



THE COMPLEX NATURE OF THE END-TIME

by

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First and Second Thessalonians both focus on teaching about the Parousia, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of time.

After the Thessalonians had received Paul's first epistle, some disciples of Christ seem to have concluded that the Parousia was so near that they should stop working in order to be ready for the arrival of Christ (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

Second Thessalonians argues that this is a wrong conclusion. Christians are not to opt out of the challenges of daily labour in this world so as to be ready for the Lord's return or out of a mistaken conviction that he has already come.

Paul, who longed for the Lord's appearance but was totally committed to toil and labour, is a model for Christians to imitate. His hard work showed how one ought to live in expectation of the end: not being a burden to anyone nor interfering with another's work.

While zealously longing for the Parousia of Jesus, Christians are to engage fully in earthly tasks and commitments.

Christian discipleship in light of the coming of the Lord is not a matter of "either/or" (*either* full engagement in work *or* yearning for the Lord's return), but one of "both/and" (*both* fully engaged in witness to others through work in the world *and* ardent longing for the fulfilment of God's rule at the end of time).

Both Thessalonian epistles give advice about what must happen in the end days. Yet each differs considerably from the other in the details given, and the second echoes the structure and language of the first letter.

This literary analysis has led some scholars to classify First Thessalonians as authentically Pauline and Second Thessalonians as a pseudonymous work (a writing by someone—a successor or interpreter—claiming Paul's authority and writing in his name).

However, the arguments are not conclusive and it seems plausible to consider Second Thessalonians as Paul's treatment of issues not mentioned in his first letter or his handling of problems created by misinterpretation of what he had said in his earlier missive (concerning "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together with him").

In this second epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul points out that traditional images regarding the end of the world imply several other "occurrences" must take place before the full range of end-time events happens (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12).

These stages, which Paul said are to precede the end of the world, describe the forces of evil as marshalling for one last-ditch attack against God's holy people. The ally of Death in the last battle for human hearts is described as "the lawless one" a person who, in league with Satan, resists God's rule.

Christians who are alert in living out their lives need have no fear of the lawless one, for "the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth...by his appearing and coming" (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

Each Pauline epistle (except Galatians) begins with a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the blessings bestowed on the Christian assembly through the resurrection of the Lord Jesus ("according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ"). These prayers may be considered as overtures (like the musical introduction to operas or stage shows) in which the major themes of the epistle are signalled.

Paul's prayer in Second Thessalonians is found in 1:3-12. It speaks of Christian steadfastness amid persecution and of how Christ's return in glory will put matters right.

This will issue in the glory not only of God and Jesus, but also of all Christians who have clung to God in faith, hope and love ("so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him").

God's purpose is that, through Jesus, all may share in the Kingdom after Christ has won the final victory over all the enemies of his Church. This is the consoling message of Second Thessalonians and of the scriptural readings of these last weeks of the liturgical year.

The fact that the New Testament presents a complex set of images to describe the end of the world means that Christians are not to anxiously consider the Parousia as a day-to-day possibility.

Rather, they must be simultaneously ready for the Lord's imminent arrival and prepared also to persevere in their faith for the long haul of patient expectation until the Lord's coming takes place.

As has been true for centuries, all who hope in Christ must live each day as if it were their last, ready to meet the Lord Jesus when he comes for, as He said, "you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matthew 24:13).

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Galatians: "Born of a Woman"