

Encouragement for a Growing Faith

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sociologists tell us that how much Christians think about heaven, or the second coming of Christ, depends on circumstances. When black people in the US were in the misery of slavery, they thought and sang about going to heaven a lot. When economic times were bad, as in the Great Depression, preachers talked more about the coming joy of Christ's return; but when times are good, when there is money in the bank and food in the fridge, Christians ponder such things far less often. Well, in 2 Thessalonians, Paul talks a lot about Christ's return. Small wonder. The Thessalonians were going through hard times. Today on *Groundwork*, we will dig into this letter of Paul. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, with this program, we are kicking off a fairly short, three-part series on Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians—2 Thessalonians—which has three chapters; and so, we will have one chapter per program in this three-part series. Not too long ago on *Groundwork*, we did a series on 1 Thessalonians—I think it was a five-part series—and we noted then that Thessalonica is a city in Greece. I think it was a port city in Greece; and it was one of the earlier churches that Paul founded.

DAVE BAST

It was; in fact, Paul went there on his second missionary journey, as we usually refer to it, when he was sort of touring Greece from north to south. So, he started out in the extreme northern part, which was known as Macedonia, and he began in the city of Philippi. Later he wrote a letter to the Philippian church; and then from there he moved on to Thessalonica, and probably very early on, whereas Philippians is one of his last letters, 1 Thessalonians was one of his very first, as you pointed out; and 2 Thessalonians followed, we are not sure exactly how much later, but later on. It seems as though Paul had not quite wrapped up what he wanted to tell them with one letter, so he wrote a shorter letter, then, as kind of a PS some years later.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and in 1 Thessalonians, Paul, particularly near the end of that letter, talked a lot about the return of Christ, and trying to make clear to the Thessalonian Christians how to think about the return of Christ; because apparently, as we said in that series on 1 Thessalonians, it appeared that the Thessalonians had concluded that nobody would die in the church—no Christian believer would die—before Christ came back; and then, people started to die, as people do; and so they went into a panic. Were those people who died not real Christians then? Or, if they die before Jesus comes back, are they lost? Am I ever going to see my mother again? My mother died; will I ever see her again? So, Paul takes pains in that first letter to say: No, no, no; Christ has not come back yet, but those who die go to be with the Lord; and when he comes back, they will be with him; and you will see them with Christ, so don't worry about those who have died; they have died in the Lord.

DAVE BAST

Right; and another great concern that he had in 1 Thessalonians was the practical morality of their lives as Christians. There is a certain kind of basic attitude about the Christian faith, and Christians in general, and the Church; about how they are to behave. So, in this case, Paul was especially concerned to point out some of the sexual immorality that was rampant in his culture. The 1st Century was unbelievable for moral laxity and all that goes with that, and Paul was eager to urge a proper lifestyle for believers on the church there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so that was sort of the heart of his teaching there; but now that we get to 2 Thessalonians...now Paul cannot quite find enough good things to say about their faith. In fact, he even says that he brags on them a little bit; you know, the way a grandfather might brag about his grandson, Billy, and what a good soccer player he is.

So, let's hear these opening words from 2 Thessalonians Chapter 1:

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: ²Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecution, and the afflictions that you are enduring.

DAVE BAST

So, that is a pretty glowing report; I mean, this is wonderful. Wouldn't it be great if somebody could look at us and say: You know what? I see more and more faith in you; and not only that, I see that your love is growing as well. So, there are two of the great three Christian virtues: faith, hope and love; and Paul says: You are increasing in these things; and nothing could be more important, really, I think, for followers of Jesus than that, to have our faith be stronger and stronger as the years go by, and our love toward others also keep pace so that we are not just all in on ourselves, but we are living that out toward others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, he is not saying they are perfect, or that they have achieved perfection. In fact, before this letter is finished, he will have a few more moral considerations and some urgings for them; and he will point to some believers who are having problems. We will get to that later in this series; but, right! You are growing; you are changing. Dave, you just said, you know, wouldn't it be good if we could think of ourselves that way, but I wonder, how often do we think of our walk as disciples of Jesus in terms of getting better? In fact, it seems like sometimes we all just sort of bump along in life and things don't change much; in fact, we all know some people who are Christian people, whose worst traits get a little worse as they get older...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, so Phil was a surly person in his 40s, but now he is in his 70s and nobody can stand to be around him, he is such a mean grouch. So sometimes, instead of seeing progress, we see it go the other way; but, Paul does this fairly regularly. When he sees believers gaining in maturity...they are looking more like Jesus...he praises that, because that is the goal; and I think we all could ponder that for our own lives and wonder: Does anybody ever say that? Well, you just said it a minute ago. Does anybody say: You know, years ago you were a little bit sharp tongued, but I sense gentleness in you now, and I am so thankful for that. I don't know if we hear that as often as maybe we ought to.

DAVE BAST

Or even if we think about it as often as we ought to, because most people set some goals for themselves in life, that might be career goals: I would like to achieve this before I retire; or it might be family or personal goals of a different kind; maybe it is physical fitness or maybe it is money, but do we set spiritual goals for

ourselves? I mean, that would be an interesting exercise, wouldn't it? In ten years from now, if I live that long, I would like to be this, this, and that in my life. I would like to have sort of overcome this sin or this problem area a little bit more. I would like to be more of a servant, I would like to be more loving, I would like to be more kind; and that is what Paul is talking about here. He is seeing that in the Thessalonians.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think we sometimes today in the Church...if we do set goals for ourselves in the spiritual realm, it seems like sometimes...I cannot speak for everybody...but I think sometimes the goals we set are more in terms of like Bible knowledge. You know, the goal of the preacher is to educate his congregation...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And really help them to get to know the Bible. There is biblical illiteracy around now, so we want to overcome that. We want people to know who Moses is. Well, that is all good. It is good to increase in our knowledge, particularly of scripture, and going to Bible study is a lot of people's attempt to get more knowledge of scripture; but right; in terms of the course of your everyday life, and how you behave and how you talk, how often do we set goals like that; and indeed, maybe we should. You know, we have New Year's resolutions: I am going to lose some weight or you know, watch less TV. I am going to eat more vegetables. But how about: I am going to increase in my Christ-likeness.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am going to cut down, if not try to cut out, my gossip. I am going to work on that temper of mine. I am an angry person. I have a short fuse, and that is not something to revel in. I want to change that. Paul would like that. He saw that in the Thessalonians, and he would like to see it in us, if he could see us.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and don't forget those big two: Faith and love. Maybe in the area of faith, you resolve: I am going to start trusting God more; I am going to fill myself with his promises, and I am going to let go of some of my anxiety and some of my worries. I am going to become a calmer, more trusting person. Love: I am going to be a little bit more of a servant wherever I can, and however I can. I am going to volunteer, maybe. All good stuff; and all things that made the apostle rejoice; and especially because it is set against the backdrop of a very difficult life the Thessalonians were enduring. They didn't have it on Easy Street.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; they were undergoing persecution and affliction, Paul said; and he is going to have more to say about that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are in the first program of a series on 2 Thessalonians, and we are in the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians. Dave, we just noted that Paul opened this letter with a lot of praise and thanksgiving for the Thessalonians, and particularly for their progress in faith and in love; and that is all the more wonderful to Paul because they are doing that in the face of some pretty serious persecution and hardship.

DAVE BAST

Right; so next in Chapter 1, Paul returns to one of the major themes of his first letter, the second coming of Christ, and he addresses the comfort that that can bring when rightly understood and anticipated. So, let's just listen to how he goes on in 2 Thessalonians Chapter 1.

⁴Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. ⁵This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. ⁶For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to give relief to the afflicted, as well as to us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, ⁸in flaming fire inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁹These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

So, those are verses 4-10 in 2 Thessalonians 1. A lot in that passage; but mainly Paul is saying here: You know, you are suffering, but it is not random...it is not for no reason. You are suffering because of God's coming kingdom, and you are a part of God's coming kingdom; and for some reason, the world does not want anything to do with that kingdom, even though the Gospel message is really good news, and it is loaded with promise and hope—the Gospel. The kingdom of God is a wonderful reality, and yet, all through history, the world has resisted its coming.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is a saying that has gained currency fairly recently in our culture, and it is often used by politicians with respect to their opponents; some politicians like to say: Well, we are on the winning side of history; and the implication is: You are on the losing side of history; and Paul really zeros in on that in this passage. There is a winning side of history, and it isn't necessarily left or right in political terms. What it is, is being on the side of God's kingdom; and when Jesus comes back, that kingdom is going to be finally and forever established; and those who have aligned themselves with it—who have been living for it, even in the face of suffering—are going to be vindicated, and those who have been opposing it, Paul says, are going to face a terrible punishment. You know, here is where we get into some rather uncomfortable truths that the Bible proclaims, the New Testament in particular. Paul talks about the eternal destruction...the punishment of eternal destruction—separated from the presence of the Lord—that will be the fate of some; and to put a fine point on it, that is hell.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and this maybe where we squirm a little; not necessarily so much on the idea that those who want nothing to do with God will finally get their wish...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, you could read these words as Paul almost encouraging the Thessalonians maybe to take a little glee, like: Yes; yes! Our enemies are going to get their comeuppance. They are going to...

DAVE BAST

And we will see it! We will be cheering it on, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Whoopie! There will be a big bolt of lightning and they are going to get fried. Is that really the attitude that Paul is recommending here? How does this square with the Jesus who told us to love our enemies and *pray*

for those who persecute us, if Paul here is saying: Hey, those who persecute you; they are going to get whacked, and what a great thing. Those are difficult things to deal with.

You know, I co-teach a course at my seminary on the Psalms, and of course, along the way you have to deal with what we call the imprecatory psalms, and those are the psalms that pray for God to destroy my enemies; break the teeth of their mouths, break their bones, O God; leave their bodies on the field to be food for jackals, and so forth. We struggle with that today as Christians because we follow the Prince of Peace, again, who told us to love our enemies. So, the imprecatory psalms are in the Bible partly to acknowledge that we do feel this way about our enemies sometimes, but we have to leave it to God, and God took all of those curses on the enemies and put them on Jesus on the cross. Jesus snapped the history-long cycle of vengeance and more vengeance and violence and more violence. So, maybe Paul is actually conveying something different. Maybe he is not encouraging the Thessalonians to kind of smack their lips over the prospect of their enemies finally getting theirs; maybe he is up to something else.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is tough to handle a passage like this, and to do so with the right kind of balance, because there are many, many places in the New Testament that have kind of a universal appeal that speak of grace, that speak of...Jesus said, for example: When I am lifted up (meaning on the cross) I will draw all people to myself. So, you know, there is a drawing, but there is also a sense that those who absolutely set themselves against the love of God are in for it; and it is best, I think, that we not try to speculate what that all means. Certainly, as you said, Scott, we don't kind of rejoice in that thought or in that prospect. We sort of leave it to God. You said it just a moment ago. Some of these things we just leave to God, how it is all going to work out. It is necessary, I think, to be faithful to the New Testament, to acknowledge the reality of hell. It is not necessary to speculate on what it is like or who is going there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, here I think, Paul is not—indeed *not*—encouraging the Thessalonians to take glee or joy at the prospect of the downfall of their enemies; rather, I think what he is saying is there is going to be justice, okay? God's got this thing. There will be justice. God will take care of it; and you are...to quote what you said earlier, Dave...you are on the winning side of history. So, there is comfort to be taken in the fact that God is not going to let the evil ones have the last word. God will have the last word. It may be a word of grace, but it may also be the word of judgment for some; and so, take comfort in the fact, not that your enemies might go to hell...in fact, you should pray they won't...

DAVE BAST

Yes; absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Try to convert them, and pray that won't happen; but, *do* take comfort in the fact that God's got this thing. He has already won, though your enemies loom large on the horizon now, in the long run, God will be all in all...and that is a good thing.

DAVE BAST

And here is the other good thing about it...the great thing about God's judgment is, speaking to those who love Jesus and who are seeking to grow in him, your faith is going to be vindicated one day...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And everyone is going to see that, yes, that was true. What you believed about Jesus, that is the truth, and he is going to be revealed, finally and forever, to everyone; but, Paul has one more thing to say in this first chapter; and as we close the program, we want to take that up as well.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and we are now going to wrap up our program, the first of three programs, on Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians; and we have been in 2 Thessalonians 1 today, where we have seen that Paul has given thanks for the Thessalonians' good moral character, and the progress that they have been making in becoming more and more Christ-like. We have also seen that Paul comforts them that Christ is going to come back one day, and when he does, their faith will be vindicated, their suffering will end, and those who have caused their suffering will be dealt with by God himself; and so, there is comfort in that, that they are on God's side. The kingdom is coming, and God will one day be all in all; but, one last thing to say in this chapter, Dave.

DAVE BAST

It is a prayer. Paul often begins his letters with a prayer for his churches...in fact, he always does, with one big exception, his letter to the Galatians, which was a whole nuther story. Actually, we did a *Groundwork* series on Galatians, and pointed that out, that there is no prayer at the beginning; but here, there is a prayer for them at the very end of Chapter 1, and it is a beautiful prayer. It goes like this:

¹¹To this end (Paul writes) we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, ¹²so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, here is a wonderful and kind of lyric reminder of what the whole of our Christian lives always boil down to, and it is grace...it is all grace, and grace alone. So, yes, it is great if we, like Paul, could see in the Thessalonians...if we could see progress in our discipleship...if we see that we or those whom we love are becoming more and more like Jesus, that is wonderful, but we always give final credit where credit is due, and it is not our own effort, it is God at work in us; and that is, I think, a reason why, Dave, that when we see good things that we do...now, we don't always do it right, but a lot of the time we do...when we see our good works, we shouldn't disparage them, we should be grateful for them, because the New Testament tells us that is God at work in you; that is the power of grace activated in you. So, don't disparage, as we sometimes do, you know? Oh, my good works don't count. In fact, there was a generation, particularly in more Reformed and Calvinist circles that were really...they were almost good at outdoing each other in chalking up their works as filthy rags, and oh, my works are nothing. I don't think Paul would want us to do that.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely not, because, in a sense, if we "dis" ourselves and our own works of faith...works of love, as we pointed out earlier, we are offering disrespect, sort of a slight, to God himself; because Paul says that is not just you, that is God working in you...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

There is where the grace comes in; so, give thanks for that...rejoice in that...because every little step you take is more evidence that God is at work in you. He has this wonderful phrase: What God is really wanting to do in and through us is enable us to live a life that is worthy of our calling. I love that idea of a worthy life, and it appears elsewhere in Paul's letters, too: The idea that the way we live, the way we speak, the way we interact with other people in some way can point to the value, the wonder of God's call of grace in our lives by somehow...you know, maybe we are never quite worthy of it, but we can aspire to that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Paul says that when that happens, then the Lord Jesus is glorified in you, he writes to the Thessalonians.

Just recently, I was a guest pastor, as I usually am these days, at a church; and at the beginning of the worship service, I said something like: In this hour of worship, you know, as God blesses us with his presence, God is also blessed by us. God *is* blessed by us when we let God work in us to praise him, to live for him, to embody kingdom virtues, that is a blessing to God, and that is what Paul is saying here. Yes, we are glorified in Jesus...that much we get, but he says first the Lord is glorified in you...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When you let God work in you...when you become a showcase display window in your own life of the character of God's kingdom, that is a blessing to God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; again, this is a consistent theme of the apostles throughout the New Testament, that we...for good or ill...we bear the name of Christ. We are called Christians; so, what we do is going to reflect on him; and as we grow in faith and love, the Lord Jesus himself has his reputation enhanced...can we say that? I don't think that is inappropriate. So, you know, all glory ultimately goes to him; but it is a concern that we have, and we long to see that happen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, what you just said, Dave, reminds me of Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, in Luke Chapter 1, where Mary says: My soul magnifies the Lord. Well, when you magnify something, you make it bigger. Well, how could little Mary make God bigger? God is already pretty big; but we do magnify God because of what you just said. We can make God bigger to other people. When we live for God and praise God, in their eyes God becomes magnified...they can see God more clearly now in us, and that is what we are supposed to do.

DAVE BAST

There is another amazing reference to this same idea in the New Testament, where it speaks of God's glorious inheritance in the saints. We are what God is going to get out of this whole deal, when we are finally perfected, when we are finally filled with the image and likeness of Jesus, when we have finally been saved and all sin has been removed from our lives, we are going to be God's great trophy that will bring increasing glory to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to discuss the events of the end times and of Christ's return from the perspective of 2 Thessalonians Chapter 2. We have a website, groundworkonline.com. Please connect with us there; tell us what *Groundwork* means to you. Suggest topics and texts for future *Groundwork* programs.

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