Our task is to keep on keeping on. **Neta Pringle**

In some way, this sense of anticipation of the end times brings to mind the old Southern business of exploiting the poor with something called funeral insurance. My father purchased such insurance. Frightened to be found lacking when the time for a proper funeral came, the poorest members of the community would fall prey to schemes whereby the dishonest insurance salesperson would guarantee a proper funeral for those who paid regularly on their

policy. Those selling insurance often exaggerated both the unpredictability and the imminence of someone's death in order to make the sale.

There is an air of disorientation and confusion that the writer of today's letter tries to quell, assuring the congregation that they will know for certain of the return of Christ and that the return will be victorious. In addition to pondering the question of the return of Christ, there are issues that bring us fear: the economy, health, the cost of health care, will we outlive our money, does the fact that the congregation does not grow in the way we wish mean we should close, will Valley School leave and we have to carry the mortgage alone, how will our children and grandchildren do in the future....the questions and fears go on and on. The author of 2 Thessalonians has a word for each of us. Brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught either by word of mouth or by our letter. When we appreciate the true depth of God's love for us we will take comfort in the One who saves us from evil. We must stand firm and receive the love of God who "through grace [gives] us eternal comfort and good hope." **Elizabeth Barrington Forney**

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