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Day 333 - November 29

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## **Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)**

### ***Second Letter to the Thessalonians***

### ***Third Missionary Journey***

**Readings: *2 Thessalonians 1:1-3:18; Acts 18:12-19:22***

### ***Reflections:***

- Second Letter to the Thessalonians: The authorship of this letter is debated. Some see it as someone's attempt to revise and update the first letter while others see it as simply Paul's attempt to clarify his earlier letter. Since many early church leaders accepted it as authentic (Marcion, Ireneaus, Ignatus, and Polycarp) it seems reasonable to view it as original. Most of the arguments against Paul's authorship is based on a constructed view of a theological progression in the early church that refuses to accept that Paul might use at times secretaries and might actually find new ways to express his understanding as the decades pass. Once a person accepts these two possibilities then the letters that were accepted as authentic by the early church leaders can also be accepted by us.
- Salutation: Paul's opening fits identically with his other letters of this time.
- Praising steadfastness: These spiritual goals should be those of every Christ community – faith that grows more and more and love everyone has for one another increases.
- Endurance to be rewarded: Paul's language is strong. Both within the story of Israel, in Jesus' teaching and within the early church, the message remains constant. Those who willfully reject God must take warning. To know the truth and then actively choose to reject it and to live in decided rebellion to God is a dangerous path. "Those who do not know God" should not be taken as those who are unaware or uninformed. It should be taken as those who willfully reject God and choose to live outside of any relationship with him. As 2 Samuel 14:14 states, "God does not take away life but devises ways for a banished person not to remain estranged from him." God's heart is reconciliation. Yet if a person knows the truth, has an opportunity to respond but then willfully chooses to reject God and instead follow their own self-centered course, they need to take heed. Those who were actively persecuting and killing innocent people must be warned. The assurance that God will judge those who are evil also relieves us from having to hate and attack our enemies but can leave their final fate with God as we seek to pray for and love our enemies. Only God knows the true heart of a person and his final just judgment frees us to simply love people trusting God will sort it all out in the end.

- Paul's prayer for them: As in many of his other letters he actually writes out his prayers so that people can read what he is saying to God on their behalf. Here in this prayer we see the vital importance of God's power (the work of the Spirit) enabling Christ followers to complete God's will for their lives and the need for a continued dependence on his grace.
- Events before Second Coming: Paul's understanding of the final rebellion, the man of lawlessness doomed to destruction and the coming of Christ fits in with prophetic images found within Daniel (Daniel 9:27; 11:36-37; 12:11) as well as Jesus' own teachings (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14 – also see Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 for expanded teachings of Jesus on the judgment against Jerusalem). Some have looked to the future to see this as a prophecy yet to be fulfilled. Some have viewed this as a second century reinterpretation of Jesus and Paul's teaching. The fact that Paul references the temple of Jerusalem suggests that this letter is written prior to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. If we allow an element of human wrestling with the prophecy of Jesus' return to judge Jerusalem, it may be possible that Daniel's prophecy, what Jesus states and here Paul restates is actually referring to the destruction of Jerusalem. Although Paul suggests that all believers will be gathered to Jesus at this time, it is possible that Paul in discerning the future is describing a prophetic picture with double layered meaning. Many of the details of this prophecy will be fulfilled at the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and yet there will also be a second fulfillment at the coming of Christ at the end of time. If this is true, then some of the events referred to here may be only specific to Paul's own day. Prophecy is always most clearly understood in hindsight. It serves a purpose in the present as it gives us clues that can help. Christians escaped Jerusalem and many were saved because of these warnings. Yet in hindsight we see in these prophetic images some are clearly fulfilled while others remain for some form of future fulfillment or understanding. We should make one more note. There is a reference to the man of lawlessness being supported by false signs and wonders and as a result of his deception, God would send a judgment of delusion that would cause people whose hearts are hard to embrace a lie. Some have wondered if Constantine was a later fulfillment of this as he came into his leadership role in the church through his own sense of signs and miracles. This is possibly a stretch but John's warning against "anti-christs" in 1 and 2 John suggests that at least Constantine was likely used as anti-christ in promoting a mass deception against the church.
- Call to stand firm: Paul again shares how he is praying emphasizing God's firm commitment to change us from the inside out (sanctification) through the Spirit and renewed minds (belief in the truth). Paul points out teachings can be shared face to face or via a letter. We must remember that God uses all forms of communication to get his truth into people's hearts.
- Request for prayer: Paul now invites his brothers and sisters to partner with him through prayer. This invitation to pray focuses on the spread of the message as well as praying for protection from the enemy. Prayer is our spiritual battleground for advancing the message

as well as defending the spiritual safety of God's people. I love this verse: "May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance."

- Warning against idleness: Paul has heard word about some supposed believers who are always taking help from the church but not working to become contributors. Paul makes it clear that compassion is not to be abused. If people who are capable of working don't work, then they don't get free food from the church. Paul encourages the believers to pull back from them and to warn them as a family member to try to motivate them to do the right thing and to start to work. If a person was an enemy, you may or may not warn them because you don't know if that would make matters worse. If they are a brother or sister, then it is required that you do your best to warn them assuming they will receive the warning.
- Benediction: Paul ends by emphasizing peace, the goal of all relationships before God. Paul is apparently using a secretary, maybe Timothy, and so at the end he writes a final greeting in his own hand so that people will see his handwriting and know that it is from him. Paul points out that he writes these greetings so that people recognize his handwriting. Some suggest he had poor eyesight and so his writing was with large letters (see Galatians 4:15; 6:11).
- 2 Thessalonians ends and we return to the story of Acts ....
- Charges before Gallio: This gives us view to the ruthless nature of their culture at that time.
- Return to Antioch: These travel logs reveal the importance of Corinth as well as Ephesus as significant cities that Paul developed as Christ communities. The letters to the Corinthians and Ephesians are central teachings in understanding the message of Paul.
- Third missionary journey: Paul as a true spiritual parent wants to do another tour of the key cities he has invested in to continue their growth and development. He spends three years in Ephesus and again demonstrates practically how strategic that city was to the growth of the movement.
- Beginning of the journey: In this third mission, Paul had a very clear vision for his tour. It was "strengthening the disciples".
- Apollos is taught: Here we are introduced to another key communicator and leader in the early Jesus movement. Apollos knows the Hebrew Scriptures, he knows about Jesus, but he only knows about John's baptism for repentance and forgiveness. Apparently he has less knowledge of the baptism of Jesus and apparently the work of the Spirit although this is never mentioned explicitly (see the following passage for why this can be assumed). Priscilla and Aquilla hear of him and then invite him into their home to spend time investing in him. The believers in Ephesus write a letter of recommendation for Apollos to open doors for him in Achaia and give him that stamp of affirmation. We should also note that Priscilla's name is mentioned first. It would appear that she was the stronger, more recognized leader of the

duo. Also, we should note the model that Luke presents here of how leaders develop leaders. It is very personal and relational.

- Disciples baptized: Apollos goes to Corinth and then Paul comes to Ephesus. Here we see Paul's need to teach this community about the Holy Spirit. It is possible to be a Christ-follower, receive great teaching and not be aware of the working of the Holy Spirit. See this key passage: "On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues (or other languages) and prophesied." This is the normative pattern for how God desires to fill a person's life, start the process of inside out transformation, and open up intimate communication between the person and him. It may not always be this dramatic but this is still the normative process that the Scriptures teach.
- Ministry in Ephesus: Paul continues his teaching ministry in Ephesus. Here we see Paul's creativity in renting a hall so that he could teach larger groups publically. Paul's desire was to find a safe place to teach publically so that people could hear the message and then organize those who were followers into house groups where they could live out the teaching in a more family-styled setting. Paul says in Acts 20:20, "...you know how I taught you publically and from house to house..."
- Exorcists use Jesus' name: This is an interesting passage. We see God's power to bring healing. Just as some people who would touch Jesus' cloak would be healed, so people would bring pieces of cloth for Paul to touch as relational connections to Paul when receiving healing from God. Now this could easily turn into some form of magical thinking. The passage immediately following points out that if you don't have a true relationship with God and in community, there is no power. In a somewhat funny way (again Luke has a sense of humor) a group of seven sons get beat up by one guy who had a demon who tried to take a magical approach to the use of Jesus' name. People first reading this would no doubt have laughed.
- Sorcery given up: We see that repentance at times comes at a high cost. The scrolls that were burned were worth close to a million dollars. We see the wealth of this city and the value of scrolls. It was not like paper is today but something of high value. Here we see that to follow Jesus you must turn away from all religion, including magical religion. We also witness that to follow Jesus as Lord means you are willing to give everything else up regardless of the cost.
- Paul anticipates journey: Paul makes a small statement that seems like a throwaway line but ends up being very significant. Rome was the most strategic city of the ancient western world. Paul believes he must go there but he ends up there in the most difficult and dangerous way. God at times uses surprising and even very difficult events to complete his will and his mission. We also see here again Paul's practice of developing young leaders and delegating important tasks to them as a part of advancing the mission and message of Jesus.