

## The Pauline Letters



### 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians

***“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our letter. 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 Thess 2.15-17)***

There is no doubt that the theme around which 2Thessalonians centers is that of **“Steadfastness”** while waiting for the Coming of Christ. Paul (or who every was writing) wanted to encourage the Thessalonians who were undergoing persecution, to stand firm. Apart from this, he also wanted to correct certain misunderstanding among the Thessalonians about the imminent Coming of the Lord’s return. Writing most probably from Corinth during his second missionary journey, Paul wanted to make sure that idleness does not dwell among the Thessalonians. So he wrote to them what kind of disciplinary action they should take towards those who refused to work.

**Paul’s answer about the Lord’s Coming is straight forward and clear: *“The Lord will not come right away”.*(2Thess 2.15-17).**

The second letter to the Thessalonians is very simple to divide and to analyse: After the Salutation and greetings (1.1-2), Paul expresses his gratitude for the spiritual growth of the Thessalonians, especially in virtue of the trials they are encountering (1.5-10). He assures them of his prayer and then in chapter 2 he enlightens them about the coming of the Lord (2.1-17). Paul’s advice applies also to us today: 1. Do not be troubled by false reports; 2. Apostasy must come first; and 3. remain Steadfast in the Truth and to be nourished by God’s Word.

The last chapter of this letter is an exhortation for a good Christian conduct. In their prayer they ought ask the Lord to direct theirs hearts into the love of God and patience of Christ.(3.1-5). Paul’s final exhortation is a strong admonition to ALL OF US: **“Don’t grow weary in doing good...”** (3.13-15).

### First Letter to the Corinthians

*An Introduction:*

The information that we need to know about the foundation of the Church in Corinth is to be found in Acts 18.1-17. We are told in this reference that Paul spent about three years in Ephesus (Ac 19.8;19.10;20.31); and from 1 Cor 16.8 we get the information that Paul is writing this letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, where he intended to stay until Pentecost.

According to Acts 18.1-3, Priscilla and Aquila were already in Corinth when Paul arrived there (ca AD 51-52 ). After his arrival, they worked together because they had the same trade: tent makers.

From I Corinthians 5.9 and also from 1Cor 16.17-18, it is possible to conclude that what we now call 1Corinthians was by no means the first letter that Paul had written to the Corinthians. In 1Cor 5.9 there is a reference to a letter that Paul had already written to the Corinthians admonishing them "not to associate with immoral men".

Most probably it was about the year AD 55-56 while Paul was staying at Ephesus (AD 54-57) that he wrote what now we call **1 Corinthians**. Directly or indirectly, a certain Christian, by the name of Chloe (1 Cor 1.11; and 11.18) has reported to Paul about the behaviour of the Corinthians, especially their separation from each other because of partisanship! This division was very serious, and it demanded that Paul will address this issue. Almost four chapters are dedicated to this problem ( 1Cor 1.10-4.21).The opening sentence of Paul's solution to this problem is a classical statement: "***I belong to Paul,***" or "***I belong to Apollos***" or "***I belong to Cephas***" or "***I belong to Christ.***" "***Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?***" These statements and questions made the Corinthians think seriously about the repurchasing of their behaviour. Division has no place in Christianity. Jesus' prayer in Chapter 17 of John's Gospel was and will always remain of great value for Christianity: "That they may be one even as we are one."  
(Jn 17.22)

Just in reading the first four chapters of this letter, it is clear that unity among the Christians is a sign of Christ's presence among them. Indeed, as we progress through the letter, it will become even clearer that the two signs of faith are: ***Unity, and love in the dimension of the Cross!***

Just a casual reading of this letter reveals to us the enthusiasm with which Paul is writing to the Corinthians. Though this is a written letter, nonetheless, the style that it is written in is so colloquial that one can hear Paul saying/speaking... declaring to us what he has written nearly two thousand years ago!

Yes indeed it is a written letter: 1Cor 4.14; 5.11; 9.15; 14.37; but it is also a word spoken with such a passion behind it , that it becomes alive with the kind of verbs that Paul is using to communicate his message. One cannot help but to notice the use of certain verbs engaged in his communication: ***Say, Speak, Declare, Assert....*** In this letter Paul makes use of these verbs in such a way that one can "*not only hear him*" but also "*see him*" physically present!

Paul is dictating this letter, and his words become alive to the reader of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century while he listens to what is being read! The repetition of the verb ***to say*** is so frequent that one can almost hear Paul speaking to him directly, as indeed, he does. In the Greek Paul makes use of three verbs which carry a lot of weight: ***Lego*** (*say*)...***Laleo*** (*speak*)... and ***Pheimi*** (*assert, declare*).

In 1Cor 6.5 we read (hear) : "I ***say*** this to your shame"; in 1Cor 7.6: "This I ***say*** by way of concession, not of command". In 1Cor 7.8: "To the unmarried and the widows I ***say*** that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am." In 1 Cor 7.12: "To the rest I ***say***...", again in chapter 7.35: "I ***say*** this for your own benefit..." But what makes this observation interesting is not just the frequent repetition of the verb ***Lego*** (*say*), but also the use of the other two verbs which bring alive his conversation: ***Laleo*** and ***Pheimi***. In his narration, Paul also makes use of "***speaking***" (***Laleo***) and when he wants to make a point across he applies the verb: ***assert*** (***Pheimi***). A couple of references will help to make my point clear. In 1Cor 9.8 we read: "Do I ***speak*** this on human authority?" ; and in 1Cor 15.34 we read: "Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no

more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I **speak** this to your shame.”

Apart from the application of Paul’s two verbs (*Lego* and *Laleo*) which we have demonstrated; he also uses the verb **Phemi** (assert, declare) when he wants to drive through his message! A few examples will make clear our point: “I **declare**, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short;”

Also in 1 Cor 15.50: “I **assert**, brothers and sisters, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.”

When we take into consideration the above observations, it does not require much wisdom to discover that what Paul is writing to the Corinthians about two thousand years ago, he is still saying it to you and me, and his words come alive as soon as we listen to them!

### The “Hauptbriefe” 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans

**Hauptbriefe** is a German word that biblical scholars use for the four main letters of St Paul which are accepted by all as being genuinely written by him! **Galatians is one of the Hauptbriefe.**

If a person has no time to read all the letters of Paul, the Letter to the Galatians is for sure the Letter to read. It has the magnetic force to suck you in the beauty and power of the Pauline literature!

Paul, having reached the shores of Syria, on his return from Corinth, heard the news about the Galatians and how someone was trying to sway the Galatians from the teachings that they have received from him. From the Acts of the Apostles and from the Pauline Letters we know that Paul had many friends in Antioch, and most probably it was from these friends that he came to know about the situation in Galatia (North?) . Some Jews had penetrated into the “Community” and were teaching that *circumcision* was a must for Salvation. Paul’s teaching was very much opposed to this: “ **It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that would compel you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ... Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God.**”(Gal 6.12-16).

In Acts 18.22ff we read about Paul’s second visit to North Galatia and Phrygia (see also Gal 4.13), and though there are a few scholars that belief that the Letter under study was addressed to South Galatia; the majority of sound scholars hold that it was north Galatia that this letter was being addressed to.

It was probably the year 55 when Paul wrote this passionate letter, a letter that has installed in us the importance of the Cross in Paul’s theology: “**Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**”(Gal 6.14)

The contents of the Letter to the Galatians can easily be summarised in six sections:

A. Introduction: 1.1-5; B. Faithfulness and Loyalty to the Gospel preached by Paul: Gal 1.6-10; C. Explanation of the Gospel preached by Paul, and the authority behind it: Gal 1.11-2.21; D. Distinction between Faith and Liberty: Gal 3.1-4.31; E. Exhortation: Gal 5.1-6.10; F. Conclusion Gal 6.11-18.

One cannot end this short introduction with Paul's exhortation to the Galatians and to each one of us: "**For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.**" Gal 5.1

**Romans: "The just-by-faith shall live"** Habakkuk 2.4 (Rom 1.17)

It is almost universally agreed by biblical scholars that the Letter to the Romans was written immediately after the one to the Galatians. Though we may encounter a little disagreement as to the date that Paul wrote this letter, mostly agree that it was written from Corinth. As to the year, it probably was the year 57-58 AD.

In The Acts of the Apostles, we have a little background as to the setting and situation in which this letter was written. The information which we have in Romans 15.22-32 is in harmony with what we have in Acts 19.21-20.6. The impression which we get from chapter 15 of Romans is that one of the purposes of this Letter was to pave the way for Paul during his visit which he intended, a self- introductory remark to the Christians in Rome. With the connections that Paul had, he was aware of the presence of the Church in Rome, and perhaps also of the obstacles that the gentiles might have been experiencing because of the large Jewish communities in Rome. H.J. Leon tells us that the presence of the Jews in Rome at this time was between 40,000 and 60,000! The Christians too were in great number. Tacitus tells us that the Christians in Rome were "huge in number".

Perhaps the Letter to the Romans is The Letter that has captured the attention of most scholars, starting from St Augustine, Origene, Luther, Barth, and Fitzmyer. Especially in Protestant exegesis, Chapters 1-8 have been regarded as the "doctrinal heart" of Romans: *Justification by faith alone*. Recently, this teaching has been challenged, and very few are those scholars who are competent enough to challenge the conclusion of A. Feuillet. Nowadays it is held that the doctrine upon which the Letter to the Romans is based is: "**The salvation offered by God to all through the faith of the Gospel**".

In reading Romans one cannot overlook the importance of Chapter 12. This Chapter is without any doubt the photo of the Christian. It is also an exposition of the mystical body of Christ, the Church. We are told in Chapter 12.12 to pray constantly, to rejoice always, and to be patient in moments of tribulations. Having discovered the many mercies that Paul has enumerated for us in chapters 9-11, he groups all these mercies in the first few verses of Romans ch 12; and exhorts us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

Two other beautiful and powerful chapters in Romans are chapter 5 and chapter 8. Chapter 5 speaks about the Law and faith, and their place in the life of the Christian; whereas chapter 8 throws at us that FAMOUS expression : "**You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship... Abba Father!**" (Rom 8.15)

Indeed, let us treasure what Paul has to tell us: "**All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.**" (Romans 8.14)

**The Letter to Philemon: A Lesson in Forgiveness and Diplomacy!**

The letter to Philemon is a private letter - a personal note - of intercession written by Paul probably from Rome ( or Ephesus) , and sent to Philemon at Colossae.(Col.4:7-9). It is the shortest of the Pauline corpus, consisting of 336 words in the Greek. From some information given to us from the Letter to the Colossians and also from the Letter under study, (Col 4.9,17;

Phlm 1,2) we learn that Philemon was a Christian, living in Colossae, and Onesimus was his slave who apparently has stolen some money from his master (Phlm 18) and run away. It has to be remembered that such a crime in Roman law was punishable by death; and whoever offered hospitality to a runaway slave was liable to the slave's master for the value of each day's work lost.

No doubt Paul is acting as an intercessor on behalf of Onesimus who has become a faithful believer and has repented. Paul's language, to say the least, is insistent and makes it clear that Onesimus should be welcomed into Philemon's family. The diplomacy and tactics of Paul cannot be overlooked, especially the parting shot: ***"Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be granted to you. (Phlm 21-22).***

As the title above indicates, this letter to Philemon is a lesson in forgiveness. Though the word forgiveness is not mentioned at all, one does not need any commentary to read in this letter Paul's intercessory petition for "forgiveness". The same can be said about diplomacy; though not mentioned at all, it is undeniable that Paul's expressions are indeed a classical example of how one power ought to deal with another power.

Paul's tactic is incredible, and his rhetoric skill is manifested in this letter as much as he manifested it in front of Festus and Gallo in the Acts of the Apostles. A couple of examples will do: ***"For I derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you."***(Phlm 7) Finally, one can hear the skilful art of Paul's persuasion: ***"but I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will."***(Phlm 14)

### **The Letter to the Philippians: Surprised by JOY!**

One can hardly find any biblical scholar who in commenting on the Letter to the Philippians does not make reference to the message of Joy that this letter communicates.

The Greek word for joy is chara, which is the experience of God's presence in our lives, an experience of gladness and peace. Paul, or who ever wrote Philippians, for sure knew the importance of this fruit of the Spirit in the life of the Christian; so much so, that the word joy or rejoicing is mentioned more than fifteen times in this Letter! The climax of these occurrences is reached in *Phil 4.4*: ***"Rejoice in the Lord always. Yes, I will say it again: Rejoice."***

Though the topic of Joy is, without any doubt, one of the topics that this letter deals with, it is by no means the only one. Other topics such as: Fellowship, Unity, Selflessness, and being rooted ***in Christ***, are but a few of the many other topics that make up the corpus of the letter to the Philippians. More than seventeen times (just in Philippians alone) Paul makes use of the Greek preposition en which contains in it the power to create a personal relationship to the extent that when one is ***In Christ***, the subject is under the control of and greatly influenced by his/her association with Christ Jesus: ***"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."***(Phil 4.7).

Another topic which jumps at us while reading Philippians is that of "Fellowship" in Greek : Koinonia ( a close association which involves sharing, communion, and close relationship). This Letter is classical for it reveals a very close relationship of sharing of the community with Paul: ***"Not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone."*** (Phil 4.15). Above all, the notion of sharing and fellowship is stated in clear terms in chapter 3 verse 10, where Paul with a determination that knows no bounds stated: ***"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings"***. Paul also applauds the Philippians for their thoughtfulness and concern: ***"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles"***. (Phil 4.14).

One cannot read Philippians and not being struck with the so called: "**Carmen Christi**", the **Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2.5-11**. This Hymn, in praise of Christ's humiliation and exaltation by God the Father, is placed in front of us as a model to follow, a Church that places its foundation on **Humility**. If there is one thing that Paul could not stand, for sure it was division: "**Exhorts Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord.**" (Phil 4.2).

This reflection will be incomplete if we do not draw the attention towards what Paul says in Phil 1.21 : "**For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.**" For every believer, it ought to be the same, as it was for Paul: **Life equal Christ, and without Christ there is NO LIFE**. Life is a lesson in learning how to die, dying to ourselves and living for Christ!

### 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy

One of the titles given to 1<sup>st</sup>& 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy, and also to Titus, is that of "Pastoral Letters"; and the title of "Captivity letters" is given to: Philippians, Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians. First and Second Corinthians, Romans and Galatians, these four are known by the title: "The Great Letters".

The so-called Pastoral Letters (1&2 Tim, and Titus), together with the letter to the Ephesians, are the most questionable letters of the Pauline Corpus. The reasons behind the questionable authorship are: contents, terminology, well organized Church, and suspected dates. If Paul is considered the author of 1 and 2 Timothy, then these must have been written towards the end of his Roman imprisonment (Acts 28.16).

Regardless of whether Paul wrote these letters or not, it remains a fact that they are considered by the Church as Biblically Inspired and worth a mine of gold for the messages they communicate to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The letters are mainly addressed to the leaders themselves, and the sentence that seems to capture the attention of the reader of 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy is "**Guard what has been entrusted to you.**"(1 Tim 6.20-21). This admonition strikes like a lightning in the darkness of the ignorance that many a times we find ourselves surrounded with. Today we are challenged like the first Christians to guard our faith and to learn how to defend it, especially by living it. Paul in his instructions gives Timothy the guidelines how he ought to deal with different situations and problems that an expanding Church was facing: False teachings, the right choice of teachers and leaders, and respect towards authority and vice versa, respect towards those being governed, including widows.

Because 2Timothy follows immediately 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, it does not mean that 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy was written before 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy. Many scholars believe that the opposite is the truth. Though 2 Timothy is shorter than 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, one should not fall into the trap of thinking that it is less important. As a matter of fact, it is in 2 Timothy 3,16-17 that we come across the Classical teaching concerning the inspiration of Sacred Scripture. We are told that: "**All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for reproofing, for teaching, for correction and for training in righteousness so that the man of God may be equipped, ready for every good work.**" See also 2Peter 1.20-21.

But the sentence that characterizes 2 Timothy is: "**Preach the gospel persistently, even if people don't listen!**"(2 Tim 4. 1-8).

**The Letter to Titus: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all."** (Titus: 2.11)

No one will deny the fact that in the theology and terminology of St. Paul, **Grace** occupies a place of great importance. In his letters, just at the introduction (greeting) of each one of them he applies the famous greeting: "**grace and peace**", two words which have come to incorporate in them the message of salvation.

Later on, St. John in the prologue of the Gospel, was to pick up again on the importance of this message where we are reminded: "**Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.**" and

again: **"Through him we have received grace upon grace."** Earlier St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, was to underline the same message: **"where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more."** There is hardly any letter of Paul where we are not reminded about the role of grace in the life of the Christian. Ephesians is strong on this, and so are Romans and Galatians.

In Ephesians we are not only reminded but also exhorted: **"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for the good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."** (Eph 8-10).

Paul himself was so self-conscious of this that he does not hesitate to state to his flock that **"by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace in me was not in vain"**. In training Titus, Paul wanted to make sure that Titus would carry the marks of a true disciple of Jesus Christ. What he had said to Timothy earlier he now repeats to Titus. **"Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness"**. (2 Tim 3.10)

Titus was a loyal disciple of Paul, and the way Paul instructed Timothy (1 and 2 Timothy), in the same way he wanted to provide some guidelines, not only to Titus, but to all those who, like him, were involved in pastoral ministry. The relation of the pastor with his flock ought to be a healthy one: Titus 2.1-3.1-11. Every member of the Christian community, including the pastor, should be **"zealous for good deeds"** (Titus 2.14b).

Paul's teaching is clear. **If you do not stand for anything, you will fall for everything. So, stand fast in your faith by being open to the grace that God wants to give you.**

(to be continued...)