

2 Thessalonians Commentary

CHAPTER 1

We may at times feel ill-at-ease with the increasingly secular world around us. It is more than secular, non-Christian; it is anti-Christian - and that quite stridently. Paul and the Thessalonian Christians knew something of that feeling, too. The Roman Empire was a huge cult of Caesar-worship, and it was very hostile to faith in Christ. In addition, there was a Jewish community in Thessalonica who resisted this new "way" of faith in Jesus, Messiah (Christ) "so-called." So this fledgling church was caught between a rock and a hard place. Would this opposition stifle their zeal and stunt their growth? What kind of soil for the seed of the church is the ground of persecution? How do Christians handle adversity? Let's take a look at the ancient church in Thessalonica, and perhaps learn some things to help us in trials.

- 1) About 75 miles from Philippi was the town of Thessalonica. Paul had founded a church there on his second missionary journey, as recorded in Acts 17. There only briefly, chased away by persecution, the Apostle now writes his second letter to the church to fill in gaps and answer their questions. With him are Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy. He addresses the letter to the church, the ones "called out" of this world unto Christ. Their physical address is Thessalonica in Macedonia, and their spiritual location is "in God and Christ."
- 2) From the Father and the Son Paul wishes for them grace and peace. This normal greeting of his is not to be glossed over. These are weighty words, rich with meaning. Grace is God's unmerited favor to sinners and saints, and it is the fountain of all good things. Peace is not just the absence of conflict; it is a harmonized relationship with God ("peace with God" [Rom 5:1]) and with the circumstances of life ("the peace of God" [Phil 4:7]). It has been called "the crown of all blessings."
- 3) Paul, and those who were with him when he wrote, felt an obligation to thank God for these Thessalonian believers. This was fitting because of the supernatural growth of their faith in God. He uses two words for this increase, piling up terms for emphasis. This vertical virtue, faith in God, had a practical horizontal resultant evidence - their love for each other was also growing. True faith in God will always produce real love for other Christians.
- 4) Perseverance is another Christian virtue. The word means to "abide under," meaning to let a burden of difficulty be used of God to shape us without running away from it. These folks had put up with mistreatment and difficult tests, and this had helped their faith to grow. How wonderful that the missionary Apostle could use the Thessalonians as an example of endurance when attempting to encourage other suffering churches! Are you abiding, or running? How do you match up so far, dear Reader? Are you persevering, or are you yielding to the temptation to run?
- 5) By His grace, God fits us for heaven, makes us "worthy," if you please. Heaven is not a reward to be earned by the way we live or by the works we do; it is a gift of grace to be received by faith in Jesus Christ. To some it might seem unjust that God's children should suffer, but the reality is that temporary suffering will end, and eternal pleasures will abound. We suffer in part because we live in a hostile world; that is not unjust - it's just natural.
- 6), 7) What an opening statement - God is just! Father Abraham had asked God (Gen 18:25) "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" The answer is, "Yes, He certainly will!" Moses wrote in Deut 32:35, 36 that God will bring calamity and retribution upon the wicked, and that He will always vindicate His people. If we look at a single scene in this long play called life, we may question whether these things be true. Paul adds the element of timing to his declaration of this principle of justice - "... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven..." The justice goes like this: those who trouble God's people will receive trouble from God! And, God's people who suffer trouble will receive "rest" from Him, as well. This is relief from the affliction, the trouble from the believers' adversaries. Christ had troubles, as did Paul, and as will we who serve the Savior in the 21st century.
- 8), 9), 10) Paul points up 2 related serious crimes of mankind here: 1) not knowing God, & 2) not obeying Him. "How," you might ask, is not knowing God a crime?" The answer is pretty simple: when men do not know God, it is by their own choice. It is an act of the will to reject the knowledge of God. There is here a dual responsibility - 1st is that of a man to know God - to see Him in His creation and respond. Such response will lead to more revelation of God to man. 2nd is our responsibility to tell men of God. Rom 10:14 reminds that men cannot believe in Him of Whom they have not heard, and that they

cannot hear if we do not tell. What an awesome responsibility is ours! Disbelief of the gospel equates to disobedience of the gospel. God's good news must not be spurned - the consequences are calamitous! There can be no greater punishment than to be shut out from the presence of God for all eternity - not to see His face, never to experience His glory! "Everlasting destruction" is better translated "eternal ruin." Lostness cannot be reversed beyond the grave. "It is appointed unto man **once** to die, and after this the judgment!" Now is the time to trust Jesus - not later, a time you are not promised. O, dear friend, trust Him today Who died for your sins & rose again. He waits to save you now! God will be glorified in His people and marveled at by those who believe. What a privilege to participate in glorifying the eternal God of the universe. To be occupied with worshiping Him forever will be our highest joy.

- 11) Paul's prayer life must have been fatiguing. He seemed always to be praying for someone - "we constantly pray for you." When one responds to the gospel, he has answered a "call." That call carries with it a purpose and the power to accomplish that purpose. Paul's prayer was that the Thessalonian Christians would be worthy of the calling and enjoy God's power in becoming like Christ in this world. How goes it with you in that process?
- 12) One needs only look and listen awhile to see that the name of Jesus is not lifted up in this culture and in this world. Yet it must be glorified - so where? The answer is in His believers. When God's people obey Him & walk with Him, the world gets a glimpse of what God is like. This is the manifestation of God and Christ in this present age. We will one day be glorified with Him when He is manifestly glorified before all the world. What a day!

CHAPTER 2

- 1), 2) Paul often writes epistles to answer questions or address issues plaguing the churches. Someone had taught the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord had already come. The "day of the Lord" is that future time when God's justice will openly prevail. In the "yom Yahweh" evil will be judged (the Tribulation) and right will be rewarded (the Millennial Kingdom). Furthermore, they represented this teaching as having come from Paul! "Don't become unsettled or alarmed! It is not true!" Jesus used similar language on the Mt of Olives.
- 3) "Do not let anyone deceive you again, not once!" There are things that must happen before Christ's glorious return can happen. A distinguishable apostasy of the professing church must come about, and the revelation of Antichrist must also happen. The latter is clearly a tribulational event, and there will be an apostate "church" then, as well.
- 4) This greatest arch-fiend of human history, the Antichrist, will desecrate the Temple (there will be a tribulation-era Temple) by his presence there, claiming that he is himself very God! And the human race that rejected and rejects the true God in human flesh, Jesus, will embrace this Antichrist!
- 5) Paul's teaching in his brief stay in Thessalonica (3 Sabbath days) had included some prophetic themes, what we call today "eschatology." New believers can handle prophetic truth; at least Paul thought so! He asks them to recall some of that and let it calm their troubled souls.
- 6) Satan would love to spring his "Man of lawlessness" on the world and start the Tribulational catastrophes ahead of God's planned time. But God is holding him back through the restraining work of the Holy Spirit so that God's schedule is kept. Note that when we want to "run ahead of God," to have or do things before their proper time, we are working like Satan.
- 7) The old version read "the mystery of iniquity." A Biblical "**mystery**" has to do with truth that was previously unrevealed, not something hard to understand, "mysterious." "Lawlessness" is certainly a spirit of this present age, but it will be personified as never before in the "man of lawlessness," as Paul described Antichrist in 2:3. Lawlessness is already at work, even *before* this wicked one comes, though not at full scale *until* he comes. The Holy Spirit is now restraining sin, but (at the Rapture) that ministry will end, and sin will be completely without restraint.
- 8) The revelation of the "lawless one," Antichrist, the Beast, man of lawlessness, the idol shepherd, awaits the removal of the Spirit's restraining power. The word "revealed" is often used of Christ's "unveiling." It gives us our word "Apocalypse." Antichrist has his unveiling, too. But he ends in destruction - and that at the hands of Jesus (or should I say "His breath") when He comes, which Paul describes with 2

words, **appearance** & **presence**.

- 9), 10) Paul uses one of those two words here for Antichrist's **presence**. He is a copy, a counterfeit of things that are Christ's. God authenticated Christ as Messiah by "miracles, wonders, & signs" (Acts 2:22). The lawless one is energized by Satan to do the same things, making himself out as a messiah, but clearly a counterfeit one, even as his "credentials" are counterfeit (the word Paul uses here gives us our word "pseudo"). See Dan 8:25 & Rev 13:13,14 for similar statements about miracles and deception connected to the Antichrist and his false prophet. How sad that the deception of the ones "perishing," headed to a Christless eternity, contributed to that path. So the question comes, "Why do men perish?" Paul here says it is because they "did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved." This agrees with Christ's words in John 3, when He said of him who does not believe that he "stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."
- 11), 12) Here are thoughts that have generated much debate. John MacArthur states here that "Those who continually choose falsehood will be inextricably caught by it." Paul wrote (Rom 1) that when men chose not to acknowledge God, "He gave them over to a depraved mind..." If men choose to follow a lie, God will not force Himself upon them. He will even help them along their chosen path. Thus, He sends a powerful delusion that helps men believe the lie they have chosen over God's truth. The false prophet of Rev 13 could not succeed in deceiving men if God did not allow it. Man's wrong is a two-edged sword. It consists of "not believing the truth" and "delighting in wickedness." God always does right & is perfectly just to allow men to suffer the end of the path they choose. Their condemnation is their responsibility. God sent His Son to save them, and they chose sin over salvation. None who make such choices will escape condemnation. On the contrary, they "all will be condemned."
- 13) Peter said that his brother Paul wrote some things "hard to understand." Was any harder than this? Permanently loved by God, these saints were the objects of God's election and the subjects of faith in Christ. Some will argue that they believed because they were chosen; others, that they were chosen because they believed. May I say that I do not know how God's sovereignty and man's responsibility work together, but I know both are true!
- 14) It was through the good news about Jesus that God called them to this faith, this salvation, this sanctification. God has told us that when Jesus comes, we shall be like Him (1 John 3:2). He is glorified, and so shall we be. But there is a present glory that we share, as well. To know Him is a life of glory - enjoying the good things that are provided for each believer. These things outweigh any minor trouble we may experience in this present age.
- 15) Paul had taught these Christians for about three weeks while he was there. Now he has written two letters to them with instructions concerning faith and practice. Knowing that the enemy would tempt them to abandon the faith, to waver, he commands them to stand firm in their faith, and to hold tightly to all that he has taught them.
- 16), 17) This is a rare occasion when Jesus is mentioned **before** God, but it goes to point up their equality. They both loved us, a sacrificial laying down of something valuable for the benefit of the one loved. Jesus laid down His life; the Father laid down His beloved Son. How great **was** and **is** their love for us! (The Spirit shares in this love, also, Rom 15:30). By Their grace They imparted to us a consolation that reaches into eternity, and a hope that goes right along with it. It seems that the believers in Thessalonica were discouraged and wavering. It was Paul's desire and prayer that God would encourage their hearts and strengthen them. The result of this would be that their words and deeds would have a beautiful quality about them. It would do us good to examine our words and deeds of the last days; have they had the quality of beauty? Or have we acted in a way displeasing to our God?

CHAPTER 3

- 1), 2) Paul had unceasingly prayed for the Thessalonians; now he asks that they pray for him. While this would most certainly help Paul, he knew that the praying would be good for them, as well. The first specific prayer request was that God's Word might spread abundantly; what a great desire this is! If it spread, it would be honored, just as it was through the folks to whom he wrote. He asked a 2nd thing, and that was more personal. He wished that his missionary team might be delivered from men he characterized as evil and "out of place." The thief on the cross used this word in the negative to

describe Jesus. He never did anything that was “out of place.”

- 3) Men are faithless; God is faithful. When we are saved by God’s grace, we have the potential for the Lord to change us, making us more like Him. As He strengthens us, He also builds a wall of protection around us - the term is a military one, a phalanx. God is faithful to guard us from the destructive influences of the Evil One, Satan.
- 4) What a compliment Paul pays the Thessalonian believers. As the one who had introduced many of them to Christ, He was not one bit worried about their spiritual future. He had absolute confidence that God was presently enabling and would keep on enabling them to obey God’s commands. Confidence in God is always well-placed.
- 5) The word rendered “direct” is used 3 times in the Greek New Testament. In Luke 1:79, Zacharias said his son (John the Baptist) would “guide” men in the way of peace. In 1 Th 3:11 Paul asked God to “direct” his way to return to Thessalonica. Here he prays for God to “direct” their hearts into God’s love (agape) and Christ’s endurance (meaning to bear up under the load, not run away from it).
- 6) These next several verses deal with a matter related to Christ’s return. It seems that some were using anticipation of the coming of Christ as an excuse to abandon daily occupation. Paul commands right-thinking believers not even to associate with those men. This was certainly NOT the teaching of Paul regarding Christ’s return!
- 7), 8) In my Bible college days I encountered men who chose not to be gainfully employed, presumably under the guise of expecting “God to supply their needs.” People would sometimes leave groceries on their porch, concerned for their children. Here were men in Thessalonica doing a similar thing. They were not following either the **teaching** or the **example** of the apostle. If Paul were writing this today, he might say, “I was not idle, and I was not a *schnorrer*” (*Yiddish* - “a scrounger who takes advantage of the generosity of others”). His sterling example included “burning the candle at both ends” so he would not burden anyone. These men should do the same!
- 9) Lest men misunderstand this and think that people giving their lives to ministry should have to “moonlight” to pay the bills, he quickly adds that his goal was to be a model for believers. He clearly had a right to receive help from those to whom he ministered. He wrote elsewhere, “They that preach the gospel should live of the gospel.”
- 10) In our ministry at the Rescue Mission, we often encounter people who are eager to work, and they take a job as soon as one becomes available. Others, however, have an “entitlement” mentality, thinking that someone owes them a living, to whom we do not hesitate to quote this text, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”
- 11), 12) Word got around in the ancient world, even without FaceBook and Twitter. It was not always a good word, like this news that instead of being busy at work, some were being “busybodies.” The idea in the word is one who is meddlesome, occupied with the affairs of others, not having any affairs of their own to which to attend. To these people comes this urging command, “get quiet and get to work.” Paul adds solemnity to the instruction by giving it “in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Because they believe in Him, they needed to stop depending on the good graces of kind people and start getting their daily nourishment the old-fashioned way - “earn it!” To have compassion on hungry people is good - to enable able-bodied people to eat without working is not good at all.
- 13) To the Galatian churches Paul would write (6:9), “*Let us not become weary in doing good...*” We assume that most of the Thessalonian believers were doing well. For them Paul also has a word, “Keep it up!” Don’t be tempted to follow the example of human leeches who shirk responsibility to be idle. “*Let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need*” (Eph 4:28).
- 14) “Church discipline,” as we sometimes call how we deal with members of the body who step outside what is right, can be in several steps. A simple beginning is what my old professor called the “cold-shoulder” treatment. Verse 6 and this one each call for a “fellowship boycott” of the unruly believers. This is an act of kindness, intended to bring a person to realize their wrong; the larger process is always designed to recover, not to hurt.

- 15) The instruction to observe the sinning brother's behavior and break off fellowship is moderated here. He is to be "warned, admonished," but not treated as a hostile. Again, the goal is repentance and recovery. How can a saint not respond well to such godly, Spirit-led gentleness? I have seen this in action and glorified God for it!
- 16), 17), 18) The farewell of the epistle calls to mind the opening greeting in its wishes for grace and peace. A troubled congregation needs peace from the Lord of peace. And Paul wishes it to be so. Since the Bible clearly teaches that God is always with us, there is a bit of mystery to the statement "The Lord be with you all." I think the cloud lifts from this when we understand that God faces us at all times, and we face Him when we walk in obedience to His Word and will. Otherwise, it is we who turn from Him, breaking fellowship but not relationship. The Apostle often had an amanuensis, a secretary, a scribe to actually receive dictation from him in the writing of these letters. That may have been because of medical issues with his eyes; it may just have been a normal practice for him. At times, he would take the pen in hand and sign the letter himself, affirming it as authentically from him. Finally, he transitions from the earlier mention of "peace" to a closing wish for "grace" to be their portion. Of course the source of grace is the same as that of peace; it comes from heaven, from deity. And so it is here.