

Handout: 1 Thessalonians Lesson 2

2:13 *And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe.* In 2:13, Paul refers to Apostolic Tradition that forms the unity of Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. Both come from the same divine origin and come together to form one thing, moving towards the same goal that is the transmission of the Gospel of salvation (see CCC 81-82). The word of God is not “Scripture alone.” The oral Tradition is the way the Thessalonians received the Word:

1. The message of the Gospel was first received orally (1 Cor 15:1; Gal 1:9; Phil 4:9; Col 2:6; 1 Thess 4:1; 2 Thess 3:6) or “heard” (Acts 15:7; Rom 10:17; Eph 1:13) by a receptive mind and heart (Mk 4:20; Acts 8:14; 2 Cor 11:4; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 2:10).
2. The hearers accepted the message, acknowledging that God the Holy Spirit has been speaking through God’s apostolic messenger (2 Cor 3:5; 13:3; 1 Thess 4:1ff). They came to faith in the word of the saving work of the Gospel that is *at work in you who believe* (1 Thess 2:13b).

2:16 *trying to prevent us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved, thus constantly filling up the measure of their sins. But the wrath of God has finally begun to come upon them [come upon them at last]. [...] = literal Greek.*

The imagery recalls the warning of God’s judgment through the messages of the Old Testament prophets (Is 51:17-22; Jer 25:15-28; 49:12; Ez 23:31-33; Hab 2:16; Zec 12:2). Prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem within His generation, Jesus said, “*Thus you bear witness against yourselves that you are the children of those who murdered the prophets; now fill up what your ancestors measured out!*” (Mt 23:31-32). The Book of Revelation also refers to God’s wrath: *A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice, “Anyone who worships the beast or its image, or accepts its mark on forehead or hand, will also drink the wine of God’s fury, poured full strength into the cup of his wrath, and will be tormented in burning sulfur before the holy angels and before the Lamb* (Rev 14:9-10).

2:16b *But the wrath of God has finally begun to come upon them [come upon them at last]. [...] = literal Greek.*

“At last” in the Greek is *eis telos*, a phrase that means “until the end,” “finally,” or “to the utmost.” The word appears six times in the New Testament (Mt 10:22; 24:13; Mk 13:13; Lk 18:5; Jn 13:1 and 1 Thess 2:16). There are two interpretations concerning Paul’s use of the phrase in this verse:

1. Paul could be describing how the full retribution of God is coming upon unbelieving Jews in Judea. They murdered the prophets and the Messiah; therefore, God’s wrath will be visited upon them “to the utmost degree.” As Jesus said in Matthew 23:36: “*Amen, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.*”
2. Paul could also be expressing how “finally” the wrath the unbelieving Jews deserve is soon coming upon them as Jesus prophesied concerning the destruction of Jerusalem that will take place in 70 AD, three years after Paul’s martyrdom (see Mt 23:37-24:22).
3. Paul could be describing the wrath that is coming upon unbelieving Jews “to the end” of history since salvation is only in the New Covenant in Christ Jesus.

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The Greek word Paul uses for Christ's "coming" in 2:19 is *Parousia*, a word derived from the ceremonial arrival of a king or ruler with his attendants to visit his subjects or the coming of a Greek god to aid the people who called for divine help. Paul draws on this understanding of *parousia* to present the visual image of Christ, the Divine King, returning with His attendants, the "holy ones" of His saints and angelic host: *...to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming [parousia] of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones* (1 Thess 3:13). Paul uses this word in a mostly eschatological sense in his two letters to the Christians at Thessalonica concerning the anticipated "coming" of the Lord in glory (see 1 Thes 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:1). Jesus first announced the tradition of the "coming" of the Son of Man in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 16:27, Mk 8:38, and Lk 9:26, and at His trial in Mt 26:64 and Mk 14:62).

The more common Christian term "Second Coming" does not appear in Christian writings until the latter half of the second century when it describes the return of the glorified Christ in contrast to His humble "first coming" in human flesh during His earthly ministry (*The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Abraham, J. Malherbe, page 272).

In 3:11-13, Paul makes a three-part petition to God on behalf of the Thessalonian church:

1. He prays for God to make the way clear for Paul and the others to return to the community.
2. He prays for God to increase the community's love for one another in the Christian family of the Church and for everyone in the human family.
3. He prays that they may be found blameless and holy at the hour of divine judgment at the Parousia of the Christ with His angels and saints.

Paul wrote in 2:18 that Satan put obstacles in the way of his return to Thessalonica. Therefore, in the first part of the petition in verse 11, Paul prays: *Now may God himself, our Father, and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you...* It is significant that the word "direct" in Greek is a singular verb even though it has two subjects. It may be bad Greek, but it is good Christian theology since it testifies to the mystery of the three Persons in one God. In the third part of the petition, Paul prays for the moral and spiritual sanctity of the community in preparation for Christ's return in glory followed by the Last Judgment. Verse 13 is the third mention of Jesus' coming in glory in the letter (see 1:10 and 2:19).