

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 25: 2 Thessalonians**

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**I. Introduction, Background and Purpose**

How many of you would say you had a good day yesterday? (Show of hands.) How many of you were tempted to think that that meant Jesus came back yesterday? (Show of hands.) Well, as odd as it might seem, that’s pretty much the problem going on in the church at Thessalonica that prompted Paul’s second letter to them. But as removed as that problem seems to be from our situation, I think as we uncover *why* it was a problem, we’ll discover a good bit of similarity to our own day and time.

Last week we looked at Paul’s first letter to the church at Thessalonica. He had had the privilege of seeing it established but had to make an abrupt departure due to an onset of persecution. And so he had written to address some confusion that stemmed from the church not really internalizing some basic truths of the faith—like the second coming of Christ. Well, some time has passed and things are still a bit of a mixed bag for the Thessalonian Christians. On the one hand, they are persevering admirably through some difficult persecution. As Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 1, “*4Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. 5This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering”* (1:4-5). This was a noble church undergoing suffering, and enduring in a way you or I would most certainly find challenging. But on the other hand, the church was still theologically confused and misunderstood the nature, timing, and purpose of Christ’s return. And so Paul writes them another short letter to help address some of these problems and to encourage them in perseverance.

**II. Outline and Structure**

So then, let’s get into this letter. The outline of 2 Thessalonians is pretty straight forward. After an introduction in the first two verses, Paul turns to a section of thanksgiving and comfort for the persecuted church at Thessalonica. (1:3-12). Verse 11 sums things up well: “*11To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power”* (1:11).

And then he gets down to business in chapter 2, refuting false claims about the day of the Lord. Chapter 3 opens with a transitioning section, verses 1-5, where Paul asks for prayer himself. And then, verses 6-15, he continues his earlier instruction about Christ’s return, addressing a particular outgrowth of the Thessalonians’ bad theology: their decision to stop working in order to wait for the second coming. Verses 16-18 of chapter 3 close the letter in Paul’s classic style: “*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all*.” (3:18)

Well. What all is contained within these three chapters? We’ll start by thinking through the problem Paul is addressing in the Thessalonian church. From there we’ll use Paul’s letter to understand why they fell into this error, and finally we’ll look at what we can take away from this controversy ourselves. First, the problem.

**III. What was the Thessalonians’ problem?**

**A. The Problem**

The problem that caused Paul to write this letter was, simply put, idleness. As Paul writes:

“*6Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep way from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. 7For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, 8nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. 9It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. 10For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. 11For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 12Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.*” (3:6-12)

Consider Paul’s seemingly meaningless act of purchasing his own food, of handing over coins to a merchant for something to eat. In that one action, Paul (1) pays for his food, (2) cares for the Thessalonian church by not being a burden, and (3) sets an example. In other words, even small actions that seem insignificant have tremendous meaning when rightly considered.

**B. The Cause**

OK. So a problem of idleness. Why? Because the Thessalonians mistakenly thought Jesus had already come back. Beginning of chapter 2:

“*1Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 2not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 3Let no one deceive you in any way.*” (2:1-3).

Now that seems strange, doesn’t it! You could understand why they might stop working if Jesus is coming back tomorrow. But the error in view here is one that suggested “the day of the Lord has already come.” How could a persecuted people possibly think that Jesus had already come back? Quite possibly, what was going on here was a group of people who interpreted persecution as, to quote Jesus, “the beginning of birth pains”—events that would occur just prior to his coming. At least the beginning of the end has come, they thought; so they could give up daily labor. Still kind of a sketchy theological premise. But likely behind this is just a reality of human nature. If we can grab a theological reason to not work, then all the better. Bad theology can be used to justify what people want to do anyway. This idleness was probably caused, in other words, by a combination of their own nature and their misunderstanding of the truth.

**C. The Solution**

So. What solution does Paul propose? His answer is two-fold: knowledge and obedience. Know the truth, and live it out.

**Know the Truth.** Paul begins by teaching the Thessaloniansthe truth about Christ’s return. You see this in the first two chapters. The main thing he wants to be sure they know is that Christ has not yet come back. As we saw at the beginning of chapter 2, he tells them not to be deceived by those who say he has. But there is more they must understand.

Paul wants to clarify several things about the second coming. First, when Christ returns, we will all know it. There will be no confusion or doubt. It will be the most obvious and clear thing in all of human history. The Thessalonians do not have to worry that they’d missed it, or that it had already happened, or that they needed to work hard to figure out when it might happen. Second, before Christ returns there will be persecution led by someone Paul calls “the man of lawlessness.” And third, Christians already know in advance that Christ will defeat the man of lawlessness, judge persecutors, and vindicate his people. The Thessalonians should look forward to Christ’s return not with anxiety but with hope and assurance. Let’s take those three in turn.

First, Christ’s return will be clear. Paul teaches the clarity of Christ’s return in his first letter to the Thessalonians, as we discussed last week. Paul wrote in that first letter that “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.” (4:16). He reiterates this teaching here. In Chapter 1 Paul describes the day of Christ’s return as the day “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels,” (1:7) and a day when Christ will be “marveled at among all those who have believed,” (1:10). Discerning whether Christ has really returned will not be hard at all. We will “marvel” at the “loud command,” the “voice of the archangel,” the “trumpet call,” the “blazing fire,” the “powerful angels,” and, most of all, at Christ himself. Whether these are metaphorical images or literal descriptions, Paul’s language makes clear that Christ’s return will be obvious because it will be unlike anything that has ever happened before, including his first coming. He’ll make it clear for us.

Second, Christ’s return will be preceded by persecution, and that persecution will be led by someone Paul calls the “man of lawlessness.” Chapter 2, verse 3: Christ’s return “will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,” Who is this lawless one? Is it some world leader whose name we know? Paul doesn’t say. He does describe him though. Verse 4: He “who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he may be revealed in his time.” He will also deceive others: “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing,” (2:9-10a).

But, third, Christ will overthrow the man of lawlessness when he returns. Paul does not warn the Thessalonians about the man of lawlessness in order to worry them, but to reassure them. The appearance of persecution and evil is to be expected. It is not a surprise to God and it is not a sign of God’s weakness or Satan’s strength. Recall how Paul introduced the man of lawlessness back in 2:3: he is “the son of destruction.” The man of lawlessness and his persecutors have already failed; God has already defeated them. Paul adds in verse 6: “And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.” (2:6-8). Paul doesn’t talk about the man of lawlessness without mentioning, in the same sentence, that he is doomed and defeated. Hope, not anxiety, should be our posture toward the future.

**Obey the Truth.** So that’s *what* we’re to know. Now, with that knowledge in hand, Christians are called to be obedient to the truth. Back to the problem at hand, they must follow God’s call to work. Amazing, isn’t it, how we go from something as mystifying as the man of lawlessness to something as prosaic as work. But they’re all connected. Paul writes, chapter 3 verse 6, “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.” And then, “Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” (3:12). In other words, *get back to work*. “As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” (3:13-15). This matter is that serious. Obedience is not optional.

The Thessalonians were idle because they thought the end had come. Paul tells them that Christ has not already returned, and what they must do now is simple: get back to work. That brings us to our next major question for this morning:

**IV. How did the Thessalonians fall into this problem?**

Because let’s be honest here. It’s not entirely clear how the Thessalonians could possibly have made the mistake of thinking the Lord had come back. Can you imagine having made that mistake this past week? “Thursday was a really good day. Maybe that’s because Jesus came back!” I don’t think so. Not if you have been instructed as a Christian.

But we shouldn’t think this was all simply a matter of human misunderstanding. One of the crucial things we need to understand in this little letter is all the language about a relationship with God. The Thessalonians had a relationship with God, but didn’t understand it fully. I think if we notice God’s role in the letter, we will understand better how this misunderstanding could have happened. The Thessalonians misunderstood their relationship with God.

**Our relationship with God in the present.** Notice in chapter 3 the little phrase, “The Lord be with you all” (v. 16). This is a simple phrase of blessing, or what some call a “wish prayer.” Yet consider what the prayer is: it is a prayer for God to bless the church by accompanying them with his presence. Not only that, notice what Paul promises God will do: “He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.” (3:3). So God is with them; he strengthens them; and he protects them. Does that sound like a relationship?

Paul uses explicit language elsewhere about “knowing God.” Both Paul and these Thessalonians have come to know God, and they have been given eternal life. That is why Paul can write so openly about being loved by God. In chapter 3, Paul refers to the “love of God” (v. 5). A few verses before, he specifically addresses them, “You, brothers beloved by the Lord” (2:13). And then he speaks of “God our Father, who loved us” (2:16**)**. It’s pretty clear they have a relationship with God.

Perhaps we can perceive Paul and the Thessalonians’ relationship with God most clearly in the languageof prayer scattered throughout the letter. And we see this in three ways: Paul thanks God, he makes requests of God, and he asks the Thessalonians to pray for him.

First, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians’ faith, hope, and love. He writes at the beginning of the letter, “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.” (1:3). A little later, Paul thanks God for God’s own love for the Thessalonians and how this love has been realized—in their salvation. In chapter 2, verses 13-14, Paul writes, “But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul is very specific about how God has loved Christians. He has shown his love in election, calling, salvation, sanctification, and glorification. Or, to use less theological language, God has shown us his love by calling us, inclining us, saving us, making us holy, and finally, bringing us home to be with him and like him. Paul thanks God for all these things.

Second, Paul *asks* God to bless the lives of the Thessalonians. At the very beginning of the letter, he writes, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:2). Then at the very end of the letter, he writes, “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all . . . The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.” (3:16,18). Coming from Paul, these traditional Hebrew (peace) and Greek (grace) greetings are more than mere wish prayers. He invests them with theological meaning—that God would continue to sustain them in his undeserved favor, and that he would hold them in a reconciled state of peace with him and those around them.

* Paul prays for God’s direction to love and perseverance. He writes, “May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.” (3:5). The ultimate direction a Christian needs is direction into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance. Paul knows the Thessalonians’ love would have to endure through difficult circumstances.
* Paul prays for God’s strength. Paul writes, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father . . . comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.” (2:16a,17). God’s encouragement and strength are not given indiscriminately. They have a purpose: to build us up in Christ-glorifying deeds and words.
* And Paul prays for the success of the saints: “To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:11-12). Paul wants them to be immediately successful: that God would fulfill their “every good purpose” and their “every act prompted by faith.” And he wants them to be ultimately successful: that the Lord Jesus would “be glorified” in them, and they in him.

**Our relationship with God in the future.** So all that concerns the Thessalonians’ present relationship with God. But the big thing the Thessalonians needed to hear—and that we need to hear—is that far more lies ahead, more than any of us has ever experienced.

First, Christ will sit in judgment. Paul writes, “since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” (1:6-8). Talk about an amazing idea: Christ will come back to sit in judgment and to punish. Judgment and punishment may not be popular concepts today, but they are hardwired into Christianity. Who will he punish? Those who have troubled Christians (v. 6), as well as those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel (v. 8). In chapter 2, Paul promises that God will also punish all “who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness” (v. 12).

How will he punish them? Paul speaks of “vengeance” (1:8) and “condemnation” (2:12). He says God will “repay with affliction those who afflict you,” (1:6). (Vengeance is wrong for us, but the Bible teaches the Lord himself must exercise vengeance in order to remain just.) He also speaks about “eternal destruction” (1:9). The idea here is of a ruin that never ends. What is that ruin like? The great Italian author Dante presented it as coldness. He pictured Satan in hell frozen in the middle of ice. Others have presented it as a ravenous vacuum that can never be filled. Both ideas might have some justification according to this image in 1:9. Clearly, it bespeaks being shut out from the presence of the Lord and the majesty of his power.

Second, Christ will save his own people.That is really what Paul describes in chapter 1, even though he uses different phrases to describe it. When Christ comes, Paul says, “when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.” (1:10). What distinguishes Christ’s own people from the others? Belief, faith, trust, reliance. It is not our superior moral virtue; it is the recognition of our sinfulness before God. We have done things that God says are wrong. Though we act like it, we are not the lords of our own universe. And one day we will have to give account to him. When we do, our only hope is to trust what God has done in Christ. We must trust that Christ himself lived a perfect life and died on the cross for the sins of everyone who repents of his or her sin and turns to Christ. We trust that God has accepted Christ’s sacrifice.

What do we Christians still have to look forward to? What will Christ accomplish at his return? God will gather his own people to himself (2:1). God will count the Christians as worthy of his kingdom (1:5). God will give relief to Christians who are troubled (1:7).

So, how could the Thessalonians have believed Christ had already returned? The relational language in this letter shows us the Thessalonians had a deep and real relationship with God, but it was something radically different than anything they had known as non-Christians and they evidently didn’t fully understand the difference. The character of the relationship, as Paul describes it in this letter, was to help them, and us, understand what they—and we—look forward to as Christians.

Last question, then:

**V. What can we learn from the Thessalonians?**

It would seem that here in DC, we struggle with the exact opposite problem from the Thessalonians. We are certainly not idle. And instead of believing Jesus has already returned we have probably become so inured to his tarrying that we functionally behave as if he will never come, at least not in our lifetimes.

But it is important to realize that while we are not idle in our busy careers, we may still be spiritually idle. Never assume that because you are busy, you are not lazy. Do we diligently study God’s word? Do we deliberately pursue fellowship and mentorship? Do we organize our finances, our time, and our relationships with God’s ends in view, or our own? And if we in fact behave as if the Lord will not return anytime soon, then we are almost certainly going to fall into this kind of spiritual idleness. Why study God’s word if I have decades yet until I meet the Lord upon my death? Why pursue fellowship now, when I can work hard, earn money, retire early, and fellowship at length then?

So we can end up having just a skewed a view of work, life, time, and priorities as the Thessalonians did. They believed Christ had already returned and so had fallen into idleness and laxity. We act as if Christ will never return, and so fall into a very similar pattern of laziness. The message of 2 Thessalonians is that we should understand that Jesus is coming back, that he is coming back soon, and that we need order our lives in light of that truth.

What does that look like? Let’s conclude by highlighting three things.

We Should Work. One thing we can clearly take from this letter is that we should work. Created in the image of God, we were made to work.Remember, work is not a result of the Fall and sin. Throughout the Bible, God calls people to work and gifts them for that work. God designed work to be the means by which we imitate his own creativeness. It has significance itself, and gives significance to our lives. Not working is regarded as a type of fast done for religious purposes. So the Sabbath is a weekly fast from purposive work (e.g. Ex 33:12). Idleness and sluggishness, on the other hand, are regularly derided in Proverbs and elsewhere.[[1]](#footnote-1) I wonder if you feel like work is merely a burden—not your particular job right now, but work itself. If you do, Paul would challenge you to reconsider what work is. Work is a normal, God-given part of human life, including a Christian’s life.

We Should Live Wisely. This letter also teaches us that we should live wisely. The Thessalonians erred in their lives because they erred in their understanding. They thought wrongly and so they lived wrongly. Theology is not unrelated to life. What we understand to be the truth impacts how we live. Living wisely, then, requires a right understanding of God’s Word. As Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to recall the teaching he had given when he was among them, so we must recall the teaching God has inspired in his Word.

We Should Live Waiting. We should spend every day of our lives waiting—eagerly and expectantly—for Christ’s coming return. The Thessalonians had forgotten this.

I know it is unlikely anyone hearing this core seminar has stopped working because he or she thought the Lord has returned. Yet there is a similarity between the Thessalonians’ situation and our own. These ancient Christians were not working because they thought they had it all. They thought they had reached the pinnacle of the faith. The Lord had returned, and they already had everything Christ would give. That is how they were deceived. We are deceived like the Thessalonians when we think and live like we already have everything Christianity offers. And when we think and live as if the great summation has already come, either a wrong liberty (doing things we should not do) or a wrong complacency (leaving undone the things we should do) always follows. In the Thessalonians’ case, complacency followed.

Unfortunately, many of us have stopped waiting, just like the Thessalonian Christians. And when that happens, our faith in the next life slips into faith in this one. Striving for spiritual health is replaced by striving for good stewardship of our physical bodies. Visions of God are replaced by visions of our earthly future, or our children’s future. The hope of heaven is replaced by the hope of the good life. Desire for our Creator God is replaced by desires for creatures. Unbelief can creep in and gain the upper hand so easily. One begins by believing in this age, as well as the next. Concentrating on this age, rather than the next. Being concerned with this age, instead of the next. Thinking less of the next. De-emphasizing the next. Questioning the next. Ignoring the next. Forgetting the next. Eventually denying the next.

As Christians we no longer live for the fulfillment of our desires here and now. We live instead working and laboring honorably. We give ourselves to caring for others even at a great personal cost, because this life no longer has to bear the weight of all our hopes, desires, and expectations. Without the certainty of Christ’s return, it is not at all certain we can live as Paul exhorts us in this little letter.

1. e.g., Prov. 31:27; cf. Eccl. 10:18; 11:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)