

Focus on 2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Abraham Smith

A common thread between verses 1–5 and verses 13–17 is the writer’s allusion to the apostolic past. In 2:1–5, shortly after introducing the “lawless” one, the writer asks: “Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?” (v. 5). This question ostensibly certifies the writer’s rendering of what has to take place before the Day of the Lord occurs, by means of an appeal to the assembly’s memory of the apostolic past. In 2:13–17, virtually in the middle of a prayer collection (vv. 13–14, 16–17), the writer also alludes to the apostolic past with the words “the traditions that you were taught” (v. 15).

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Barbara J. Blodgett

Perhaps there is wisdom in granting the existence of nefarious forces whose appearance signifies the end of the world as we know it, if only to take more seriously the very real evils we know *do* exist. Beverly Gaventa suggests that 2 Thessalonians may “place before us the obligation to rage against evil.” Granting the reality of the powers allows us to take all the more comfort in the One who saves us from them. Only those who appreciate the true depth and intractability of evil will, after all, be able to receive the love of God who “through grace [gives] us eternal comfort and good hope” (v. 16).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Neta Pringle

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. But there is also another way: to live as if the Day of the Lord has already come. My 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.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by
Elizabeth Barrington Forney

Gratitude and encouragement are the antidotes to fear-based hysteria. The letter takes a decidedly sharp turn in verse 13, when the author offers up thanksgiving for the faith of the people and their receptivity to the good news preached among them. There is an intentional shift on the writer’s part to take inventory of what is right in the life of the community. He reminds them of their calling and their inheritance in the glory of Christ. We are not called to run in fear that the sky is falling. We are called to be the sons and daughters of Christ.

The Day of the Lord

The Day of the Lord is a recurring theme in Old Testament prophetic literature and in the New Testament. In the prophets, the phrase designates the coming intervention of God to bring judgment, deliverance, and salvation. It is variously termed Day of Judgment, Day of Yahweh, day of the wrath of Yahweh, or sometimes simply “that Day.” Additional New Testament terms include the great day of God the Almighty and the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the New Testament “the day” refers to Christ’s second coming or Second Advent. Faithful believers are urged to look forward with great anticipation to this joyful day of redemption and victory, when Christ will return in final triumph over evil and will gloriously establish his kingdom forever.

Theologians use the term “eschatology” to refer to the doctrine of the last things, or God’s final consummation of all creation and history, which includes the Last Day, Christ’s second coming, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the end of the world, and the final establishment of Christ’s eternal kingdom. Thus, we say that the Day of the Lord is an eschatological concept.

Over the centuries many strange ideas and predictions have been made about the Day of the Lord. In the second century, Montanus declared that the end of the world was imminent and that the New Jerusalem would come to Phrygia. Later, bishops from Pontus and Syria persuaded people to stop farming and to get rid of possessions because the final judgment would come in two years’ time. And so it has gone through the centuries. Rumors of the end of the world were particularly prevalent in the year 1000 and of course cropped up again in the year 2000. Even today people attempt to predict the time of the second coming. Such rumors will be with us literally until the great and glorious day does eventually come in God’s own good time. But that is the point—only God knows when that day will be, and any claim otherwise is false, no matter how convincing the self-proclaimed prophet may sound.

Literalist teachings of the end brought the whole doctrine somewhat into disrepute in the first half of the 20th century, and preachers and teachers often avoided it. Then in the latter half of the 20th century, theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg revitalized the understanding of eschatology as an essential part of Christian faith. Moltmann emphasizes the relation of eschatology to liberation and justice; Pannenberg relates the doctrine to praise, church unity, nature and science, and ethics. Both call the resurrection a “prolepsis” (foretaste, anticipation) of the eschaton (Day of the Lord). Both believe that the eschaton calls us to responsible action in the world today, and to faithful trust that God will bring about the end at the right time.

