

# **The Early Pauline Letters**

by  
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## Preface

The thirteen letters bearing the signature of Paul have been grouped in various ways according to either themes, dates or some other criteria. Critical scholars do not assign all of these to Paul, of course, and the undisputed letters consist of 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philemon and Philippians. Of the remaining letters, 2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians are debated among various scholars who fall on both sides of the authenticity question. Critical scholars only rarely ascribe 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus to Paul, although conservatives continue to defend their authenticity. It is not my purpose here to debate the authorship of the letters, which bear Paul's name. For the purposes of this study, Galatians and 1 Thessalonians are undisputedly Paul's and probably the majority of scholars also accept the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians. I shall be assuming such authenticity throughout.<sup>1</sup>

More pertinent here is the observation that there are four groups of Paul's letters if one treats them with respect to his travels and imprisonments. While there is still room for debate, particularly as far as the order within a given group, at least a generally accepted chronology is as follows (assuming that Paul is the author throughout):

Second Tour:	Galatians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians
Third Tour:	1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Romans
Prison:	Colossians Philemon Philippians Ephesians
Pastoral	1 Timothy Titus 2 Timothy

A special comment is in order with regard to Galatians, because of all Paul's letters, this one is the most uncertain with respect to its grouping. The South Galatian Theory

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<sup>1</sup> For extensive treatments of authorship, see the standard introductions. Critical introductions include those by Reginald H. Fuller and Werner Georg Kummel. Conservative introductions include those by Donald Guthrie and Everett F. Harrison.

places Galatians in the Second Tour group; the North Galatian Theory places it in the Third Tour group (see commentary).

For those scholars who place maximum theological significance on interpreting Paul's letters according to a model of developing theology, the order of writing is crucial. As such, Galatians is usually considered to be too theologically advanced to have been Paul's earliest correspondence. On the other hand, if one views Paul as already mature in his theological thinking (he had, after all, been a Christian for well over a decade before he began writing), then the order of the letters becomes less important.

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## Letter to the Churches in Galatia

### Introduction

The letter to the Galatians, among Paul's early correspondences and according to some scholars possibly his earliest,<sup>2</sup> was written to combat a theology that threatened to permanently distort the Christian gospel. This letter, unlike the others that bear Paul's signature, has the distinction of being written to a group of congregations in a large geographical area rather than the Christians in a single city. At the heart of the issue was the question of the Christian's relationship to Mosaic law, and in particular, his/her responsibility toward the ritual of Jewish circumcision. For Paul, this issue was not merely a matter of scruples, but it was a matter of the Christian gospel itself. In the letter, Paul discusses the nature of the Christian gospel and the meaning of Christian freedom. In many ways the statement is true that Galatians is the *Magna Charta* of the Christian faith. The letter played a major role in the theological development of Martin Luther and John Wesley. John Bunyan, the author of the well known *Pilgrim's Progress*, considered Luther's commentary on Galatians to have preference over all other books except the Bible itself.<sup>3</sup>

### The Founding of the Galatian Churches

Due to the uncertainties of precisely who the Galatians were, more emphasis should be placed upon the founding of the churches from the internal evidence of the letter itself rather than upon a correlation of the letter with the missionary accounts in the Book of Acts.<sup>4</sup> We do know that Paul first preached to the Galatians because of a physical ailment, which afflicted him, but nevertheless, he was warmly welcomed as

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<sup>2</sup> The dating of the Galatian letter is directly related to the identification of the Galatians themselves. The term Galatia could be used in two ways, firstly to represent the early Celtic immigrants who settled in north-central Asia Minor (the "Territory Hypothesis," also called the "North Galatian Theory"), and secondly to represent the province reorganized under Augustus Caesar that extended southward to the Mediterranean Sea (the "Province Hypothesis," also called the "South Galatian Theory"), cf. F. Bruce, "Galatian Problems (2): North or South Galatians?", *BJRL*, 52 (1969-70) 243-66; W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. H. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) 295-298; R. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1971) 23-26. If the Galatians to whom Paul wrote were in southern Asia Minor, then the Galatian churches would have been those started by Paul in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe on his first missionary tour (Ac. 13:13--14:20). The letter may have been written as early as Paul's second missionary tour, since Paul regards the Galatian problem as having happened "so quickly" (1:6). On the other hand, if the Galatians to whom Paul wrote were a group of northern churches, Paul did not pass through this area until his second missionary tour (Ac. 16:6), and he made a subsequent visit at the beginning of his third tour (Ac. 18:23). This latter reading of the data would seem to indicate that the letter could not have been sent prior to the third tour, since Paul recalls in the letter his earlier visit to Galatia (4:13-14). The evidence seems equally divided, and while here we favor the southern hypothesis, which points toward the earlier date, it must be conceded that the question is still very much open.

<sup>3</sup> R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) II.145.

<sup>4</sup> L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 303.

God's messenger (4:13-14). The Galatians were Gentiles who became converts to Christianity directly out of paganism (2:8; 4:8). Whether or not they were familiar with Torah is unclear, though certainly if they had not been exposed to it previously, the new theology brought in by Paul's opponents depended heavily upon it (3:2; 4:21; 5:4). In the founding of the church, Paul alludes to miracles that were performed (3:5). The center of the Christian proclamation to these Gentile pagans had been the crucifixion of Jesus (3:1), and their response had been warm and accepting (4:15).

### **The Occasion of the Letter**

Some time after Paul had established the churches in Galatia, some teachers (probably outsiders, though Paul does not specifically say) arose who managed to create doubt among the Galatian Christians about Paul and his message (4:15-16). Because of them, the Galatians were now in danger of turning to "another gospel" (1:6), and Paul was fearful that they had been deceived (3:1) and were in danger of defecting from the Christian faith (4:11; 5:7). These newcomers were aggressive in propagating their theology (4:17), and it is not unlikely that they were themselves Jewish, given the eagerness with which they pressed the Jewish law. In any case, Paul describes them as trying to compel the Galatians to *ioudaizein* (= to Judaize, that is, to live like Jews), and hence, they are usually called by the name Judaizers (2:14). The contention of these so-called agitators (5:12) was that one must not only have faith in Christ, but obey the Torah also if he/she was to be truly in a right relationship with God. Circumcision was the ritual symbol for taking the yoke of Torah, and these teachers urged it strongly (5:1-4; 6:12-13). Of course, circumcision was only the beginning. To accept the yoke of Torah through circumcision meant also to accept the full range of the laws demands (4:10), or as Paul says, "Every man who lets himself be circumcised...is obligated to obey the whole law" (5:3).

We, the readers, would like to know more about these troublemakers, where they came from, what their relationship might have been to the Jerusalem church, and whether or not they embraced any Greek philosophical ideas. Furthermore, it would matter a great deal to be able to date this letter either before or after the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 at which this same problem also was addressed and at which an encyclical for all the Gentile churches was composed and sent out. If before, which is the general position assumed in this study, then there was no apostolic decree to which Paul might appeal (and, of course, he makes no such appeal). If afterward, then the agitators would have been in direct conflict not only with Paul but also the Jerusalem church. Though neither of these questions can be answered with finality, it is still clear that the main thrust of the new faction was that Christ was not sufficient. In their view, mature Christians needed something more than Christ alone -- and this



assertion Paul flatly denies (2:21; 5:6; 6:14).

### Date

Since the date of the letter is so dependent upon the identity of the Galatians themselves, it can only be said that if the South Galatian theory is correct, the letter might be as early as AD 48, and if the North Galatian theory is correct, the letter might be as late as AD 55.



### The Opening (1:1-5)

The opening to the Galatian letter is more abrupt than most of Paul's other correspondence. Usually, Paul has an affectionate word of commendation for his readers, but not here! The mood from the beginning suggests agitation and frustration. As is customary, the opening gives the sender, the reader, and a greeting.

#### 1:1

It is quite normal for Paul to describe himself as an apostle, but the added

description “not from men nor by man” anticipates that Paul felt the need to defend himself against the charge that his authority was only a derived authority and dependent upon others. As is common, Paul includes references to God, the Father, and Jesus Christ.

1:2

Paul does not name his associates, so even here there is no clue as to where he was when he wrote.

1:3-5

The typical greeting in Greco-Roman letters was *chairein* (= greeting), but Paul habitually substitutes the near homonym *charis* (= grace) and adds the familiar Jewish greeting of *eirene* (= *shalom*, peace). Again there follows the dual reference to God, the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. On some occasions Paul includes a reference to the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Co. 13:14), but usually he does not. Christ is described in terms of his voluntary sacrificial work, which was accomplished according to God’s will, and it is to God, the Father, that glory is to be given eternally.

Paul’s eschatology of the ages is unique in that he sees the Christian as victorious over the present evil age even before it ends. One’s life as an unbeliever was “according to the age of this world” (Ep. 2:2, Greek Text), but God has rescued believers from the powers of darkness that dominate this age, even though believers still struggle against them (Ep. 6:10-13). The present world is even now passing away (1 Co. 7:31), and God will soon crush Satan (Ro. 16:20)<sup>5</sup>

### **A Curse Upon the Infiltrators (1:6-10)**

It is customary in Paul’s letters for him to follow his opening with a thanksgiving, often accompanied by an intercession for the church to which he is writing. Not here! Paul plunges directly into the Galatian problem.

1:6-7

Instead of thanksgiving, Paul expresses shock<sup>6</sup> at the Galatian defection from the true gospel. The qualifier “so quickly” seems to indicate that the perversion of Paul’s message occurred only a relatively short time after his establishment of the churches. The conversion of the Galatians was by the grace of Christ, that is, by his divine initiative, which offered salvation as a free gift (cf. Ro. 4:1-5; 11:5). Now the

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<sup>5</sup> Paul views the *aeons* (= ages) as more than just epochs of time. Rather, he sees them as world orders and domains of power, of. L. Keck, *Paul and His Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 77-81.

<sup>6</sup> The verb *thaumazo* (= to wonder, marvel, be astonished) is controlled by its context as to whether it is good or bad, BAG (1979) 352. Here the context is obviously appalling.

Galatians were turning to a different gospel -- a gospel which was not a free gift, and certainly not *euangelion* (= good news). Whoever the infiltrators were, and Paul seems not to have known them by name,<sup>7</sup> they were confusing the Galatians and perverting the Christian gospel.

1:8-9

Paul's vehemence against the infiltrators is vividly expressed in a double *anathema* (= curse)<sup>8</sup>. His language could hardly be more unyielding, and it is roughly equivalent to the modern expletive in which someone is "damned to hell." The *anathema* was reserved for those who outspokenly rejected Christ (cf. 1 Co. 16:22). The mention of a preaching angel is merely a way of describing the most extreme position. It mattered not how exalted the preacher; there was only one way to God. If what was preached contradicted the gospel of grace, then it was to be damned.

1:10

Paul follows his anathema with a rhetorical question. The question is posed, it would seem, out of a suspected accusation, which sought to discredit Paul as one who pandered to what people wanted to hear. It would have been simple enough to indict Paul's "easy gospel" as morally irresponsible (cf. Ro. 6:1). But the word *arti* (= now) is in the emphatic position,<sup>9</sup> and if the Galatians had ever suspected that Paul was merely trying to avoid saying anything offensive, they could put that assessment to rest. Once they might have thought so, but not "now." Any man who has just damned to hell his opposition could hardly be accused of trying to soft-peddle the message!

### **Paul Defends His Apostolic Authority (1:11--2:21)**

It seems apparent from the way in which Paul's argumentation runs that a major effort had been made to discredit his credentials as an apostle, or at least, to reduce his authority by making him seem to be dependent upon the Jerusalem church, and therefore, as having no superior status over his opponents. Thus, Paul enters into an extended apologetic defending his apostleship, which he insists came by divine revelation (1:1, 12) and the election of God (1:15). Furthermore, Paul is concerned to demonstrate his independence from the Jerusalem church. It is not that Paul is at odds with the Jerusalem church, but rather, since his opponents are devaluing him as dependent on the Jerusalem church, Paul seeks to show that his apostleship is not derived or contrived but directly commissioned by God.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul's consistent use of ambiguous terms, such as, "some people" (1:7), "anybody" (1:9), "they" (4:17), "the one" (5:10), suggests that his opponents were unknown to him personally.

<sup>8</sup> In the LXX, the term *anathema* was used to translate the Hebrew *herem* (= a thing devoted to destruction).

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis in the Greek sentence is determined by word order, and the adverb *arti* (= now) appears as the first word, which is not grammatically necessary (cf. 1 Co. 13:12).

### **Paul's Assertion of Independence (1:11-12)**

Paul is quite clear that his articulation of the gospel was not self-designed or humanly contrived. Furthermore, he did not receive it from others, but he received it by direct revelation from Christ Jesus. Now it is hardly to be supposed that everything Paul knew about Jesus came in this way, since he himself admits that at least some elements of the gospel were passed down to him by tradition.<sup>10</sup> However, in his Damascus Road experience, the commission of Jesus that he should preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles was given to him directly by the risen Lord, and not through any intermediaries in the Jerusalem church (Ac. 22:17-18, 21; 26:12-18). Finally, it was not the testimony of others that convinced Paul to be a Christian. Rather, it was the risen Lord himself, who bluntly asked Paul, "Why do you persecute me?" (Ac. 9:4; 22:7; 26:14). Paul's knowledge of the resurrection and his confession of Jesus as Lord and Christ was indeed based upon revelation!

### **Paul's Conversion (1:13-17)**

In order to reinforce his independence of the Jerusalem church, Paul described the account of his conversion.<sup>11</sup>

#### *1:13*

He began his notoriety as the grand inquisitor for the Sanhedrin, intensely persecuting the Christians in Palestine (cf. Ac. 8:3; 26:9-11). He approved of the lynching of Stephen (Ac. 7:58; 8:1) and arranged for extradition papers from the Sanhedrin against any Christians in the Damascus synagogues (Ac. 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:12). This mistaken zeal would long haunt Paul's memory (Ac. 22:19-20; 1 Co. 15:9; Phil. 3:6), and he elsewhere describes himself at that period as a blasphemer and a violent man (1 Ti. 1:13).

#### *1:14*

His advance in Judaism was well known, as he explains here, and he outstripped the fellows of his own age. Paul had much to recommend him. He was born a Roman citizen (Ac. 22:27-28), which in turn indicates that his father was a

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<sup>10</sup> Paul, for instance, says that he "received" the gospel (1 Co. 11:23; 15:3), and the verbs *paralambano* (= to receive) and *paradidomi* (= to pass on), especially when used together, imply the transmission of tradition, of. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 86-87.

<sup>11</sup> There is partial truth in the suggestion that Paul's Damascus Road experience is a call as much as a conversion, at least insofar as Paul did not change deities, scriptures, or religious heritage. In fact, Paul uses the same vocabulary as does Isaiah in describing the Servant of Yahweh as "set apart from birth" (Is. 49:1), cf. K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 7-23. However, Stendahl goes too far in attempting to eliminate altogether the conversion aspect of Paul's experience. Paul frankly admitted the insufficiency of Judaism and persistently championed the all-sufficiency of Christ alone, which surely argues that in coming to faith in Jesus, Paul experienced a genuine conversion.

Roman citizen before him. He had all the natural advantages of being a Jew with an impeccable pedigree -- circumcised on the eighth day, descended from Abraham, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee (of Phil. 3:5; 2 Co. 11:22). Besides, he had been sent from his home city of Tarsus in Cilicia to Jerusalem to be educated at the feet of Gamaliel, the most noteworthy Pharisee of the day (Ac. 22:3; 26:4-5)<sup>12</sup>. As he himself said, he was “a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees” (Ac. 23:6), and in his own words, he was “extremely zealous for the traditions of the fathers.”

Paul’s description of his former life in Judaism was not made purely for the sake of boasting. Rather, he wished to dispel any notion that perhaps he was not sufficiently acquainted with Judaism and therefore in no position to pronounce judgment upon his opponents.

*1:15-17*

Paul sees his role in the sovereign purposes of God in much the same way as Jeremiah (1:5). He was set apart from his mother’s womb, now called by grace, even as the Galatians had been called by grace (1:6), and commissioned to preach Christ among the Gentiles. It is quite true that while Paul’s commission to the Gentiles occurred at his conversion by a direct statement from Jesus (Ac. 26:16-18), a commission reinforced by Ananias (Ac. 9:15; 22:14-15) and confirmed later while Paul was in a trance in the temple at Jerusalem (Ac. 22:17-21), his actual sending out by the church did not occur for a number of years (Ac. 13:1-3). In the meantime, Paul did not announce his unique call, nor did he contact the leaders in the Jerusalem church. Instead, he went into Arabia for an unspecified period of time, the Nabataean kingdom of Arabs ruled by Aretas IV (9 BC--AD 40)<sup>13</sup>. It is popular to assume that he went there to reflect upon his new faith, but it is not impossible that he went there to begin exercising his new commission to preach to the Gentiles. In any case, we know by his own testimony that while there he incurred the wrath of Aretas who sought to apprehend him and made necessary his escape over the city wall of Damascus (2 Co. 11:32-33).

According to Luke, Paul’s immediate response to his conversion was to “preach that Jesus is God’s Son” and “the Christ” in those same synagogues at which he had intended to serve extradition papers upon Christians. It is not clear whether this preaching by Paul was before or after his visit to Arabia, though probably after.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gamaliel, Paul’s tutor, was the grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel according to the Talmud. He was himself a member of the Sanhedrin (of Ac. 5:34), and he was the first of seven successive leaders of the school of Hillel to be honored with the title *Rabban* (= our Master), cf. R. Youngblood, “Gamaliel,” *ISBE* (1982) 11.393-394.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Harmonizing the data from Acts and Galatians is difficult, but since Paul indicates that it was three years between his conversion and his first trip to Jerusalem after his conversion (Ga. 1:18), the probable order of events may be

Jewish Christians were still worshiping in the synagogues with their fellow Jews at this early period,<sup>15</sup> and Paul used his influence to gain a platform from which to speak (Ac. 9:20, 22).

### **Paul's First Contact with the Jerusalem Church (1:18-24)**

Paul subsequently went to Jerusalem three years after his conversion<sup>16</sup>, but as he explains, even then his contact with the apostles was limited. His primary purpose seems to have been to make the acquaintance of Kephias,<sup>17</sup> and he stayed with him for fifteen days. This visit was not merely social but informational, for no doubt Paul wished to inquire of the leading apostle about the details of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection.<sup>18</sup> The two-week conversation between Paul and Peter must have been rich indeed! In fact, Paul asserts that he saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother (to be distinguished from two apostles by that name among the original Twelve)<sup>19</sup>. His stay in Jerusalem was marked by debates with the Hellenistic Jews (probably his former cohorts in the lynching of Stephen who would now consider Paul to be a traitor), and they tried to kill him (Ac. 9:28-29). For his own safety, he was sent back to his home city and province, Tarsus of Cilicia (Ac. 9:30). Before he left Jerusalem, however, he experienced a vision while in a trance in the temple. In this vision the Lord reconfirmed his call to the gentiles (Ac. 22:17-21).

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reconstructed as follows:

- 1) Conversion on the Damascus Road (Ac. 9:3-6)
- 2) Withdrawal into Arabia for an unknown period of time (Ga. 1:17b)
- 3) Return to Damascus (Ga. 1:17c; Ac. 9:19b-20, 22)
- 4) Aretas' conspiracy to arrest and kill Paul (Ac. 9:23-25; 2 Co. 11:32-33)
- 5) A return to Jerusalem three years after his conversion (Ac. 9:26; 22:17-18; Ga. 1:18)

<sup>15</sup> Jewish Christians continued to worship in the synagogues until the incorporation of the *birkat ha-minim* (curse upon deviants) into the synagogue liturgy, a policy which effectively drove them out, cf. R. Brown and J. Meier, *Antioch and Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 48.

<sup>16</sup> It probably is worth pointing out that a common Jewish idiom of time reckoning was to include any part of a year as a whole year. As such, the first and third year of this three-year reckoning might only be partial years, and therefore, the total considerably less than three years, cf. D. Guthrie, *Galatians [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 72. A similar time reckoning may be found in Jesus' reference to the three days and nights of his entombment in the grave (Mt. 12:40), when in actuality, it was part of Friday, all of Saturday, and part of Sunday, cf. H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 73-74.

<sup>17</sup> *Kephias* (= rock), the Aramaic nickname that Jesus gave to Peter (Jn. 1:42), is Paul's regular designation for Simon the son of John (cf. 1 Co. 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Ga. 2:9), though he alternates his references with the Greek form *Petros* (= rock) that corresponds to the Aramaic name.

<sup>18</sup> The NIV rendering of the infinitive verb *historeo* as "to get acquainted" could stand to be strengthened, since the verb means to visit for the purpose of coming to know someone or something and often carries the connotation "to get information," cf. *BAG* (1979) 383.

<sup>19</sup> According to Luke, Paul also attempted to join the Jerusalem disciples at this time, but due to their fear concerning his possible motives, they rejected him (Ac. 9:26). It was Barnabas who managed to secure for Paul an audience with the apostles Peter and James (Ac. 9:27), and while James was not one of the original Twelve, he nevertheless qualifies as an apostle and an important church leader (Ac. 15:6, 13, 22).

He was personally unknown to the Judean churches, though of course, they had heard of his conversion and eventually came to accept it.

This explanation of his limited contact with the Jerusalem church was necessary in Paul's eyes to combat the notion that his apostolic ministry had somehow been derived from members of the Jerusalem church. Far from being instructed and commissioned by them, Paul had never even met with most of them, and in fact, they at first had rejected his claim of faith, thinking that it was a ploy.

### **Paul's Second Contact with the Jerusalem Church (2:1-5)**

The natural force of Paul's introductory *epeita* (= then) and the additional *palin* (= again) is that he is enumerating in sequence his contacts with the Jerusalem church.

#### *2:1-3*

It was fourteen years before Paul again visited Jerusalem<sup>20</sup>. During the intervening time, he apparently had no direct contact with the Jerusalem church or the twelve apostles. His journey was in direct response to a revelation, and though Paul gives the reader no clue as to the nature of this revelation, it might well have been the prophetic word by Agabus of a great famine which would spread over the Roman world, a famine that Luke says occurred during the reign of Claudius Caesar (Ac. 11:27-28). In the Acts narratives, the response to this prophecy was the collection of a relief fund, which was sent to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Paul (Ac. 11:29-30)<sup>21</sup>. At the time of this visit, Paul privately reviewed with leaders of the Jerusalem church his mission to preach to the gentiles. The gentile mission already had been set in motion in Antioch after the persecution of Stephen (cf. Ac. 11:19-21), and the Jerusalem church already had made an investigation through Barnabas, who had traveled to Antioch and later had been instrumental in bringing Paul there as well (Ac. 11:22-26). Whether or not Barnabas had yet reported to the Jerusalem church is unclear, but after bringing Paul to Antioch, the two of them ministered for about a year prior to the relief mission to Jerusalem (Ac. 11:26).

For his part, Paul was deeply concerned that the gentile mission be approved by the Jerusalem church; otherwise, his evangelistic efforts would have been wasted,

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<sup>20</sup> It is not clear whether the fourteen year period dates from Paul's conversion or from his first visit to Jerusalem, though the latter seems to be the more natural import of the language, J. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (rpt. Lynn, MA: Hendrikson, 1981) 102.

<sup>21</sup> Those who follow the North Galatian theory usually view Paul's second visit as the one described in Acts 15 rather than the relief mission in Acts 11, but this would in effect cripple Paul's argument if he had actually made an intervening trip to Jerusalem but failed to mention it. Paul's purpose is to recount his limited contacts with the Jerusalem church so as to prove his independence, and the failure to mention an actual personal visit to Jerusalem and the elders there would seem to verge on duplicity.

and there would have developed two churches -- one Jewish and the other Gentile. Part of Paul's gospel was the unity of the church (cf. Ep. 3:2-6). Furthermore, it was important for Paul to make clear to the Galatians the fact that his Gentile mission was already being put into effect in Antioch, even before he had received approval from the Jerusalem leaders. As such, no one could say that Paul's Gentile mission was merely derived from the Jerusalem church. In presenting his case before the Jerusalem leaders, Paul had taken with him a test case, Titus, a young Greek convert. Yet when the leaders in Jerusalem had heard Paul, they declined to insist on Titus' circumcision, and in fact, allowed him to remain as an uncircumcised Christian. This fact would surely cut the nerve of the Judaizers' arguments. If the Jerusalem church did not demand circumcision of Gentile converts, why should the Galatians or anyone else?

2:4-5

The whole issue of whether or not Titus was to be circumcised, and for that matter, whether or not any Gentile convert to Christianity was to undergo mandatory circumcision, was brought to a head by certain agitators whom Paul calls "false brothers," men who had infiltrated the Christian ranks in order to strip them of their freedom in Christ. Luther suggests that perhaps these opponents may have been watching Paul and his test case, Titus, thinking that he might not be willing to confront them in the presence of the apostles.<sup>22</sup> Against these agitators Paul stood his ground without flinching. For him, the very integrity of the gospel was at stake. With the introduction of the term *eleutheria* (= freedom, liberty), Paul calls attention to what will become the driving theme of the letter.

### **The Affirmation of Paul's Apostleship to the Gentiles (2:6-10)**

It was during this crisis on his second visit to Jerusalem that Paul's Gentile mission was confirmed. The primary figures in the Jerusalem church were James, Peter, and John, James being first mentioned because he was probably the prominent one of the three (cf. Ac. 12:17; 15:13; 21:18).<sup>23</sup> These were the men who recognized and confirmed Paul's Gentile mission as being on a level with Peter's Jewish mission. Still, this confirmation was merely recognition; they added nothing to Paul's message, and they imposed nothing beyond what Paul had already proclaimed and practiced. Certainly circumcision was not required of Gentile converts. Instead, they gave to Paul and Barnabas the "right hands of fellowship," a gesture of handclasping which was a sign of friendship and trust,<sup>24</sup> and possibly even

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<sup>22</sup> M. Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, ed. J. Fallows (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978) 48.

<sup>23</sup> Peter and John are doubtless the two apostles of the original Twelve, while James bar Zebedee had probably been martyred by this time (Ac. 12:2). The James here in Galatians would then have been the half-brother of Christ.

<sup>24</sup> BAG (1979) 174.



of a covenant.<sup>25</sup> They agreed that both the Gentile and the Jewish missions were products of divine grace. The only condition they gave was that the poor should not be forgotten, a condition with which Paul was obviously in harmony, given the fact that his trip to Jerusalem in the first place was to transport a relief offering. Certainly no condition of circumcision was issued.

Paul's manner of referring to James, Peter and John may seem almost sarcastic. He speaks of them as "those who seemed to be something," but then he quickly adds that their reputation did not impress him. In fact, as Paul points out parenthetically, God himself does not judge by external reputations. Later he speaks of them as those "reputed to be pillars," and earlier he has already mentioned those who "seemed to be leaders" (2:2). It is not unlikely that Paul is here chiding, not the apostles themselves, but his opponents who have set up extravagant claims for these apostles. Paul may even have been borrowing the language of his opponents who may have referred to James, Peter and John as "the pillars" and who, by inference, belittled Paul as being inferior. Paul, therefore, is quite bold to maintain that his revelation concerning the Gentile mission was in no way to be depreciated.

### **Paul's Confrontation with Peter at Antioch (2:11-14)**

As a final proof that Paul's apostleship was not dependent upon the Jerusalem church nor the original twelve apostles, Paul describes a critical confrontation between Peter and himself at Antioch. Sometime after Paul's visit to Jerusalem, Peter traveled north to visit the church in Antioch. The congregation was racially mixed, including both Jews and Greeks (Ac. 11:19-21), and the leadership reflected this diversity. In addition to Paul, the former Pharisee of Cilicia, the leaders included Barnabas, a Jewish Levite from Cyprus (Ac. 4:36), Simeon the Black<sup>26</sup>, Lucius of Cyrene in North Africa (also possibly black), and Manaen, the foster-brother<sup>27</sup> of Herod Antipas who had been indicted by John the Baptist (cf. Ac. 13:1). When he first arrived, Peter was warmly received, and he responded by joining in close fellowship with the other believers, freely eating and associating with them. Peter, of course, had already been exposed to the idea that he must not reject those whom God had accepted (Acts 10). However, when some Jewish believers from the Jerusalem church arrived,<sup>28</sup> Peter began to segregate himself from the non-Jewish believers to

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<sup>25</sup> H. Ridderbos, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Churches of Galatia*, trans. H. Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 90.

<sup>26</sup> The Latin nickname Niger probably indicated that Simeon was a black man from Africa, cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 260.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, 260-261.

<sup>28</sup> That the visitors from Jerusalem came "from James" need not be interpreted to mean that James necessarily endorsed their actions. The chronology between this visit by Peter to Antioch and the council in Acts 15 is not clear, but in the latter case James was certainly opposed to this kind of prejudice (Ac. 15:13-21). In any case, the visitors from James need not have been sent on a spying mission, even if that is what they ended up doing.

avoid censure by his old friends. Perhaps he still remembered the sting of criticism he had received earlier when he had eaten in the home of Cornelius, a Roman military officer (Ac. 11:2). Other Jews, presumably members of the Antiochan church, began to join in Peter's show of prejudicial segregation, and finally, even Barnabas was intimidated into joining them.

This was more than Paul could tolerate. Publicly confronting Peter and exposing his earlier behavior before his Jewish friends, Paul challenged the chief apostle because, as he said, he "was not acting in line with the truth of the gospel." If the gospel is by grace, it is not by heritage, tradition, race, religious ritual, or the observance of taboos. Furthermore, if it is by grace, than all those who believe are worthy and accepted by God. To reject those whom God has accepted makes a mockery of the gospel and changes it into "no gospel at all" (Ga. 1:7).

Lying barely beneath the surface of this story, and well beyond the fact that Paul establishes his unyielding opposition to Jewish legalism, is the fact that Paul was unafraid to confront even Peter himself, and he did so successfully. If the Galatians had any doubt about Paul's authority, or if others had convinced them that Paul was inferior to the Jerusalem church leaders, that opinion should be put to rest!

### **Either/Or not Both/And (2:15-21)**

It is clear that in 2:14 Paul begins rehearsing what he said to Peter in the confrontation at Antioch. What is not clear is where Paul leaves off reviewing his speech and makes the transition into a general theological discussion. Some English versions confine Paul's quotation to 2:14 (NEB, NAB, RSV). Others continue his quotation all the way through 2:21 (NIV, NASB, JB). Though the question must be left open, the viewpoint of the longer quotation fits the context and flow of thought well, since Paul obviously is speaking from the standpoint of Jewish Christians.

As such, Paul points out that those Christians who enjoy the birthrights of purebred Jews (like himself and Peter) as opposed to non-Jews who were considered by the Jewish constituency to be pagan sinners (Paul probably uses the term here with deliberate irony) -- even they knew that justification is not by observing laws but by faith in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

Here is Paul's first use of the important word group *dikaioo/dikaiosyne* (= justify/righteousness) in the Galatian letter. This is a central theological idea for Paul, and he draws the metaphor from the Greco-Roman law courts. The word group carries a forensic meaning, and it includes the ideas of acquittal, forgiveness, and

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<sup>29</sup> One cannot help but recall Peter's bold declaration at the Jerusalem council that Gentiles and Jews alike are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus when God purifies their hearts through faith (Ac. 15:9, 11). The gospel of salvation by grace through faith is often thought to be particularly a Pauline message, and so it is, but not exclusively so!

pardon -- in short, getting into right relations with God.<sup>30</sup> Instead of being accused and condemned, the guilty person has been acquitted by an act of gracious mercy.<sup>31</sup> The central Christian message was that one could not get into right relations with God by following Moses, but only by believing in Christ.<sup>32</sup> Luther is certainly correct when he gives this definition of a Christian: “A Christian is not he who hath no sin, but he to whom God imputeth not his sin, through faith in Christ.” Since right standing with God is achieved by faith, it is not achieved by works. Works are always lacking in time, quality and amount, and this implicitly includes religious works, such as, baptism, benevolence, and the showing of love. Baptism may well express symbolically the washing away of sin and the entrance into a new life, but it is not a magic act, and in fact, apart from faith, it is powerless altogether. Nowhere in the New Testament is one ever said to be justified by baptism; rather everywhere one is declared to be justified by faith.<sup>33</sup>

The gospel of justification by faith, however, has a perennial objection. If one is justified by faith alone, then does that not open the door to sinning with impunity? Would not justification by faith mean that Christ promotes sin? And does not the fact that Christians sometimes sin prove it?<sup>34</sup> Paul responds that such logic is unthinkable.<sup>35</sup> For Paul, justification does not mean that one has the freedom to sin with impunity, but rather, it means that one is free to live for God.

The interjection in 2:18 is ambiguous. Just what is it that Paul has destroyed? On the one hand, he may be referring to his old life of sin, and if so, he is saying that if after being justified by Christ he rebuilds his old life of sinful ways, he is obviously a lawbreaker, something that Christ forbids. On the other hand, and this is perhaps the best solution, Paul may be referring to his old attempts at justification under the system of Judaism, and if so, he is saying that if after being justified by Christ he rebuilds the system of justification by law, he violates the law itself which points toward Christ.

It is the law itself that contained the seeds of its own demise, since it pointed beyond itself toward the coming of Jesus. In essence, the real transgressors of the law

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<sup>30</sup> A. Hunter, *The Gospel According to St Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 20-22, 84-85.

<sup>31</sup> A clear corrective is in order with regard to a popular definition for justification, which asserts that it means “just-as-if-I-had-never-sinned.” Such a definition needs qualification. Justification means that even though one is guilty, he/she is still pardoned and set free by an act of grace. Justification does not restore the sinner to innocence; it exempts him/her from condemnation.

<sup>32</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 72.

<sup>33</sup> J. Faulkner, J. Murray, G. Bromiley, “Justification,” *ISBE* (1982) II.1169.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of other views regarding Paul’s words in 2:17, see J. Boice, “Galatians,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) X. 449-450.

<sup>35</sup> The Greek expression *me genoito* (= may it not be) is the LXX equivalent to the Hebrew *haliylah* (= to the profane).

are not those who forsake the Mosaic rituals for Christ; rather, the real transgressors of the law are those who forsake Christ for the Mosaic rituals. In dying to law, Paul is now able to live for God.

Paul clearly sees his own death to Judaism as vitally connected with the death of Jesus on the cross. Just as Jesus died but lives again in a new existence, unbound by the limitations of physical life, so Paul also has died and risen to a new life unbound by the limitations of justification by law. Paul's new life is a life of faith, and it is grounded in the fact that the Son of God loved him and gave himself over to death in Paul's behalf. As such, the condemnation demanded by law no longer applies. The just desserts of the law have been satisfied. To try to be justified by law is absurd, since the punitive requirements of the law have already been met. The crucifixion of Christ was an emphatic end to any attempt to be justified by ritual. So Paul concludes, "I do not set aside the grace of God." To return to legalism and justification by ritual would be a flat rejection of Christ. The Christian gospel could never be a both/and theology, that is, justification by both Christ and the law, but the choice is clearly an either/or -- either be justified by Christ, or reject him and turn back to the law. If justification by law was possible, the crucifixion of Christ was an empty death, and he died for nothing.

### **The Argument for Justification by Grace/Faith Rather Than by Law (3:1--4:31)**

Paul now plunges into the theological reasons that demonstrate his thesis. In a veritable barrage of hard-hitting arguments, ranging from personal experience to the interpretation of Torah, Paul urges the Galatians to abandon any attempt to turn back to Jewish legalism as an effective means to be in right standing with God. In his arguments, Paul puts special emphasis on the experience of Abraham, and particularly, on the relationship between the promises of God to Abraham and the appearance of Torah as an intermediate expedient between the promise and its fulfillment in Christ.

#### **The Argument from Experience (3:1-5)**

Experience, by its very nature, is more personal than the abstractions of logic and theology, so it is not unusual that Paul begins here. He does not rest his case on personal experience alone, of course, since such a basis is at best unstable<sup>36</sup>. At the

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<sup>36</sup> While personal experience cannot be denied, it is often emotional and tendentious, and it is always subjective. It is the subjective nature of personal experience that demands that any conclusions must not place too much weight on it. While personal experience cannot be denied, it cannot prove the truth of a thesis for anyone except the one who had the original experience. Still, experience is not to be discounted as inadmissible as long as its subjective character is balanced by other means.

same time, the Galatians' original response to the good news about Jesus should have pointed them in the right direction with regard to justification by faith as opposed to law.

Paul's opening address is blunt. "You stupid Galatians!" (NED) he exclaims. "Who has bewitched you?"<sup>37</sup> When the gospel was first preached to the Galatians, it was clearly focused on the cross, not the law, and it was held up publicly for all to see.<sup>38</sup> Somehow the Galatians had lost sight of the centrality of the cross and had replaced it with law.

Paul follows with several pointed questions: "Did you receive the Spirit by doing what the law commands or by believing the gospel message?" (Moffat). Obviously, Paul expects the answer to be the latter, and he has good precedent. Even in Acts, Luke shows that faith in Christ was decisive for receiving the gift of the Spirit (Ac. 10:43-44; 11:14-15; 15:8-9). As for Paul himself, he had, according to his own testimony, kept the Jewish legal code to a fault (Phil. 3:6b), but it was not until he had accepted the gospel that he received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 9:17). For the Galatians, it was the same. Faith in the message of the cross was the basis upon which the Spirit was bestowed.

The second question is again introduced with a blunt preface, "Can it be that you are so stupid?" (NEB). "After beginning with the Spirit, are you now being perfected in [the] flesh?" (my translation). For Paul, the Spirit and flesh are domains of power, the Spirit being the eschatological gift of power that was a mark of one's participation in the future and the flesh being the arena of human weakness.<sup>39</sup> As such, then, Paul asks them that if they began their Christian experience in the power of the Spirit, how is it that they are now hoping to reach perfection by means of their human weakness? The answer, of course, is a resounding, "They can't!"

The third question is less clear since it may be translated either, "Have all your experiences been in vain?" (NEB) or, "Have you suffered so much for nothing?" (NIV). The verb *pascho* may be taken in either way. If the former, then the question is a summary and reinforcement of the previous questions. If the latter, then Paul may be alluding to some sort of difficult circumstances that the Galatians had endured because of their allegiance to Christ, perhaps even the distress caused by the Judaizers who had infiltrated their congregations and thrown them "into confusion" (1:7). The latter translation and latter interpretation may be preferable, and it makes

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<sup>37</sup> The verb Paul uses, *baskaino*, means to cast a spell upon someone with the "evil eye." In the popular folklore of the period, one could ward off such a spell by spitting three times (Theocritus 6, 39), though Paul, of course, uses the expression as a metaphorical hyperbole.

<sup>38</sup> Paul uses yet another figure of speech in the verb *prographo* (= posted, placarded). The verb was commonly used to describe public notices or proclamations, cf. Lightfoot, 134.

<sup>39</sup> Keck, 99-108.

good sense of the passage. If the Galatians had been following legalism in the first place, they would not have been intimidated by the Judaizers at all, and Paul's extension, "...if it really was for nothing," demonstrates his hope that the Galatians will come to their senses.

Paul's final question addresses the exercise of spiritual gifts in the Galatian congregations. "The one who furnishes you with the Spirit and performs acts of power among you -- [is it] the result of the works of the law or the hearing of faith?" (my translation). Just what miracles God may have worked among the Galatians is not clear, but Paul certainly expects the Galatians to concede that these spiritual blessings were not the result of legalism.

### **The Argument from Abraham (3:6-9)**

It is not without significance that Paul now shifts to Scripture itself as the primary arbiter of theological dispute. Experience is valid, but it is not final.

Paul recalls the story of Abraham in which God covenanted with the patriarch to give him a natural son in his old age out of whom would issue a multitude of offspring (Ge. 15:1-6). In the Genesis record, the narrator simply comments that Abraham believed God's promise, and God credited his faith as righteousness.<sup>40</sup> Faith, then, is not a crowning merit but a readiness to accept what God has promised. Righteousness is not something one achieves but something one receives on the ground of believing.

To be a "son of Abraham" was to be one of the chosen ones and to belong to the redemptive family. It is likely that the Judaizers who had come to Galatia maintained that in order to be a "son of Abraham," one had to accept circumcision. Paul, on the basis of Genesis 15:6, argues that the true heritage of Abraham is faith, not circumcision. One is a son of Abraham by believing, and it is clear that Paul sees the faith of Abraham and the faith of Christians as being of the same kind (cf. Ac. 3:25).<sup>41</sup> This being so, then the Galatians were already sons of Abraham because of their faith in Jesus Christ, and circumcision was therefore irrelevant.

God's covenant with Abraham promised that "all nations would be blessed through him" (Ge. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4). Paul understands this promise as a forecast of the future justification of the Gentiles. The blessing of Abraham is in fact justification and the gift of righteousness that comes by faith. Those who believe have received the blessing of justification so that they are joined to Abraham the man of faith.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul elsewhere appeals to this same passage (Ro. 4:3) as does James (2:23).

<sup>41</sup> It may be remembered that John the Baptist pointed out the same thing in saying that God was able to raise up children to Abraham from stones if necessary. God was not confined to bloodlines or religious tradition (Mt. 3:9). Furthermore, Jesus argued with the Jewish leaders regarding the same thing, that is, that one was a child of Abraham by doing the thing Abraham did, not by being born into Abraham's bloodline (Jn. 8:39).

### **The Argument from Law (3:10-14)**

Still remaining with the text of Scripture, Paul explains the difference between faith and law by citing a collage of passages. First, he points out that to be under the law is to be threatened with a curse. Citing the closing lines of the antiphony that was called out by the two groups of Israelites in the Shechem Pass from the facing slopes of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerezim (cf. Dt. 27:26), he demonstrates that those who rely on observing the law in order to be justified must realize how total are its demands. To fail to keep all the law is to be under a curse, and the history of the Israelite nation spelled out only too clearly how devastating that curse could be!

It is against the background of this devastating curse that Paul quotes Habakkuk. Habakkuk lived at about the close of the 7th Century BC, and in his visions he saw the ruthless advance of the Babylonians who would carry out the curse of the law upon a disobedient Judah (Hab. 1:5-11). Still, though his own nation was under the curse of the law, a curse that was to be carried out by a pagan army, Habakkuk was not without recourse. He could still live by faithful reliance upon God (Hab. 2:4). Though the nation was to be destroyed, and though obedience to the law was no longer an option in order to forestall the impending disaster, the righteous person who lived by faith would not be abandoned by God. In the midst of calamity, his faith would enable him to spiritually rise above the terrible consequences of the curse (Hab. 3:16b-19). So Paul concludes, “Now, clearly, no one is justified before God by law, because the righteous man will live by faith” (my translation).

The law, of course, is based on obedience, not faith. Citing Torah itself (Lv. 18:5), Paul shows that the emphasis of the law is a matter of doing rather than believing. It could safely be assumed that no one had ever perfectly followed the law, and therefore, everyone was under the curse of the law (3:10). However, Christ bought us back from the law’s curse by substituting himself in our place. That Jesus was under the curse of God when he died was clear to Paul in that Torah pronounced everyone who was executed by hanging to be under the divine curse (Dt. 21:23). Since both Paul and the Galatians accepted that Jesus was innocent, he could not have been under the curse of God for his own sins, but he died for the sins of others.

In this discussion, Paul uses another important verb to describe the atoning work of Christ, the verb *exagorazo* (= buy back, redeem). It is probable that he has in mind the Old Testament practice of paying a price in order to preserve someone who was sentenced to death for a crime such as failing to pen up a goring bull (Ex. 21:28-29). In such a case, the sentence of death could be commuted by paying a price to the survivors (Ex. 21:30-32). In similar fashion, Christ paid the price of his own life to buy us back from the law’s curse. By buying us back from the law’s curse, he is able to bestow upon us the blessing of Abraham, that is, justification, and this blessing comes by faith. The distinguishing mark that guarantees God’s acceptance is the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ac. 15:8). Justification is sealed by the gift of the Spirit, and as Paul says elsewhere, the Spirit is a guarantee of our future life with Christ (2 Co. 1:22; 5:5; Ep. 1:13-14). God gives the Holy Spirit to those who believe (3:2), or as he says here, we received the promised Spirit “through faith.”

### **The Relationship Between the Promise and the Law (3:15-25)**

By his comments on God’s promise to Abraham and his discussion of the nature of Torah, Paul has implicitly introduced a tension that he intends to develop and explain, a tension between the promise and the law.

3:15-18

He cites, for the sake of analogy, the common practice of drawing up a last will and testament.<sup>42</sup> When such a document has been written and attested, no outside party is at liberty to dismiss it or even to adjust its wording. Similarly, when God made his covenantal promises to Abraham, those promises were inviolable. In spite of anything that might have happened after the promises were made, they remained actively in force.

The promises were given to Abraham and to his “seed,” and Paul draws great significance from the fact that the terms *zera*’ (= offspring, Hb.) and *sperma* (= seed, Gk.) are singulars rather than plurals.<sup>43</sup> Paul is thinking here, of course, of one particular passage that contains the promise that in Abraham’s offspring the nations will be blessed (Ge. 22:18). He would hardly deny that various other references to the “seed” of Abraham refer to the posterity of Abraham in a collective sense, such as, the passages containing the land promises, the prediction that Abraham’s posterity would be slaves in Egypt, and the covenant of circumcision (Cf. Ge. 12:7; 13:15; 15:13, 18; 17:7ff.). However, the “seed” through whom the nations would be blessed would not be merely Abraham’s collective descendants, but rather, would be one particular descendant, Jesus Christ.

The giving of Torah to Moses in no way altered this promise, which was still in force and remained to be fulfilled throughout the history of Israel. Though Torah

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<sup>42</sup> As is well-known, the word *diatheke* is capable of two English renderings, either “last will and testament” (as normally used in classical Greek and followed by NEB, JB, RSV, NAB, NASBmg, Knox, Williams) or “covenant” (as used in the LXX to refer to the ancient Near Eastern practice of swearing to agreements and followed by ASV, NASB, KJV, NIV, TEV, RSVmg), cf. *BAG* (1979) 183. It is not unlikely that Paul may be drawing from both ideas, cf. J. Boice, *EBC*, X. 462

<sup>43</sup> Paul’s appeal to such a fine grammatical point may seem strange to us, especially since the word *zera*’ in the Hebrew text, while singular, may also be used as a collective, much as the English word offspring. In many cases its context requires that it be read as a collective. Paul, however, seems confident that the Genesis record in 22:18 deliberately contains a word that, due to its singular form, has a meaning deeper than the collective, and this deeper meaning points toward Jesus Christ, particularly since it has to do with a blessing for all nations, a blessing that Paul understands to be justification by faith.



was introduced some four centuries after the promise was made,<sup>44</sup> the covenantal promise that all nations were to be blessed through Abraham's seed was in no way cancelled, nor could the promise have been fulfilled through the law itself. The law certainly did not bless the nations! It was an exclusive covenant with one nation chosen from among the other nations. Thus, the promise remained unfulfilled.

### *3:19-20*

The question then arises as to why Torah was given in the first place if it did not fulfill the promise of blessing made to Abraham. Paul's answer is that Torah was a temporary moral expedient until Jesus, the coming seed of Abraham, could fulfill the promise of true justification. Torah was mediated from Yahweh through angels,<sup>45</sup> then to Moses, and finally to the people. The fact that it was mediated in this indirect fashion, unlike the promise which was given directly by Yahweh to Abraham, suggests the priority of the promise over the law as does also the chronology of the promise which was given well before the law.

The purpose of Paul's statement in 3:20 is not immediately clear. The statement is clear enough, that is, that a mediator automatically implies that two parties are involved, but why Paul should say this is obscure. If one surveys the commentaries, the diversity of treatments is virtually overwhelming.<sup>46</sup> The most satisfactory solution may well be that Paul is here reflecting on the conditional and unconditional nature of God's covenants. The covenant at Sinai certainly was conditional, as evidenced by the potential for blessing or cursing. The fact that it was established through mediators reinforces this conditionality. The angels and Moses mediated between Yahweh and Israel, Yahweh giving the Torah and Israel responding, "We will do everything Yahweh has said. We will obey" (Ex. 24:7). The promise to Abraham, however, was an unconditional divine commitment. Abraham could not do anything to secure the promise other than believe it, and this unconditional character was reflected in the fact that God declared his intentions directly without a mediator and without any stipulations. The conditional covenant

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<sup>44</sup> There is some uncertainty as to how the reference to 430 years should be taken. The text of Ex. 12:40 is the problem, and the Masoretic Text seems to indicate that the period was the time during which the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. The LXX and the Samaritan Pentateuch, however, read "Egypt and Canaan," making the period include both the patriarchal period and the period of slavery. In Ge. 15:13 the period of enslavement is rounded off to 400 years (cf. Ac. 7:6). Paul, for his part, seems to be following the LXX and reckons the 430 years to be not only the enslavement period but also the period between the giving of the promise to Abraham and the giving of Torah at Sinai.

<sup>45</sup> The presence of "holy ones" on Sinai during the giving of Torah is only briefly alluded to in the blessing of Moses upon the twelve tribes (Dt. 33:2), though the LXX adds the phrase "angels were with him on his right hand." A similar allusion in Ps. 68:17 gave rise to the rabbinic belief that angels were directly involved, cf. Lightfoot, 145, and this belief was adopted by the early Christians (cf. Ac. 7:53; He. 2:2).

<sup>46</sup> Lightfoot, writing in the middle of the last century, pointed out that he was aware of between 250 and 300 different treatments of this verse, 146.

given at Sinai, then, is unlike the unconditional covenant made with Abraham. The one is mediated and contingent; the other is direct and guaranteed.

3:21-25

This difference between the covenants in turn raises the question as to whether or not the promise to Abraham and the giving of Torah are in fundamental opposition to each other. Could it be that they are in conflict, so that one must choose between them but cannot recognize the validity of both? “May it never be,” Paul exclaims! The only way they could be in genuine conflict is if they were both trying to achieve the same end through conflicting means. However, and this is the height of Paul’s argument, promise and law were *not* trying to achieve the same end. In fact, they had two different purposes altogether. The purpose of Torah was never that it could produce righteousness and life. Rather, its purpose was to demonstrate that the whole world was the prisoner of sin.<sup>47</sup> Torah was a condemning force rather than a justifying one, and in fact, this condemnation was essential if one was to fully realize the need for justification. As such, Torah was rightly given before the fulfillment of the promise. Torah made clear the human need for justification, and the promise, which was fulfilled in Christ, answered that need for all who would believe.

In the period of Israel before faith in Christ was possible, all were held prisoner by Torah. Torah was like a *paidagogos* (= slave-custodian) under whose charge we were kept until Christ came.<sup>48</sup> Torah certainly performed a role, but it was not justification. Rather it was, so to speak, the role of a truant officer that made sure we arrived at school, that is, the law was a temporary guardian that brought us to Christ. It is Christ who is able to justify through faith, and since faith has now come, the role of the slave-custodian has ended.

### **Sonship in Christ (3:26--4:7)**

The difference between law and grace is comparable to the difference between slavery and the full rights of sonship. Here Paul hits at the very heart of Jewish religion.

3:26-29

In the Old Testament, one of the most important definitions was that a “son of

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<sup>47</sup> Paul makes the same point in his correspondence to the Romans when he says, “I would not have known what sin was except through the law” (7:7b), and he adds that the purpose of Torah was in order that “sin might be recognized as sin” (7:13)

<sup>48</sup> The translations “schoolmaster” (KJV) and “tutor” (NEB) are less than best. According to Herodotus, a *paidagogos* was not so much a teacher as a “...slave who went with a boy from home to school and back again,” cf. *LS* (1982) 1286. Such slaves were essentially truant officers, cf. *TDNT* (1967) V.620, and they were often stereotyped as being rude, rough and qualified for nothing better, H. Betz, *Galatians [Hermenia]* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 177.

God” was God’s elect, and it was a truism that God’s elect were the Jewish people. In the exodus, God speaks of Israel as “my son” (Ex. 4:22), and this idea of God being Israel’s “father” reoccurs frequently in similes and metaphors (Dt. 1:31; 8:5; 14:1; Ps. 103:13; Is. 1:2; 30:1, 9; 50:1; 63:16; 64:8; Je. 31:9; Eze. 16:20; 23:37; Ho. 1:10; 11:1ff.). It is on this basis that the Jews could claim, “The only Father we have is God himself” (Jn. 8:41b). Paul, however, strikes at the heart of this assumption and declares that “we all” (including the Gentile believers) are sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus. Just as the true children of Abraham are those who believe instead of merely those who have descended from Abraham, so the true sons of God are those who believe in Jesus. This theological assertion strips Jewry of its exclusive monopoly on God’s favor, and it renders circumcision irrelevant.

Since both the Galatians and Paul maintained the common ground that Jesus was God’s Son *par excellence*, then it was possible to argue that those who were baptized into Christ had taken upon themselves the character of sonship through faith in him.<sup>49</sup> All the old distinctions that had been based on the separatistic codes of Torah were now gone. Jewishness or non-Jewishness did not count; social station was a matter indifferent; maleness or femaleness was no longer a basis for value judgment. All of these former dominant-submissive categories of race, caste, and gender were absolved in Christ. All believers, regardless of their stations, were on common ground. They now exist as one!<sup>50</sup> If a woman or man belongs to Christ, who is the promised seed of Abraham, then he/she is blessed with the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham -- justification.

#### 4:1-3

What a liberating difference to have the full rights of sons! To illustrate this difference, Paul points out that a child, while he is a minor, is not much different than a slave. Paul would never deny that the people Israel, the chosen race, were truly the sons of God by divine election in the Old Testament (cf. Ro. 9:4-5). However, sonship at this level was still slavery in effect. Any son (and particularly Israel under the law) is still ruled by guardians and trustees<sup>51</sup> until he comes of age at the time designated by the father. So, also, God the Father had designated a particular time

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<sup>49</sup> The metaphor of “putting on” Christ, that is, the idea that the initiate rises from the baptismal waters “wearing Christ,” has parallels in the Greco-Roman mystery religions in which the initiate “puts on” the redeemer figure, Betz, 188. As such, the metaphor was probably not unknown to the Galatians.

<sup>50</sup> Traditionally, interpreters have been reluctant to accept Paul’s thoroughgoing statement at face value, preferring instead to read Paul’s assertion as an eschatological vision to be seen in the present era by the eyes of faith only. In this way, male dominance and male exclusiveness in authority and church office could be maintained. However, the present tense of Paul’s statement *hymeis heis este* (= you are all one), as opposed to a future tense, must be taken seriously, and if Paul’s affirmation is to be accorded a determinative role in the life of the Christian community, then Christians have been painfully slow to implement it!

<sup>51</sup> *Epitropoi* (= guardians, foremen, stewards); *Oikonomoi* (= private managers of estates, stewards, administrators)

when the great transition was to occur, the time of the coming of Christ. Before the appointed time, however, the Galatians had in effect been slaves to the *stoicheia* (= elements) of the world, those primitive forms of religious thought that dominated all people, both Gentile and Jew.<sup>52</sup> It is a general characteristic of religion, both in Judaism and elsewhere, to rely heavily on religious demands. As such, even the Galatians, who had not been reared in Judaism, had experienced the bondage of religious law.

4:4-7

Just as the full rights of sonship are only bestowed at the time indicated by the father, so the full privilege of sons in a spiritual sense could only come in God's appointed time. Yet when the time had fully come -- when the period of waiting had been fulfilled<sup>53</sup> -- God acted decisively in sending his own Son into the world to become a human under its current system of law<sup>54</sup>. He entered the world in order to redeem those who were under law, that is, those who were under the curse of death that the law demanded, so that they might receive the full rights of sons.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The term *stoicheia* has received a fair amount of attention, because it was used in widely differing ways in the Greco-Roman world. On the one hand, it had a scholastic nuance, and referred to elements of order and learning, such as, the letters of the alphabet, or in social life, the basic principles of manners and morals. On the other hand, it had a mystical nuance and referred to the basic substances believed to underly all reality, substances such as earth, air, fire and water. Demons and spirit-beings were believed to inhabit these substances. Closely related to this latter nuance was the usage of the term to refer to the heavenly bodies, the stars and the zodiac, all of which were believed to be controlled by deities, cf. BAG (1979) 768-769; H. Esser, *NIDNTT* (1976) 11.451-453. Commentators are divided over which of these meanings Paul has in mind. If the former (so NIV, TCNT, JB, Weymouth, Williams, Knox), then the bondage prior to Christ consisted of elementary forms of religion, forms which now were outdated by the coming of Christ. If the latter (so RSV, NEB, TEV), then the bondage prior to Christ was raw paganism. Both options have arguments in their favor. If the Galatians were indeed pagans before being converted through Paul's ministry, they may well have worshiped, or at least believed they were under the power of, the *stoicheia* as the mystical powers of the universe. However, Paul uses the inclusive "we" so that he identifies himself as also being under those same powers, and it seems unlikely that he would describe his life in Judaism in this way. Thus, it's preferable to take the *stoicheia* to refer to human religious traditions in the more general sense.

<sup>53</sup> The term *pleroma tou chronou* (= fullness of the time) probably refers to the fulfillment of the period of time prior to Christ's coming rather than the point in time when he came. If the latter idea were intended, the more natural word to use would have been *kairos* (= point in time).

<sup>54</sup> It is unclear whether Paul is using the term *nomos* (= law) in the narrower sense of Jewish law or the broader sense of legalism under which virtually all humans are born. (All people are born under some kind of law.) The fact that there is no article might suggest the latter, cf. A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 115-116.

<sup>55</sup> The NIV phrase "full rights of sons" is actually a single word in the Greek text, the word *huiiothesia* (= adoption). In Greco-Roman culture, the process of adoption referred not merely to a change of parentage, but also, a change of status. A man might adopt any male citizen into the privileges of sonship with the condition that the adopted son accept the legal obligations and religious duties of a real son. Sometimes this adoption process was accompanied by the fictitious sale of the son by the natural father to the adoptive father (and may have influenced Paul's choice of the verb redeem), but it invariably included the transfer of a person from under the paternal authority of his natural father to the paternal authority of his adoptive father, cf. *ISBE* (1979) I.54.

In his present metaphor, then, Paul envisions the change of status when one has been brought out from the position of being a son of the law to being a son of God. Whereas before Torah was the parent, now God is the

Because adoptive sonship has been established through the redemptive work of Christ and the faith of the believer, God has sent the Spirit of Jesus, his Son, into our hearts who enables us to truly call God our Father.<sup>56</sup> The adoptive process has been completed; the Galatians were no longer slaves, but Sons and heirs of God's promise for justification. Given this privilege, it would be unthinkable for the Galatians to return to their parentage under Torah or to think that they could achieve a better standing with God by regressing to legalism. The full rights of sonship had already come, not through law, but through grace and faith.

### **Paul's Plea to the Galatians (4:8-20)**

Now that he has explained the theological reasons that demand a firm resistance against being pulled back into legalism, Paul issues a strong personal plea to the Galatians to reject the infiltrators and their Jewish theology.

#### *4:8-11*

In their life before they accepted the Christian faith, the Galatians were worshipers of "those who by nature are not gods," that is, they followed the polytheistic paganism of the Greco-Roman world. They were slaves to pagan religion and pagan legalism not unlike the Jews who were slaves to Torah. Now that they had come to know the true God<sup>57</sup>, why should they wish to turn back to the weak and miserable *stoicheia*<sup>58</sup> of legalism? To escape pagan legalism through Christ only to lapse back into Jewish legalism would be a spiritual disaster. The demand to observe the Jewish weekly sabbath, the Jewish festivals such as Passover, Atonement and Booths, which were based on the Jewish lunar calendar, and the sabbatical years and jubilees were all part of a legal system which was empty of any power to gain God's favor.<sup>59</sup> Paul was afraid that he might have wasted his time on the Galatians<sup>60</sup>.

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parent. It is not that Paul is denying God's authorship of Torah, but that he is emphasizing the different status of sons who have been adopted from Torah to the freedom and full rights of sonship in Christ. It is the difference between what would later be called *bar mitzvah* (= son of the commandment) and *uios tou Theou* (= son of God).

<sup>56</sup> *Abba* is the Aramaic word for Father, but more with the nuance of *pappa*, since it was widely used in the talk of small children. It would probably have seemed disrespectful, perhaps unthinkable, for Jews to address God in this familiar way, but the address was a hallmark of Jesus' prayer-life, and Paul doubtless derived it from the traditions about Jesus, J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Scribners, 1971) 61-68.

<sup>57</sup> Almost as an afterthought, Paul adds the phrase, "...but rather, being known by God." He wants to be sure that the Galatians understand clearly that salvation is by divine initiative, not human initiative. Grace is prevenient!

<sup>58</sup> See the discussion under 4:3

<sup>59</sup> Quite literally, Paul says, "You are observing days, and months and seasons and years." That he would lump even the Jewish festivals in the same category as pagan festivals, at least with regard to their power to please God, demonstrates how intense is his rejection of justification by legalism.

<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere, Paul makes similar remarks about having "labored in vain" (1 Co. 15:14; 1 Th. 3:5; cf. 2 Co. 11:2-4). If the Galatians eventually defected, Paul's work among them would come to nothing.

## 4:12-16

Thus he pleads with them to follow his example. He has left the fold of Judaism to “become all things to all” (cf. 1 Co. 9:19-23), in effect taking his stance with the Gentiles. The Galatians should follow suit. When they responded to the gospel, they did not injure Paul (although by defecting from it, they might be doing so now).

Paul had come to Galatia in the first place because of an illness, though he does not enlarge on the circumstances. Either he had not originally intended to go to Galatia, or else he was passing through, not intending to stay, but the illness changed his plans.<sup>61</sup> In any case, even though struggling with sickness himself, and even though his sickness was also a problem for the Galatians<sup>62</sup>, Paul was graciously received by them as though he were a messenger (or an angel) from God or even as though he was Jesus Christ himself. They would gladly have given to Paul whatever he needed, even their own eyes if possible.<sup>63</sup> Since this was their initial response to Paul and the good news, what had happened to their spontaneous joy in the meantime? Would the truth of the gospel of grace now make them Paul’s enemies?

## 4:17-20

So Paul turns to the infiltrators who have brought their new theology to Galatia. They were certainly zealous, but their cause was wrong. They wanted to alienate the Galatians from Paul so as to win the Galatians’ loyalties to their own perverted cause. Zeal is certainly a good quality, providing the issue is right, but Paul was deeply disappointed that the Galatians seemed to be zealous for the gospel of grace only when he was personally with them. Now that he was absent, their zeal was being shifted to an alien theology. As a parent who is inwardly torn over a wayward child, Paul calls the Galatians his “little children.” His inward agitation is so acute that he compares it to childbirth, and since the Galatians have reverted from grace back to legalism, it is like childbirth all over again. He had struggled to bring them into new birth when he first preached the gospel to them, and now, because of their

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<sup>61</sup> Much conjecture has gone into Paul’s illness, particularly as it is related to his comments about a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Co. 12:7). William Ramsey built a case for chronic malaria which may have driven Paul from the sea coast into the highlands of Galatia on the Anatolian Plateau, cf. W. Ramsey, *A Historical Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 417-428 (see also Ramsey’s *St. Paul the Traveler*, 94ff., 135). However, no line of reasoning can be considered final.

<sup>62</sup> The Greek text quite literally reads, “Your trial in my flesh you did not despise or disdain.” This seems to indicate that in some way, whether due to the responsibility of caring for a sick man or due to some other factor in the illness, Paul’s condition was a difficulty for the Galatians.

<sup>63</sup> The precise implications of the expression, “You would have plucked out our eyes and given them to me,” are unclear. This might have been simply a colloquial saying, such as our own, “You would have given me your right arm,” or it might indicate that Paul had failing eyesight. Some have connected this reference with 6:11 as an indication that Paul may have suffered from near-sightedness, but such a conjecture is unclear, since he may have written with an enlarged penmanship for reasons other than ophthalmia.

defection, he is struggling once more to bring them back to the message of grace. Paul mixes his metaphors somewhat, but the point is well taken. The metaphor of childbirth and the metaphor of the image or character of Christ being formed within the believer both point to the same reality.

Though it was not practically possible, Paul would have liked to speak with them face to face so as to be able to communicate in some fashion other than this harshness. However, since he could not be with them, the letter would have to suffice, regardless of its tone. The tone, in turn, was produced by his inward turmoil.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Allegorical Argument (4:21-31)**

Paul's final argument in favor of faith over legalism is in the style of rabbinic theologizing called *midrash*<sup>65</sup>. It presupposes knowledge of the Old Testament that few people possess today, and because it is somewhat technical, many regard it as the most difficult passage to interpret in the whole letter<sup>66</sup>. It may very well be that the Judaizers themselves used similar styles of arguments, and if so, then Paul was turning their own methods against them. In this argument, Paul sets forth a series of correspondences between legalism and grace<sup>67</sup>:

#### **Legalism**

Hagar, the Slave-wife  
Ishmael, the Slave-son (born naturally)  
The Old Covenant (Mt. Sinai, Arabia)  
Earthly Jerusalem  
Judaism

#### **Grace**

Sarah, the Free-wife  
Isaac, the Free-son (born miraculously)  
The New Covenant (Heaven)  
Heavenly Jerusalem  
Christianity

#### *4:21-23*

Since those who were reverting back to legalism, particularly Mosaic legalism, accepted the authority of Torah, Paul now presses his point home through yet one more argument from Torah. The Genesis record describes Abraham's two sons. One

<sup>64</sup> The verb Paul uses, *aporeo* (= to be at a loss), is roughly equivalent to our own expression "to be at wit's end."

<sup>65</sup> *Midrash* is that style of exegesis and commentary that was developed by the Jewish rabbis in ancient Palestine. It attempted to penetrate the inner significance of texts of Scripture so as to establish authentic religious and ethical doctrines, cf. *IDB* (1962) 111.376. This passage in Galatians is a *midrash* on several chapters in the Book of Genesis (16, 21-31), introduced by the keyword group *eleutheria/eleutheros* (= freedom/free person) in 4:22, cf. E. Ellis, "How the New Testament Uses the Old," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 204-205.

<sup>66</sup> J. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1968) 121.

<sup>67</sup> In 4:25 he actually uses the word *systoicheo* (= to correspond or parallel).

was Ishmael, a slave-son born naturally to Abraham through Hagar, a slave-wife (Ge. 16:1-4a, 15-16). The other was Isaac, a free-son born miraculously to Abraham through Sarah, a free-wife (Ge. 21:1-7). The son born in the natural way represents law, the common means by which people think they become righteous. The son born by a miracle represents grace and faith, the means of justification that comes by divine declaration and against all odds.

4:24-27

The story of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael, on the one hand, and Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, on the other, may be taken figuratively to represent Torah as opposed to grace and faith.<sup>68</sup> The two wives of Abraham represent two covenants. Paul does not name the two covenants, but the context demands that one of them is the covenant of law while the other one is the new covenant, the covenant established with Abraham by promise, as predicted by Jeremiah (Je. 31:31ff.) and fulfilled in Jesus' death (Mk.14:24//Mt. 26:28//Lk. 22:20).

Hagar, the slave-wife, represents the covenant made at Sinai in Arabia, that is Torah. This covenant is a covenant of slavery, like Hagar herself was a slave. All who are born under this covenant are slaves, just as Ishmael was a slave. In fact, the city of Jerusalem, the capital of Jewish religion, was still in slavery to Torah, because Jerusalem represented all those Jews who were still faithful to Torah. That Paul was bold enough to compare the Jewish constituency to the Ishmaelites would have been a particularly sharp rebuff, for Ishmael was described as a "wild donkey of a man," and his descendants, the Arabs, were categorized as those who lived the life of hostile bedouins in the deserts (Ge. 16:12; 25:13-18). Furthermore, one line of Ishmael's descendants crossed over into the family line of the Edomites, the descendants of Esau (Ge. 28:8-9). For Paul to identify the followers of Judaism with the Arabs was a stiff jab indeed!

Sarah and Isaac, the free-wife and the free-son, represent the gracious promise that culminates in the gospel of grace and faith. In contrast to the earthly Jerusalem, which was still in slavery to Torah, believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ belong to the heavenly Jerusalem, which is free. To reinforce the miraculous character of birth by a barren mother, Paul quotes Isaiah 54:1. This passage, addressed to the Jewish exiles, follows hard on the heels of the Fourth Song of the Servant<sup>69</sup>, the familiar description of the innocent suffering Servant of Yahweh who suffered for the sins of others (Is. 52:13--53:12). Paul assumes that his readers will be familiar with the

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<sup>68</sup> The verb *allegoreo*, from which we derive the English word allegory, means to speak symbolically or allegorically.

<sup>69</sup> For a clear analysis of the Four Servant Songs in Isaiah and their use by writers in the NT, see F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 83-99.



context. The only response to be made in view of the vicarious atonement, which was fulfilled in Jesus' death (Is. 53), was overwhelming joy (Is. 54:1). The Servant's work has been accomplished. The disgrace of childlessness has been rectified by a miracle. The nation that had suffered sterility and desolation in exile would once more bear children, not in the natural course of events, but by the power of God. This promise Paul understands to be fulfilled in the proclamation of the gospel. The children born out of grace and faith are categorically different than those born out of law. Those born out of law are born in the natural order of things, and they are slaves. Those born out of grace and faith are born by an act of God, and they are free! The true fulfillment of the promises made to Israel, both the promise of blessing to Abraham and the promise of children to the exiles in Babylon, are to be found in those who respond in faith to the good news about Jesus.

In this allegory, Paul not only presses home the bitter truth that the hated Arabs spiritually correspond to the Jews who hold fast to Torah, he also presses home the equal truth that the real descendants of Abraham -- the true Jews -- are the people of faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of their nationality. As the Baptist had said to his Jewish hearers, God was indeed able to raise up children to Abraham by miraculous means (Mt. 3:9)!

4:28-31

So the Galatians, who had responded in faith to the message about Jesus, were like Isaac. They were children of promise, born by a miracle. Just as there was conflict between the free-son and the slave-son in the family of Abraham (Ge. 21:8ff.), a conflict in which Ishmael, who was born in the natural order of things, persecuted Isaac, the son born by the miraculous power of God, so there was conflict between those who wished to hold on to the legalism of Torah and those who had been born by an act of the Holy Spirit. In the present conflict, as in the ancient one, the slave-son had to go. In ancient Near Eastern law, it was stipulated that indirect heirs (such as slave-son) must give place to a true son born later<sup>70</sup>. So Abraham was obliged to send away the slave-wife and the slave-son (Ge. 21:10), just as Paul was calling for the Galatians to send away the Judaizers who were attempting to enslave them under Mosaic legalism.

Addressing his readers directly, Paul declares, "You are not children of the slave-wife but of the free-wife." The Galatians were not children of Torah, but

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<sup>70</sup> Our knowledge of Hurrian laws is based on the discovery of the tablets in Nuzi, an ancient Hurrian town to the east of the Tigris. Some 20,000 clay tablets inform us of the legal and social structures of society in patriarchal times. The biblical patriarchs kept close contact with Haran, a Hurrian town, and a number of puzzling aspects within the patriarchal narratives have been explained by Hurrian law, cf. E. Speiser, *Genesis [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 113-114; E. Maly, "Genesis," *JBC* (1968) 1.19-20; G. Mendenhall, "Covenant," *IDB* (1962) 1.718.

children of Abraham by faith, and therefore, children of God!

### **The Paraenesis (5:1--6:10)**

The letters of Paul demonstrate that he is as much an ethicist as a theologian. In form, his letters follow a generally fixed pattern, that is, an opening, a thanksgiving or blessing, a body, a paraenesis,<sup>71</sup> and a closing. A paraenesis was not uncommon in private letters that have survived from the Greco-Roman world, and while Paul adopts the more-or-less standard form, he also adapts it to his Christian purposes. Paraenesis in Paul's letters is invariably built upon the foregoing theological base, and it consists of ethical, edifying material with strong moral overtones.<sup>72</sup>

### **Christian Freedom (5:1)**

For some time now, Paul's argumentation has focused on the slavery and bondage of legalism and law. He has used a literary technique which might be described as "chaining," that is, a stringing together of various metaphors and arguments all of which have the common theme of slavery. As such, he traces this slavery in the following way:

1. Scripture (Torah) declares the whole world to be a prisoner of sin (3:22).
2. The law held us as prisoners (we were condemned) before faith came (3:23).
3. The law was a slave-custodian under whose temporary charge we were placed so that we might come to Christ (3:24).
4. Even sons are like slaves until they reach the age of transition determined by the father, and the time of transition, spiritually speaking, was the advent of Christ (4:1-2, 4-5).
5. When we were at the level of immature children, we were slaves to the *stoicheia*, the basic principles of the world (4:3).
6. Prior to Christian conversion, the Galatians had been slaves to pagan gods (4:8).
7. Now they are being urged to submit to the slavery of Jewish legalism (4:9-10).
8. To do so would be to identify with the slave-wife and slave-child of Abraham, both of which represent the slavery of Jewish legalism(4:22-25).
9. However, just as in the story of Abraham's family, the slave-wife and slave-

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<sup>71</sup> *Paraenesis* is the Greek word for advice.

<sup>72</sup> For Paul's use of paraenesis following the common pattern of Greco-Roman letters, see W. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 37-39, 83.

son must go; they cannot be heirs together with the free-wife and free-son (4:30-31).

This extensive commentary on the slavery of legalism reaches a crescendo with Paul's emphatic declaration: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free!" Paul gives both an assertion and an exhortation -- both a fact and a demand. The assertion is that Christians are truly free, liberated from all the former bondages, categories and legalisms that enslaved them. To be free in Christ means to be liberated from the power of sin, the despair of condemning law, the prejudices of racism, classism and sexism, the bondage of theological immaturity, the demands of social impositions, and the futility of pagan religion.

The exhortation -- the imperative demand -- is that the Galatians must dig in their heels tenaciously to protect this freedom, not allowing themselves to be snared again by the yoke<sup>73</sup> of legalism, regardless of what sort it is. If believers are free in Christ, they must not revert back to slavery!

### **Everything or Nothing (5:2-12)**

For Paul, there is no middle ground. It could not be both slavery and freedom, for such is a contradiction in terms. Therefore, it could not be faith and legalism -- the categories are mutually exclusive. If one is in right standing before God by faith, then it is faith alone, not faith plus works. If one achieves right standing by works, then faith in Christ is pointless and the death of Jesus was an exercise in futility.

5:2-6

Of course, the immediate demand of the Judaizers was for circumcision. Paul well knew, however, that circumcision<sup>74</sup> was a theological symbol that stood for salvation by Jewish ritual (cf. Ac. 15:1). Furthermore, it was a symbol of placing oneself under the obligation of obeying the entire 613 commandments of Torah in order to be righteous before God. Paul was not opposed to circumcision as a cultural practice among the Jews (of. Ac. 16:3; 1 Co. 7:18), for he considered it a matter indifferent (cf. 1 Co. 7:19). But Paul was adamantly opposed to the notion that circumcision was necessary to gain right standing with God, and in fact, if anyone was circumcised for that reason, Christ had implicitly become worthless. To require circumcision was to sever relations with Christ and to become alienated from the gospel of grace. It was everything or nothing! It was either/or, not both/and -- either

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<sup>73</sup> The image of a yoke is particularly apt, since the metaphor was used by the rabbis to refer to submission to Torah. They spoke of the yoke of Torah, the yoke of the commandments, the yoke of the kingdom, and the yoke of God, cf. W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) II.17.

<sup>74</sup> The Galatians had apparently not yet submitted to circumcision, since the conditional verb in 5:2 is a present passive and carries the nuance, "If you allow yourselves to be circumcised..." (cf. Phillips, NEB).

faith or law, not both faith and law.

Finally, true righteousness was eschatological, not merely temporal. To be sure, the believer already has been given the gift of righteousness, as Paul says elsewhere (e.g., Ro. 9:30). Still, the consummation of this gift of righteousness will be God's declaration of acceptance at the great judgment where Christ stands to defend those who believe (cf. Ro.4:25). The righteousness, which is by faith, is from "first to last" or "from faith to faith" (cf. Ro. 1:17). At the great judgment, no one could ever be pronounced righteous by perfect obedience to the laws of Torah (cf. Ro. 3:20). Rather, it is only those who are declared righteous by an act of divine grace who truly will be in right standing (of. 1 Th. 3:13). It is this final declaration of righteousness for which believers eagerly wait. Since that is the case, circumcision or the lack of it means nothing.

The only thing that counts is genuine faith that expresses itself in love. It is worth observing that Paul shows little interest in abstract faith that has no practical expression. Genuine Christian faith is not merely a set of propositions. It is a way of life. Paul fully agrees with James (2:17-19, 24, 26) and John (1 Jn. 2:9; 4:17, 20-21) on this point!

5:7-12

Using the metaphor of the familiar Greco-Roman games, Paul describes the Galatians as runners who had been cut off by their competition<sup>75</sup>. Switching to the language of rhetoric, Paul asserts that the persuasive arguments of the Judaizers, to which the Galatians had been listening, certainly did not originate with God. Citing a familiar maxim, Paul warns the Galatians about the adverse effects of entertaining such ideas.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, he is confident that they ultimately will see the situation in his way.

It is difficult to know exactly how to take this expression of confidence on Paul's part. Earlier in the letter he certainly did not evidence any particular confidence, but in fact, declared that he was shocked (1:6) and perplexed (4:20), that he feared he might have wasted his time in Galatia (4:11), and that he may now have become the Galatians' enemy (4:16). Furthermore, he accuses them of falling from grace and being alienated from Christ (5:4). These are not the sorts of expressions

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<sup>75</sup> Paul was apparently quite familiar with the Greek games, for he makes allusions to them several times, both in terms of rules (2 Ti. 2:5), physical conditioning (1 Co. 9:25, 27), foot-racing (1 Co. 9:24, 26a; Ga. 2:2; Phil. 2:16), boxing (1 Co. 9:26b), and chariotry (Phil. 3:13-14). He held that there was some value in physical training (1 Ti. 4:8), and it is likely that he was in Corinth for the biennial Isthmian Games in AD 51, though this might have been some time after his Galatian correspondence, Cf. V. Furnish, "Corinth in Paul's Time: What Can Archaeology Tell Us," *BAR* (May/June 1988) 24-25.

<sup>76</sup> The maxim, "A little yeast leavens the whole batch," is roughly comparable to our own maxim, "One bad apple spoils the barrel." Paul was fond of the saying, for he used it twice (1 Co. 5:6).

that usually climax with a statement of confidence! However, while Paul seems to show little confidence in the Galatians themselves, he places a very firm confidence “in the Lord.” This amounts to a confidence in God’s power to complete his gracious work of salvation in the Galatians -- a confidence in the perseverance of those whom God has chosen (cf. Phil. 1:6). The infiltrator, and here Paul narrows it down to one particular ringleader, though he is uncertain as to his exact identity<sup>77</sup>, will bear God’s judgment.

It is possible that some Galatians were under the impression that Paul favored circumcision. Perhaps they had heard of the circumcision of Timothy (cf. Ac. 16:3), though it is unclear whether this event would have occurred before or after the Galatian letter was written. In any case, Paul wants it clearly understood that he does not favor circumcision, and in fact, he would not have incurred any persecution from the Judaizers in the first place if he had favored it. If he favored circumcision with its attendant doctrine of justification by law, there would be no offense to the message of the cross, for the cross would become a secondary event. But the message of the cross was indeed an offense, because it announced to everyone that in the death of Jesus, and there alone, was there true reconciliation with God. The cross alone was decisive! It was a *skandalon* (= trap, offense), because it rejected the effectiveness of all human effort and merit.

As a final retort, Paul voices the wish that if the Judaizers wanted so intensely to practice circumcision, perhaps they should simply castrate themselves. His language is coarse, and his disgust is apparent. Translators have struggled to capture his idea while maintaining good taste<sup>78</sup>, but it is difficult. This is a raw and angry retort and ought to be read as such.<sup>79</sup>

### **The Spirit Versus the Flesh (5:13-26)**

Paul is truly regarded as the “Apostle of Liberty,” but here, as in all of his writings, liberty is not antinomianism or lawlessness. Paul argues for freedom, but he never detaches freedom from responsibility. For Paul, true Christian liberty is the freedom to act as one should rather than permission to sin with impunity.

Paul works out the implications of Christian freedom in the categories of *sarx* (= flesh) and *pneuma* (= spirit), categories that are as often misunderstood as they are

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<sup>77</sup> Earlier, Paul has spoken of his opposition in plural terms (1:7). Although here he speaks of a single person, it is no doubt with the view in mind of a person who represents the whole.

<sup>78</sup> Other translations render the phrase by such expressions as, “They had better go the whole way and make eunuchs of themselves” (NEB), “Let them go on and castrate themselves” (TEV, NAB), and “I would like to see the knife slip” (JB)

<sup>79</sup> Elsewhere, Paul makes a similar derogatory remark about the Judaizers when he calls them “dogs” and “mutilators” (Phil. 3:2).

understood. It is not uncommon for interpreters to define flesh as a category of evil and spirit as a category of godliness, though this owes more to Greek thought than to Paul's letters. For Paul, the spirit as well as the body can be contaminated (2 Co. 7:1), and God's sanctifying work includes the entire range of spirit and body (1 Th. 5:23). Rather, Paul sees the flesh as an arena of human weakness. To be sure, because the flesh is weak, it is susceptible to sin, but the flesh is not sinful in and of itself. Jesus himself was born "according to the flesh," but he was without sin (e.g., Ro. 1:3; of. 8:3; 9:5; 2 Co. 5:16; Ep. 2:14ff.; Col. 1:22; 1 Ti. 3:16). Instead, the flesh is the weak and transitory human state, which is mortal and perishable.

The Spirit (that is, the Holy Spirit) is the new mode of existence for the believer. Whereas the flesh is an arena of weakness, the Spirit is an arena of power. Just as Jesus died in the fleshly arena of weakness, he lives through the Spirit by God's power (cf. Ro. 1:3-4; 8:10; 2 Co. 13:4; 1 Ti. 3:16). As such, then, the flesh and the Spirit are two states, two modes of existence, and two spheres of influence.<sup>80</sup> One is weak and temporary, while the other is powerful and eternal. It is out of the context of these fundamental structures that Paul speaks of freedom.

#### 5:13-15

As he does in the Roman letter, Paul makes clear that the blessing of Christian freedom does not mean that one may indulge in human weaknesses (Ro. 6:1-2). The Christian is free from sin and the despair of condemning law, but he/she is not free to sin. Christians may not use their freedom as a license or a pretext to live in the sphere of weakness. Instead, they are responsible for serving each other in love, as Torah itself commands (Lv. 19:18), as Jesus affirmed (cf. Mt. 22:37-40; Mk. 12:29-31; Lk. 10:25-27), and as Paul and others also say (Ro. 13:9; Ja. 2:8). Freedom from the weakness of the self means the opportunity to serve others.

Legalism, on the other hand, stifles love and the spirit of servanthood. It quickly degenerates into judgmentalism and criticism. The congregation divides into the "haves" and the "have-nots," the ones who "do" and the ones who "don't." Hypocritical superiority becomes the order of the day, and the church becomes like a pack of dogs, biting and eating each other until all are destroyed.

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<sup>80</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. J. de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 64-68. The NEB, which understands Paul's categories of flesh and Spirit to refer to a lower nature versus a higher nature, is based on Greek metaphysical dualism, in which the body retards the capacities of the soul and spirit because their essences are incompatible. But as Keck says, "This is precisely what Paul does *not* mean," Keck, 105. The NIV rendering of *sarx* as the "sinful nature" is perhaps better (Ro. 8; Ga. 5), but this in turn must not be taken to imply that the body is evil, which Paul would never say. Our bodies are God's creation, and they are good -- even worthy to be resurrected! Paul's meaning of the flesh is derived from Old Testament thought in which the flesh means creatureliness and transitoriness (cf. Is. 40:6), cf. H. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 26-31.

## 5:16-18

Instead of living in the arena of weakness, believers should live in the arena of power --instead of living in the flesh, they should live in the Spirit. If they live in the Spirit, they will not succumb to the desires of their human nature. To live “by the Spirit” means to live according to the inner motivations of the Holy Spirit that indwells all believers. All Christians have an inner conflict that is intense, and either the flesh or the Spirit will suffer, since both cannot have their own desires fulfilled.

To live “by the Spirit” is at opposite poles from living under the principle of law. The one is a positive force, the other a negative one. The Spirit leads the believer by the compulsion of love; the law drives a person by the fear of consequences. If one is led by the Spirit, he/she is no longer under the despair of condemnation.

## 5:19-21

To insure that his readers will know what he means by a life lived in the realm of weakness, Paul provides a list of activities to which the flesh, in its weakness, is susceptible . Like most of Paul’s lists, whether lists of virtues, gifts, or sins, this list is suggestive rather than exhaustive. It provides an indication of the kinds of things he has in mind rather than all of the things possible, and he closes the list with the extension, “....and things like these.” It is interesting to note that in light of the current problems at Galatia, Paul loads up his list with several terms having to do with factionalism, dissension and sectarianism. The people who behave in these ways will not inherit God’s kingdom, and by this Paul means, the eschatological reign of God at the close of the age.

*porneia* (= prostitution, unchastity or fornication; in short, every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse)

*akatharsia* (= uncleanness, impurity, being morally dirty)

*aselgeia* (= debauchery, licentiousness, gross indecency)

*eidololatria* (= idolatry, participating in pagan worship)

*pharmakeia* (= sorcery, witchcraft)

*echthrai* (= hostilities, hatred)

*eris* (= strife, discord, contention, quarreling)

*zelos* (= zeal, rivalry, partyism, fanaticism)

*thymoi* (= anger, wrath, rage, fury)

*eritheiai* (= selfish ambition, contentiousness, disputes)

*dichostasiai* (= dissension)

*haireseis* (= sectarianism, partyism, factionalism)

*phthonoi* (= envy, jealousy)

*methai* (= drunkenness, drinking bouts, dissipation)

*komoi* (= excessive partying, unrestrained revelry, carousing)

5:22-26

In opposition to the works of the flesh, Paul then lists the fruit of the Spirit. Much has been made of the singular form of the word *karpos* (= fruit), usually from the standpoint that the various items in the list are not to be separated from each other. As such, every believer is to bear the fruit of the Spirit, and the various items are much like grapes in a cluster -- they all come together.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, Paul seems to deliberately contrast the terms “works” and “fruit.” The works of the flesh are human productions. The fruit of the Spirit is produced by the indwelling Holy Spirit and is not a result of mere human effort. As before, Paul’s list is suggestive, not exhaustive.

*agape* (= love, particularly altruistic love)

*chara* (= joy)

*eirene* (= peace, harmony, tranquility)

*makrothymia* (= patience, tolerance, endurance, particularly with respect to other people)

*chrestotes* (= goodness, uprightness, kindness, generosity)

*agathosyne* (= goodness, uprightness, generosity)

*pistis* (= faithfulness, reliability, fidelity, trustworthiness)

*prautes* (= gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness, mildness)

*enkrateia* (=self-discipline, self-control, especially though not exclusively in matters of sex)

Not too much should probably be made of the order of these virtues, though it may at least be pointed out that the first three deal with internal qualities affecting primarily the self while the final six have stronger social implications.

Certainly there has never been a restriction on these kinds of virtues! If one lives by the Spirit, there is no need of restraining orders. While law works primarily as a negative force, both forbidding actions and prescribing retribution, the Spirit works as a positive force, inspiring and motivating behavior for the good of all concerned.

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<sup>81</sup> The KJV gives the term “fruits” in Phil. 1:11, but this is simply an incorrect translation. The word is still singular in the Greek text.



Those who truly belong to Christ have surrendered the realm of fleshly weakness, with its susceptibilities and cravings, to the cross of Jesus. This statement is parallel to Jesus' call to discipleship and self-denial. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk. 9:23). "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:27). Paul's statement here must not be confused with his earlier statement about being crucified with Christ (2:20). The former has to do with faith-union with Christ and the completed atoning work of the cross. This latter has to do with Christian lifestyle. The former has been done for the believer in Christ's death. The latter points to what the believer has him/herself done in putting to death the actions of sin.<sup>82</sup>

As a further admonition, Paul urges the Galatians to live a life controlled by the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit is the source of spiritual life, then one must let it direct his/her lifestyle. The spiritual life forbids any form of conceit, ambitious rivalry or envy. As Paul's words imply, there is a relationship between what we think of ourselves and how we treat others. If our self-image is inflated, our relationships with others will be poisoned by pride. The Christian way is servanthood, not rivalry!

### **Responsibility for Others (6:1-10)**

Paul extends this line of advice further.

#### *6:1-5*

If a fellow Christian is discovered committing a trespass, he/she<sup>83</sup> should be gently restored by those who are spiritual. But who are the "spiritual ones" of whom Paul speaks? He gives no criteria, but in light of what he has just described as spiritual fruit, it seems most probable that he has in mind those Christians who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. (It would be highly unlikely, without anything in the present context to justify it, that Paul has in mind some particular spiritual gift, such as one of the ones mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14). Furthermore, those who engage in any sort of ministry that seeks to restore others must watch their own lives carefully, since they also are susceptible to temptation.

Christians should care for each other, sharing each other's concerns and struggles and difficulties. In this way, they can fulfill Christ's law. Paul surely has in mind that "Christ's law" is to be contrasted with Mosaic legalism, and it is likely that he has in view Christ's teachings regarding love and servanthood. It is also possible that Paul intends the three expressions "love your neighbor as yourself" (5:14), "carry

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<sup>82</sup> The grammar of the passage is significant. In 2:20, the verb is passive ("I have been crucified...."). Here, the verb is active ("we have crucified....").

<sup>83</sup> Paul uses the term *adelphoi* (= brothers), but he certainly has in mind all Christians, male or female.

each other's burdens" (6:2a), and "fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2b) to be roughly equivalent.<sup>84</sup>

Attitudes of self-importance are to be shunned. Self-evaluation should be performed internally, with respect to motives, not externally, by comparisons with other people. Furthermore, there is no official "tester" of God's people in the church. Each believer should examine him/herself. It is significant that Paul balances out his advice for a restoration ministry in the church with the equally important advice that no one is competent to set him/herself up as the conscience of the people. Furthermore, he balances the command to bear each other's burdens with the equally important, "Each should carry his/her own load." Benevolence and mutual concern must never become an excuse for dependency and laziness. A ministry of restoration is never an excuse for meddling in other people's affairs!

6:6

The old English KJV rendering, "Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth," is not merely archaic but misleading. The word *koinoneo* (= to share) probably does not have reference to verbal communication as much as to sharing material goods. What Paul is urging is that the Galatians do not cease to give financial support to their leaders.

6:7-10

In view of all that he has said, Paul adds a final warning about the nature of the harvest. God is not the kind of deity who can be fooled, and the common proverb, "You reap what you sow," is true. Whether Paul coined this proverb or borrowed it from the common vernacular is unknown, but the fact remains that God assesses human actions. While Paul consistently argues that good works can never justify, he is equally insistent that Christians should be living good lives and doing good works. The person who sows or lives in the arena of human weakness, that is, in the flesh, will harvest a massive crop failure. The person who sows in the realm of the Spirit will harvest eternal life. Christians must be diligent in doing good deeds, and in time, they will harvest a reward from God if they do not give up. They are to make the most of their opportunities to do good, and they should do good to everyone, both Christian and non-Christian alike, though fellow-Christians come under special consideration.

### **The Closing (6:11-18)**

Paul is now ready to close his letter. Up to this point, he has apparently been

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<sup>84</sup> Stott, 158.

dictating to his amanuensis<sup>85</sup>, but now he takes the pen in order to add his personal authentication of the letter.

### **Paul's Large Penmanship (6:11)**

Paul draws special attention to his penmanship. He apparently writes in much larger characters than does the amanuensis, and since the closing in his own hand is his own personal mark of authentication (Cf. 2 Th. 3:17), he wishes to make the letter very personal. While the word *gramma* (= letter of the alphabet), as used here, can in some cases refer to a document, Paul's habit is to use the word *epistole* (= letter, epistle) as the designation for his correspondence (cf. Ro. 16:22; 1 Co. 5:9; 2 Co. 3:1; 10:9; 1 Th. 5:27).

Why Paul writes in such large characters is not clear. It may simply have been his habit, or as some have suggested, it may be his way of emphasizing the final remarks, somewhat like our own use of italics or underlining. Others, following the speculation that his eyesight was poor, have suggested nearsightedness as the cause (see comments under 4:12-16).

### **The Final Argument (6:12-15)**

In his own hand, then, Paul summarizes his case. The Judaizers who have come to Galatia have attempted to win over the Galatian Christians through an impressive array of religiosity. They have urged the Galatians to *euprosopesai en sarki* (= to make a good showing in the flesh) by becoming circumcised. Paul sees a deeper motive, however, than simply the attempt to please God. Rather than trying to please God, their real motive was to please the Jewish constituency. These Judaizers were not willing to be ostracized from their Jewish culture and religion for the sake of Christ, something that Christ requires for all his disciples (cf. Lk. 14:25-27). By retaining circumcision and its inclusive allegiance to Mosaic legalism, these Judaizers could ostensibly have the best of both worlds -- they could be acceptable to Christians as well as to their non-Christian Jewish families and friends. Paul sees this for what it is, a refusal to suffer persecution for the cross. Furthermore, even those

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<sup>85</sup> It was not unusual for Paul to use an amanuensis or secretary in composing his letters (cf. Ro. 16:22), though when he did so, it was also his habit to pen the closing in his own hand, as he does here (1 Co. 16:21; Col. 4:18; 2 Th. 3:17). It is well known that secretaries were sometimes allowed considerable freedom in writing down their master's ideas, and in some cases, the master would give only a rough outline to his amanuensis, who was left to compose the document in accord with the outline. The master, of course, would have to give his approval of the final product. As such, though the ideas expressed were the master's, the language was that of the amanuensis, cf. D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970) 779. On other occasions, the work of an amanuensis amounted more or less to the taking of dictation. How much freedom Paul gave to his amanuensis in any given letter is debatable, but the practice of closing the letter in his own hand was an accepted convention. Cicero, for instance, follows this same practice, cf. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* [WBCJ (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 216.

who follow Mosaic legalism are not capable of measuring up to its demands, so the whole system then erodes into a glorification of Jewish ritual, what Paul sarcastically calls “boasting about your flesh.”

For his part, Paul makes his position clear. There is no room for boasting except in the cross of Jesus Christ. This theme of “no room to boast” is merely in keeping with the gospel of grace. If salvation is indeed by the grace of God, then human boasting has no place, and Jewish ritual has no provenance (cf. Ro. 4:2; 1 Co. 1:28-31; 4:7; 2 Co. 10:17; Ep. 2:9). Boasting is a quality of the world, but in the cross, the world has been nailed up for death, and Paul has been nailed up with Christ because of the world’s rejection. Circumcision or the lack of it is irrelevant. The only thing that matters is being a new creation in Christ (2 Co. 5:17), or in the words of the Fourth Gospel, being born from above (Jn. 3:5). Ritual, of whatever sort it is, does not make one a new creation in Christ. Only God does this by an act of grace through the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Israel of God (6:16)**

Paul now adds his final benediction to the church. As a concluding irony, he describes the Galatian Christians as the “Israel of God.” This designation is in keeping with what he already has said, that is, that the true seed of Abraham are the people of faith (3:7, 29), and the true children of Sarah are those who are free in Christ (4:23, 31).<sup>86</sup>

### **The Marks of Jesus (6:17)**

In contrast to the physical mark of circumcision, which indicated loyalty to Mosaic law, Paul bore in his body the physical scars of his loyalty to Jesus, the scars that had been inflicted by his numerous persecutions. If the South Galatian theory is correct, then Paul may have been particularly speaking of the scars that remained from his stoning in Lystra (Ac. 14:19-20).<sup>87</sup> In view of his obvious loyalty to Christ, no one should dare trouble him on the issue of circumcision as though he merely wished to avoid discomfort.

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<sup>86</sup> It is not uncommon for dispensationalists to view the phrase “Israel of God” as referring exclusively to Jewish Christians, based on the dispensational preference for maintaining a sharp distinction between Israel and the church and the dispensational reluctance to view the church as the New Israel, cf. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 89. As such, then, they would view Paul as having two groups in mind here -- those who “follow this rule” (Gentile Christians) and “the Israel of God” (Jewish Christians). This construction seems unnecessarily artificial, however, and there is every contextual reason to take the conjunction *kai* in the sense of “even” (so NIV, JB, RSV, TCNT, Williams, Phillips, Weymouth).

<sup>87</sup> In 2 Corinthians, Paul details some of the incidents that very well would have left him physically scarred for life, incidents such as beatings and floggings (6:5; 11:23), including the five occasions when he received the Jewish forty lashes minus one (11:24) and the three times when he was beaten by the Romans with rods (11:25).

There is little to commend the medieval interpretation that Paul bore in his hands and feet the *stigmata* of Jesus' crucifixion in a sort of sympathetic identification. This interpretation is nothing more than an anachronistic reading into the text the phenomena of a later period. To be sure, the Greek word *stigmata* is used here, but in the Greco-Roman world, the term *stigmata* referred to the brands upon slaves that marked them as the possession of their masters. Paul gladly bears such brands, the marks of Jesus, which are his physical scars suffered in persecution.<sup>88</sup>

### **Benediction (6:18)**

Paul closes with a short benediction in which the significant word is grace.

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<sup>88</sup> J. Fitzmyer, "Galatians," *JBC* (1968) II.246.

## The Thessalonian Letters

### Introduction

Paul's Thessalonian letters, among his earliest, revolve around the subject of Christ's return. For modern Christians as for ancient ones, this topic is exciting and intriguing, although one must be willing to confess the limitations of our knowledge. In Paul's teaching and writing, he frequently uses the word *elpis* (= hope) to refer to the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of believers at that time (Ac. 23:6; 24:15; 26:6-8; Ep. 4:4; Col. 1:5, 27; 1 Ti. 1:1; Tit. 1:2; 2:13; 3:7). The Thessalonian letters are no exception. It is the hope of Christ's return that inspires endurance (1 Th. 1:3), that motivates evangelism (2:19), that assuages grief over departed loved ones (4:13), that becomes the believer's armor against despair (5:8) and that builds strength and courage (2 Th. 2:16-17).

Sometimes in English the word hope takes on a tentative connotation. Not so for Paul! For him, the word hope carries an unconditional certainty within itself. It is not an uncertain wishfulness but a confident and unshakable expectation!<sup>89</sup>

### The Church at Thessalonica

During Paul's second missionary journey, an event of great significance occurred in Asia Minor. Paul had traveled through Phrygia and Galatia ministering to established churches and delivering to them the encyclical from the Jerusalem Council (Ac. 16:4). He intended to turn back toward the East to Bithynia to do new missions work but was forbidden by Christ (Ac. 16:6-7). At Troas Paul received his direction from the Lord to turn west instead of east (Ac. 16:8-10). The next area of evangelism would be Macedonia. After work in Philippi (Ac. 16), Paul and his company continued down the famous Via Egnatia (the main Roman highway

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<sup>89</sup> E. Hoffman, "Hope, Expectation," *NIDNTT* 91976) II.241-244.

connecting Rome with the East) to Thessalonica, the capital of the province.<sup>90</sup>

Evangelism in Thessalonica began in the synagogue services (Ac. 17:1-4), but after three weeks the jealous reaction of the Jews forced Paul and his company to leave in order to avoid being indicted for political agitation (Ac. 17:5-10). Luke's narrative seems to imply that Paul was in Thessalonica only three weeks (Ac. 17:2, 10), but from other statements by Paul there is the possibility that he was there longer (cf. Phil. 4:16; 1 Th. 2:9; 2 Th. 3:8).<sup>91</sup>

Luke's brief description of Paul's preaching at Thessalonica centered upon the suffering messiah, the risen messiah, the identity of Jesus as the messiah, and the lordship (kingship) of Jesus (Ac. 17:3, 7). There are five verbs that indicate the rhetorical style of Paul's preaching in Thessalonica. They are:

*Dialecromai* (= to reason, to discuss, to lecture)

*Dianoigo* (= to open up, to explain)

*Paratithemi* (= to set before, to point out, to prove)

*Katangello* (= to announce, to proclaim)

*Peitho* (= to persuade, to convince, to win over)

All of these verbs are especially appropriate within the Greek intellectual world. The nucleus of believers came from three categories, namely, Jews, God-fearers (the term "God-fearers" is a technical term for one who was a Gentile worshiper of Yahweh but who had not become a circumcised proselyte), and prominent women. Macedonia was more advanced in their respect for women than most of the ancient world, and freedom for them to personally respond to the gospel was more apt to happen there (cf. Ac. 16:12-15; 17:12).<sup>92</sup>

### **Paul's Occasion for Writing**

Paul was forced to leave the Province of Macedonia rather abruptly due to severe opposition, but he left Timothy and Silas behind, apparently to stabilize the congregations. He instructed them to rejoin him as soon as possible (Ac. 17:13-15). Exactly what Timothy shared with Paul about the Thessalonian situation is not described, but it can adequately be pieced together from the first letter. The Pauline emphases in the letter are as follows:

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<sup>90</sup> D. Guthrie, *The Apostles* (Grand Rapids: 145-146. Zondervan, 1975)

<sup>91</sup> I. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 276.

<sup>92</sup> Guthrie, 129.

### *Paul's Defense of His Evangelistic Integrity*

From the amount of space Paul devotes to a vindication of his ethics (chap. 2), it seems likely that the Jewish enemies Paul had made in Macedonia were attacking his integrity. They probably sought to defame him as an imposter, an opportunist and an exploiter.<sup>93</sup>

### *The Despair over Persecution*

Closely related to the attacks upon Paul were attacks on the Thessalonian disciples themselves. Paul felt compelled to assure them that such attacks were to be expected (3:4). They were to take comfort in the fact that they were sharing in the suffering of Jesus, the prophets and his apostles (2:14-15).

### *The Question of Dying Christians*

A third problem that confronted the Thessalonians regarded some Christian brothers and sisters who had died since Paul had been there (4:13). What would be their status when Christ returned? Would they share in the glory of this event or would they miss out? It is quite possible that the Greek division of human personality into spirit and body accounts for some of this problem.<sup>94</sup> For the Greeks, the soul (or spirit) was imprisoned in the body. The wise individual wished to cultivate the soul so that at death it might be freed from the body. The body was thought to be a hindrance and dispensable to the highest self.<sup>95</sup> Thus, the ideas of a bodily resurrection and a bodily return of Christ were difficult for Greeks to accept.

### **Date**

The dating of this letter may be fixed at about AD 50-51. Such calculations rest upon the time of Gallio's tenure as proconsul of Achaia while Paul was in Corinth (Ac. 18:12-13).<sup>96</sup>

## **The Conversion of the Thessalonian Believers (1 Thess 1: 1-10)**

### **The Opening (1:1)**

Paul's opening is brief, but it contains all the essentials. He writes in company with Silas (Silvanus is a Latin form) and Timothy, and the order of the names is probably according to seniority.<sup>97</sup> Paul is a Greek name meaning "little." Saul, of

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<sup>93</sup> D. Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1977) II.41.

<sup>94</sup> H. Flanders and B. Cresson, *Introduction to the Bible* (New York: Wiley, 1973) 418.

<sup>95</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 457-458.

<sup>96</sup> D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970) 566-567.

<sup>97</sup> R. Ward, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1973) 21-22.



course, was Paul's Hebrew name. A description of him from the second century reads: "A man small in size, with meeting eyebrows and a rather large nose, bald-headed, bowlegged, strongly built, full of grace; for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel".<sup>98</sup>

Paul's letters have a general form that is compatible with the way letters were usually organized in the Hellenistic world.<sup>99</sup> This form is as follows:

*Opening:* Sender, reader, greeting

*Thanksgiving or blessing:* Often with intercession and/or a climactic statement referring to the return of Christ

*Body:* Usually dealing with doctrinal matters and some indication of his future plans

*Paraenesis:* Ethical discussions and injunctions

*Closing:* Benedictions and greetings and sometimes a mention of the writing process

In the context of Paul's greetings, the word *ekklesia* (= church) always means congregation. Paul invariably mentions God the Father and Jesus Christ. To say that the Thessalonians are "in" the Father and the Son is a way of expressing the closeness of relationship between them. The standard salutation in Greco-Roman letters was *charein* (= greeting), but Paul substitutes a near homonym Christian word, *charis* (= grace), and couples it with the standard greeting of the Old Testament, *shalom* or "peace."

### **The Thanksgiving (1:2-3)**

In his thanksgiving Paul stresses the three primary Christian graces that above all other things exemplify a believer -- faith, hope and charity (cf. 1 Co. 13:13). The true sources of all Christian fruit are these graces.

### **The Dynamics of Evangelism (1:4-10)**

After the opening conventions of the letter, Paul turns his attention to a description of his evangelistic work in Thessalonica.

*1:4-5a*

Election is always a difficult subject because of the tension between God's sovereign choice before the dawn of history (cf. Ep. 1:4) and our human response to

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<sup>98</sup> M. Smith, "Paul," *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 64.

<sup>99</sup> W. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 27ff.; Hiebert 15-16.

the preaching of the gospel within history (cf. 1 Th. 1:9). One must firmly resist the caricature of God as an arbitrary tyrant, damning some and saving others. Rather, God's election proceeds from his love. It is not God's device for dooming men but his redemptive action for rescuing them. God's redemptive love involves the world (cf. Jn. 3:16) and the church (cf. Ep. 5:25-26) as well as individual believers.

The New Testament always describes election in a positive way and never in a negative one, that is, it always focuses on God's action to save and emphasizes that salvation is wholly through God's initiative and never by human merit (cf. Ro. 8:29-39). At the same time, one must affirm the paradox of both the sovereignty of grace and the responsibility of humans. Furthermore, the election passages in the New Testament are in plural form. The emphasis tends to be much more on the community than the individual.

Paul recognized that God chose the Thessalonians, because he had observed their response to the gospel. Paul uses the word *dynamis* (= power, enablement) to describe the convicting force of the gospel (cf. 1 Co. 1:17-18; 2:4-5).

*1:5b-7*

There was no distance between the personal lives of Paul, his companions and the Thessalonians. Paul uses the metaphor of modeling, first to describe how the Thessalonians imitated him, and second to describe how the Thessalonians became models for others to imitate. Such modeling requires closeness and common ground. A radical distance between clergy and laity is inappropriate.

*1:8-10*

The faith of the Thessalonians became well known in the neighboring cities of Philippi, Berea, Athens and Corinth. The expression of their faith Paul sums up in two verbs: to *serve* and to *wait*. The coupling of these two words demonstrates that waiting is not passive but active. It also demonstrates that serving is anticipatory, that is, it is action that is motivated by the certainty of Christ's return.

Finally, Paul assures the Thessalonians that God's judgment on unbelievers shall not affect believers. (It is probably better to understand God's wrath as having a general reference to his judgment of wicked people rather than narrowing it to a technical label for the Great Tribulation.)

### **Paul's Defense of His Evangelistic Ethics (1 Thess 2:1-12)**

From the nature of Paul's comments, it seems clear that his Jewish enemies were doing their best to discredit him. In the following defense, the reader learns much about the manner in which Paul evangelized.

## Paul's Ethics in Handling the Gospel (2:1-6)

2:1

A theme that occurs frequently in Paul's letters is his concern that his evangelism not be a wasted effort. There are three ways in which Paul considers this:

1. It would be a wasted effort to evangelize without any conversions to Christ (1 Co. 15:10).
2. It would be a wasted effort to evangelize if one was preaching a false gospel (1 Co. 15:14; Ga. 2:2).
3. It would be a wasted effort to evangelize if one's converts to Christ did not remain true to their Christian faith (1 Co. 15:2, 58; 2 Co. 6:1; Ga. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; 1 Th. 3:5).

It is to the first of these ideas that Paul here refers. His visit to Thessalonica was not *kenos* (= in vain).

2:2

Paul assured the Thessalonians that far from being an opportunist, he had brought the gospel at great personal risk. He reminded them of his flogging and incarceration at Philippi (of. Ac. 16:22-24) as well as the mob of agitators in Thessalonica (of. Ac. 17:5-9). Certainly no one who was merely out for self-gain would submit to such treatment!

2:3-5

Furthermore, Paul assured the young congregation that the message was true, that his evangelistic motives were pure, and that his methods were honest.

*The True Message:* The test for the truth of any religious message must be whether or not it is derived from God. Paul's claim was that his evangelistic group had been approved by God, that is, accepted as those approved by appropriate tests (*dokimazo*)<sup>100</sup>. From the evangelism of the neighboring city of Berea, one finds that the Scripture itself becomes decisive in determining truth (cf. Ac. 17:11).

*Pure Motives:* Pure motives are to be tested by the question, "Who are we attempting to please?" (cf. Ga. 1:10). To be sure, Christians seek to serve their fellow humans, but never at the expense of displeasing God.

*Honest Methods:* Honesty in evangelism will forego flattery and gimmicks. The word *dolos* (= trick) was originally used of a bait for fish, and on one occasion in classical Greek literature, it was used of the

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<sup>100</sup> BAG, 1979 202.

famous Trojan horse.<sup>101</sup> The ancient world was full of “roaming ‘philosophers’, jugglers, sorcerers, fakes, swindlers...”<sup>102</sup> Paul disclaimed any connection with them, for they always had a hidden agenda -- money making!

### **Ethics in Financial Matters (2:7-9)**

Money matters can become very sensitive issues, and Paul took special precautions that his evangelism did not put a financial burden upon his new converts. His standard policy was to offer the gospel “free of charge” (1 Co. 9:18). As apostles, he and his company could have claimed the right of support (cf. 1 Co. 9:6, 11-12; 1 Ti. 5:17-18),<sup>103</sup> but instead he became like a nurse or a mother. He worked long hours, presumably at his tent-making trade (cf. Ac. 18:3), so as to provide his own support. We know from another letter that some financial aid was forthcoming from the Philippians (cf. Phil. 4:15-16), but apparently it was not sufficient for Paul to cease working.

### **Ethics in Personal Relationships (1 Th. 2:10-12)**

In their personal relationships, Paul describes his company as impeccable. They were *holy* (pious), they were *righteous* (morally clean) and they were *blameless* (without any cause for reproach). From the metaphor of a mother or a nurse (2:7), Paul now shifts to the metaphor of a father who encourages, comforts and admonishes. Paul’s ministry was at opposite poles from the selfishness of which he had been accused. Rather, in his ministry he had urged the believers toward discipleship -- to live lives worthy of God in anticipation of the glorious consummation of his kingdom.

There is a sense, of course, in which the kingdom of God is both present and future.<sup>104</sup> In general, the expression “kingdom of God” refers to the rule of God, and while it has been inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus during his first advent, it has yet to be consummated in his second advent. Paul has this latter sense in mind here.

### **Encouragement During Hard Times (1 Thessalonians 2:13--3:13)**

After sufficiently assuring the congregation of the purity of his evangelistic motives, Paul turns his attention to the serious matter of the severe opposition the

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<sup>101</sup> LS (1982) 443.

<sup>102</sup> W. Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955) 62-63.

<sup>103</sup> The phrase *dynamenoi en barei einai* (= could have been a burden, or lit., “being able to be with weight”) is sufficiently ambiguous to yield more than one meaning. I take it to refer to the apostolic right of maintenance, cf. L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 75-76.

<sup>104</sup> G. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 63-98.

Thessalonians were encountering. Persecution characterized the early church from its inception to Constantine's Edict of Toleration in AD 313. Tertullian of Carthage in North Africa (c. AD 150-220) made the incisive observation that "the blood of the martyrs is seed."<sup>105</sup>

### **The Assurance of Conversion (2:13)**

Paul's encouragement begins with his thanksgiving for the conversion of the Thessalonian believers. The certainty that one's faith is founded on truth is essential if one is to endure persecution. The foundation for Christianity must indeed be the "word of God" and not the "word of men." Paul summarizes his observations about how the Thessalonians responded to the gospel (cf. 1:6, 8, 9; 2:10, 13).

### **Sharing in Persecution (2:14-16)**

Picking up once more on his metaphor of imitating, Paul declares that the Thessalonians shared in a fellowship of suffering with their fellow-believers from Judea as well as with the Lord Jesus himself and the prophets (here referring to the Old Testaments prophets). In every case, the religious persecution came from those Jews who were themselves supposed to be religious.

Religious persecution by religious people is often the most severe and certainly the most inappropriate, and this is as true for Christians as it is for Jews. Whatever one believes regarding the truth of his/her particular religious persuasion, there is no valid excuse for persecuting others of a different persuasion. The Jews, in their sin of religious arrogance, wished to restrict God's love exclusively to themselves, and this is why Jesus declared that tax-gatherers and prostitutes are ahead in entering the kingdom (Mt. 21:31-32). Matthew 23 is Jesus' blistering attack on religious arrogance. William Barclay has correctly observed, "There is something fundamentally wrong with a religion which shuts a man off from his fellow-man."<sup>106</sup> The wrath of God will certainly come!<sup>107</sup>

### **Paul's Efforts to Contact the Thessalonians (2:17-3:5)**

2:17-18

The brevity of Paul's stay in Thessalonica (hardly more than three weeks)

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<sup>105</sup> E. Ferguson, "Tertullian," *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 111.

<sup>106</sup> W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 192.

<sup>107</sup> The aorist tense here possibly indicates certainty rather than past tense. The dramatic aorist may speak of a present or future event as an accomplished event, i.e., as though it was as good as done. On the other hand, it may refer to the wrath of God upon the Jewish nation due to their rejection of Jesus Christ as the messiah (cf. Mt. 21:43; 23:38; Lk. 23:28-30), cf. L. Morris, 92; W. Hendrikson, 73.

stimulated in him an intensive effort to return on several occasions. The reason he gives for not doing so was that Satan interfered. On other occasions, Paul recognized that God had blocked his way (cf. Ac. 16:6-7), but here he definitely attributes it to the Evil One, although he does not reveal the circumstances. It is not impossible that he refers to the political turmoil that necessitated his leaving the first time (Cf. Ac. 17:5-9). Another suggestion is that Paul labored under a physical illness such as accompanied his evangelism in Galatia (Ga. 4:13-14; cf. 2 Co. 12:7).

2:19-20

Paul's question ties the Thessalonians' conversions to his own joy, glory and reward at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

*The Parousia (= Presence) of Our Lord:*

Three words in the New Testament describe Christ's second advent.<sup>108</sup> They are:

*Parousia:* ....meaning the coming, arrival or presence of Christ. This, of course, is the term employed here.

*Apocalypsis:* ....meaning revelation, that is, when Christ will be disclosed to the world at his return.

*Epiphaneia:* ....meaning appearance or visible manifestation.

*Stephanos (= crown)*

In Paul's letters, the crown alludes to the wreath of triumph awarded to the winner in an athletic contest. As such, it becomes symbolic of a Christian's reward and is metaphorically similar to Paul's references to *bema* (= the judicial bench) of Christ where awards and judgments are given (cf. Ro. 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10).

3:1-5

Frustrated in his own efforts to return, Paul decided to stay on in Athens alone and send Timothy to Thessalonica. His deep concern was that the Thessalonians would not succumb in their severe trials. There was no question but that suffering was a part of Christian discipleship (cf. Mt. 10:16-26a; Jn. 16:33; Ac. 14:22; Col. 1:24), and Paul had warned them in advance. Now he wished to be reassured that their faith had not failed and that his evangelistic efforts had not been wasted (cf. 2:1). The clause in the Lord's prayer, "lead us not into temptation" (or better, "do not let us succumb in the trial"<sup>109</sup>), is always appropriate!

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<sup>108</sup> G. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 62-70.

<sup>109</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 104-107.

### Timothy's Report (3:6-13)

3:6-8

Paul's anxiety over the Thessalonians was relieved by Timothy's report. The word *arti* (= now) indicated that Timothy had arrived in Corinth from Thessalonica just before Paul began composing his letter. He was now reassured that the Thessalonian believers were still loyal to him in spite of any slander from the jealous Jews. This encouraging report helped alleviate the pressure of Paul's difficult circumstances. He had received, so to speak, a new lease on life, for the Thessalonians' steadfastness meant that all his efforts had been worthwhile.

3:9-10

Paul's question is not intended to be answered. Rather, it is an outburst of joy and gratitude. He has never ceased wanting to be reunited with these northern believers.

"....*what is lacking in your faith....*"

This clause is significant for two reasons:

1. In spite of the Thessalonians' strong faith and love, they needed further Christian instruction so as to be brought toward maturity.
2. Paul's tact is here evident. He speaks first of what he can sincerely praise in them before he hints that they may stand in need of further teaching.<sup>110</sup>

3:11-13

It is characteristic of Paul's letters that he frequently slips into some short prayer.<sup>111</sup> He prays:

- ... that he may be allowed to return to Thessalonica.
- ... that the love between believers would increase and overflow.
- ... that God would strengthen the Thessalonians so that they might be holy and blameless at Christ's return.

*Ton Hagion (= Holy ones)*<sup>112</sup>

Paul's reference to "holy ones" is ambiguous, and the NIV translators chose to leave it that way. In the Judaism of the intertestamental period, the expression "holy ones" was normally a designation for angels who not infrequently were associated with the return of Christ (cf. Mt. 13:41; 25:31; Mk. 8:38; 2 Th. 1:7). However, this

<sup>110</sup> L Morris, 69.

<sup>111</sup> L. Morris, 110.

<sup>112</sup> R. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 268.

same phrase customarily is used by Paul to refer to Christians and is most often translated as simply “saints.” Which Paul may have in mind here is unclear, and it is not impossible that he may be referring to both since he uses the word *pas* (= all).

### *Nature of God*

Twice in this passage Paul refers to God the Father and our Lord Jesus. The deity of Christ and the unity of the Father and the Son in the being of God is indicated in that Paul uses the third person singular verb *kateuthynai* (= clear the way) to refer to both subjects of the sentence.

## **Admonitions for a Christian Life-Style (1 Thess 4:1-12)**

### **Recalling Past Instruction (4:1-2)**

Paul first reminds the believers of the ethical teachings he had previously given them.

### **The Importance of Sexual Purity (4:3-8)**

It may seem strange to us that Paul stressed so heavily the importance of sexual purity. However, in view of the prevailing immorality of the Hellenistic culture, such instruction was necessary due to the low moral order.<sup>113</sup> Divorce in the Roman Republic was unknown for over 500 years. However, when the Roman Empire absorbed the Hellenistic culture, this stability changed rapidly. Seneca quipped: “Women are married to be divorced and divorced to be married.” Demosthenes said: “We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes.” Sexual promiscuity was a normal part of life in the Roman world of Paul’s day. The ideal of chastity was regarded as an unreasonable demand.

#### *4:4*

The phrase rendered “to control his own body” is problematic for translation. Literally rendered, it reads “each one of you (should be able) to know (how) to possess his own vessel in sanctification.” Part of the question, as is evident in the NIV footnotes, hinges on whether one’s “vessel” refers to his own body or to his wife. Also important is the verb *katomai* which normally means “to acquire” or “to procure,” but on some occasions can also mean, “to possess.” Thus, the translation options are:

1. Each believer should learn to control his own body (as in the NIV text)

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<sup>113</sup> Barclay, 198-200.



2. Each believer should learn to live with his own wife (NIV footnote)
3. Each believer should learn to acquire a wife (NIV footnote)

In any case, Paul's basic meaning is clear. Sexual control is expected of Christians, and a wholesome marriage is the antidote for sexual immorality.

4:5

“Passionate lust” signifies any overpowering desire, and in this context, an overpowering sexual desire. Paul says, in essence, that the believer should control his/her biological drives and not allow them to gain the upper hand.

4:6-8

Paul treats sexual impurity as a way of defrauding one another. In the case of a married person, it violates the rights of that person's spouse. In the case of an unmarried person, it violates the rights of that person's potential spouse. God will not overlook such flagrant sin. Paul assures his readers that the sexual ethics he has expounded are of divine origin.

### **General Admonitions (4:9-12)**

Paul closes this section of warnings by encouraging several important elements in a Christian life-style:

- ❖ Show brotherly love (*philadelphia* = lit., the love between blood brothers and sisters)
- ❖ Lead a quiet life (here, the phrase denotes tranquility rather than inactivity)
- ❖ Mind your own business (this expression is found only here in the New Testament; it calls for attention to one's own affairs in contrast to being meddlesome)
- ❖ Work with your hands (manual labor, of course, was the most common work in the ancient world; Christianity and industry go together)
- ❖ Win the respect of outsiders (Christians always ought to provide an example to unbelievers)
- ❖ Maintain independence (Christians ought to avoid relationships of dependency. In our modern culture saturated with time payments, this advice has a pointed relevance for the 20th century believer!)

### **The Blessed Hope (1 Thess 4:13-5:11)**

Here the reader arrives at the third major thrust of 1 Thessalonians. Paul has defended his ministry, he has encouraged the church in the face of severe persecution, and now he turns his attention to the question of dying Christians. The circumstances are unknown under which certain believers in the Thessalonian church

had died. To connect their deaths with the persecution may be too daring an assumption. Whatever the case, it seems that the Christians had understood Paul to say that all believers would see the *parousia*. There is some evidence that the first century believers may have expected that this event could happen in their lifetimes (of. Phil. 4:5; Ja. 5:7-9). Did the death of a believer put him/her at a disadvantage?<sup>114</sup> Paul seeks to answer this problem.

### **The Coming of Christ (1 Thess. 4:13-18)**

This passage is frequently called the “rapture” passage. However, Paul’s descriptive word is *parousia*, that is, the *coming* of the Lord (4:15).

#### *4:13*

Paul’s characteristic formula, “We do not want you to be ignorant” (cf. Ro. 1:13; 11:25; 1 Co. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8), is his way of stressing that the following information is very important.

Paul describes the believers who have died as “those who fall asleep.” This metaphor is particularly apt for Christians inasmuch as death, like sleep, is something from which they will awaken. The New Testament does not provide much information about this intermediate state between death and resurrection. We know, of course, that it is transitional, that is, that the righteous dead are awaiting the resurrection (1 Co. 15:51-54). We know that in some sense this is a state of blessedness (Lk. 23:43; Phil. 1:23) and that the believer is in the presence of Christ (Phil. 1:23). We know that this intermediate state is one of incompleteness, the nakedness of a disembodied spirit, while the resurrection is the believer’s hope toward completeness (2 Co. 5:1-5; Phil. 3:20-21). Beyond these few clues one must hesitate to go further.<sup>115</sup>

One thing is clear. The believer is not overwhelmed by the loss of a fellow-believer in the same way as the unbelieving world. The believer has a certainty in the blessed hope!

#### *4:14*

The certainty of the believer’s hope rests in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for if Christ did not rise, the Christian hope is a horrible deception (cf. 1 Co. 15:12-19). Christ’s resurrection is the inauguration of the final resurrection (cf. 1 Co. 15:22-23; Col. 1:18).

The latter phrase in this verse is difficult. God will “bring with Jesus” those who have died in Christ, but the questions “from where” and “to where” are not

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<sup>114</sup> Morris, 83.

<sup>115</sup> G. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 29-39.

answered. Two interpretations are possible:

*From Earth (and the corruption of death) to Heaven (and the state of eternal life):*

This position identifies the phrase with what follows the resurrection. To be “brought with Jesus” is to be resurrected, to be caught up in the air and to be ever remaining with the Lord.<sup>116</sup>

*From Heaven (the state of disembodied spirits) to Earth (the scene of the believer’s reunion of spirit and body):*

This position identifies the phrase with what immediately precedes the resurrection. To be “brought with Jesus” is to accompany Christ in his return as a disembodied spirit so that this spirit might be rejoined to the resurrection body.<sup>117</sup>

This second interpretation seems to fit the order of the passage best.

4:15

Paul’s main concern here is to point out the unity of believers in the resurrection. He does this in two ways:

*A Quotation from Christ:* The introductory clause “according to the Lord’s own word” is probably a reference to something Jesus said that was preserved by the early church but did not find its way into any of the four canonical gospels, much like what is alluded to in Acts 20:35.<sup>118</sup>

*An Emphatic Negative:* In New Testament Greek, the use of a double negative (*ou me*) indicates strong negation. Thus, Paul says, “We will certainly not...” or “We will not at all . . .

Paul’s strong assertion makes clear that there will not be a priority of living believers over deceased ones at the coming of Christ. Those alive when Christ returns will not “go in front” (*phano* = precede) of those who are dead in Christ. The *KJV* translation “prevent” is obsolete and misleading at this point.

4:16-17

The order of events at the coming of Christ is as follows:

*Christ shall descend:* Since his ascension, Christ has remained in heaven (cf. Ac. 3:21). Nevertheless, he who ascended to heaven will come again, bodily, just as he left (cf. Ac. 1:11). He will descend with a loud command to awaken

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<sup>116</sup> Thomas, 276.

<sup>117</sup> A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 169.

<sup>118</sup> J. Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) 204.

the dead. It is not clear whether or not the loud command, the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God are alternative ways of describing the same thing. Grammatically, they may be exegetical, that is, they may be an extended description of the same thing.<sup>119</sup> If so, the meaning would be that Christ's command will be *like* the voice of an archangel and a trumpet. Alternately, the phrases may refer to two sounds, the loud command of Christ accompanied by the trumpet blast blown by an archangel, such as Michael (Jude 9).<sup>120</sup> One thing is clear: the coming of Christ shall not be a private, secret affair but a public and a noisy one. One must not use the fact that Christ's coming is like a thief (which merely refers to the unknown time element) to obscure the fact that his coming is with a loud command. The dispensational notion of a secret rapture fits very awkwardly in this passage.

*The dead shall be raised:* The bodies of those believers who have died shall be brought to life. This affirmation by Paul would have been a strong comfort to the Thessalonians. Their departed friends would not miss anything at all! They would be resurrected before the glorious finale! This is why Paul says they shall rise first.

*All will be caught up together:* The emphatic "with them" is the heart of Paul's message here. The phrase *hyma syn autois* (= "at the same time with them" or "together with them") is especially strong. The unity of believers who will share in the glory of Christ's return is what Paul wishes to stress.

There are two expressions worthy of closer consideration in Paul's description of this event:

- a) "caught up," (*arpazo* = to be forcefully snatched or taken away): This verb, used also to describe the phenomena involving Philip, Paul and the manchild in the Apocalypse (Ac. 8:39; 2 Co. 12:2-4; Re. 12:5), was translated *rapere* (or *raptus*) in the Latin Vulgate, and it is from here that we derive the word rapture.<sup>121</sup>
- b) "to meet the Lord" (*eis apanteoin tou kypiou* = "to a meeting of the Lord"): The noun "meeting" or "encounter" has received some attention because of the bearing it has on where Christ and his church are to go after they are joined in the air. The word *apantesis* (= meeting) is a technical term for the ancient civic custom of publicly

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<sup>119</sup> Morris, 143.

<sup>120</sup> Hendriksen, 115-116.

<sup>121</sup> J. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1957) 8; Thomas, 279.

welcoming important visitors to one's city.<sup>122</sup> As such, the use of this word seems to indicate that after the believers join Christ in the air, they will escort him back to the earth.

4:18

Paul's final statement is that this hope of the believer is the source of mutual encouragement.

### **Our Present Attitude (5:1-11)**

The New Testament passages that deal with the second coming of Christ never leave the reader with an escapist mentality. The fact that Jesus is coming again is a motivation toward serious discipleship, Christian character and the work of the kingdom of God. It should never become an excuse to avoid or escape Christian responsibility. In this section, Paul defines the nature of the Christian's attitude toward the blessed hope.

5:1-3

Paul's first point of emphasis is the fact that the time of Christ's return is unknown.

*Times and Dates:*<sup>123</sup> Paul here uses two important words for time (found also in Ac.

1:7):

*chronos* = "times" (especially a duration of time; time in its chronological aspect)

*kairos* = "dates" (especially a point in time or a fixed date; time in its qualitative aspect)

By combining these two words, Paul addresses both the duration of time that must elapse before Christ's return and the nature of events that will characterize Christ's return. It is apparent that when he was with the Thessalonians he had informed them about both these aspects of time in reference to the end (cf. 2 Th. 2:5). The Thessalonians knew very well that the Day of Yahweh would occur at an unknown time.

*The Day of Yahweh:*<sup>124</sup> One thing that is especially significant in any study of

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<sup>122</sup> E. Peterson, *TDNT* (1964) 1.380-381; W. Mundle, *NIDNTT* (1975) I.325; R. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 104.

<sup>123</sup> O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. F. Filson (Philadelphia; Westminster, 1964) 39-43; *BAG* (1979) 887-888.

<sup>124</sup> G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 66ff.; E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. A. Heathcote and P. Allcock (New York: Harper & Row, 1958) 317-327; D. Guthrie, *New*

eschatology is the fact that the New Testament borrows much of its language from the Old Testament. The use of the phrase “Day of the Lord” (in the Old Testament, the “Day of Yahweh”) is such an instance. As used by the Old Testament prophets, the Day of Yahweh is indicative of the divine visitation of God’s judgment within human history. In some passages, the phrase looks to an event in the near future, such as, the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities (Is. 13:1-6; Am. 3:8-12; 4:12; 5:18-20). In other passages, it envisions a day of universal judgment and the far future (Is. 2:12, 17; Zep. 1:14-18). The Day of Yahweh is at times described in vivid word pictures of the disintegration of the universe (Is. 24:18b-23; Jl. 2:1-2, 10-11). It carries with it not only images of destruction, but also of salvation (Jl. 2:31-32), victory (Mal. 4:1-3) and restoration (Zep. 3:9-17). It was quite natural, therefore, for New Testament writers to associate these Old Testament predictions with the second coming of Christ (2 Pe. 3:3-4, 10; 1 Co. 1:8; Phil. 1:6, 10; etc.).

The imagery of the thief is a vivid simile of the unexpectedness of the event, and it is similar to Jesus’ parable of the owner (Mt. 24:42-44). The simile of the labor pains of a pregnancy emphasizes the inevitability of the event. The end will come surely and suddenly, even though the world at large lives as though all was well. (There is no valid contextual reason for taking the phrase “when people are saying peace and safety” to refer to some particular peace effort in world history, as though one could approximate the time of the end by observing some precise political situation. Paul is not trying to give the Thessalonians a secret sign by which to calculate the prophetic calendar. He is simply pointing out that Christ will return to an unsuspecting world.) Along with Jesus’ teaching, Paul agrees that any effort to predict the time of the end is futile (cf. Mt. 24:36; Mk. 13:32; Ac. 1:7).

#### 5:4-5

In these verses Paul describes the situation of believers in the world by using the images of light and darkness, a rather common figure of speech in the ancient world.<sup>125</sup> While the Day of Yahweh will come upon an unsuspecting world as does a thief, it will not be a surprise for believers, because they are “sons of light.” To be a “son of [ ]” is a Semitic idiom.<sup>126</sup> It has nothing to do with genetics but means to be characterized by something (cf. Mt. 8:12; 23:15; Lk. 16:8; 20:34; Jn. 8:44; 17:12). Believers are “sons of light,” meaning that they are characterized by light. This may be taken to mean either intellectual understanding or moral living.

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*Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981) 804.

<sup>125</sup> H. Conzelmann, *TDNT* (1971) VII.423ff.

<sup>126</sup> Morris, 156.

5:6-11

As sons of the daytime, Paul urges the Thessalonians to be occupied with their Christian responsibilities. Alertness toward the coming of Christ, self-control in the midst of a degenerate society, and the expression of the primary Christian graces of faith, hope and love were to be the areas of Christian concern. God's destiny for believers was not wrath (which would come so unexpectedly upon the unbelieving world) but the finality of salvation.

*Salvation:*<sup>127</sup> Paul's writings describe salvation in three tenses:

- 1) as a *past* event (in the historical cross and resurrection of Jesus);
- 2) as a *present* experience (in the continuing work of the Holy Spirit); and
- 3) as a *future* hope (in the return of Jesus Christ).

Here Paul refers to the future aspect of salvation. It is guaranteed to all who believe on the basis of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. All believers will share in this final salvation, whether they live or die. The Thessalonians could comfort and build each other up in this assurance, even in the face of the loss of some of their Christian friends by death!

### **Final Advice (1 Thessalonians 5:12-22)**

Paul finishes his letter with a series of admonitions to guide the congregation. They are practical outworkings of the Christian faith, which, though they are directed toward a single church, still have relevance for modern believers.

5:12-13

Respect toward leaders is first on Paul's list. He describes the function of leadership in the church as working hard, supervising, and admonishing, that is, warning and instructing. His request that leaders be held in highest regard (*hyperekperissou* = "quite beyond all measure")<sup>128</sup> is closely related to the following imperative, "Be at peace." Dissension and criticism of leaders is at opposite poles from respect.

5:14 There are four injunctions here:

- ❖ *Warn the idle* (*ataktos* = lazy, insubordinate, disorderly)<sup>129</sup>
- ❖ *Encourage the timid* (*oligopsychos* = faint-hearted, discouraged)
- ❖ *Help the weak* (weakness here probably refers to moral and/or spiritual)

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<sup>127</sup> A. Hunter, *The Gospel According to St. Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 14-57.

<sup>128</sup> BAG (1979) 840.

<sup>129</sup> BAG (1979) 119.

weakness)

- ❖ *Be patient with everyone* (*makrothymeō* = to wait or to have patience)

5:15

The similarity between this injunction and Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount are clear (of. Mt. 5:38-48).

5:16-18

The advice in this verse has primarily to do with one's inner life. Joy, consistent prayer (the idea here is that of recurring prayer, not nonstop prayer), and thanksgiving are primary Christian responses to life. It should be noted that the word *en* (= in) does not mean the same thing as giving thanks *for* everything. The latter would require a different construction, possibly using the word *peri* (= about). Rather, Paul's meaning is to urge believers to give thanks *in the midst of* everything, or as the NIV has rendered it, "in all circumstances." Thanksgiving is to be offered to God for his care and grace in spite of circumstances.

5:19-22

From one's inner life Paul shifts to communal worship. It is generally conceded that this passage deals with the exercise of spiritual gifts. Unlike Corinth, where there was little or no control over the charismata, in Thessalonica there appeared to be too much control, so much so, in fact, that they were in danger of squelching them altogether. One particular gift which was endangered, the gift of prophecy, was being held in contempt. It seems likely that this contempt for prophecy may have arisen as a reaction to counterfeit utterances. Thus, Paul warns against overreaction. At the same time he also balances his warning by urging the believers to test and discriminate between spiritual manifestations so as to retain only what was valuable. No utterance was to be accepted gullibly. A mere claim to inspiration was no guarantee of authenticity. An apparent gift, if it brought evil, was to be avoided.

## **Closing (1 Thessalonians 5:23-28)**

### **Sanctification (5:23-24)**

Paul's prayer for the complete sanctification of the Thessalonian believers raises two questions.

1. *What is Sanctification?* The verb *hagiazō* (= to make holy or to consecrate) primarily indicates the setting apart of a person or thing for sacred use. It is modified here by the compound word *holoteles* (= through and through), the first half of which means "whole" (*holos* = entire, complete) and the second



half of which means “completion of a process” (*telos* = end, goal, conclusion). Thus, Paul’s prayer here is that God would entirely complete the process of setting the believers apart for his divine purposes.

2. *What is the Whole Person?* Paul describes the whole person as spirit, soul and body. Some Christians have made much of this phrase and see Paul as describing the essence of being human as a trichotomy, i.e.:
  - a. the *body* (world consciousness, that is, the five senses);
  - b. the *soul* (self-consciousness, that is, intellect, volition, emotion); and
  - c. the *spirit* (God consciousness, that is, conscience, intuition, communion).<sup>130</sup>

However, we must at least say that if this is Paul’s understanding, here is the only occasion on which he clearly expressed it. It seems more feasible that Paul was not attempting to provide a technical description of the composite human. Elsewhere, his anthropological terms include heart, mind, conscience and flesh, in addition to body, soul and spirit.<sup>131</sup>

In the Old Testament the human person is viewed as a unity so that a listing of parts emphasizes the total person (of. Dt. 6:5).<sup>132</sup> Paul’s usage here is probably analogous. He wishes to insist that the whole person is involved in sanctification, not just some parts of him/her.<sup>133</sup>

Paul ends his prayer with the assurance of God’s faithfulness to sanctify the believer completely.

### **Final Words (1 Thess. 5:25-28)**

5:25

The prayers of humble Christians strengthened even Paul.

5:26

In the world of Paul, the kiss was a culturally accepted greeting and an affectionate farewell. It was also a gesture of Christian love between believers of one’s own sex.<sup>134</sup>

5:27

This charge, accompanied by an oath, shows Paul’s concern that his letter is

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<sup>130</sup> W. Nee, *The Spiritual Man* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1968) I.21-42.

<sup>131</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 163-176.

<sup>132</sup> H. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 7-9.

<sup>133</sup> Morris, 156.

<sup>134</sup> E. Ellis, *NBD* (1962) 666.

read aloud in public worship. This practice was a major step toward canonization.

5:28

In place of the customary “farewell” which ended most letters in the Roman world, Paul ends his letter with a simple Christian benediction.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> W. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 39-42.

## 2 Thessalonians

### Introduction to 2 Thessalonians

Paul's second letter to Thessalonica seems to have been written soon after his first one, perhaps within a few months. Evidently, some statements Paul had made in his original letter had been misunderstood, and now Paul felt it urgent to clarify his position. There is no certain indication as to how Paul knew of the Thessalonians' problem. He only says, "We hear..."<sup>136</sup>

#### Two Indications of the Misunderstanding

There are two passages that point toward the wrong responses the Thessalonians made toward the second coming of Christ.

*The Notion that the Day of Yahweh Had Already Arrived (2:1-2):* The major problem was that some Thessalonians, due perhaps to the severity of their persecutions, considered that the Day of the Lord already had arrived (cf. 1:4-5). Paul was quick to correct this faulty idea.

*Laziness (3:6-15):* Paul does not specifically mention the cause of the Thessalonian problem here, and he may not have known it himself, but it is clear that for some reason some of the Thessalonians had ceased working for a living. It is a fairly reliable conjecture that they did so on the excuse that if Jesus were coming at any moment, there was no sense in becoming involved in the mundane affairs of employment.<sup>137</sup> Paul sharply rebuked this attitude!

#### The Possibility of a Forged Letter (2:2; 3:17)

Many scholars see in these two verses evidence for a spurious letter with a forged signature.<sup>138</sup> If such a thing had occurred, Paul would have been anxious to set the matter straight.

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<sup>136</sup> E. F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 226.

<sup>137</sup> A. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 145.

<sup>138</sup> R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) II 166.

## God's Ultimate Justice (2 Thessalonians 1:1-12)

### The Opening (1:1-2)

The opening to Paul's second letter is much like the first. Paul is still in company with Silas and Timothy, and he sends greetings of grace and peace. It may be noted that Paul has two ways of speaking of God the Father:

- 1) as "our Father" (denoting especially his Fatherhood to Christians)
- 2) as "the Father" (usually denoting his Fatherhood to Jesus Christ)

Sometimes he uses both expressions together (cf. 2 Co. 1:2-3; Ep. 1:2-3; Col. 1:2-3).

### Thanksgiving for Perseverance (1:3-4)

As usual, Paul offers the customary thanksgiving. He emphasizes the growing faith and love of the believers, especially as it was thriving amidst persecution from the outside. Paul made their perseverance an object of praise among other congregations.

### God's Justice (1:5-10)

At this point Paul enters into a careful defense of God's justice in face of the severity of the Thessalonians' trials. In his first letter, Paul had instructed them that persecution toward believers was quite to be expected (3:3-4). It already had been leveled against other congregations, not to mention the prophets of old and the Lord Jesus (1 Th. 2:14-15). Nevertheless, it may have seemed to the Thessalonians that such a state of affairs was very unfair. Surely believers who put their trust in Jesus ought to be rewarded, not oppressed. This problem, as old as Job and the psalmists, still confronts believers today. Charles Swindoll has rightly said, "Somebody needs to address 'the other side' of Christian life. If for no other reason than to uphold reality, Christians need to be told that difficulty and pressure are par for the course. No amount of biblical input or deeper-life conferences or super-victory seminars will remove our human struggles. God promises no bubble of protection, no guaranteed release from calamity."<sup>139</sup>

#### 1:5

Here Paul makes the paradoxical statement that perseverance in persecution is proof of the justice of God. The paradox is that, on the surface of things, one might tend to view it as just the opposite -- an indication of injustice. However, the justice of God must be defined by looking at more than the present difficulty, as the following verses show. In the present, God develops his people in the fire of trial and

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<sup>139</sup> C. Swindoll, *Three Steps Forward / Two Steps Backward* (Nashville: Nelson, 1980) 14.

gives to them fortitude to endure (cf. He. 2:10). This grace is only in anticipation of their ultimate reward at the end. That God allows his people to suffer in the present should not be viewed as a sign of his abandonment but as a token of his confidence and an assurance of his divine power to sustain (cf. 1 Co. 10:13). This is in keeping with God's purposes, for he is more interested in the believer's growth than his/her comfort.

#### 1:6-7

God's justice will ultimately will be accomplished, but not necessarily immediately. At his *apokalypsis* (= revelation), Christ will give relief to his persecuted people and afflict their persecutors (cf. Re. 14:13). Paul's description of Christ's revelation is threefold. Christ will come...

- 1) ...from heaven
- 2) ...in blazing fire
- 3) ...with the angels.

The language of "blazing fire" is borrowed from the Old Testament, where it symbolizes the divine presence (Ex. 3:2; Dt. 5:4; Is. 66:15; cf. Re. 1:14-16; 19:12). Jesus himself described on several occasions the fact that at his return the angelic host will accompany Christ (Mt. 13:41, 49; 16:27; 24:30-31; 25:31).

#### *The time of the return of Christ*

A much-debated question arises over the time of Christ's return in relation to the period of great affliction. Two major positions (as well as some mediating views) have emerged,<sup>140</sup> though there are more details provided in chapter 2:

*Pretribulation View:* The roots of this view in the early 1800s can be traced back through C. I. Scofield and others to John Nelson Darby.<sup>141</sup> Pretribulationists divide Christ's coming into two phases, a coming "for" his saints (the rapture before the tribulation) and a coming "with" his saints (the return of Christ after the tribulation).<sup>142</sup> Pretribulationists clearly wish to separate the *apocalypse* of 2 Thessalonians 1:7 from the *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16.

*Posttribulation View:* The roots of this view go back to the earliest centuries of the Christian church in which the complex of events, including the appearances of antichrist, the tribulation and the return of Christ, were thought to be on the near horizon.<sup>143</sup> "Every church father

<sup>140</sup> M. Erikson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 109-181.

<sup>141</sup> C. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960)

<sup>142</sup> D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 206-207; Ladd, *Blessed*, 89ff.

<sup>143</sup> Ladd *Blessed*, 19-31.

who deals with the subject expects the Church to suffer at the hands of Antichrist.”<sup>144</sup> As such, posttribulationists make no distinction between the *parousia* and the *apocalypse*, nor do they accept the notion that Christ’s coming will be in two phases. For them, 2 Thessalonians 1:7 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16 refer to the same event.

1:8

It would seem that Paul here refers to two groups of persons, those who do not know God (whether they are unwilling to know him or are unevangelized, Paul does not say) and those who do not obey the gospel. The definite article *tois* (= “those” or “to the ones”) accompanies both expressions and would serve to give a grammatical separation in normal usage. Accordingly, some interpret the two groups as being the unevangelized heathen as well as the ones rejecting the gospel, others that they are Gentiles and Jews respectively. It should be noted, though, that this separation, while grammatically natural, is not mandatory. Paul may be merely using the one phrase to modify the other in a Hebraic form of parallelism.<sup>145</sup>

1:9

The punishment to be given is called *olethron aionion* (= ruin or destruction which is age-long). It is qualified by the phrase “from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” Several things are to be noted here:

1. The word “destruction” need not mean annihilation, that is, a cessation of existence. It does not seem to bear that connotation in 1 Co. 5:5 and probably not in 1 Ti. 6:9.
2. The word “eternal” primarily means age-long, but since there is no evidence that the future age will come to an end, it may very well mean unending.<sup>146</sup> It should be kept in mind that eternal destruction is the antithesis of eternal life.
3. The expression *apo* (= from) the presence of the Lord could indicate either “away from” or “the source of.” If the former is chosen, which choice seems to be corroborated from other New Testament passages (of. Mt. 7:23; 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), then the eternal destruction is the banishment of the disobedient from God’s fellowship.

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<sup>144</sup> Ladd, *Blessed*, 31.

<sup>145</sup> Compare the following: J. Lightfoot, *Notes on Epistles of St. Paul*, ed., J. Harmer (1895 rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 103; Morris, 204-205; Thomas, 312-323.

<sup>146</sup> See discussion: M. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946) IV.58-62; Morris, 205-206.

1:10

The day of Christ's return will be a day of glorification for God's faithful people. He shall be set on display for his people's sake, and his glory will be shared among them.

### **Paul's Prayer (1:11-12)**

Paul ends this section of teaching with a prayer. It may be noted that the verb *axioo* means "to judge or esteem worthy" rather than "to make worthy." The believer is already worthy in Christ, but Paul looks ahead to the final consummation when believers will be pronounced worthy before the judgment seat of God. Further, Paul prays that God would bring to pass every resolve of the Thessalonians for goodness so that both Christ and the church would be mutually glorified.

### **The Man of Lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12)**

This is without question one of the most intriguing, not to mention debatable, passages in the New Testament. The gist of Paul's concern is evident, that is, that the Thessalonians must not become hysterical over their false assumption that the end of the world was already upon them. We may sketch in the broad outline of Paul's statements:<sup>147</sup>

1. There is an evil force in the world.
2. God is in control.
3. When Christ returns, the triumph of God over evil shall be completed.

Beyond that, however, there arises a variety of questions about details. Unfortunately for us at least, the Thessalonians had more information at their disposal than the modern reader (cf. 2:5). Because there is a certain amount of ambiguity in Paul's statements, we would do well to avoid dogmatism and oversimplification.

### **The Thessalonian Error (2:1-2)**

In introducing this main part of his letter, Paul is primarily concerned that the Thessalonians do not continue under the mistaken notion that the Day of the Lord has already arrived (*enesteken* = perfect tense of "to be present"). In examining these verses more closely, the following points are significant:

*Concerning:* The word *hyper* (= concerning) has the force of "in the interests of the truth concerning" or "to correct mistaken notions about."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Barclay, 213.

<sup>148</sup> Lightfoot, 108; Morris, 124.

*Jesus' Coming and Our Gathering to Him:* This phrase is an obvious parallel to the description of the catching away of the believers in 1 Th. 4:13- 18. Paul uses the familiar word *parousia* (= "presence" or "coming"), and he couples it with the phrase "our being gathered to him." Thus, in the interests of setting forth the true nature of the rapture, Paul urges believers not to succumb to hysteria by thinking that the Day of the Lord was already present. (It may be noted that the KJV rendering "day of Christ" is an inferior translation. The word in the text is *kypiou* (= of the Lord), not *christou* (= of Christ). The phrase Day of the Lord almost certainly is a counterpart to the Old Testament Day of Yahweh. As a complex of events, it would include the divine judgment on a rebellious world, the disintegration of the universe, and the final salvation of God's people. From Paul's first letter, it was natural for them to associate the second advent of Christ with the Day of Yahweh (cf. 1 Th. 4:13-5:11).

*The Reason for Their Misconception:* Paul suggests several ways in which this mistaken notion could have arisen. It could have been:

By Some Prophecy (*dia pneumatos* = "through a spirit;" as such, it might mean the gift of prophecy, or it might equally mean some other vocal gift.)

A Report (*dia logou* = "through speech," possibly in a sermon or through a supposed private conversation with Paul)

A Letter (it is possible that Paul is here referring to the Thessalonians' misunderstanding of his first letter, but in light of 3:17, it seems more feasible that he alludes to the possibility of a forged letter purporting to be from him)

### **The Prerequisite for the Day of the Lord (2:3)**

Paul here gives the fact that before the Day of the Lord occurs, something must happen first. (The phrase "that day will not come" appears in brackets in the translations, because although it is not in the Greek text, it is clearly implied and is necessary for English grammatical sense. The ASV substitutes "it will not be.")

#### *The Rebellion*

Before the Day of the Lord, there will be an *apostasia* (= rebellion or abandonment). It is the word from which our English word "apostasy" is derived.) Note that it is given with a definite article. It is not an apostasy, but *the* apostasy. Just what Paul means by this is uncertain. Several suggestions have been made, such as:

*A Jewish Apostasy:* Jewish tradition speaks of a complete apostasy from God



and the Torah before the appearance of Messiah.<sup>149</sup>

*The Apostasy of Modernism:* The thesis has been proposed that modern liberal theology is the great apostasy.<sup>150</sup>

*An Apostasy of Pseudo-Christianity:* Some pretribulationists define the apostasy as the defection of professing Christians who have missed the rapture.<sup>151</sup>

*The Rapture of the Church:* By some linguistic juggling of the term *apostasia*, other pretribulationists take the word to mean “departure” and interpret it to refer to the catching away of believers.<sup>152</sup>

*An Apostasy Within the Visible Church:* For those who see the church as enduring the tribulation, the apostasy is sometimes described as the defection of those who have outwardly professed faith but who are inwardly unregenerated.<sup>153</sup>

*The Rebellion Against God by an Unbelieving World:* Here, the word is not interpreted as a defection from Christian ranks so much as the general rebellion of the world against God during the tribulation period (cf. Ps. 2:1-3; Re. 9:20-21; 16:10-16; 19:19).<sup>154</sup>

After surveying the above interpretations (and they do not exhaust the possibilities), we can only conclude that there is not sufficient information to be dogmatic. However, inasmuch as the rebellion, whatever it is, is set alongside the revelation of the man of lawlessness, we may reasonably assume that it is somehow connected with his career.<sup>155</sup>

#### *The Revelation of the Man of Lawlessness*

Besides the rebellion and perhaps in conjunction with it, the man of lawlessness must be made known before the Day of the Lord arrives. One may note that the early manuscripts vary at this point giving rise to the English variations “man of sin” and “man of lawlessness.” Will he be a human person? Although the terms “*man* of lawlessness” and “*son* of perdition” are both applied to him, this does not by itself prove that he is a human person, since both phrases are Hebrew idioms. However, the way he

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<sup>149</sup> H. Shlier, *TDNT* (1964) 1.513; Lightfoot, 111.

<sup>150</sup> R. Aldrich, *Identifying the Apostasy* (Findley, OH: Dunham, n.d.).

<sup>151</sup> R. Thomas, “2 Thessalonians,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 321-322.

<sup>152</sup> See discussion and refutation: Gundry, 114-118.

<sup>153</sup> Hoekema, 153-154.

<sup>154</sup> Morris, 218-219.

<sup>155</sup> Ladd, *Last*, 66-67.

is described as acting within human history seems to indicate that he is a human person.<sup>156</sup> He is clearly distinguished from Satan, although he works in close association with him (2:9).

What Does “Revealed” Mean? The word used here is the same as that used of the second coming of Christ (*apokalypto* = to disclose or bring to light). This is sometimes taken to refer to a final disclosure at the end of the tribulation period, but 2:8 seems to indicate that it refers to the initiation of his diabolical career. He is revealed by his evil purposes and satanic actions.

### *The Rapture Question*

As alluded to earlier, the question of the time of the rapture in relation to the tribulation period looms large in this passage. If the man of lawlessness is the person under whom evil is headed up during the tribulation period (and this is generally conceded), then the following question is pertinent: What is the relationship between the rapture, the tribulation and the Day of the Lord?

Pretribulational View: Pretribulationists usually see the Day of the Lord as stretching over an extended period of time that *includes* the tribulation period. They do not necessarily see the rapture as a part of the complex events constituting the Day of the Lord. Rather, the Day of the Lord (i.e., the tribulation) begins immediately after the rapture of the church.<sup>157</sup>

Posttribulational View: Posttribulationists usually hold that the Day of the Lord begins *after* the tribulation period, since it cannot come until after the rebellion and the revelation of the man of lawlessness. Therefore, the church will go through the tribulation. They also hold that Paul uses the phrase Day of the Lord in direct connection with the rapture and final salvation of the church, so that the rapture must be part of the complex of events that constitute the Day of the Lord (1 Th. 4 and 5; 2 Th. 2:1-2).

### **The Description of the Man of Lawlessness (2:4)**

The title Man of Lawlessness seems to bear some affinity to the Old Testament term Belial, a term indicating a very wicked person or the incarnation of evil.<sup>158</sup> Belial seems to embrace both the concrete-personal dimension as well as the abstract-conceptual dimension of evil.<sup>159</sup> So also does the expression Man of

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<sup>156</sup> G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930 rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 112-113.

<sup>157</sup> Pentecost, 229-230.

<sup>158</sup> Barclay, 212-213; Vos, 96-103.

<sup>159</sup> B. Otzen, *TDOT* (1975) 11.131-136.

Lawlessness. The description here is very similar to passages in Daniel, Matthew, Mark and the Revelation. He is portrayed as opposing and usurping all deities (cf. Da. 7:25; 11:36-37; Re. 13:5-6), occupying God's temple (cf. Da. 11:31; Mt. 24:15; Mk. 13:14), and claiming to be divine (cf. Re. 13:8). The correlation of Paul's words here with the other passages cited stimulates several intriguing questions:

*What is the "temple" of which Paul speaks?*

Interpreters go in several directions in their attempt to define specifically what Paul has in mind.

Figurative Interpretations: It is important to note that the Greek language has two words for temple: *hieron* (= the precinct of the temple in Jerusalem including its complex of buildings, courts, etc.) and *naos* (= the shrine or inner sanctuary as opposed to the outer buildings). It has been observed that in his letters Paul consistently uses the latter term, and he does so in a figurative way.<sup>160</sup> As such, many interpreters see the reference to the temple as a metaphor referring either to the church or the usurpation of God's honor.

*The Church:* The interpretation is thus advanced that the Man of Lawlessness will arise from within Christendom. In this view, the temple is a metaphor for the church. The Reformers (especially Luther) and the Westminster Confession identified the antichrist with the papacy as does the original preface to the KJV.<sup>161</sup> This approach usually identifies the apostasy as being a defection in visible Christianity.

*A Metaphor for Usurping God's Honor:* Many interpreters, while refusing to specifically identify the temple, simply see it as a symbolic way of describing the action of "arrogating to oneself of divine honor."<sup>162</sup>

Literal Interpretations: Other interpreters see no reason to demand a figurative meaning. They see the temple as:

*The Jewish Temple Rebuilt:* This interpretation is especially characteristic of dispensationalism. In the dispensational belief that God shall again deal with the nation Israel on the basis of Old Testament law, dispensationalists project the building of a temple in Jerusalem by the Jews, so that they will be able to conduct the

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<sup>160</sup> Lightfoot, 113.

<sup>161</sup> Hendrikson, 174.

<sup>162</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* trans. John R. De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 520-521; Hoekema, 160; Ladd, 67.

sacrificial requirements of the law of Moses.<sup>163</sup>

*An Unidentified Building:* Non-dispensationalists who wish to interpret the temple as a material building either see it as some location not yet made known<sup>164</sup> or perhaps as a generally recognized Christian or religious shrine such as, the chapel of the United Nations.<sup>165</sup>

*Is the Man of Lawlessness a Pseudo-Messiah?*

Dispensationalists sometimes understand the Man of Lawlessness to be a surrogate messiah who will be accepted by the Jews.<sup>166</sup> This notion seems unlikely, however, since the very concept of messiahship presumes that the one acting as messiah is subordinate to God. Such subordination is not at all what Paul says the Man of Lawlessness shall exhibit. Instead of acting as God's subordinate representative, Paul says that the Man of Lawlessness will claim to be God himself, and it is difficult to see, at least in Jewish terms, how he could be both a messiah under God and God at the same time.<sup>167</sup> One must take care not to misunderstand John's term *antichristos* (= against Christ) as necessarily meaning an imposter.

### **Paul's Reminder (2:5)**

Having explored some of the complex ramifications of the foregoing verses, one might well wish that he/she had access to Paul's oral teaching on the matter, as did the Thessalonians!

### **The Restrainer (2:6-8)**

If Paul has given two prerequisite events to the coming of the Day of Yahweh, he now shows that one of those events cannot occur immediately. The revelation of the Man of Lawlessness cannot occur as long as there is a restraining force in the world holding it back. Paul remarks that the Thessalonians already knew the identity of that restraining force, apparently from Paul's earlier teaching (2:5). Only after the restraining force was removed would the Man of Lawlessness be allowed to begin his diabolical work. In the end, Christ would destroy the Man of Lawlessness at his return.

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<sup>163</sup> H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 55-57; L. Strauss, *God's Plan for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965) 133; Thomas, 322.

<sup>164</sup> Morris, 224.

<sup>165</sup> Ward, 157.

<sup>166</sup> A. Gaebelien, *The Prophet Daniel* (New York: Our Hope Publishers, 1911) 180-195, cited by J. Walvoord, *Daniel, the Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 273-274.

<sup>167</sup> Vos, 114-119.

*Who or What is the Restraining Force?*

Paul alludes to the restrainer as something he has already explained to the Thessalonians, but unfortunately for the modern reader, he does not review that teaching here. The reader is left to interpret as best he/she can. Some critical questions are:

*The Problem of Gender:* One peculiarity is in the grammar of the passage. In 2:6, Paul refers to the restraining force in the neuter gender (*to katechon* = the restraining thing). As such, one would at first assume that the restrainer is perhaps an impersonal force. But in 2:7, he switches to the masculine gender (*ho katechon* = the restraining *one*) which seems to infer personality. This leaves the question as to how the restrainer can at once be both impersonal and personal.

*The Time of Restraint:* Whatever the restraining force is, Paul's language makes clear that it was already at that time serving as a restraint to the powers of lawlessness.

*Options for Interpretation:* Among the various possibilities which have been suggested for the restrainer are:

The Force of Civil Government: Since the early Christian era, the restraining principle has been identified with the Roman Empire (neuter) and its emperor (masculine)<sup>168</sup> Elsewhere, Paul certainly seems to see the Roman state as "God's servant to do you good" (cf. Ro. 13:4). The main objection to this interpretation is the difficulty of finding a relevance for the Roman Empire at the end of the age. This difficulty is somewhat alleviated if the restrainer is understood in more general terms as civil law and order not necessarily confined to the Roman state.

The Holy Spirit: Pretribulationists usually interpret that the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, which elsewhere is referred to in both the masculine and neuter genders (cf. Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14 *pneuma* = "Spirit" is neuter and *ekeinos* = "that one" is masculine).<sup>169</sup> When the church is removed from the earth, the Holy Spirit also will be removed so that lawlessness will reign unchecked. The objection here is the question as to how anyone can be saved if the Holy Spirit is absent?<sup>170</sup> The Revelation certainly seems to indicate that some believers are redeemed

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<sup>168</sup> Ladd, *Theology*, 560-561.

<sup>169</sup> Walvoord, *Rapture*, 86-87.

<sup>170</sup> Ladd, *Last*, 68.

during the tribulation (Re. 7:9-14; 14:1-5).

Other Theories: A variety of other suggestions have been offered as candidates for the restraining force. These include the preaching of the gospel, the binding of Satan, and the presence of the church.<sup>171</sup> Some expositors, like Morris, simply conclude: “The plain fact is that Paul and his readers knew what he was talking about, and we do not.”<sup>172</sup>

#### *What is the Secret Power of Lawlessness?*

Though we must be tentative about our identification of the restraining force, we can be more certain in identifying the secret power of lawlessness. Paul’s reference to the *mysterion* (= mystery) does not so much indicate something that cannot be fathomed as something that can be fathomed only as God reveals it.<sup>173</sup> More than likely, Paul has in mind the same evil power that John describes as “the spirit of the antichrist” (1 Jn. 4:3), that is, a special form of evil that is hostile to all that Christ is and stands for. That force, which is already at work in the world, will work unchecked after the restrainer is removed.

#### *The Destruction of the Lawless One*

At the return of Christ (lit., *te epiphaneia tes parousia autou* = the epiphany of his parousia) the Man of Lawlessness will be destroyed (cf. Re. 19:19-20).

### **The Diabolical Work of the Man of Lawlessness (2:9-12)**

#### *The Epitome of Deception (2:9-10a)*

The central characteristic of the Man of Lawlessness will be deception. Paul makes clear that this is not just a man with evil ideas, but he is a man directly in league with Satan. The one whom Paul calls the Man of Lawlessness seems to be the same as the antichrist whose coming was to be expected (1 Jn. 4:3), the beast empowered by the dragon (Re. 13:1-10; 16:13-16; 19:19-20), and the boastful horn (Da. 7:8, 24-27). Furthermore, he is capable of producing miracles. These supernatural phenomena are not counterfeit in the sense of sleight of hand, but counterfeit in the sense that a lying agent produces them. By using such displays, the Man of Lawlessness will lure men and women to their destruction (of. Mt. 24:15-25; Mk. 13:14-23).

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<sup>171</sup> Thomas, 324.

<sup>172</sup> Morris, 227.

<sup>173</sup> R. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964) 44-45.

*The Ones Deceived (2:10b-12)*

Though the Man of Lawlessness shall not be able to deceive God's chosen people, his tactics will be most effective among those who have rejected the truth. "Truth" for Paul is not simply a body of factual knowledge. Rather, it is the gospel, or in his own words, "...the truth that is in Jesus" (Ep. 4:21: cf. Ro. 2:8; 15:8; Ga. 2:5; 5:7). Those who reject Christ God will be even more susceptible to error so that they will accept the lie and be doomed (Jn. 3:19). Note that it is not *a* lie but *the* lie.

**Perseverance: 2 Thessalonians (2:13-17)**

From the grim prospect of the Man of Lawlessness, Paul turns to the brighter picture of the Thessalonians' faith. The hope of believers stands in sharp contrast to the fate of scoffers. Once again, as in his first letter (1:4; 5:23), Paul speaks of election and sanctification.

**The Process of Salvation (2:13-15)**

"In this passage there is a kind of synopsis of the Christian life."<sup>174</sup> Paul sees the process of salvation as involving election, calling, salvation, perseverance, and glorification, and this progression is thematic in several of Paul's letters (see especially Ro. 8:28-39; Ep. 1:3-14).

**Chosen from the Beginning**

God's purpose to save humans can never be defined as an afterthought. From the beginning God decided to save people through the agent of the Holy Spirit and the faith-response of women and men to the gospel.

Loved by the Lord: Election and divine love are always to be viewed together. In the Old Testament, the election love of Yahweh (*ahabah*) was the decisive factor in God's redemption of Israel (Dt. 7:7-8; 10:15).<sup>175</sup> God chose to save humans because he loved them (of. Ep. 1:4-5)!

Sanctifying Work of the Holy Spirit: As discussed earlier, the idea of sanctification is the act of consecrating or setting apart a person or thing for a sacred purpose (cf. 1 Th. 5:23). It is the Holy Spirit who acts first in separating a person from his/her affection toward the world and then creating in its place a love for Jesus Christ.

Belief in the Truth: As always, faith is the central element in the believer's response to the gospel.

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<sup>174</sup> Barclay, 214.

<sup>175</sup> N. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946) 167-182.

### *Called Through Our Gospel*

The call of God to the individual is made through the message of good news about Jesus. Paul speaks of the gospel as a personal possession (“our gospel”), because he was chosen by God to be the apostle to the gentiles (cf. Ro. 2:16 = “my gospel”).

### *Sharing in the Glory*

When Christ returns in glory, his people will share that glory (cf. 2 Th.1:10)

### *Standing Firm in the Tradition*

Paul gives this imperative in view of the Thessalonians’ persecution and God’s rich promises. It would be worthwhile for them to persevere! The word *paradoseis* (= traditions, teachings) refers to the fact that the Christian message is passed on as an authoritative body of truths beginning with Jesus Christ and his apostles. Much of Paul’s understanding of the Christian message he had received from others. The word *paralambano* (= received) in 1 Corinthians 15:1, 3 primarily refers to the passing on of tradition.<sup>176</sup> The tradition of the Christian message was preserved orally for about twenty years by the living eyewitnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (cf. 1 Co. 15:5-8). However, in the middle of the first century, these traditions began to be codified, first in the letters to various churches and later in the gospels. Today, the traditions of Christian truth are embodied in the canon of the New Testament.

### **A Prayer for Courage and Strength (2:16-17)**

Paul here injects one of his spontaneous prayers for the perseverance of the Thessalonian Christians. The eternal encouragement and good hope that God gave to believers are his very great and precious promises (cf. 2 Pe. 1:4). The word encouragement is from the same root as the word Counselor in John’s writings.<sup>177</sup> The encouragement for which Paul prays is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

### **A Request for Prayer (2 Thessalonians 3:1-5)**

The expression “finally” shows that Paul has concluded his main argument and will shortly close. He requests that the Thessalonians continue praying for him so that the good news about Jesus might spread quickly (lit. “. . . the word of the Lord may run....” (*trecho* = run or rush). Second, he asks prayer for deliverance from the enemies who stand opposed to the Christian faith. He assures the Thessalonians of God’s faithfulness and protection. All these statements become especially significant

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<sup>176</sup> F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 86-93.

<sup>177</sup> Paul here uses the word *paraklesis* (= encouragement), while John uses the title *parakletos* (= counselor), cf. Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 Jn. 2:1).



in light of the Thessalonians' own trials.

The last phrase in 3:5 (lit...into the love of God and into the patience of Christ) is capable of being translated in two ways:

- ... our love toward God and our patient waiting for Christ to return (i.e., objective genitive/adopted by the Amplified Bible)
- ... God's love toward us and Christ's example of fortitude (i.e., subjective genitive/adopted by the NIV)

Many versions (KJV, RSV, ASV, etc.) leave the meaning ambiguous.

### **The Problem of Idleness (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)**

The old cliché “idleness is the devil’s worship,” though not in the Bible, would fit in well with what Paul says here. Apparently, Paul is addressing a situation that resulted from the Thessalonians' inaccurate understanding of the return of Christ. Those who thought the Day of Yahweh had already arrived had abandoned their jobs. Twice Paul mentions that he had heard that some Thessalonian believers were “walking idly” (3:6,11). The word *ataktos* (= idly) means undisciplined and/or disorderly.<sup>178</sup> Its verbal form was used to describe an apprentice who “played truant.”<sup>179</sup>

### **The Loafers (3:6-10)**

Paul makes clear that fellowship is to be withheld from those who claim Christ but who do not live according to the Christian tradition of working for a living (*papadoseis* = “tradition” as in 2:15). Even Paul himself worked at tentmaking to support himself while evangelizing (cf. Ac. 18:3; 20:34; 1 Th. 2:9). He, of course, maintained that it was his right to receive support for his gospel ministry (cf. 1 Co. 9:4-7, 11-12a; 1 Ti. 5:17-18). Yet he forfeited this right so as to offer the gospel free of charge (cf. 1 Co. 9:12b, 18). Paul uses himself as a model for the Thessalonians to follow. Idleness is “out,” and payment for food is “in.” No believers are entitled to a free ride!

### **The Busybodies (3:11-13)**

Paul uses a wordplay in 3:11. Literally, he says that the ones not working for a living are merely “working around,” or to follow the syntax of the Greek, “nothing working but working around.” The word *periergazomai* (= working around) means to do useless or unnecessary things.<sup>180</sup> The loafers were showing motion but not

<sup>178</sup> BAG (1979) 119.

<sup>179</sup> J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930) 89.

<sup>180</sup> BAG (1979) 646.

production. They were keeping busy, not by making a living, but by engaging in superfluous activities. Paul sharply commands such people to “earn their bread!”

<b>God's Eternal Purpose</b>			
	<b>Ro. 8:28-39</b>	<b>Eph. 1:3-14</b>	<b>2Th. 2:13-17</b>
<b>Election</b>	Foreknowledge and Predestination	God chose us first, and he predestined us to be sons	God chose you from the beginning
<b>Calling</b>	Called according to God's purpose	God made known to us his will in the Word of Truth	God called you through the gospel
<b>Salvation</b>	Justification	Redemption through Christ's blood and the forgiveness of sin	Sanctification by the Holy Spirit and belief in the truth
<b>Perseverance</b>	More than conquerors and inseparable from Christ's love	The Holy Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance	Stand firm and hold to the teachings
<b>Glorification</b>	Glorification	Final redemption of believers who are God's possession	You will share in the glory of our Lord

### **The Disobedient (3:14-15)**

Anyone who would rebel against Paul's apostolic injunctions was to be avoided, though not excommunicated. Showing disapproval toward an undisciplined brother is not to be confused with rejection.

**The Closing (2 Thessalonians 3:16-18)**

As his final words, Paul invokes peace on the Thessalonians. He adds his distinguishing signature to authenticate the letter and to provide a means of avoiding any deception by forgeries (cf. 2:2). Paul sometimes produced his letters through an amanuensis or secretary (Ro. 16:22), but as he mentions here, he makes it his habit to sign off in his own penmanship (cf. 1 Co. 16:21; Col. 4:18).