



# 2 THESSALONIANS

## Survey of the New Testament: The Pauline Epistles

Winter 2006

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### Introduction (1:1-2)

#### Greeting

##### Author

Paul, along with his companions, Timothy and Silas. Paul wrote this during his second missionary journey, shortly after leaving Thessalonica, from the city of Corinth. Based on the consistent themes as 1 Thessalonians, this letter was probably written not long after the first epistle to the Thessalonians.

##### Audience

The letter is addressed to the church of the Thessalonians. For details, refer to the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians.

#### Occasion for the Writing

Some time after sending the first epistle to the Thessalonians, the church received a forged letter that seemed to be from Paul, which indicated that the Lord had already returned (2:2). Paul is sending this letter with his mark of authenticity (3:17) to correct this false doctrine and correct their understanding of the second coming.

#### Theme of the Book

The themes of 1 Thessalonians continue in 2 Thessalonians; namely the themes of sanctification and Christ's return. However, added to this is an appeal for the Thessalonians to stand firm in their doctrine.

*So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught... (2 Thessalonians 2:16).*

#### Structure of the Book (1:9-14)

Paul begins with a prayer reminding them of God's faithfulness in chapter 1, followed by the correction of false doctrine in chapter 2, and then concluding with exhortations in chapter 3.

God's Faithfulness in the midst of Persecution	Teaching on the Second Coming	Final Exhortations
1:1 1:12	2:1 2:17	3:1 3:18

### God's Faithfulness in the Midst of Persecution (1:3-12)

#### The Thessalonians' Faithfulness in Persecution (1:3-5)

Paul begins his epistle with his typical prayer of thanksgiving for his readers. Paul is particularly thankful for the Thessalonians growing faith and love (1:3). But mostly Paul is proud, and even boasts to others, of their faith in the midst of persecution and affliction (1:4). Paul assures them that their persecution is making them into worthy participants of the kingdom of God that is to come (1:5).

## God's Faithfulness to Judge the Persecutors (1:6-10)

When that kingdom comes, God will repay those who persecute them with judgment (1:6). God will give relief to the afflicted (1:7), but will deal retribution to unbelievers (1:8). Specifically, unbelievers will pay the penalty of eternal destruction and will be separated from the presence of the Lord and his glory (1:9). While other scriptures speak of hell as a lake of fire and a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, the ultimate punishment for the unbeliever is the eternal separation from the presence and the glory of God.

However, for the believer, at Christ's return God's glory will be found in the saints who believe (1:10). While unbelievers will be separated from the glory of God, believers *are* the glory of God!

## Call for Sanctification (1:11-12)

Therefore, in light of their future deliverance and participation in the glory of God, Paul calls on the Thessalonians to "walk worthy of your calling," and continue in the process of sanctification, so that when Christ returns he indeed will be glorified in them. This continues the theme of 1 Thessalonians, where Paul calls on them to diligently work on their sanctification so that they can be found ready at the return of Christ.

## Teaching on the Second Coming (2:1-17)

### The Issue at Hand (2:1-2)

Paul asks the Thessalonians not to be shaken by any false teaching that comes either by spirit or by a forged letter (2:2). Evidently the church had received a false report, as if from Paul, indicating that the "day of the Lord has come."

This may seem like an unusual error, for certainly the second coming of Christ would be an event obvious enough to know if it was missed. Paul's teaching in his first epistle to them revealed that the second coming would come with a shout of the archangel and the blast of a trumpet, and with the believers being caught up in the air to be with Christ. Certainly if this had happened, they would have known it.

However, it is likely that the false teaching wasn't that the Thessalonians had been *left behind*, but that the second coming was not a literal, physical event, but a spiritual one. In our study of 1 Corinthians, we discovered that there were those who had claimed that the resurrection and the kingdom of God were spiritual concepts, not physical realities. There were those who claimed to have already been resurrected and to have entered into the kingdom, in a spiritual sense. Such teaching makes the resurrection and the kingdom of God as metaphors of a higher plane of spirituality that could be achieved through greater knowledge and wisdom.

But Paul makes it clear in 2 Thessalonians that the coming of the Lord will be obvious to all, and that it will only come after certain events take place.

### Signs of the Coming of the Lord (2:3-12)

#### The Man of Lawlessness (2:3-5)

Paul assures the Thessalonians that the coming of the Lord and the rapture (2:1) has not happened yet, because before these events take place, there will be the revealing of one known as the man of lawlessness (2:3). Commentators usually correlate this man of lawlessness with the anti-Christ of the book of revelation. The man of lawlessness will exalt himself as god and even take a seat in the temple of God (2:4). This event seems to correspond to an event predicted by Daniel 11 and by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 24, known as the "abomination of desolation." This man of lawlessness will perform great signs of power and many false wonders (2:9).

### **The Restrainer (2:6-8)**

This spirit of lawlessness was already underway in when Paul was writing this letter, but the fullness of this man of lawlessness was not yet revealed for there is something that is restraining the man of lawlessness. Once this restrainer is removed the man of lawlessness will be revealed.

There is great debate regarding what this restrainer is. Some commentators have suggested that the Roman government serves as the restrainer. Others suggest that Paul himself is restraining the lawless one. Many who believe in a pre-tribulation rapture see the church itself as the restrainer, for once it is removed from earth, the man of lawlessness would be revealed. Others consider the Holy Spirit to serve as the restrainer. While Paul had made the identity of the restrainer known to the Thessalonians (2:5-6), we must be satisfied without knowing for certain what it is that hold back the man of lawlessness.

Nonetheless, the important principle is that God is in control of when these events take place, not the man of lawlessness. God is currently restraining this man, and only through the action of God will the apostasy be allowed to happen. God is firmly in control of the events of the last days and these events will be used to serve his purposes.

### **Non-believers will be deceived (2:9-12)**

Non-believers will be captivated by the miracles, power and signs and wonders of the man of lawlessness (2:10). Furthermore, God will send a “deluding influence” upon unbelievers so they will believe the deception of this man (2:11). Those that choose not to believe in the true God will be allowed to believe the lie that the man of lawlessness is god. As a result, the unbeliever will face the consequences of this unbelief and will receive punishment from God (2:12).

### **Paul Assures the Thessalonians (2:13-15)**

But the Thessalonians will not end up in punishment as the unbeliever, for God has chosen them to be saved, sanctified and gloried (2:13-14). They can be assured that God has already accomplished their salvation from the beginning of time (2:13). Therefore, Paul calls on them to stand firm in his teachings, whether it comes from his mouth of in a letter (2:15).

Paul also hopes that now they understand that they hadn't some how missed the return of Christ, that they are comforted and strengthened, and can continue in their good works (2:17).

## **Final Exhortations (3:1-18)**

### **Paul's Request for Prayer (3:1-5)**

Paul concludes his epistle with a request that they pray for him. Specifically he asks them to pray that he would be allowed to spread the word of God (3:1) and that he would be rescued from those who were persecuting him (3:2). Paul is assured that the Lord will protect the Thessalonians from their persecution (3:3), and that God will help them continue in their obedience to Paul's commands (3:4-5).

### **Paul's Command to Work (3:6-15)**

There appears to be a number of people in the Thessalonian church who were undisciplined, lazy freeloaders who were capable of working, but who instead were living off the generosity of others (3:11). Most commentators speculate that these may have been people who saw the coming of Christ as so imminent that they quit their jobs and were now just waiting for the coming kingdom.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul instructs such people to start working. It appears that at least some had not heeded his warning. Now Paul tells the church to keep away from these unruly brothers (3:6), and to stop associating with them (3:14). He reminds the church that these people are not their enemy, but should nonetheless no longer be provided with free handouts (3:14).

Paul believes strongly that people should work for a living, as indeed he did (3:8). As an apostle, he had the right to be supported financially by the church, but he didn't so as to set an example (3:9). Paul says that if you are capable of work and choose instead to be lazy, then you shouldn't eat (3:10).

### Paul's Mark of Authenticity (3:16-18)

Paul concludes his letter with a customary blessing of peace (3:16) and grace (3:18). However, Paul also signs his letter with his distinguishing mark to attest to the validity of this letter (3:17). Because there had been some forgeries passing false doctrine, Paul sees the need to attest to the authenticity of this letter (3:17).

## Bibliography

Gundry, Robert H. *A Survey of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan. 1994.

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