

Shaken and Reshaken

November 9, 2025

Haggai 2:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

In the first century in which the Apostle Paul lived, Christianity was very new. It wasn't always clear how it was supposed to work. Its best-known leaders didn't always agree.

Then there were the basic problems of living in the first century. Most people were poor, very few people were middle class, and far fewer people were rich. "Give us this day our daily bread" was a heartfelt prayer for most people. Injury and illness could be much more dangerous than they are for us. Without antibiotics any infection could overwhelm a body's ability to survive and recover.

And then, there were the problems of becoming a Christian. It was a new faith, unfamiliar to most people. As an offshoot of Judaism, it would appeal to some Jews, but concern others who worried that their faith was being corrupted. Paul himself had been on both sides of that argument. Far more people, however, would have followed the religious traditions of Greece, Rome, or Egypt, and found Christianity unfamiliar, unsettling, and even threatening.

In Thessalonica, it seems that the Christian community had suffered a lot of pressure from those around them. That's why Paul wrote. In First Thessalonians, Paul wrote, "For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did..." (1 Thess. 2:14). We don't know what the source of the persecution was. It might have been the pressures of prejudice from those around them. They might have been overcharged or refused service in shops. They might have faced taunts in the street. They might even have suffered assault and injury.

Or there might have been official suppression of the Christian community. They might have been "moved aside," or arrested, tried, and punished for not following the customs of Rome. And, of course, there might have been both. Taunts in the streets leading to provocations and assaults, which were followed up by arrest, appearance before the magistrates, and further punishment.

That happens to marginalized people. In a lot of places. In a lot of time periods.

Whatever was happening, it concerned Paul, who had been instrumental in founding the church in Thessalonica. He feared that the suffering would drive people away from the church, and away from the faith itself. "I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and

that our labor had been in vain,” he wrote in First Thessalonians. “But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love” (1 Thess. 3:5-6).

They had held on. They had not been shaken.

Shaking is a frequent part of the life of faith. Or rather, getting shaken. It was the situation of Jesus’ friends and followers. Jesus kept shaking their expectations. It was the situation hundreds of years before when the exiles who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem found that they had more work before them to rebuild God’s Temple than they’d anticipated. They’d been shaken. Haggai reminded them that God shakes the world.

The Thessalonians had been shaken by their persecution. They had been shaken, but they had not fallen.

Paul feared, however, that they might fall to something else, something that you and I don’t fear quite so much. “...We beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.”

Why would he fear that? Because the Thessalonians wanted it to be there.

I don’t blame them.

There has been more than one occasion in my life where I have thrown my hands into the air and said something like, “Come, Lord Jesus!” What I meant was: I was ready for the Second Coming. I’d seen or felt too much pain. I’d seen or felt too much oppression. I’d seen or felt too much, and it was time for it to come to an end. Let history close. Let the new sunrise dawn. I was ready for not just a change, but The Change.

So far, to be clear, that hasn’t happened.

The Thessalonians, I suspect, were drawn to predictions of the end, of Jesus’ imminent return, because they had suffered. They’d suffered more than they wanted. They’d suffered more than what was just. They’d suffered more than they thought they could bear. “Come, Lord Jesus!” was a cry to end the suffering. It was a cry to have mercy.

Mariam Kamell writes at Working Preacher, “For some churches and preachers, it becomes a fascination bordering on an obsession, but the teaching of ‘escape’ through the rapture leaves people paralyzed about how they ought to live in the world now while they wait. In a sense, life can become a mere holding cell, a waiting pattern till they can escape and go to heaven. But Paul’s focus is to remind them instead of all the things that need to happen first, so they ought to trust God and continue on doing good rather than obsessing about the end.”

My guess is that you are not likely to be obsessing about the end of time, or the end of history, or the end of the world as we know it. I would further guess, however, that something has happened in your life, perhaps recently, perhaps some time ago, where you've asked, "When is this going to end? I'm tired of being shaken. I'm weary of being reshaken."

When is this going to end?

I remember feeling like that about the Puna eruption in 2018. I remember feeling like that about Hurricane Lane that same year, which settled off the southwestern coast and dumped heavy rain on us for three solid days. I remember feeling like that during uncertain times of my career as a minister, during health crises in the family, during the breakup of my marriage.

When is this going to end?

The Thessalonians wanted to know. They wanted to read things in their time as signs of the end. They wanted the suffering to be over.

Paul, however, couldn't reassure them that way. One of the characteristics of first century apocalyptic literature – a format in which contemporary events were criticized by declaring how they'd be judged at the end of time – is that the meaningful signs are things people could have seen. And in fact, during our Bible Study on Wednesday, one of the group read, "He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God," and gave that person a name. I would guess you could give such a person a name. I would also guess that we wouldn't all give that person the same name.

Right?

Paul couldn't tell them that Jesus was about to return and that their suffering would end. What he could do was commend them for their faithfulness and urge them to hold on. "Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter."

"Paul's point," writes Nijay Gupta at Working Preacher, "is not to sketch out a full timeline of eschatological events. His point is that some big things are yet to happen, and there is really nothing we can do to stop them (unlike issues of political strife and economic turmoil, matters that we certainly can and must address)."

Paul's point was to say, I hear you. I ache for you. I am proud of you. I pray for you. My heart is with you.

"My thoughts and prayers are with them," has, all too often, substituted for real help in our day. Properly, thoughts and prayers should be coupled with concrete action. We have our limits, however. We can't do all we want to do, like the 'apapane who can't find another flower

for a hungry i'liwi, or when a loved one's illness brings pain I can't relieve, when the world around has problems I can't address.

This week Mary Luti quoted the late Pope Francis in a UCC Daily Devotional. He said, "The world needs to weep. The marginalized weep, the scorned weep, the sick and dying weep, but we who have what we need, we who are privileged, we don't know how. We must learn. There are realities in this life you can see only with eyes clarified by tears. If you don't learn to weep, you can't be a good Christian."

Paul wrote, my heart is with you. My prayers are with you. My tears are with you.

Let's be with one another. Let's be aware that God is with us.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson