

Second Thessalonians Outline

Introduction: In this second letter to the Thessalonians Paul again confronts practical challenges relating to the immanent eschatological beliefs of the community, the belief that Christ will be coming back very, very soon.

But before Paul deals with the most practical matter he also has to face what must have been an enormous challenge indeed in the ancient world: miscommunication. There was a wide variety of beliefs in the early church regarding what the end of time would look like- there was general agreement that terrible calamity would accompany the end, but little agreement about what this would actually look like. So in the second chapter Paul warns the community to be skeptical about reports that the end has already come- Paul in a sense is telling them it has not come and when it does come they will know it, because it will be bad.

An important note here, the “end” (the eschaton in Greek) did NOT refer to the end of the world, as it has come to mean in our usage. The early church looked to the end of the age, or the end of a time period- namely the end of Roman rule when the kingdom of God would be spread out upon all the earth and Jesus would reign. So, while this term is almost entirely negative in our context, symbolizing total destruction and oblivion, in the context of the early church it meant the coming of an absolutely peaceful time.

Finally, the practical problem Paul confronts in this letter is a natural consequence of a community that believes this end is coming within days: many people in the community stopped working. Many people, believing the world as they knew it would be coming to an end soon, just decided that paying bills and paying for food and really any kind of work just didn’t sound all that appealing. Why bother if the kingdom was coming? So Paul forcefully addresses this, telling the community the end may be near, but it isn’t there yet- and until it does come they can jolly well work for their bread like he does and the rest of the apostles. Paul’s words are so strong here he advocates that the community shun brothers and sisters who choose idleness. Paul also reminds the community that no one, not even himself, even knows when the end is coming anyway, so what they really need to do is to be vigilant as possible.

Chapter 1: Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians

Chapter 2: Paul warns them against false reports that the end has already come;
Description of the “man of lawlessness”

Chapter 3: Paul’s warning against those who have stopped working

Stories/texts to know: (Chapter 2) Warning against false reports; (Chapter 3) warning against idleness;