

## 2 Thessalonians

We finally finished our long series in Deut, and we are ready to launch into something else. And I thought it would be appropriate for us to study something from the NT. Over the course of my time here, we have studied almost every book in the NT, either in SS or in the worship service. One book that we have not yet considered is 2 Thess. I'm sure many of you remember that we worked our way through 1 Thessalonians back in 2010. Now would be a good time to look at 2 Thess.

This will be a fairly short series—the book has only 3 short chapters.

As I usually do when beginning a new series, I'd like to take the first message to talk about some introductory matters and look at the main themes of the book. We can begin our study of this book with a bird's eye view, considering the forest before we begin looking at the trees.

### **Read 1:1**

During Paul's second missionary journey, he planted a church at a city called Thessalonica. In 1 Thess (1:7), Paul praises this church as a "model/example" for other churches to follow. Paul really appreciated the church at Thess; he writes two letters to this assembly, so I think he had a special relationship with this group of believers.

### **Read: Acts 17:1-10a**

**Historical Background:** Thessalonica was a large, prosperous port city near the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea in Greece. The city still exists—Salonika or Thessaloniki. It was an important center of population in Paul's day, governmentally, militarily, and commercially.<sup>1</sup> Romans, Greeks, and many Jews lived there.

Like most large, seaport cities, Thess was filled with immorality and idolatry. Thess is not far from Mt. Olympus, the legendary home of the mythical Greek gods, and many of the Thessalonians worshiped those false gods – Zeus, Apollo, Athena, Aphrodite, among others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:687.

<sup>2</sup>Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002), 43.

**Quote:** The adoration and honor of the gods was not simply a private but a civic affair. Cities in the ancient world had patron deities and honored them [in various ways]... Sacrifices, prayers, and images of the gods were common elements in meetings of the official assembly or the governing council. ... Participation in the civic cult was one of the fundamental obligations of the population.<sup>3</sup>

So idolatry was baked in to the entire culture. Many of the people of the church would have been former idolaters and pagans.

**Purpose of the Letter:** This is the second letter that Paul sent to the church in Thess. His first letter apparently did not answer some of the questions that were troubling the people there. So he wrote this second letter to clear up any remaining confusion or to clarify some of his teaching. The church was dealing with false teachers or letters sent in Paul's name (forgeries), and it seems that the people were a bit confused, primarily about the timing and circumstances of the Second Coming of Christ.

In fact, the Second Coming is a main theme of the book. These false teachers had apparently claimed that the Day of the Lord had already come, so Paul assures them that the DOL had not come yet. He mentions certain things that would happen before Jesus returned.

The book also includes many practical principles for daily Christian living. Paul encourages his readers to persevere under persecution, to be strong, to continue to grow, and to deal appropriately with those who were living disorderly lives.

Also, much of this letter is a response to theological error/false teaching. That tells us that the church has had to correct error from the very beginning. The church has always been plagued by error, and it's very important for church leaders to correct false theology or mistaken beliefs. We respond to error by teaching the truth.

**Quote:** Paul wrote to his beloved flock who were: 1) discouraged by persecution and needed incentive to persevere; 2) deceived by false teachers who confused them about the Lord's return; and 3) disobedient to divine commands, particularly by refusing to work.<sup>4</sup> Paul's second letter addresses all these issues.

**Date and Place of Writing:** Acts 17-18 shows that Paul must have written this letter while he was at Corinth. Conservative scholars date 1 Thessalonians between AD 50 and 51, and he wrote 2 Thess only a few months later. These are two of Paul's earliest letters.

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<sup>3</sup>Gene L. Green, 38, quoting Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 170–85.

<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1851.

**Author:** The first word in the book names the author: Paul (1:1). There is no good reason to doubt that Paul was the author. Paul mentions Silas and Timothy as colleagues, but Paul seems to have been the main author and spokesman.

**Literary Type/Genre:** 2 Thess is an epistle, i.e., a letter from Paul to the church at Thess. So this is a “pastoral conversation”<sup>5</sup> between Paul and the church he started at Thess.

**Outline:** This book is a personal letter in which Paul discusses three main issues.

Greeting (1:1–2)

- I. Comfort for those under persecution (1:3–12)
- II. Correction for misunderstanding the Parousia (2:1–3:5)
- III. Confrontation for incorrect practice (3:6–15) (conduct/behavior)

Conclusion (3:16–18)

**Theology:** This is a pastoral/personal letter and not a theological textbook. It’s not like Romans or Ephesians, where Paul gives several chapters of theology followed by exhortations to godly living. The content here is more personal and directed toward the particular needs of this church. Paul is giving practical guidance and encouragement to new Christians rather than a theological discourse.

### **Main Themes of the book**

- I. Endure “persecutions and tribulations.” 1:4b

The church at Thessalonica began in a context of conflict, and believers there continued to suffer for their faith; they were enduring persecution and tribulation. They were fairly new believers, yet they were continuing on in faith in spite of opposition and hostility.

Unlike those who promote a health, wealth, and prosperity “gospel,” Paul warns Christians to expect tribulation and persecution.

2 Tim 3:12 *All who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.*

We should expect persecution. I believe that we will be spared from the “Great Tribulation” that is to come, but that does not mean that we will escape persecution and tribulation in general.

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<sup>5</sup>D. Michael Martin, vol. 33, 1, 2 *Thessalonians*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1995), 37.

John 16:33 ... *In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*

II. Expect Jesus to return with both glory and vengeance. 1:7b-9

- A. One of the main problems in Thess was that they were confused regarding the timing of Jesus' Second Coming. They were concerned that Jesus' return would be immediate—very soon.
- B. Paul teaches that Jesus will return, but only after the “man of sin” (2:3) is revealed—and that had not happened yet. It still has not happened.
- C. We believe that Jesus returns initially at the rapture, when he comes to take his church, and then a bit later he returns in glory to establish an earthy kingdom. So we hold the two-stage understanding of Jesus' return – “rapture” and “revelation.”
- D. Paul is referring here to the second stage of Jesus' return. The Second Coming of Christ in glory will be a monumental event that the whole world will see. Jesus will return with glory, power, and vengeance.
- E. .7 “rest with us” is the response to this truth. Instead of being all worried and concerned about the details of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming, the proper attitude is “rest.”
  - 1. We want to be found faithfully serving God when Jesus' returns—“occupy until I come.” Do our Father's business. Continue steadfastly in the faith.
  - 2. But we do not need to stress out over the details of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming. The proper attitude about the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming is “rest.”

In 1 Thes, when dealing with the same issue, Paul tells us to “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thes 4:18). So eschatology—teaching about end times events—ought to provide comfort and rest for believers, not stress and contention.

Sadly, eschatology is often the source of division and discord rather than “rest.” But a proper understanding of eschatology should give us peace.

III. Glorify God. 1:11-12

- A. Our highest goal and calling is to glorify God. Cf. 1 Cor 10:31.
- B. .11 How?
  - 1. Live worthy of this calling. I.e., we live in a way that is consistent with our holy calling.

2. “fulfill all the good pleasure of his goodness...” We experience God’s goodness as we seek to accomplish his will for us.

We glorify God as we live in a way that is worthy of God’s calling on our lives. We strive to fulfill God’s good pleasure for us—that brings glory to God.

#### IV. Understand the timing of Jesus’ Second Coming. Chapter 2

- A. Vs. 2 shows that the Thessalonian believers had some misconceptions about the timing of Jesus’ 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming. They were apparently “shaken in mind” and “troubled” about this issue.

It did not help that false teachers were seeking to lead them astray about this issue.

- B. The return of Jesus is a key doctrinal teaching of the Christian faith. All Christians believe that Jesus will come again. But there is a lot of disagreement, discussion, and speculation regarding the timing of Jesus’ return. Eschatology is a controversial issue.

Many people have tried to figure out when Jesus will return, and they’ve all been wrong. We should not even try to predict it; Jesus said, “No man knows the day or the hour.” Our responsibility is to be ready for it and be found busy serving God when Jesus returns.

- C. Paul gives a whole list of things that must happen before Jesus returns.
  1. .3 There will be a “falling away.”
  2. .3b the man of sin will be revealed.
  3. .7end something has to be “taken out of the way”
  4. .8a “that wicked (one will) be revealed”
  5. .9 that individual will do powerful but deceitful signs and wonders
  6. .11 unbelievers will be subject to a “strong delusion” that will make them “believe a lie.”

Paul’s point is that those things have not happened yet, so the “day of Christ” is still future. We believe these things will happen during the Tribulation. They have not happened yet, but they will.

.2 Don’t be “shaken in mind, or troubled” about these things. These preliminary events have not happened yet, so relax. God has his own purposes and his own schedule. We can pray that Jesus would return soon/quickly, but we should not fret over these issues.

V. Stand fast in the faith. 2:15

- A. Instead of worrying about the timing of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming, make sure that you are standing firm in the faith.
- B. Paul had been in Thessalonica long enough to pass down certain “traditions” to the believers there, and his main concern is that they retain these teachings.
- C. The Christian faith has parameters and boundaries—Jude calls it “the faith once for all delivered to the saints.” Our responsibility is to “stand fast and hold the traditions” taught by Jesus and his apostles.

That means we do not change things or compromise on what Jesus and the apostles taught. We don’t add or remove anything from the faith. We simply retain what Jesus and the apostles taught faithfully; we stand fast in what they taught originally.

- D. Paul elsewhere warns us about being “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14). We don’t want to be unstable; we want to be firm in the faith and steadfast.

VI. Avoid disorderly living. 3:6

- A. .6 It was disorderly to violate the traditions that Paul had taught them. Their responsibility was to retain what Paul’s teachings.

**App:** Our primary authority is the teachings of Jesus and the apostles—the NT. Our job is to retain these teachings without changing them. We should be going back to the Bible to make sure that we believe what Jesus and the apostles originally taught. We must hold fast to this tradition.

- B. .11 It was disorderly to be idle and not work.

- 1. It appears that some of the believers thought that Jesus’ return was so near at hand that they could quit working and were just waiting for Jesus to come back.

Historically, several groups have done the same thing—quit work, sell their property, give away their possessions, and wait for Jesus to return. E.g., the JWs.

- 2. Paul does not say when Jesus will return, but that event is *not* so close that the believers should quit work and be idle. They should not just sit around and do nothing as they await the return of Christ.

We are supposed to be diligent and busy serving the Lord as we await the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming.

3. .11end Idleness leads to further disorderly living; i.e., gossip. Idleness leads to immorality.
4. .10b If people don't want to work, then they should not expect to eat.

C. The solution to this problem was work. 3:12b

The normal pattern for Christians is that they work for a living. We work so that we can provide for our own needs (vs. 12end). If someone does not want to work, then he should not expect to eat.

**App:** That's a timeless principle that still pertains today. Those who are capable of work ought to work; work is good. God designed us to work, not to sit around and be idle.

And that's the end of the book.

So, as I mentioned, the book can be summarized by three main points:

- I. Comfort for those under persecution (1:3–12)
- II. Correction for those who misunderstand the Parousia (2:1–3:5)
- III. Confrontation for those who are practicing the faith incorrectly (3:6–15)

2 Thess is a rather short book—only three short chapters and three main issues, so we'll be able to make our way through it fairly quickly. The book contains some interesting theology as well as a good bit of practical living issues.

I trust that our time spent in the book will be both profitable and convicting.