

INTRODUCTION TO 2 THESSALONIANS¹

Title

In the Greek New Testament, 2 Thessalonians is listed as “To the Thessalonians.” This represents the Apostle Paul’s second canonical correspondence to the fellowship of believers in the city of Thessalonica (cf. 1:1).

Author and Date

Paul, as in 1 Thessalonians, identified himself twice as the author of this letter (1:1; 3:17). Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, Paul’s co-laborers in founding the church, were present with him when he wrote. Evidence, both within this letter and with regard to vocabulary, style, and doctrinal content, strongly supports Paul as the only possible author. The time of this writing was surely a few months after the first epistle, while Paul was still in Corinth with Silas and Timothy (1:1; Acts 18:5) in late A.D. 51 or early A.D. 52 (see Introduction to 1 Thessalonians: Author and Date).

Background and Setting

For the history of Thessalonica, see Introduction to 1 Thessalonians: Background and Setting. Some have suggested that Paul penned this letter from Ephesus (Acts 18:18–21), but his 18-month stay in Corinth provided ample time both for the Thessalonian epistles to be authored (Acts 18:11). Apparently, Paul had stayed apprised of the happenings in Thessalonica through correspondence and/or couriers. Perhaps the bearer of the first letter brought Paul back an update on the condition of the church, which had matured and expanded (1:3); but pressure and persecution had also increased. The seeds of false doctrine concerning the Lord had been sown, and the people were behaving disorderly. So 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. Paul wrote to address those three issues by offering: 1) comfort for the persecuted believers (1:3–12); 2) correction for the falsely taught and frightened believers (2:1–15); and 3) confrontation for the disobedient and undisciplined believers (3:6–15).

Historical and Theological Themes

Although chapters 1 and 2 contain much prophetic material because the main issue was a serious misunderstanding generated by false teachers about the coming Day of the Lord (Paul reveals that the Day had not come and would not until certain other events occur), it is still best to call this “a pastoral letter.” The emphasis is on how to maintain a healthy church with an effective testimony in proper response to sound eschatology and obedience to the truth. Eschatology dominates the theological issues. One of the clearest statements on personal eschatology for unbelievers is found in 1:9. Church discipline is the major focus of 3:6–15, which needs to be considered along with Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–13; Gal. 6:1–5, and 1 Tim. 5:19,20 for understanding the complete Biblical teaching on this theme.

Interpretive Challenges

Eternal reward and retribution are discussed in 1:5–12 in such general terms that it is difficult to precisely identify some of the details with regard to exact timing. Matters concerning the Day of the Lord (2:2), the restrainer (2:6,7), and the lawless one (2:3,4,8–10) provide challenging prophetic material to interpret.

Outline¹

- I. Paul’s Greeting (1:1,2)
- II. Paul’s Comfort for Affliction (1:3–12)
 - A. By Way of Encouragement (1:3,4)
 - B. By Way of Exhortation (1:5–12)
- III. Paul’s Correction for Prophetic Error (2:1–17)
 - A. Prophetic Crisis (2:1,2)
 - B. Apostolic Correction (2:3–12)
 - C. Pastoral Comfort (2:13–17)
- IV. Paul’s Concern for the Church
 - A. Regarding Prayer (3:1–5)
 - B. Regarding Undisciplined Living (3:6–15)
- V. Paul’s Benediction (3:16–18)

¹ <https://www.gty.org/resources/bible-introductions/MSB53/2-thessalonians>

OUR FINAL RESCUE FROM AFFLICTION

2 THESSALONIANS 1:1–12



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" (2 Thessalonians 1: 6–7).

2 Thessalonians 1:5–10

According to one story, the great Baptist preacher Charles H. Spurgeon hung a sign above the door to his study that read "Perhaps Today." He posted this sign to remind himself that Jesus could come back at any time, that today might not end before Christ returns to judge His world. Indeed, our Lord's second advent will happen "in the twinkling of an eye." The dead will be resurrected, and all people will hear the final verdict regarding their eternal destinies (1 Corinthians 15:51–52).

We often forget the imminence of Jesus' return during prosperity, but serious affliction usually prompts us to long for our Savior to come again and consummate His kingdom. We must repent whenever we find ourselves not longing and looking for Jesus' appearance with His angels. Yet we should find the promise of the Lord's second advent particularly comforting during affliction. The Heidelberg Catechism recognizes this in question and answer 52, reminding us that Christ's return comforts us because Jesus will then "cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation." No longer will we suffer at the hands of our foes, be they physical or spiritual, for Christ will send the enemies of His church to eternal punishment.

Paul teaches this truth in today's passage. Interestingly, the Apostle informs us that the suffering we endure for Christ proves us "worthy" of God's kingdom (v. 5). Only those who are zealous for Jesus in following His law and proclaiming His lordship will suffer for their profession. Such individuals are unashamed of Christ and His kingdom, and Jesus will be unashamed of them on judgment day (Mark 8:38). Their willingness to suffer proves their faith is real, which proves the reality of their justification. Their justification means they are clothed in Christ's merit and thus "worthy of the kingdom." In turn, their justification reveals itself via their persevering faith in the Savior, faith that enables them to stand firm in every affliction (Hebrews 11).

The suffering we endure as Christians is momentary. At His return, Christ will repay His enemies for all the trouble they have caused His people (vv. 6–10). We are comforted now to know that the foes of God's kingdom will not always be ascendant. Jesus will give us "relief" at His second advent, granting us resurrected life before Him forever (v. 7).

CORAM DEO

At His return, Jesus “will take me and all his chosen ones to himself into the joy and glory of heaven” (The Heidelberg Catechism, A. 52). What greater comfort could there be than to know that we will live before the face of God forever, free from sin and all the pain that it causes? Let us pray that we will always long for this great day and that our longing for it will make us more willing to suffer for the kingdom whenever it is necessary.¹

OPEN IT

1. Describe a time when you were recognized or awarded for an achievement? What had you done that made people think you were worthy of such an honor? Did you feel worthy of it?

READ 2 THESSALONIANS 1:1–12

EXPLORE IT

2. What two things does Paul do when it comes to the Thessalonians in verses 3 and 4?
3. What does Paul say God will do, in verses 6 and 7?
4. How does Paul say Jesus Christ will be revealed at His Second Coming?
5. What will His Second Coming mean to unbelievers?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/our-final-rescue-from-affliction/>

6. In what two areas does Paul pray for his friends in verse 11?



GET IT

These opening words remind us, as we need constantly to be reminded, that Thessalonians is, like the other Pauline epistles, neither a theological treatise nor a sermon, but a real letter, written at a specific time to meet a specific situation. For this is precisely the way in which any private letter of the times would begin, with the name of the writer, followed by the name of the addressee, and a polite greeting.... So he greets them, not just with good wishes, but with a prayer that grace may be granted them — that unmerited gift of God's love to men through Christ, forgiving, strengthening, uplifting them; making them at one with Him, and thereby giving them the peace that passes all understanding, the inward tranquility, health, and soundness of life in harmony with God."²

7. Why does Paul thank God for the growth that is happening in the lives of the Thessalonians? What might Paul's words tell us about the role God plays in our spiritual growth and fervor?

In our materialistic age, believers need to be reminded again that all our blessings have their origin in God the Father whom we have come to know through the Lord Jesus Christ."³

8. Paul tells the Thessalonians that he has been boasting about them to others and yet he thanks God for what they are doing. How can others' faith cause us to thank God and praise him?

9. Read 2 Corinthians 10:17 and 2 Thessalonians 1:4. How do we balance Paul's words in these two passages? When, if ever, is it right for the Christian to boast? What truths must we remember when boasting about God's work in the life of others?

Paul was well aware of the shortcomings of the Thessalonian believers, but he did not allow their faults to blind him to their strong points. He was deeply appreciative of the transforming change that had been wrought in them.... He will faithfully deal with their failings but first he is eager to give praise where praise is due...."⁴

² <http://bibleoutlines.com/library/pdf/2thessalonians.pdf>

³ Hiebert, D. Edmond. *The Thessalonian Epistles – A Call to Readiness*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1971

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10. Why does Paul start his epistles with thanksgiving? Is thanksgiving for other believers a big part of your life? Are you quick to express your appreciation for others? What keeps you from following Paul's example?

*We do not know exactly how they suffered. Some had probably been arrested, thrown in jail and beaten. Perhaps their homes had been confiscated and heavy fines had been levied against them or normal privileges of citizenship had been denied them. In all likelihood they were undergoing the same trials as Christians today who are living under Communist dictatorships. But whatever form this persecution took, the apostle says—and do not miss this — **their endurance in the face of tremendous pressure was evidence that God was at work among them!** You cannot endure, you cannot hang in there, unless you are being strengthened by the Spirit of God. That is painfully obvious on many sides today. People who are put under pressure give up very easily unless something is strengthening them. But the Thessalonians were enduring, and that, says Paul, was evidence of God's working among them.⁵*

11. How does this passage challenge the way you view the presence of pain in your life? What can affliction and pain teach you about how God deals with those He loves?

Exclusion! Banishment! Separation! But not annihilation! Some claim that what these verses mean is that when people die their existence also ends; that they go out like the light of a candle and they are no more. But Scripture never describes it in those terms; rather, it speaks here of "eternal destruction." The word is "ruin," the loss of everything that makes life worthwhile; the trashing of life. Some folks like to make jokes about hell, but I want to tell you that when you read the Scriptures you discover that hell is no joking matter. Jesus himself is the One who speaks of hell more than anyone else in the New Testament. Some say they do not mind going to hell. They say, "all their friends are going to be there." They speak of hell as if it were one great Animal House, with a fraternity party going on forever, where you just waste yourself and no one can stop you or say anything against what you are doing. That is never the picture that Scripture gives.

C. S. Lewis has put it well:

"In hell, everybody will be at an infinite distance from everybody else."

Loneliness and emptiness! The Apostle Jude describes those in hell as "wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever," {Jude 1:13b RSV}. **Those are very sobering words....** What terrible thing must one do to merit such an end? Turning one's back on God's offer of grace, is the answer of Scripture. God does not want anyone to perish like that. He says so. And he has gone through terrible agony to keep it from happening. But no matter how much you dislike passages like this, two truths always emerge:

First, it is justice that is being carried out; not meanness, not cruelty, not capriciousness, but justice on God's part. It is His righteous reaction to cosmic treason on man's part. That is what turning your back on Jesus means: Treason against the King of the universe.

And second, it is self-chosen. It is what those involved have always wanted: freedom from God. Everything in their life has said, "I don't want God messing up my plans and telling me what to do." There comes a time where man says to God, "Thy will be done," or else God says to man, "Thy will be done." What you want is what you get! I do not like preaching like that but that is reality, and Scripture confronts us with reality at every turn. ⁶

⁵ Sermon by Ray Steadman found @ http://www.pbc.org/system/message_files/5317/4097.html

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12. Describe how Paul details the events surrounding the judgment for those who do not love God. What thoughts or feelings do you experience as you read this description?

13. How is God just and righteous in the way He deals with sinners? How is God's vengeance different from our vengeance?

*Paul assures the Thessalonians that God is going to even the score: "... **God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted.**" It is encouraging to know that Hitler and Stalin and other mass murderers will eventually get their comeuppance. God has not forgotten their terrible deeds. He will afflict the ones who afflict God's people and bring rest to his own. I like that word "rest." The word really is "relief." In the Greek, it is anesis.⁷*

14. Paul says God will grant us rest at His coming. How does this promise give us a willingness and strength to endure afflictions and persecutions in this present world?

15. How does Paul's sobering description of Christ's Second Coming motivate believers who have been promised God's rest instead of His vengeance to live lives that glorify Him?

16. In what specific areas do you need God's power so that you might glorify Him? How can believers help one another to resolve and fulfill the good works God is calling us to live out?

Spend some time praying that Jesus might be glorified through you this week.

⁷ Sermon by Ray Steadman found @ http://www.pbc.org/system/message_files/5317/4097.html