

# INTRODUCTION AND 2 THESS. 1:1 – 3:18

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## Introduction to 2 Thessalonians

### I. Reminder of Details of Second Missionary Journey

A. After the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 49, Paul suggested that he and Barnabas revisit the churches they had planted during their missionary journey. They disagreed over taking John called Mark (Paul did not want to because he had deserted them early in the first journey), so Barnabas took John/Mark and sailed to Cyprus; Paul took Silas and headed out on foot (Acts 15:36-41).

B. When they visited Lystra, they were joined by a young Christian named Timothy. (Acts 16:1-3). They went from town to town strengthening the churches (Acts 16:4-5), and then, with some guidance by the Spirit, went to Troas. In response to a vision Paul had, they sailed from Troas into Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10).

C. In Philippi, Paul and Silas are illegally flogged and thrown in prison (Acts 16:16-40).

D. From Philippi Paul, Silas, and Timothy go to Thessalonica and plant the church to which the Thessalonian letters are written. After starting that the church, they are forced to flee to Berea when the Jews start a riot (Acts 17:1-10). At most, they were in Thessalonica for a matter of months.

E. Paul's experience in Berea is similar to his experience in Thessalonica, so the brothers send him off to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea (Acts 17:11-15).

F. Silas and Timothy join Paul in Athens (Acts 17:15-16), and then Timothy is sent back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1-2). Silas goes to some undisclosed place in Macedonia and then he and Timothy rejoin Paul (perhaps Silas arrived first) who has since moved to Corinth (Acts 18:5; probably arrived in Corinth early 50).

### II. The Letter

A. The news Timothy brought regarding the church in Thessalonica prompted 1 Thessalonians.

B. 2 Thessalonians was written some months after 1 Thessalonians as a follow up pastoral letter. Paul's rebuttal in 1 Thessalonians of the slanderous attacks on the missionaries had apparently been successful, but some of the other problems needed further attention.

Particularly, the problem of idleness persisted and there were further misunderstandings about Christ's second coming.

## **2 Thess. 1:1 – 3:18**

I. Prescript (1:1-2) – This is very similar to 1 Thess. 1:1.

II. Thanksgiving, Encouragement, and Prayer (1:3-12)

A. Appropriateness of thanksgiving for Thessalonians (1:3-4)

1. It is fitting that the missionaries thank God for the Thessalonians because their faith is growing abundantly and their love for one another is increasing.

2. The missionaries are even boasting about them to other churches because this growth is happening in the face of persecution and affliction.

B. Encouragement by truth of God's judgment (1:5-10)

1. The present persecution of the Thessalonians by the unrighteous (non-Christians) testifies to a coming day of righteous judgment, a day when God will set this matter right and vindicate his faithful (see Rev. 6:9-11). Those who persevered in faith despite the persecution will be considered worthy of the kingdom and receive divine rest; those who persecuted them will receive divine affliction. (1:5-7)

2. This judgment will happen at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven (1:8-10)

a. He is coming back from heaven (Jn. 14:2-3; Acts 1:10-11) accompanied by his mighty angels in flaming fire (see Mat. 24:29-31). It will be no secret! (So they should know it has not already occurred as some claimed; see 2:2.)

b. At that time, he will mete out punishment to those who do not know God, more precisely defined as those who do not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ (according to Bruce, the second clause is, in the style of O.T. prophecy and poetry, a synonymous parallel to the first). Jesus could not have been more blunt when he said in Jn. 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." See also Acts 4:12.

c. The punishment is here described as eternal destruction, separation from the presence of the Lord. Elsewhere that punishment is described as being thrown into a fiery furnace (e.g., Mat. 13:50), into a lake of fire (Rev. 14:9-11, 20:15), and into the darkness (e.g., Mat. 25:28-30). The description is often accompanied by the phrase, "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," so whatever the particulars, it is as bad as it gets.

d. At that time, Jesus will be glorified in his saints in the sense that we sinful men and women will be presented redeemed and glorified through his sacrifice on the cross. He will be glorified *in* us because we will be glorified *with* him (see Rom. 8:17; Eph. 2:4-10; Col. 3:4).

e. He also will be marveled at by all who have believed, including the Thessalonians because they believed the missionaries' message.

### C. Prayer report (1:11-12)

1. The missionaries are praying that God will count the Thessalonians worthy of his calling, which he will if they conduct themselves in a worthy manner (see Eph. 4:1). This does not mean they earn salvation; it means that their faith must be genuine, in which case it will influence how they live.

2. They are also praying that God will powerfully fulfill every desire of goodness and work of faith so that Jesus will be glorified in them and they in him.

a. Jesus will now, as opposed to at his Second Coming (1:10), be glorified in them by the nobility of their lives. In living as faithful disciples, they will bring honor to their Master.

b. Those who live lives of faith will ultimately be glorified as a result of being united with Christ (see Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 15:42-53; Col 3:4).

## III. Misunderstanding About Christ's Second Coming

### A. Reassurance regarding false claim about Second Coming (2:1-3a)

1. Apparently some in Thessalonica were attributing to Paul and the other missionaries the notion that the Second Coming referred to in 1 Thess. 4:13 - 5:3 had already occurred. This was causing confusion and anxiety in the church because it seemed inconsistent with the teaching they previously had received from Paul and his companions and with their being persecuted.

2. Paul is not sure how they were tracing this teaching to him, so he tells the Thessalonians not to be disturbed by any prophecy (spirit), oral teaching (word), or letter purportedly emanating from him to the effect the day of the Lord is already here. If that is the substance of the report, he has been misrepresented; whoever makes such a claim is trying to deceive them.

B. Rebuttal of false claim about Second Coming by reminder of antecedent events (2:3b-12)

1. In 1:7-10 Paul implicitly rebutted the claim that the day of the Lord had already occurred. It will be an open display of the Lord's glory, a day in which the saints will marvel.

2. Now he explicitly rebuts the claim by reminding them of what he had already taught them, namely that Jesus will not return until the rebellion and the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, is revealed. Since that had not occurred, the claim that Jesus had already returned was false.

### 3. The coming "man of lawlessness"

a. It seems clear (to me) that Paul's "man of lawlessness" is the same character as the first Beast of Revelation 13, the one called Antichrist in 1 John. He is the ultimate, end-time opponent of God, the one who leads the final rebellion against God and his people.

b. The coming of Antichrist was part of the common stock of early Christian teaching about end times (e.g., 1 Jn. 2:18, "*as you have heard* that the antichrist is coming, . . .").

c. Paul provides several pieces of information about this person, which when supplemented with the information in Revelation, yields the following picture.

(1) He is the Satan-inspired ruler of a powerful, worldwide, and violently antichristian empire (Rev. 12:9, 13:1-9, 17:11).

(2) He exalts himself as God and is worshipped by non-Christians throughout the world (Rev. 13:4-8, 12).

(3) This worship is fostered by the performance of miracles through satanic power (Rev. 13:11-15, 16:14, 19:20).

(4) He is involved in organizing the nations for the final battle against God and his Christ (Rev. 16:12-16) and will be destroyed when the Lord returns (Rev. 16:15, 19:19-21).

d. Those who are deceived by the miracles are those who did not love the truth. If they had loved the truth, they would not have believed the lie that Antichrist is divine (note 1 Cor. 12:3) regardless of what miracles were performed on his behalf. See Deut. 13:1-5. It is God's way of peeling off those who really delighted in wickedness.

e. Paul suggests that the timing of Antichrist's appearance is being controlled by one who is now restraining him. At some point, the one restraining him will be removed, and then he will appear on the stage of history.

(1) In my opinion, Paul is saying the same thing John says in Rev. 20:1-3. There Satan is bound in the sense he is prevented from deceiving the nations so as to prematurely gather them for the ultimate confrontation with God (Harmagedon). Rev. 20:3 specifically states that the reason for his binding is to prevent him from "deceiving the nations."

(2) Since miraculous power is the means by which Satan will ultimately deceive the nations into gathering against God (see, e.g., Mat. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9-10; Rev. 13:13-14, 16:14, 19:20), the binding more specifically represents the elimination of his power to perform nation-gathering miracles. That power will only be restored to him, i.e., he will only be set free, when God chooses to bring this age to a close.

(3) The time of 1,000 years symbolizes the fullness of God's time (10 cubed). Satan will in no way "jump the gun" and thereby dictate the timing of the end; he will not be "released" until the precise moment God desires.

4. In 1 Thessalonians Paul stressed the unpredictability aspect of Christ's return because his focus was on ethics; Christians can never pinpoint Christ's return so need to live in a state of constant readiness. Here he stresses the condition precedent because it disproves the false teaching.

#### IV. Thanksgiving, Exhortation, and Prayer (2:13-17)

##### A. Thanksgiving (2:13-14)

1. 2 Thessalonians 2:10-11 speaks of those who perish under the deception of Antichrist because they did not love the truth so that they may be saved. Condemnation is for those who did not believe the truth but delighted in wickedness.

2. But the Thessalonians are not in that category. Rather than condemnation, God chose them (as he has chosen all Christians) for salvation, a status that is marked by belief in the truth and sanctification of the Spirit (i.e., delighting in goodness).

3. Accepting the reading "firstfruits" in v. 13 rather than "from the beginning," I see it as a reference to the fact those to whom he is writing are the first Christians in Thessalonica.

4. The fact the Thessalonians are among the redeemed is cause for regular thanksgiving.

5. God called them to salvation through the missionaries' gospel. That message is the means by which people are saved. That is the impetus behind evangelism.

6. Salvation is further defined as "the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." We will share in his glory when he returns (see, 2 Thess. 1:12; Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 15:42-53; Col 3:4).

#### B. Exhortation (2:15)

1. Given the glory of their destiny in Christ, they are exhorted to stand firm and to hold fast to the traditions they were taught, meaning the divine truths the missionaries had passed on to them. If they abandon those truths, they will not share in the glories of the kingdom (see 1 Cor. 15:1-2).

2. Those truths were passed on to them both by word (when they were in Thessalonica) and by "our letter," a clear reference to 1 Thessalonians. This shows a very early appreciation of the importance of apostolic writings, an appreciation that led to their being preserved, being publicly read, and eventually being gathered into a collection.

#### C. Prayer (2:16-17)

1. They pray that the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father will encourage their hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word. They needed encouragement and strengthening as they pursued the Christian life in the face of a hostile populace.

2. Jesus and the Father are described as having loved them (most pointedly in the incarnation and the cross) and having given them eternal encouragement and good hope by grace (in the gracious gift of salvation).

### V. Prayer Request, Further Encouragement, and Prayer (3:1-5)

#### A. Prayer request (3:1-2)

1. They ask for prayers on their behalf so that the gospel ("word of the Lord") may spread rapidly and be glorified, as it was with the Thessalonians.

a. The prayers are for the missionaries because God has chosen human instruments for the spread of his saving message. He does not directly instill knowledge of the gospel in people. All the conversions in Acts involve a human messenger (even Paul had Ananias come to him).

b. God wants his gospel to go throughout the world (Mat. 28:18-20) and to be accepted by all people (1 Tim. 2:3-6; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Jn. 2:2), but he knows that many will reject it (Lk. 13:22-27; Mat. 7:13-14).

2. They ask for prayers that they may be delivered from evil and wicked men, specifically opponents of the gospel who persecute them as they evangelize. They did not want their gospel witness to be impeded.

#### B. Encouragement (3:3-4)

1. The Lord is faithful, to his word and to his disciples, so he can be counted on to strengthen them and to guard them from the assaults of Satan. This does not mean they will have no hardships; it means they will be protected during them. Satan cannot prevail against those who are faithful to Christ.

2. They express their confidence in them, that they are doing and will do the things the missionaries command. To obey the Scriptures is to live in submission to the Lord.

C. Prayer (3:5) - They pray that the Lord will lead the Thessalonians into a growing appreciation of God's love for them (which will increase their love for him and for one another) and into an even greater participation in the endurance of Christ.

### VI. Exhortation Regarding Idleness (3:6-15)

#### A. Command to avoid the idle (3:6)

1. The missionaries had previously taught that, as Christians, they were not to live in idleness, not to be unwilling to work. They taught this both when they were with the Thessalonians (3:10) and in their prior letter (1 Thess. 5:14).

2. Those who refused to accept this instruction were to be avoided. As explained in 3:14, the main purpose of this discipline was to shame the offenders into compliance. (Elsewhere we see it also serves to keep the church pure.)

3. The church cannot shrink from its God-given responsibility to discipline wayward members. Sin must be taken seriously in a community of believers. It is not "spiritual" to wink at sin; rather, it is an affront to God to treat sin, for which Christ died, as though it were no big deal!

a. The Lord's charge against the church in Thyatira in Rev. 2:20 was that they tolerated a false prophetess, one who was misleading Christians into immorality and idolatry.

b. 1 Corinthians 5 makes it abundantly clear that the church has an obligation to (ultimately) withdraw from the impenitent.

#### B. Missionaries' example of self sufficiency (3:7-9)

1. The missionaries had set the example for the church by not sponging off them when they were in Thessalonica (see 1 Thess. 2:7, 9). They stayed, at least part of the time, in Jason's house (Acts 17:7), but they paid for what they were provided.

2. They refused to become an economic burden on the converts, even though they had a right, as preachers of the gospel, to be supported by them (see 1 Thess. 2:7).

#### C. Reminder of command previously given (3:10)

1. When they were in Thessalonica, they commanded them that if anyone is unwilling to work, do not let him eat.

2. Giving food to the one who is unwilling to work only feeds his sin. It is not the loving thing to do.

D. Report about idlers (3:11) – They had heard that, despite 1 Thess. 5:14, there were idlers<sup>1</sup> among the Christians. With so much time on their hands, these idlers were acting as busybodies.

E. Command to idlers (3:12) - They are to work with quietness, meaning to work and to mind their own business (see 1 Thess. 4:11).

F. Encouragement of faithful (3:13) - Do not become weary in doing good. Those doing right are not to lapse into the type of conduct being condemned.

G. Renewal of command to avoid (3:14-15) - The idlers are now to be avoided. The only other use of this word "associate" (*sunanamignumi*) is in 1 Cor. 5:9, 11. Presumably the idlers have had ample opportunity to repent and have refused to do so.

## VII. Conclusion

### A. Prayer (3:16)

### B. Closing (3:17-18)

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<sup>1</sup> The adverb *ataktōs* may well mean "disorderly," but Louw and Nida give the meaning "lazily." BDAG notes in regard to the adjective form that "some prefer the sense *idle, indolent*." However, granting the meaning "disorderly," BDAG rightly points out that "the specific manner in which the irresponsible behavior manifests itself is described in the context: freeloading, sponging."