

# 2 Thessalonians

**WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT?** Paul follows up his first letter to the Thessalonian church, clarifying how believers are to live while waiting for the Lord's return.

✦ **WHO WROTE IT?** The apostle Paul.

✦ **WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?** About A.D. 51 or 52.

✦ **WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT?** Soon after Timothy and Silas returned from delivering 1 Thessalonians.

✦ **THE BREAKDOWN**

- Chapter 1: Paul thanks God for the church and prays for them
- Chapter 2: More information on Christ's return
- Chapter 3: Pray and work hard

✦ **KEY CONCEPTS**

- Thanks
- Suffering
- Prayer
- Second Coming
- Hard work



2 THESSALONIANS 2:18

## Tough Questions

What does withdrawing from another believer for the purpose of restoration look like? • 3:6, 11-15

Christian doctrine in general does not elevate separation above unity, which makes particular instructions like these difficult. But the point of this passage is that we should separate ourselves as a church body from those whose ongoing and willful disobedience shows that they are intent on causing division within a fellowship of believers. *Withdraw* (3:6) pictures gathering together one's robe and walking away, not in a spirit of superiority but in a refusal to condone wrong deeds. The purpose of withdrawing is to create a distance that will encourage repentance and restoration (3:14).

In practical terms, withdrawing means: Do not be influenced by troublemakers. Do not join in their pursuits or let them whisper destructive things in your ear. In the Greek, to "not keep company" with someone literally means, "Do not mix yourselves up with them" (3:14). If some come along who want to start trouble in the church, shut yourself off from their controversy and encourage others to do the same. And confront them—lovingly (Gal. 6:1)—since they are not the enemy, but brothers and sisters in Christ (3:15). Urge the disorderly to get back in step with the army of believers and walk faithfully in obedience to the Word. This is the biblical way to restore fellowship.

## WORTH MEMORIZING

- 3:5 May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ.
- 3:10 Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: "Those unwilling to work will not get to eat."

## THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE

- **QUIET BUT STRONG.** Paul emphasizes quiet qualities, like standing firm (2:15), prayer (3:1), hard work (3:12), and doing good (3:13). In a world that often rewards flashy self-promotion, Christian men should distinguish themselves by quietly serving behind the scenes.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF  
2 Thessalonians?

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While you're  
waiting for the  
Second Coming  
... get to work!

## THE SECOND EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS

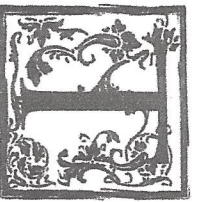
SINCE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER, THE seeds of false doctrine have been sown among the Thessalonians, causing them to waver in their faith. Paul removes these destructive seeds and again plants the seeds of truth. He begins by commending the believers on their faithfulness in the midst of persecution and encouraging them that present suffering will be repaid with future glory. Therefore, in the midst of persecution, expectation can be high.

Paul then deals with the central matter of his letter: a misunderstanding spawned by false teachers regarding the coming day of the Lord. Despite reports to the contrary, that Day has not yet come, and Paul recounts the events that must first take place. Laboring for the gospel, rather than lazy resignation, is the proper response.

As the second letter in Paul's Thessalonian correspondence, this was entitled *Pros Thessalonikais B*, the "Second to the Thessalonians."

## WATCH WORDS

- **endure** (bear up under the strain of suffering; persevere)—1:4
- **falling away** (sliding back, away from the faith)—2:3
- **faithful** (believing in God or Christ; reliable; dependable)—3:3



those who travel for a living know the burden of long-distance parenting. Thanks to modern technology, we can still read to our kids or talk to them at bedtime. But it's hard to be away from our children when they need us.

That's how Paul felt about the church of the Thessalonians. In Acts 17, he had arrived in this city with the Gospel, but persecution had driven him away before he had adequately instructed his converts. In 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul was providing long-distance parenting to his children in the faith.

Both these letters focus on the return of Christ and on the way we ought to live while anticipating that day. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul answered some questions about the Second Coming. But afterward some unknown person, apparently pretending to be Paul, had written that the return of Christ had already occurred. The Thessalonians were understandably confused, so Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to clear up the issue.

The first chapter of this letter expresses Paul's thanksgiving and prayer for the church. Chapter 2 deals with the events leading up to the Day of the Lord. The last chapter commands us to be busy and productive as we await His coming. Paul's teaching on the End Times should motivate us to be hopeful toward the future and diligent in the present. The purpose of the teaching about the coming of Christ is not for our speculation but for our sanctification as we grow up in Christ.

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**KEY THOUGHT:**

The return of Christ is a future event that will be swift, certain, and glorious.

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**KEY VERSES:**

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work."

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

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**KEY ACTION:**

The Second Coming shouldn't provoke idleness among believers, but action; not speculation, but sanctification.

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**KEY PRAYER:**

God, help me see through the distraction of this world to the glory of Heaven beyond.



INTRODUCTION TO  
**2 THESSALONIANS**

### BACKGROUND

Paul, Silas, and Timothy established the church in Thessalonica, but had to leave because of persecution (Acts 17:1-10). (See also the introduction to 1 Thessalonians.) The bearer of the first letter from Paul to the church in Thessalonica may have brought Paul an update on new developments at the church, prompting Paul's reply. The apostle's claims of authorship (1:1; 3:17) are supported by the vocabulary, style, and doctrinal content, which are congruent with his other writings.

### MESSAGE

Paul writes 2 Thessalonians to correct a misunderstanding about the return of

### OUTLINE

- I. Thanksgiving and Prayer
- II. The Man of Sin
- III. Stand Firm in the Faith
- IV. A Prayer Request
- V. Warnings about Idleness
- VI. A Blessing

Christ. Facing persecution and thinking God's judgment has already begun, the believers are falling prey to false teaching. As a result, many of the believers stop working and are simply waiting for the Lord to suddenly appear. Paul admonishes them not to be idle and to "be not weary in well doing" (3:13). As in other epistles, he puts a high priority on prayer—his for the believers as well as theirs for him.

### TIME

First Thessalonians was written in A.D. 51, and 2 Thessalonians probably was written a few months later, while Paul remained in Corinth with Silas and Timothy (Silvanus and Timotheus, mentioned in 1:1).

- 1:1-12
- 2:1-12
- 2:13-17
- 3:1-5
- 3:6-15
- 3:16-18

## BASIC SURVEY

### 2 THESSALONIANS

**AUTHOR:** The apostle Paul, along with Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy (Tit).

**DATE:** Early 50s—perhaps Paul's second oldest letter.

#### IN TEN WORDS OR LESS

Christians should work until Jesus returns.

#### DETAILS, PLEASE

Shortly after writing 1 Thessalonians, Paul dictates a follow-up. Apparently, a letter falsely claiming to be from Paul had left the Thessalonians "shaken in mind . . . troubled" (2:2 KJV) at the thought that Jesus had already returned. Paul assures them that the event is still future—and urges everyone to live positive and productive lives until the second coming. "If any would not work," Paul commands those who have become idle in anticipation of Jesus' return, "neither should he eat" (3:10 KJV).

#### QUOTABLE

> You who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels (1:7 KJV).

> Brethren, do not grow weary in doing good (3:13 NKJV).

#### UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

It is clear that Paul dictated this letter from his comment, "The salutation of Paul with my own hand . . . so I write" (3:17 NKJV).

#### SO WHAT?

As with all of the Christian life, balance is key: we should always look forward to Jesus' return, but we should also be busy doing good while we're here on earth.

READ PSALMS 114-116.

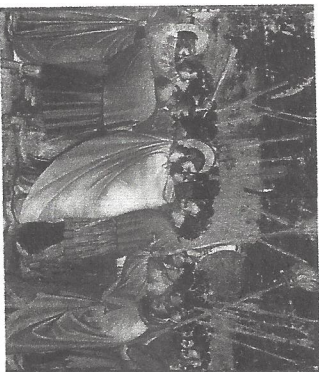
- One-Month Course: your next reading is on page 244. →
- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 244. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 242. →

## CLOSER LOOK

## THE GREAT APOSTASY

After Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, he penned a second epistle in which he discussed “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him.” He said, “Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin [the Antichrist] is revealed” (2 Thessalonians 2:1, 3 NKJV).

The “falling away” is called the “apostasy” in the NASB, the “rebellion” in the NIV, and the “great rebellion against God” in the NLT. Many Christians believe that in the end time much of the church will backslide from God. This will fulfill Titus 1:16 (NLT), “Such people claim they know God, but



The apostasy is a rebellion against God. Giotto (c. 1267–1337) painted *Kiss of Judas*, which is one example of how a believer, Judas, fell away from God.

they deny him by the way they live. They are . . . disobedient, worthless for doing anything good.” They will then come up with deceptive doctrines to justify their disobedience. “The Holy Spirit tells us clearly that in the last times some will turn away from the true faith” (1 Timothy 4:1 NLT). (See also 2 Timothy 4:3–4.)

In many ways, the great apostasy is *already* here. It’s been a fact of life for the church for much of the last two thousand years. Even in the early church, some Christians claimed to be spiritually alive yet were actually dead (Revelation 3:1). Rather than listing the ways that a Christian society and different churches fall short, Christians do well to examine their *own* lives and make sure that *they* are truly loving and obeying God.

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 2 AND PSALM 135.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 244.



## HIDDEN TREASURE

## THE WICKED WILL BE PUNISHED

The Christians of Thessalonica were being persecuted, so Paul wrote that God would reward them *and* would punish their enemies. “It is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted. . . dealing out retribution” (2 Thessalonians 1:6–8 NASB). By patiently suffering, and even loving their enemies, the Thessalonians had fulfilled this passage: “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19 NIV). Some people think that it’s even wrong for God to judge, but the Bible reminds us: “True and righteous are Your judgments” (Revelation 16:7 NKJV).

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 1 AND REVELATION 20.

## HIDDEN TREASURE

## AN HONEST DAY’S WORK

Paul taught that those who preached the Gospel full-time should earn their living from it. He also said that if people benefited spiritually from a preacher, then he had a right to expect financial benefits in return (1 Corinthians 9:1–12). However, some Christians in Thessalonica were abusing this principle. They had stopped working for a living and were simply going from house to house sharing their so-called “revelations”—and mooching off those who held regular jobs. Paul himself had never done this (Acts 20:33–35; 1 Corinthians 9:12–18; 2 Thessalonians 3:7–9). So he reminded the Thessalonians, “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10 NKJV).

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 3 AND ISAIAH 62.

# 2 Thessalonians

BOOK INTRODUCTION

**P**lanting and shepherding a new assembly of Christians is much like birthing and raising children, and Paul used that analogy more than once (Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7, 11). Now, only a few months after he had sent his first letter to the Thessalonians, it seemed that the newborn church in Thessalonica needed long-distance parenting yet again. This second letter served to clarify, correct, and counsel about the things that still made the people “shaken in mind” (2:2) regarding the Second Coming.

Both of Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians have the same overall theme: the return of Christ and the way believers ought to live as they wait for that day. In his first letter, Paul had answered some of the Thessalonians’ most troubling questions, in particular the issue of what happens to Christians who die before Christ returns. But after that letter, some unknown person had communicated that the return of Christ (“the day of Christ”) had already occurred (2:2)! Perhaps the Thessalonians themselves had misunderstood what Paul said in his first letter (1 Thess. 4:17). So Paul wrote once more to assure those believers that the day of Christ had *not* happened because certain events had not yet occurred.

## WHAT IT SAYS | *Reassurance for Young Believers*

Like new believers today, the Thessalonians were vulnerable to false doctrine and fainting hearts in the face of suffering and difficulty. Because the persecution he encountered kept Paul from being with them, he needed to send his best counsel in a letter and then entrust this flock to the Chief Shepherd.

He was especially concerned that some had misunderstood his teaching or that someone had sent the Thessalonians a false communication (2:1, 2) with misleading teachings about the return of Christ. He wanted to make sure the Thessalonians understood what would take place in the world *before* the Rapture of the church so they would not think that “the day of Christ” was already upon them. Further, he admonished his spiritual children to stand fast in the teachings of Christ and not to be moved by the persecution around them.

With this second letter, Paul also invites these young believers to be his partners in prayer. He reminds them that he too faced opposition from “unreasonable and wicked men” (presumably in Corinth, the base of his ministry) who were outside the faith. By

2 THESSALONIANS

remembering him in prayer, the Thessalonians would have a real stake in taking the gospel into the wider world (3:1–5).

Finally, Paul does what every good father must do: he corrects the out-of-line behavior among his children. Some within the Thessalonian church habitually relied on its wealthier members to provide for them and had become busybodies. Paul had addressed this long-standing problem when he was among them personally—and he speaks of it even more starkly near the end of this letter (3:12).

Both of Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians have this message at heart: Wait faithfully for the appearing of Christ (1 Thessalonians), but do not be confused about the signs of His appearing (2 Thessalonians). Meanwhile, stand firm, be faithful, and spread the gospel by word, deed, and prayer until the coming of the Lord.

## WHAT IT MEANS | *Signs of the End Times*

Paul writes these assurances and exhortations to the Thessalonians in his second letter:

- **The End of the Age:** Nearly 40 percent of 2 Thessalonians touches on the Second Coming, emphasizing the signs that will precede the Day of the Lord, culminating in the coming of Christ and the destruction of the “man of sin” (2:3). The Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:2) will be the final manifestation of God’s salvation and judgment. Believers will share in the glory of the returning Christ and unbelievers will be judged (1:5–10; 2:9–14).
- **Idleness:** Paul calls the idle to account and holds up Timothy, Silas, and himself as examples of a sound Christian work ethic. Paul and his companions could have depended on others for their sustenance during their stay in Thessalonica, but they worked diligently so they would not be a burden to others (3:4–15).
- **Man of Sin:** Nowhere else does Paul give as much detail about the coming Antichrist. Paul notes that the “man of sin” and his lawless acts will be precursors to the coming Tribulation on earth and judgment by the returning Christ (2:3–12).
- **Standing firm:** Standing fast in the truth is a favorite theme for Paul throughout his epistles (Rom. 11:20; 1 Cor. 15:1; 2 Cor. 1:24; Gal. 5:1; Eph. 6:11). Paul uses it here to encourage the Thessalonians not to be thrown off course by persecution (2:13–17) or false teaching.

## WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU | *Be Established in the Truth*

In every era, whenever people have endured persecution or oppression by an evil dictator, there are always those who say, “These are the last days! The Antichrist has come!” Such words can shake our faith—unless we are firmly grounded in the truth.

Although God’s Word does report specific signs and events that will alert us to the beginning of the Great Tribulation, it is more important for Christians in any age to live with the bigger picture in mind: until the Lord comes, we are to live wisely, endure suffering, and wait with hope, since we know that one day God will come to set things right.

Whenever we practice the biblical truths we have been taught—refusing to take revenge ourselves, faithfully enduring difficulties, rooting out false doctrine, confronting disobedient believers—we plant another stake in the soil of truth, bringing God glory and establishing ourselves in the faith until the day He calls us home. Paul’s teaching on the end times should motivate us to have hope for the future and live responsibly in the present. The purpose of the NT teaching on the coming of Christ is not for our speculation but for our sanctification.

# 2 THESSALONIANS

## THE BIG PICTURE

The message we receive is not always the message that was sent. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians had made an impact on its readers. But it wasn't the impact Paul had intended. Paul had affirmed that Jesus would return soon. In response, some of the Thessalonian believers assumed that they should stop everything and wait for Christ's return. Some even stopped working, expecting that they would no longer need food and other supplies.

Not every believer in Thessalonica thought that way; many continued to act responsibly even as they anticipated Christ's return. But this only added to the tension between church members. The diligent believers felt pressured to pick up the slack left by the others. The idle believers claimed that they were living lives of true faith. After hearing about this problem, Paul sent this second letter to the Thessalonians.

Though Paul wanted to correct his audience's misunderstanding, he made sure to commend them for their faithfulness to God and their commitment to doing God's will. Paul was confident that God would help them resolve this issue, so his message to them was simple. He urged them to be content with their situation and disciplined about fulfilling their responsibilities.

Second Thessalonians contains good reminders for us. Though we surrender our lives to God in this life and look forward to the day when all our problems will be behind us, we still have to live in the here and now. Developing a relationship with God and pursuing spiritual growth does not mean we can neglect our families, work or friends. Accepting the responsibilities God has given us is a key to our spiritual growth.

## SPIRITUAL RENEWAL THEMES

### GOD IS THE SOURCE OF OUR HOPE

Sometimes in our spiritual growth we take our eyes off God and focus on ourselves. We tell ourselves that if we only keep up our resolve, all will be well. But placing our hope in anything other than God sets us up for a fall. Our realization that we needed God's help was what led us to desire spiritual renewal in the first place. If after depending on God and beginning the process of spiritual renewal we revert to depending on ourselves again, we will only face failure and frustration. We will want to quit our spiritual journey. But if we depend on God, he will provide us with the hope and joy we need to persevere in our faith.

- A. GREETINGS (1:1 – 2)
- B. COMMENDATIONS IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION (1:3 – 12)
- C. CORRECTION CONCERNING THE DAY OF THE LORD (2:1 – 17)
- D. ENCOURAGEMENT FOR PRAYER AND A DISCIPLINED LIFE (3:1 – 15)
- E. CONCLUDING REMARKS (3:16 – 18)

## Essential Facts

### PURPOSE:

To encourage the Thessalonian believers to fulfill their daily responsibilities while awaiting Christ's return.

### AUTHOR:

The apostle Paul.

### AUDIENCE:

The church at Thessalonica, a city in Macedonia.

### DATE WRITTEN:

About AD 51 – 52, during Paul's second missionary journey, shortly after he had written 1 Thessalonians.

### SETTING:

Some of these believers had misunderstood Paul's first letter and believed Christ's return was imminent. They used that assumption as an excuse for being lazy while awaiting Christ's return.

### KEY VERSE:

"May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance" (3:5).

### KEY PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS:

Paul with Silas, Timothy and the believers at Thessalonica.

## 1:4 endure

(Gr. *anekhotai*) (Mark 9:19; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13; 2 Tim. 4:3) G0430: This word is formed from the preposition *ana* (G0303), "up," and the verb *echō* (G2192), "to hold." Put together it means "to bear up" under the strain of suffering; to persevere. People who exhibit this characteristic maintain their courage even in the face of great tribulation. In Scripture this is often used to describe bearing with someone in love, putting up with another person's irritating or hurtful behaviors.

1:5 righteous - see Matt. 7:9.  
1:5 judgment - see John 3:19.  
1:6 tribulation - see John 16:33.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSEVERANCE

Some of the believers in Thessalonica were idly waiting for the return of Christ. Their lazy, indifferent attitudes toward the concerns of everyday life kept them from living responsible lives. These believers soon became a burden to others. Entrusting our lives to God does not mean we can just sit around. We must continue to follow God's plan, trusting God to sustain us and bring about the transformation we desire. Our dependence on God is a partnership with him; he doesn't become our slave or a genie in a bottle. We must cooperate with God in both spiritual and practical ways, or we will miss God's best and alienate those who have to pick up the slack because of our lack of perseverance.

## GOD'S REASSURING POWER AND PRESENCE

Evil seems to be on the increase in our society much as it was in Thessalonica. The Bible tells us that until Christ returns evil will continue to increase. But we don't need to be surprised or afraid of these changes; God is sovereign over the earth, no matter how evil our world becomes. As we continue to seek God and surrender to him, he promises to give us victory over the evil in our lives. We only need to remain faithful to God.

## ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

### Providing for Ourselves

2 Thessalonians 3:1-8

Part of our spiritual growth involves accepting financial responsibility for ourselves. Adults have a basic responsibility to work and provide for themselves, and if they are parents, to provide for their children. Accepting this responsibility is practical advice that will help us grow in spiritual maturity too.

The apostle Paul taught us by example what it means to be responsible: "We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you" (2 Thessalonians 3:7-8). He also instructed believers "in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:12).

If we have not accepted such financial responsibility, we must consider how our refusal to do so may have affected others. We may have caused others much pain if we have failed to provide for ourselves or our family's needs. If our honest reflection on our lives shows patterns of irresponsibility, we may feel shame and discouragement. However, once we face our failure and willingly change our ways, we will gain self-respect. Accepting responsibility for our finances by working hard and clearing up any financial problems will reduce daily stress and free us to focus on our spiritual growth.

Turn to Philimon.

## Tough Questions

If God chooses us, what is the point of evangelism? • 2:13

The doctrine of election affirms that God chooses those whom He will save. But some people argue, "If you believe in election, there's no point in sharing the gospel, because God will ensure that whoever is going to be saved will be saved whether or not you do anything about it." The problem with this line of thinking is that God has not only selected people to be saved, but He has elected the means by which they've saved. If we do not cooperate with Him by spreading the Word and allowing it to be heard, we frustrate His means of grace in people's lives.

God's sovereignty in choosing who He will for salvation does not rule out human responsibility. Verse 15 in this chapter reminds us that Christians are commanded to stand firm and cling to the teaching they've received. And throughout Scripture, we are commanded to share the gospel and respond in faith.

Although we will not see how this all fits together until eternity, we can be confident that God is responsible for His process of election and He has given us responsibility as His mouthpieces in that process. We should share the Word of God, and God will use that Word and the Spirit's work as the means of bringing people to Christ.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:15

## 3 Ways to Give Thanks for Fellow Believers

Read: 2 Thessalonians 2:13 | Habit: Gratitude

A common feature of Paul's letters is his practice of giving thanks to God for believers in the churches he's writing to. In his second letter to the church of the Thessalonians, Paul twice uses the exact same phrase to let them know he is thankful for them: "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters" (2Th 1:3; 2:13).

Paul frequently named names when praising believers before the church.

"Not only does he thank God for them," notes Doug Wilson, "but he insists on telling them that he thanks God for them." Wilson adds,

God gives us gifts in one another, and through one another. We are the body of Christ to one another. The recognition that God is behind all of it is central. When Paul gives thanks, he gives thanks to God. All the good works that we do for one another are repurposed gifts, redirected gifts. God first gives, and then as a consequence of this, we are able to give. But we can only give biblically if we ourselves are a gift. When we give, we are imitating God who always gives Himself in the gift. So this is why we render a two-fold thanks. When we say thank you, we say thank you first to God, and secondly to the instrument in God's hand.<sup>1</sup>

Here are three ways you can follow Paul's example and express your gratitude for fellow believers:

1. *Be open in your expression*—Paul frequently named names when praising believers before the church. For instance, he praised Andronicus and Junia as "outstanding" apostles (see Ro 16:7). Let individuals know you're thankful for them. But also make a habit of letting others in the church know you are thankful for those individuals too.
2. *Be generous and specific in your praise*—Paul was rather effusive in his praise of Epaphroditus (see Php 2:25-30). Notice that Paul identifies Epaphroditus by noting his various roles—brother, coworker, fellow soldier, messenger—and talks about how he risked his life for the good of the church.
3. *Be thankful in prayer*—Don't just tell people you are thankful for them, let God also know how thankful you are for his servants (2Th 2:13).

**PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY:** We should express our gratitude for our fellow Christians because God is the source of their gifts and blessings.

VERSE FOR THE DAY:  
2 Thessalonians 3:10

AUTHOR:  
Thomas Merton

PASSAGE FOR THE DAY:  
2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

## Work and the Spiritual Life

AN ACTIVITY that is based on the frenzies and impulsions of human ambition is a delusion and an obstacle to grace. It gets in the way of God's will, and it creates more problems than it solves. We must learn to distinguish between the pseudo spirituality of activism and the true vitality and energy of Christian action guided by the Spirit. At the same time we must not create a split in the Christian life by assuming that all activity is somehow dangerous to the spiritual life. The spiritual life is not a life of quiet withdrawal, a hothouse of growth of artificial ascetic practices beyond the reach of people living ordinary lives. It is in the ordinary duties and labors of life that the Christian can and should develop his spiritual union with God.

This is no new principle. But it is perhaps not often easy to apply in practice. A writer or preacher who assumes that it is very easy may seriously mislead those who try to follow his advice. Work in a normal, healthy human context, work with a sane and moderate human measure, integrated in a productive social milieu, is by itself capable of contributing much to the spiritual life. But work that is disordered, irrational, unproductive, dominated by the exhausting frenzies and wastefulness of a worldwide struggle for power and wealth, is not necessarily going to make a valid contribution to the spiritual lives of all those engaged in it.

### Additional Scripture Readings:

Ephesians 4:25-32;  
1 Thessalonians 4:3-12

VERSE FOR THE DAY:  
2 Thessalonians 1:11

AUTHOR:  
Frederick Buechner

PASSAGE FOR THE DAY:  
2 Thessalonians 1:3-12

## All Sorts of Voices

IN THE year that King Uzziah died [see Isaiah 6], or in the year that John F. Kennedy died, or in the year that somebody you loved died, you go into the temple if that is your taste, or you hide your face in the little padded temple of your hands, and a voice says, "Whom shall I send into the pain of a world where people die?" and if you are not careful, you may find yourself answering, "Send me." You may hear the voice say, "Go." Just go.

Like "duty," "law," "religion," the word "vocation" has a dull ring to it, but in terms of what it means, it is really not dull at all. *Vocare*, to call, of course, and a man's vocation is a man's calling. It is the work that he is called to in this world, the thing that he is summoned to spend his life doing. We can speak of a man's choosing his vocation, but perhaps it is at least as accurate to speak of a vocation's choosing the man, of a call's being given and a man's hearing it, or not hearing it. And maybe that is the place to start: the business of listening and hearing. A man's life is full of all sorts of voices calling him in all sorts of directions. Some of them are voices from inside and some of them are voices from outside. The more alive and alert we are, the more clamorous our lives are. Which do we listen to? What kind of voice do we listen for?

### Additional Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 6:1-8; Jeremiah 1:4-10

**2:15-17** Paul praised the Thessalonians for their exemplary faith and then went on to encourage them to continue to seek God, his will, and his power. Paul also reminded them to hold on to the truth they had been taught. We must do the same if we hope to make spiritual progress. If we cannot face the truth about our own lives, we cannot even begin the process. We need to recognize that we are dependent on God's help to survive and grow spiritually. Recognizing this truth is foundational to spiritual growth.

**3:1-2** Paul drew his readers into his life and ministry by asking them to pray for him. He didn't set himself above them but rather shared how he needed their prayers, just as he needed the power of God for continued safety. Paul shows us how his own survival was tied to the spiritual growth of others. As the Thessalonians prayed for Paul, they shared in his life. And as Paul experienced deliverance, they rejoiced and were strengthened by God's clear answers to their prayers. By involving the Thessalonians in his struggles, Paul also involved them in his victories. Our relationships with others who share our faith can provide mutual encouragement in similar ways.

**3:6-10** Apparently many of the Thessalonian believers, in anticipation of Christ's return, had stopped working. Their false understanding had led them to live irresponsibly. So Paul set things straight by telling these believers to get back to work. If they refused to work, they would have to face the consequences—they wouldn't be allowed to eat. Since God has promised to help us grow spiritually, we might be tempted to think we can sit idly by and watch it happen. This is not the case. We need to participate in the plan God has for us.