

Take-Home Two

The Word Before the Book

Unless Someone Guides Me | Session Two

What We Found

The Gospel was preached, believed, and died for before a word of the New Testament existed. St. Luke says so in his own opening: his account rests on what was delivered to him by eyewitnesses. The written Gospel depends on the handing on, not the other way around.

St. Paul tells the Thessalonians to hold to what they were taught “either by word of mouth or by letter,” and he does not rank the two. He uses the same Greek word Jesus uses in Mark 7, where it is condemned. The difference is never the handing on itself. It is the source: the tradition of men, or what the apostles delivered.

And we went looking for Jannes and Jambres in Exodus and did not find them, because they are not there. Paul names Pharaoh’s magicians from Jewish tradition outside the Old Testament, eight verses before he writes that all Scripture is God-breathed.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Basil the Great

On the Holy Spirit, ch. 27 (summary)

The Church holds some things from written teaching and others from apostolic tradition handed on unwritten, in Basil’s phrase received in a mystery, and both carry the same force. His examples are ordinary: the sign of the cross, turning east to pray, the words used at the blessing of the eucharistic gifts.

Voice of the Church

St. John Chrysostom

Homilies on 2 Thessalonians (summary)

Preaching on 2 Thessalonians 2:15, he takes the verse plainly: if Paul distinguishes what was taught by word from what was taught by letter, the apostles did not deliver everything in writing, and both deserve credence.

Voice of the Church

Papias of Hierapolis

Preserved in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III.39

Writing in the early second century, he says that whenever anyone came who had followed the elders, he asked what the apostles had said, because he did not think what came out of books would help him as much as a living and abiding voice.

Ready Response

Two ways this comes up, and what to do. The goal is never to win. It is to open a door that stays open.

“Tradition is just man-made.” Agree with half of it, warmly. Some traditions are exactly that, and Jesus condemned those by name in Mark 7. Then: “Paul told the Thessalonians to hold to what he taught them by word of mouth. What do you do with that verse?”

“Then show me your list of oral traditions.” Concede it plainly, because there is no list and pretending otherwise will cost you the conversation. Tradition is not a stack of extra facts kept next to the Bible. It is the handing on of the whole faith, including how the Scriptures are read and the sacraments celebrated.

Live It This Week

- Read 2 Timothy 3 in one sitting, and watch verse 8 go past on the way to verse 16.
- Tell one person one thing about the faith out loud this week, without sending them a link.
- At Mass, notice how much of the liturgy you know by heart and never learned from a page.
- Keep praying by name for the person you named last week.

Memory Verse

“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” **2 Thessalonians 2:15**

Before Next Session

Read: Psalm 133. It is three verses. Ask one question as you read it: what would that unity have to look like to be visible from outside?

Catechism: CCC 75-83. If you read only one, read 83.