

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: 2 Thessalonians**

## **July 29, 2012**

### **Occasion and Theme**

Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians from Corinth on his second missionary trip, shortly after he had written 1 Thessalonians. During the interval between the two epistles fanaticism had increased in the church at Thessalonica. The fanaticism resulted from belief in the immediacy of the Lord's return. That belief, in turn, apparently resulted from a desire for deliverance from persecution. Paul therefore wrote this second epistle to the Thessalonians to quiet the fanaticism by correcting the eschatology that gave rise to it.

### **Encouragement**

Read 2 Thessalonians 1-3

After the initial greeting (1:1,2), Paul again thanks God for the spiritual progress of the Thessalonian believers and for their patient endurance of persecution; but the commendation is much shorter than in 1 Thessalonians. Passing quickly to the subject of eschatology, Paul vividly describes the Second Coming, when persecutors will be judged and the persecuted relieved of their sufferings. His purpose is to encourage the Thessalonians to continued endurance by pointing forward to the turning of the tables when Christ comes back. In 2:1ff. Paul begins to deal with their misunderstandings about the Parousia by saying that it is not immediate. Therefore, they should return to their jobs and businesses. Looking for Christ's return does not mean cessation of normal living. He *may* not return for some length of time.

### **Correction**

Paul's warning not to be deceived by a false prophecy or by an oral or written report forged in his name (2:1,2) suggests the leaders of the fanaticism in Thessalonica claimed Paul's support. The phrase "man of lawlessness" (2:3) refers to the Antichrist, a world leader of wickedness and persecution in the last days. This evil figure will demand worship of himself in the temple of God; i.e., he will try to force the Jewish people to worship his image, which he will place in the (rebuilt) temple in Jerusalem (2:4, 5; compare Mark 13:14; Matthew 24:15; Revelation 13).

It is suggested that Paul had in mind the unfulfilled order of Emperor Caligula in AD 40 that a statue of himself be erected in the Jerusalem temple for worship.

Perhaps so, but Daniel's prophecy concerning the abomination of desolation (9:27; 11:31; 12:11), the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC, and Jesus' allusion to a still future abomination of desolation (Matthew 24:15ff.) provide the primary sources of Paul's statement.

What or who restrains the Antichrist from appearing till the proper time Paul felt it unnecessary to identify, for the Thessalonians already knew the identity from his oral teaching (2:5-8). The two most probable suggestions are (1) that the restraint is the institution of human government – personified in rulers, such as the Roman emperor and others – ordained by God for the protection of law and order (the Antichrist will be “lawless”) and (2) that the restraint is the activity of the Holy Spirit on earth at the present time in keeping back the Antichrist either directly or through the medium of the church. Finally, the emphasis in 3:17 on Paul's own handwriting as an indication of the genuineness of the epistle possibly implies that an epistle had been forged in Paul's name to support the fanaticism (cf. 2:2).

### **The Prescript (1:1-2)**

Except for two minor differences, 1:1-2 is identical to what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 1:1. (1) The first difference is the addition of “our” to “Father,” an instance of what Paul commonly does in the rest of his letters. The designation of God as “our” Father reflects Paul's conception of Christians as forming the family of God in a metaphorical sense and is to be seen alongside those texts where believers are called the children of God (cf. Romans 8:14-23; Galatians 3:26; 4:4-7). (2) The other difference is in verse 2, where the source of the “grace and peace” (which is assumed by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1:1) is explicitly identified as “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The same (or similar) phrase is found in all of Paul's letters except 1 Thessalonians and Colossians (which has only “God our Father.”

### **The Thanksgiving (1:3-4)**

The Thessalonians' “faith is growing more and more,” and the love they have “for each other is increasing” – the very thing for which Paul said he was praying in 1 Thessalonians 3:10, 12. The Thessalonians' growth in faith and love (cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:3) was taking place under the most adverse conditions: the continuing experience of “persecutions” and “afflictions.” The church's circumstances do not appear to have changed much since the time of Paul's writing the first letter (cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5). But adverse external circumstances have not hindered the fellowship's growth in the critical areas of faith and love; if anything, they may have promoted it. Consequently, Paul reports one more reason

why he gives thanks and “boasts” to other congregation about the Thessalonians - the “perseverance” they have demonstrated.

### **Instruction and Encouragement (1:5-10)**

In 1:5, Paul goes on to say that “all this” – that is, the three reasons he has just mentioned for giving thanks – is at the same time “evidence” of “God’s righteous judgment.” The Thessalonians, Paul implies, having placed their faith in God, are being attacked by forces hostile to God. God in turn has judged the situation correctly, as his blessing of them in the midst of their suffering indicates. In other words, the growth, increase, perseverance, and faith demonstrated by the Thessalonians together give evidence that they are indeed part of God’s people. The troublers of God’s people are part of a larger group identified as “those who do not know God,” that is, who “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (v. 8). The punishment this group will experience is identified in verse 9. Paul’s definition of “destruction”

(cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:3) here is precisely the opposite of his definition elsewhere of salvation as being with the Lord always (1 Thessalonians 4:17) and sharing in God’s glory (Romans 8:17-18, 30; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 3:21).

In sharpest contrast to those who “disobey the gospel” (1:8), “those who have believed” will experience both the presence and the glory of the Lord himself (the very things the other group will not experience). This is because the Lord “will be glorified in the presence of his holy people.” They will also “marvel,” either in the sense of “admire” or, perhaps, “worship.” All that Paul has been talking about “will happen when the Lord is revealed from heaven” (1:7b), that is, “when he comes...on that day” (1:10, NRSV). This is the same event that Paul in his first letter referred to as Jesus’ “coming” (*parousia*, 1 Thessalonians 4:15) or “the day of the Lord” (5:2).

### **A Prayer Report (1:11-12)**

His first petition (which resumes the idea of v. 5) is that “God may count you worthy of his calling.” God’s “calling” is essentially equivalent to God’s “election” or “choice”

(1 Thessalonians 1:4). The other petition is that God might “fulfill” or “bring to completion” – the verb has the idea of finishing something already begun – “every good purpose of yours (cf. Romans 10:1; Philippians 1:15; 2:13).

The glorification of the Lord and his name in turn results in the glorification of his followers (“and you in him”), a process that begins with the work of the Spirit in the lives of believers now (2 Corinthians 3:18) and culminates with the revealing

of the “glorious freedom of the children of God” at the Parousia (Romans 8:18-21; cf. Philippians 3:20-21).

***Persecution and God’s justice.*** Although we do not know for sure why or how the question about God’s justice arose, it seems likely that it is closely connected with the confusion about whether the Day of the Lord has already arrived (the topic of chapter 2). In 1 Thessalonians, Paul had informed the believers in Thessalonica (1) that the trials or afflictions they were experiencing were not due to God’s judgment of them, but were instead the result or consequence of their allegiance to God’s word, the gospel (1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14; 3:4), and (2) that when the Day of the Lord, with its accompanying judgment, did occur, they would experience not wrath but salvation (5:9). In short, the coming of the Day of the Lord would bring an end to their afflictions – the “relief” Paul mentions in 2 Thessalonians 1:7.

It is important to observe that when Paul asserts that God will vindicate his people, he is repeating a theme at least as old as the Exodus. In the “Song of Moses” in Deuteronomy 32:40-41, for example, the Lord himself declares:

I lift my hand to heaven and declare:  
As surely as I live forever,  
when I sharpen my flashing sword  
and my hand grasps it in judgment,  
I will take vengeance on my adversaries  
and repay those who hate me.

Isaiah takes up the same theme and finds in it a word of encouragement (Isaiah 35:4):

Say to those with fearful hearts,  
“Be strong, do not fear;  
and your God will come,  
he will come with vengeance;  
with divine retribution  
he will come to save you.”

With respect to its structure, 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2 introduce both the general topic (the *parousia* or coming of the Lord) and Paul’s specific concern (that the Thessalonians not be disturbed by rumors that it has already happened). Evidently some time after receiving the first letter, some members of the congregation in Thessalonica had become persuaded that the “Day of the Lord” – which Paul in

1 Thessalonians 5:2-6 had indicated would come when least expected and would surprise the unprepared – had already arrived. Paul informs them that it is impossible for the Day of the Lord to have already arrived because certain events and developments (which had not yet taken place) must first occur (2:3-12).

### **Has the “Day of the Lord” already arrived? (2:1-2)**

At least some of the Thessalonians have become “unsettled” by a claim – in some way attributed to the apostle himself – “to the effect that” the “day of the Lord has already come.” For all that Paul knows (and it clearly isn’t much), this misunderstanding may have arisen or come to the Thessalonians in one of three ways. It may have come (2:2) via a “prophecy” or a “report” or a “letter.” But Paul’s primary concern is not with how the claim reached them, but with its content (i.e., the claim that “the day of the Lord has already come”), which apparently has been attributed to him.

### **Paul’s response: The day has not arrived (2:3-4)**

With respect to this misunderstanding, Paul emphatically denies both its attribution to him and its content. These things must happen first (which probably should be taken as components of a single complex event, but could be two sequential items) include (1) the occurrence of “the rebellion” (v. 3), and (2) the revealing (cf. vv. 6, 8), of “the man of lawlessness” (v. 3b). Paul takes it for granted (cf. v. 5) that his readers know what he means by “the rebellion” and says nothing further about it. The term could denote either political or religious rebellion; here the two ideas are likely combined, with the emphasis on the latter. Paul, like other New Testament writers, probably has in view a time of increasing wrongdoing and general opposition to God (cf. 2 Timothy 3:1-9).

The leader of this rebellion is described in 2:3b-4 by means of a series of parallel phrases. He is first of all a “man of lawlessness” (cf. Psalm 89:22). Because of this opposition he is, whether he realizes it or not, a “son of destruction,” i.e., “doomed to destruction.” Paul further characterizes this individual as one who not only “opposes” God but also “exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped,” a description that echoes Daniel 11:36-37.

The result and climax of this arrogant and audacious self-exaltation is the attempt by this person to usurp the very power and position of the one true God. This occurs when “he sets himself up in God’s temple,” a symbolic action that involves nothing less than “proclaiming himself to be God.” Moreover, like the Lord Jesus himself, this man of lawlessness will have his own “revealing” or “*parousia*” (2:9), a devilish imitation of the real thing. This suggests that he is nothing less than a rival messiah or antichrist.

### **Additional information about the “Man of Lawlessness” (2:5-12)**

One reason for some of the uncertainty regarding 2:4 is that Paul takes for granted that the Thessalonians know what he is talking about. As 2:5 indicates, he had taught them about this matter previously. Paul alludes in 2:6-8 to what is “holding...back” or “restraining” (NRSV) his appearing until “the proper time.”

(1) The secret power of lawlessness (lit., the mystery of lawlessness) is already at work (2:7a), but (2) it is operating in a manner that is somehow restrained or held back (2:6, 7b). (3) At some future time, however, “the lawless one (= ‘the man of lawlessness’ of 2:3) will be revealed” (2:8a; cf. 2:3, 6) or have his own “coming” (i.e., *parousia*, 2:9), at which point (4) he will be overthrown and destroyed by the far greater power and splendor of the Lord’s own *parousia* (2:8b). In 2:7 Paul confirms that evil is currently at work in the world (as evidenced, e.g., by the persecutions the Thessalonians are experiencing) and is satanic in origin (2:9), but it is nonetheless in some way limited or hindered. Here we come to a difficult question, that of the identity and/or character of the restraint that is currently keeping the “secret power of lawlessness” in check. It is difficult to avoid Augustine’s conclusion: “I frankly confess I do not know what he means.”

Verses 11-12 discuss the consequence (not the cause) of this choice: “For this reason God sends them a powerful elusion so that they will believe the lie.

*What we do know.* (1) Apparently some of the Thessalonians thought that the “Day of the Lord” has already arrived. (2) Paul’s answer is relatively straightforward: The “day of the Lord” and “our being gathered to him” will not come until after certain other things happen. These things are “the rebellion” and the revealing of “the man of lawlessness” (2:3).

*A pitfall to avoid.* In view of what is clear or what we do know about this passage, the things we do not know constitute not so much an obstacle as a temptation – to speculate about what we do not know. (1) Such speculation distracts our attention from and obscures what we do know. (2) Speculation on the identity of the Antichrist is a waste of time, effort, and resources. The list of those confidently identified as Antichrist is a long one. It includes various Roman emperors, various peoples, Emperor Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX, Martin Luther, King George II of England, Napoleon Bonaparte, the League of Nations, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein, the New Age Movement, theological Matthew Fox, Henry Kissinger, and former presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Wilson Reagan (six letters in each name =666 [cf. Revelation 13:18], and Reagan

recovered from a serious wound [13:3]). When novels about Antichrist outsell books about Jesus, it seems to me that there is something seriously out of balance.

### **Thanksgiving to God (2:13-14)**

The “but” with which 2:13 opens contrasts the fate of those “who are perishing” with that of the Thessalonian believers, described as brothers and sisters “loved by the Lord” and chosen by God for salvation.

### **Exhortation to “stand firm” (2:15)**

#### **An intercessory prayer (2:16-17)**

The prayer illuminates Paul’s objective in the preceding verses: to encourage and strengthen the Thessalonians.

#### **A request for prayer (3:1-2)**

Having concluded his prayer for the Thessalonians, Paul proceeds in 3:1-2 to ask for their prayers on his behalf (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:25). The first of two closely linked requests has to do with the “message of the Lord.” As in 1 Thessalonians 1:8, where the identical phrase occurs, it is essentially synonymous with the “gospel of Christ.” The word translated “spread rapidly” echoes a scriptural image (Ps. 147:15, “his word runs swiftly”).

Whereas Paul’s first request is on behalf of the message (3:1), the second one is for the messengers who proclaim it (3:2): that Paul and his companions “may be delivered from wicked and evil people” (NIV). The two adjectives are roughly synonymous and convey the idea of morally perverse people who maliciously obstruct the gospel, like the people in Thessalonica who had instigated a riot in order to hinder the preaching of the gospel (Acts 17:5).

#### **Expressions of confidence (3:3-4)**

In 3:3 Paul quickly returns to his primary concern in this section: the encouragement of the community. People who are “evil” lack “faith,” but (3:3) the Lord is “faithful” and will continue to “strengthen” and “protect” his followers from the “evil one.” By praising the Thessalonians for what they have been doing and expressing his “confidence in the Lord” that they “will continue to do the things we command,” Paul is preparing the way for the instructions he is about to give in 3:6-15.

### **Further prayer (3:5)**

He prays that the Lord might “direct” the Thessalonians’ attention to two important points. The first, “God’s love,” echoes once more a key theme running through 2:13-3:5, namely, assurance grounded in God. The second, “Christ’s perseverance,” sets before them Christ as the example of what Paul has repeatedly been encouraging them to do, that is, to persevere (cf. 2:15, 16-17; cf. 1:4; also 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 3:13). Strictly speaking, the phrase “love of God” can indicate either “their love for God” or “God’s love for them.” Both the immediate context (2:13, 16) and Pauline usage (e.g., Romans 5:8, 5) make it virtually certain that it is the latter.

***Perseverance.*** God’s faithfulness ought to prompt a response of faithfulness on our part. For Paul, Christianity is not a quick-fix treatment or a short-term solution for what ails us; it is, as someone has said, “A long walk in the same direction.” The writer of Hebrews expressed much the same idea when he encouraged his readers to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1), for “we have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (Hebrews 3:14). Both Paul and Hebrews in turn reflect the teaching of Jesus, who on more than one occasion reminded his disciples that “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13 NRSV).

***Scripture as a safeguard.*** One reason the Thessalonians had become so “unsettled” (2:2) regarding the future was that they had allowed themselves to be misled by unreliable information. Instead of sticking to what Paul and his companions had actually said or written, they gave credence to information of uncertain origin and indeterminate reliability. Paul’s response was to encourage the Thessalonians to hold firmly to the teachings they have received from the apostles themselves, and nothing more. Whether in 1 Thessalonians 3:4; 4:1-2; 5:1-2; or 2 Thessalonians 2:5, 15; 3:6 (cf. also 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14) his point was consistent: They should live in light of what they have been taught.

What are some ways we fail to hold tightly to scripture:

- take verses out of context and give them meanings the author never intended.
- give more weight or attention to what popular teachers or novelists teach than to what scripture does.
- uncritically accept alleged prophecies, “words of knowledge,” or other charismatic “revelations” and fail to test them against scripture.
- emphasize one part or teaching of scripture to the exclusion of others.



- suggest that scripture is not relevant to contemporary issues because circumstances were so much simpler in biblical cultures (e.g., by claiming that scripture has so little to say about an issue that it cannot be called upon to resolve the contemporary church's debates about that issue or to address itself to the modern complexity of that issue).

## **2 Thessalonians 3:6-18**

The tone of Paul's exhortation in 3:6-15 is the most bluntly authoritative of anything in either letter. Both the community as a whole and those who are the source of the problem are explicitly commanded "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (3:6; cf. v. 12) to obey specific Pauline instructions (cf. 3:14), and penalties for noncompliance are spelled out.

### **Defining the problem: idle or disorderly**

Second Thessalonians 3:6-15 is often interpreted in light of 2:1-3 as Paul's response to a situation generated by excessive interest in and excitement about the imminent return of Jesus, which led some members of the church to abandon their jobs and live in idleness, dependent on the generosity and resources of others. The problem was not inactivity, but the wrong kind of activity. Paul's mention in 3:11 of "working" hints that those whom he is criticizing may have claimed that they were engaged in legitimate "work." Instead of working responsibly to support themselves, the people in question were eating other people's bread (cf. 3:8, 12) and thus living "irresponsibly" or "in an undisciplined manner," which was burdensome to the rest of the congregation. Their behavior was, in other words, undisciplined, disruptive, or "disorderly" rather than merely "idle."

### **The apostolic command and example (3:6-10)**

"If anyone refuses to work, do not permit that person to eat." This translation attempts to convey the emphasis in Paul's sentence on the refusal or unwillingness to work. What Paul and his colleagues had taught during their initial visit (3:10, "when we were with you, we gave you this rule") they had also lived themselves; that is, they deliberately practiced what they preached. Even though as apostles they had the right to be supported by others (3:9), they voluntarily declined to exercise this right in order to provide an example (3:6) or model for the Thessalonians to follow (3:9; cf. Philippians 3:17).

### **Orders for the disorderly (3:11-12)**

The actual command to the disorderly is that "quietly working, they should eat their own bread" (2 Thessalonians 3:12b). That is, rather than wasting their time in pseudo-work or unproductive busyness and meddling, they should engage in productive self-supporting activities, in accordance with the apostolic model.

### **Instructions for the congregation (3:13-15)**

Even as Paul authoritatively commands the disorderly, he encourages the rest of the congregation to “never tire of doing what is right.” It means continuing to care for those who genuinely need help; that is, those who legitimately require assistance should not suffer a loss of aid just because a few have taken advantage of the charity of others. The instructions in 3:14-15 have in view everything discussed since 3:6. Paul clearly hopes that the disorderly will comply voluntarily with his instructions. If this compliance, however, is not forthcoming, the congregation itself must take steps to enforce them.

### **The letter closing (3:16-18)**

In the benediction in 3:16, the reference to “the Lord of peace” is unique in the New Testament. Jesus is more often linked with peace in the opening of a letter (as in 1:2 and every Pauline letter except Colossians) rather than in the closing (where the usual phrase is “God of peace,” as in 1 Thessalonians 5:23; cf. Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9).

It was not uncommon for a person dictating a letter to take the pen from the amanuensis (the “secretary” or “scribe” who actually wrote the letter; cf. Romans 16:22) and write the last sentence or two in his (or her) own hand. Paul seems to have done this as a matter of habit (he refers to it as “the distinguishing mark in all my letters”). The exact phrase used here (lit., “the greeting in my own hand, Paul’s”) occurs in 1 Corinthians 16:21 and Colossians 4:18, and he comments on his writing in Galatians 6:11 and Philemon 19).

***Church discipline.*** Nowhere does Paul spell out fully his views about the principles and practice of church discipline. The major passages where the topic arises are here and 1 Corinthians 5.

- (1) Discipline is the responsibility of the congregation as a whole, not one or a few individuals within it (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:4).
- (2) Discipline should generally be reserved for matters affecting the health or well-being of the entire community. Although Paul nowhere lists or defines what qualifies for discipline, it is clear that it is not for offenses that can be dealt with privately (as per Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1).
- (3) The disciplinary action itself involves a measure of social ostracism (3:6, 14; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:11).
- (4) The purpose of disciplinary action is redemptive and remedial, not judgmental or punitive, and the spirit in which it is carried out must reflect this (3:14-15; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5).

## **A Summary Outline of 2 Thessalonians**

Themes: the quieting of a fanatical belief, engendered apparently by persecution, that the Parousia was going to take place immediately.

Introduction: greeting (1:1, 2)

### **I. Persecution (1:3-12)**

- A. Thanksgiving for the progress of the Thessalonian believers in the midst of persecution (1:3, 4)
- B. Assurance of deliverance from persecution and of divine judgment on persecutors at the Parousia (1:5-10)
- C. Prayer for the Thessalonian believers (1:11, 12)

### **II. The Parousia, Rapture, and Day of the Lord (2:1-15)**

- A. Denial that the Day of the Lord has arrived (2:1, 2)
- B. Affirmation of necessary precedents (2:3-15)
  - 1. The rebellion (2:3a)
  - 2. The man of lawlessness (2:3b-15)
    - a. His divine claim (2:3b-5)
    - b. The present restraint of his appearance (2:6, 7)
    - c. His doom (2:8)
    - d. His deceitfulness (2:9-12)
    - e. The protection of the Thessalonian Christians from his deceitfulness and doom (2:13-15)
- C. Benediction (2:16, 17)

### **III. Exhortations (3:1-15)**

- A. Prayer, love, and stability (3:1-5)
- B. Industrious labor (3:6-13)
- C. Disciplinary ostracism of disobedient church members (3:14, 15)

Conclusion: further benedictions and final greeting with emphasis on Paul's own handwriting in the last few lines to guarantee the authenticity of the epistle (3:16-18).