

2

Thessalonians.

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Introduction

It seems a reasonable thing to assume that Apostle Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians not long after 1 Thess. This is well attested by the early Fathers – Polycarp, Ignatius and Justin. It appears in early lists of N.T. books, and has, I believe a very “Apostle Paul” feel to it.

So let’s adopt this traditional position, and give it a date not long after 1 Thess. – say 51 C.E.

As we look though 2 Thess., many of the themes from 1 Thess. appear again - in fact a lot of the language is very similar, which is to be expected. There is new teaching on the Parousia, and some of the things he challenged them on in 1 Thess. have improved. The “afflictions” are still going on. They are still an example to everyone else as a church - their faith and endurance an encouragement to everyone.

2 Thessalonians 1

¹ Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:² Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a very similar greeting to 1 Thess., and that is to be expected. Here, it is “**God our Father**”, not “God the father” (1 Thess.1:1). The stress here is on the inclusiveness of the fatherhood of God. “**Grace**” (Gk: “Charis”) and “**peace**”, (Gk: “Eirene”) are here again, and it is hard to see how they can be improved on as a blessing. All of God within his shalom! That sounds very good to me, and to a new and growing church it certainly would have sounded good to them.

³ **We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.** ⁴ **Therefore, among God’s churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.**

“Your faith is growing more and more.” This is an interesting verse, and has a lot to tell us about our personal growth, the growth of the church and of the kingdom. The Greek word is “pleonazei” and does not mean “growth exceedingly” (A.V.) but rather more reflects the idea of steady organic growth. Faith - personal and fellowship - is to be steady and sure. This is the best growth, and the growth which will last. Fast dashes of growth look good on the C.V., but seldom endure. N.I.V.’s “more and more” is a good reflection.

How often we go against this principle, pushing too hard, going too fast, setting up work we can neither sustain nor service. Apostle would say of such growth, “Easy come easy go.” He was looking for “slow and steady.” This is the growth which lasts, yet we often don’t want it. We have become addicted to fame, to success and to greatness, believing that size and success are the measure of the kingdom.

Slow and steady growth demands perseverance, endurance, suffering and hard work - traits which we have already seen in 1 Thessalonians. In the 21st century, the church places little value on such virtues - even though they are the proven biblical ways of progress.

“Slow and steady” led Joseph to become the second man in Egypt. (Genesis 41:41) We don’t have to stay small. But we only become great in small increments. This is the growth which lasts – and this appeared to be the situation of the church which was known in all of Asia.

“Love all of you have for one another is increasing.” “Agape” love is increasing, which must be an encouragement to Apostle Paul. This is what he challenged them to in 1Thess., and apparently, it’s happening.

“Your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.” Endurance and faith - the two go together. “Faith” is generally faith in something or someone. We have put our faith in Jesus - so why isn’t it all plain sailing? Here we come up against a key trait of the Christian faith – we are free to accept or reject God in the first place, and when we accept him there is a growth process, including “afflictions”, which he allows. “Afflictions” (Gk: “Thlipsesin”) are those things we have to endure because we are following Christ. This can be very challenging, so why does God allow them, if he loves us? Our mistake is in accessing the depth of that love. God loves us so much that he wants us to be mature in Christ. “Afflictions”, hard though they are, generate endurance, and endurance helps us to ascend the summit of faith. God wants us to reach the heights, and the afflictions help us in that process. If God didn’t love us, he would just make us puppets, dancing to his tune.

This would make us babies, getting just what we need when we need it with no effort. We would be weak. But he wants maturity from us - hence afflictions.

We have to make a choice as his people - maturity or babyhood. I want to be the man God made me to be. I want to be mature, his co-worker, trustworthy, unlikely to fold up like a deckchair in the wind, privy to the power and glory of the kingdom, knowing his agape, his power and his joy. If afflictions are the route, so be it. I don't want anything less than maturity.

⁵ All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. ⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well.

It's easy for us to give up under "afflictions." Possibly the Thess. Church faced this temptation, so the Apostle encourages them that by enduring, they will be counted "**worthy**" of the kingdom. We are not earning our acceptance, but rather living by the principles of the Kingdom. Suffering is part of what we signed up for, what we accept, and we take it on, along with all the blessings of belonging to the kingdom. Those who cause the afflictions will have to answer to God. We get on and endure. Judgment belongs to God. We are worthy.

This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

Suddenly, out of the calmness of teaching comes this blazing passage. This is typical of the Apostle's writing. He can quickly be transformed from the calmest of seas to a raging storm of teaching. I have always found this so exciting. He is not a theological book, but a real man, whose emotions can suddenly overwhelm him, and out comes some of the most exciting and challenging teaching. So it is here. Thinking about the afflictions which his church in Thess. Are experiencing, his mind jumps to the final judgment which he has hinted at. Here it is:-

*** Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.**

The end times will be marked by the revelation, (the "apocalypse") of Jesus. This time it will not be in a manger, but with **blazing fire**, (See the fire in 1 Kings

18:38) and “**powerful**” (Gk: “dunamis”) angels. In the book of Revelation, angels are key to the apocalypse. Note that it is the Lord who is powerful. Apostle is careful to keep his focus, and ours, on the one being revealed.

*** He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.**

It is clear from the biblical teaching that those who reject faith in this life will face terrible loss – “**destruction**” at the judgment. Few want to face this truth, but it is the inevitable consequence of a God who loves with a passion, has offered a way to eternal bliss on the cross, and also sets certain moral absolutes. Many rebel against this teaching, but do so without taking into account the desire of God to forgive and bless. At the cross he has shouted to all of us “I want to bless, not to destroy.” If we keep rejecting, then what else can we expect?

“**Destruction**” (“ruin”) is defined as being shut out from the presence of God - just what so troubled Dives. (Luke 16:19-31) Other parts of the Bible describe this in fuller detail, but Apostle leaves it at its simplest and most disappointing – shut out from the presence of God forever. Can there be anything worse?

*** On the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed.**

“**on that day**” is the Parousia day, when the Lord returns once and for all. It has strong O.T. support. Bu the Apostle is teaching that it is a day of judgment for some, but of worship for us. We will be able to give him the praise and glory he deserves, and do it face to face. There is no fear of “that day” for God’s people. Our account has been settled, and we can do what we were made to do - worship the Saviour.

¹¹ With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. ¹² We pray this 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.

This is a good prayer, and all the different requests fit well together.

***worthy:** The emphasis is:- “to live life in such a way as to be able to offer pure worship on “that day – to have our worship accepted on the basis of the quality of our faith, refined over many years of service.” The Apostle hammers

away at this concept. We are not earning our way to heaven, but becoming good craftsmen and women in the Faith - a good and “worthy” goal for any Christian life. Like apprentices, we want to develop the traits of the master craftsman we are serving.

* **Goodness:** Here, the Apostle is praying that God himself would give the good things needed in the lives of the Thess. Church. This links well with “worthy” and prevents us straying into works based faith. We are to be worthy, and God will, by his Spirit, generate the things and experiences necessary to produce worthiness.

* **Faith:** In the teaching of the Apostle, “faith” means “faith in something or someone.” We are worthy, because God is at work in us, and we, wanting to be able to offer that pure praise on “the day” put our faith in Jesus, and adopt the lifestyle and teaching of Jesus as we exercise that faith.

* **Glorified in you:** This makes sense in the light of what has gone before. If we are worthy, inspired by the Spirit within us, then the glory will shine through us. It is one of the astonishing truths of faith that people see Jesus through us. It’s even more astonishing that Jesus wants it this way. How he has honoured us.

* **Grace: (Gk “charis.)** All this blessing is because of the grace of God - because this is what he wants and this is what he will do. But “grace” is an action as well as an experience. So often, God’s people use “grace” as an opportunity to do nothing. “God will do it” is an expression I hear a lot. Yes - God will do it through, in and with us. Sometimes I think that the Apostle would like to add 1 Thessalonians 1: 13 and it would read “So get on with it!”

2 Thessalonians 2

¹ Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, ² not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come.

In 1 Thess., the Apostle had to outline the events of the Parousia. We know that the first Christians were expecting a very quick return of the Lord, and this led to some strange behaviour and thinking, both in Thessalonica and in Corinth. Some, possibly many, feared that they had missed the coming of the Lord. The Apostle tells them not to be easily unsettled The Greek word

“saleuo” reflects motion of wind and sea, and suggests restlessness, like a ship tugging at its moorings as it is tossed by the wind and waves. The Apostle doesn’t want his church pulled from its moorings **by prophecy, word of mouth or by letter**. Were the Thess. Church thinking these had originated from Paul by a revelation, or had they misunderstood his letter (1 Thess.) to them?

It’s unusual that they should think that “the day of the Lord” had come, but we have the benefit not only of the full Pauline and N.T. corpus, but of a lot of extra biblical material and 2000 years of theology to help us. The Thess. Church had only, presumably 1 Thess., Paul’s teaching on his visit there, and may be some LXX (Septuagint) material.

Whichever way we look at it, the Thess., church is troubled - despite the good teaching in the 1 Thess., letter. Like the good Pastor that he is, Paul now turns to address their fears.

³Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴ He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

There are two signs of the “day”.

* **The rebellion.** (Gk: “apostasia.”) Jesus teaches about this in Mark 13, and Matthew expands it. (Matt 24/25) As the pressure comes on God’s people, with the approach of the day, many will become apostate. This has certainly proved to be case in many of the persecutions of the church. When the price moves from the realm of theory to the realm of practical experience, many are not prepared to pay the price. We have to see more here than just personal falling away. The enemy, the “spiritual power” of Ephesians 6, is at work behind the human scene, seeking to achieve their aims as laid down in Revelation 13.

* **The man of lawlessness is revealed - the man doomed to destruction.**

“The man of sin” (A.V.) is “revealed.” (Gk “apokalipsis”) If he is revealed, then he has already been active, is known, and is fundamentally under the control of God, who allows him to be revealed. All these things are very important.

Christianity is not dualist. We do not teach that there is a battle between two kingdoms of equal worth. There is only one kingdom – the kingdom of the Lord Jesus. He allows the lawless one to appear. It is probably better, theologically, not to identify the man as such, but to see him as the antichrist (v9) who is under the control of the Satan. He is a “son of perdition”, which means he is doomed to destruction, as was Judas Iscariot. (John 17:12)

What does he do? We should look again at Revelation 13, where the various beasts and the false prophet seek to control the world, imprison the human spirit, oppose everything godly, and ultimately to become God. Nothing new here, except that it will all become more overt.

Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? ⁶ And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. ⁷ For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming.

“Holding back - revealed at the proper time.” Here we suffer from not knowing exactly what the Thessalonian Christians knew! It could be the Roman Empire which is restraining the man, or the Jewish law, or an angelic being. The Father has been suggested, but “taken out of the way (v7) means this does not work. Basically, we do not really know what the restraining power is. When the restraining power is removed, then the lawless one will be revealed. Presumably the lawless one believes that this will mark his time, but it really marks his perdition. For the Lord will overthrow with the **“breath”** of his mouth, and destroy him

*** And destroy by the splendour of his coming.** “Destroy” is from the Greek meaning “make inoperative.” “Brightness” is “epiphania”. J.B.Philips translates “the radiance of the coming” and another translates “by the glory of his Presence.”

The point of Apostle's teaching is not detail, but encouragement. He is encouraging the Thess. Church to live in the victory of whatever happens, and then get on with their task.

⁹ **The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, ¹⁰ and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie ¹² and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.**

These verses are quite a challenge. At first, it is fairly easy. The lawless one is manipulated by Satan, who will use “signs and wonders” to “serve the lie.” The enemy loves to work through others, and here we see that he continues to do this as the Parousia approaches. His purpose is clear - to **“deceive those who are perishing.”** We have to be very clear here, or we will lose our way.

God desires that all should be saved, and does his utmost to bring all to eternal life. But some obstinately refuse to accept his gift. We see this in the attitude of Pharaoh in the Exodus narrative, and very clearly in Revelation. If people have a hard heart, refusing God’s gift, then the enemy keeps them blind, hastening their destruction. If we truly have freedom to accept or reject God, then the inevitable consequence is that some will perish. We have to hold on strongly to this teaching, both here and in the whole of the Bible. God is not vengeful, but those who shut their ears to his invitation bring destruction on themselves.

But what are we to make of **“For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion?”** This is perfectly biblical. There is one God, and so all things must emanate from him, even delusions which lead to destruction. (See 1 Kings 22:23; Romans 1) Ultimately, God uses Satan to punish.

Difficult isn’t it? The alternative is to allow Satan to be the originator of judgment, and this is not biblical. We have to be consistent in our theology, or we lose our foundation. Some things are difficult.

¹³ **But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.**

From the gloom to the sunshine! “eucharistein”- **“Give thanks!”** Paul says something similar to the Philippian Church – “Rejoice in the Lord always.” (Phil 4:4) Christians have been saved from all the works of the lawless one. We are **“beloved”** (agape), **“chosen”** (as Israel were chosen by God) **“made holy”** by the work of the Spirit in us. There’s more – called to share in all that is the Lord’s, especially the revelation of **his “glory”**, which is, in this context, the Parousia.

So – stand firm in the **“teachings.”** (Gk “paradosis”) The teachings are the tradition of teaching, beginning with Jesus, and the reflections and the developments in understanding handed on to generation after generation.

This should encourage us all to know “the teachings.” We live in an age here the slow and steady study of biblical truth by the people of God is at a low ebb. It takes time, and doesn’t deliver up its secrets without a lot of perspiration.

¹⁶ May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, ¹⁷ encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

* **“Encouragement”** is the Greek work “paraklesin” which has an emphasis not so much on “comfort” but of strengthening.

* **“Hope”** in the N.T. is something which is certain, as it is grounded in the divine will and undergirded by divine promise.

Thessalonians 3

¹ As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you. ² And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. ³ But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. ⁴ We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance.

We have seen Apostle Paul asking for prayer in 1 Thess., and he does so again here, praying for the spread of the Gospel, and for deliverance from **“wicked people.”** From the Greek construction, (a definite article and an aorist for the grammatical among us!) suggests a specific group - probably the Jews. There was a big struggle between Paul and the Jews, as we know from many sources.

God will protect, and Paul is confident that the Thessalonians will do as he commands. But will they? We have seen from 1 Thess., that there were stresses and strains in the Thess. Church, and we are about to see that again. But as always, the Apostle tries to be positive towards them - a trait which those in leadership today might do well to emulate.

The challenge is to **persevere**, (Gk "hupomone") a challenge which we have seen a number of times in both letters. "Patient waiting" (A.V.) doesn't really express the Greek well. Hupomone has been described like this – "the characteristic of a man who is unswerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith by the greatest trials and sufferings." I think that hits the mark - endurance is a positive and powerful position.

⁶ In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

A change of tone follows, and we can begin to see that although the Thess., church was an example to all of Asia, it had its problems. What a relief – no church is perfect! The tone is tough. "**Command**" has a military ring to it, and "**disruptive**" refers to a soldier who fails to keep in rank.

The Apostle outlines his way of life. He was not idle when he was with them; he worked hard, providing for his own needs, so that he might be a model to them as to how they should live. This isn't the first time in these two letters that the Apostle has had to address this issue. He expects faith to touch all of life, and he certainly expects faith to produce a hardworking and self-sufficient lifestyle. And he expects them to obey him. (v7 "ought = compelling necessity.)

For those who will not live in this way, he commands "**keep away.**" This Greek word ("stallesthai") refers to the furling of sails, and hence "withdraw." The saying "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" has no biblical background as such.

¹¹ We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. ¹²Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. ¹³ And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

It seems that the Apostle has specific people in mind. Hoping for the Parousia, they had stopped working, and were implanting their idleness into other members of the church. Apostle will have none of this. He is well aware that a little yeast affects the whole dough, and is quick to **“charge”** and **“urge”** them to settle down to work. He modifies “charge” with “urge” because he is a Pastor at heart. He doesn’t want to be too hard on them, and he knows that if they can comply with him, they and the church will be better for it. But he isn’t slow to stake his authority on the Lord **“I charge and urge you in the Lord Jesus.”** Wow - quite a challenge!

¹⁴ Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. ¹⁵ Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.

The Apostle suspects that his “charge and urge” might go unheeded. What should the church do then? **“Note them”**. This has the flavour of disapproval, and once noted, “don’t mix yourselves up with them” is a good reflection of the attitude Paul expects. It’s interesting to read this, in the light of our twenty first century unwillingness to exercise any discipline in our churches. The Apostle would be astonished at this attitude. Every family must have discipline, which occasionally must be exercised. But note the purpose of his discipline **“so that he might feel ashamed”** - in other words, repent and return to the family. We should be quick to encourage repentance, and slow to exercise judgment or exclusion. After all, he is not an **“enemy”** but a **“brother.”**

We are drawing to the end of 2 Thessalonians, and the Apostle has had to deal with issues - issues of a lack of understanding, and in chapter 3, issues within the Church itself. The joy of this letter, as with 1 Thess. is that we can almost see the people Paul is speaking to, and he allows us to see himself at work, encouraging, teaching and correcting, so that the church might grow stronger. We can learn a lot from his teaching, from his approach and mostly from his passionate heart for the work of God.

¹⁶ **Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.**

¹⁷ **I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.**

¹⁸ **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all**

For **“God of peace”**, see 1 Thess.1:1.

“I Paul..” Paul dictated his letters, but writes in his own hand, to authenticate this letter to his friend in Thessalonica. He finishes by offering them a shortened version of the **“Grace.”**