

Notes on 2 Thessalonians

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Dr. Thomas L. Constable

Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This epistle contains evidence that Paul had recently heard news about current conditions in the Thessalonian church. Probably most of this information came to him from the person who had carried 1 Thessalonians to its recipients, and who had returned to Paul at Corinth. Perhaps other people as well, who had news of the church, had informed Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Some of the news was good. The majority of the Thessalonians were continuing to grow and to remain faithful to Christ, in spite of persecution. Unfortunately some of the news was bad. False teaching concerning the day of the Lord had entered the church, causing confusion, and was leading some of the Christians to quit their jobs in expectation of the Lord's imminent return.

In view of these reports, Paul evidently felt constrained to write this epistle. He commended his children in the faith for their growth and faithfulness, corrected the doctrinal error about the day of the Lord, and warned the idle to get back to work.

"It is primarily a letter of correction—correction concerning persecution (chapter 1), concerning prophecy (chapter 2), and concerning practice (chapter 3)."¹

Almost all conservative scholars believe that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians from Corinth. The basis for this conclusion is that Paul, Silas, and Timothy were present together in Corinth (Acts 18:5). The New Testament does not refer to them being together from then on, though they may have been. Paul evidently wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth, too. The topics he treated in the second epistle seem to grow out of situations he alluded to in the first epistle. They reflect a very similar situation in the Thessalonian church. Corinth, therefore, seems the probable site of composition of 2 Thessalonians.

For the above reasons, it appears that Paul composed 2 Thessalonians quite soon after 1 Thessalonians, perhaps within 12 months.² This would place the date of composition in the early A.D. 50s, perhaps A.D. 51, and would make this the third of Paul's canonical

¹Charles C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 87.

²George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. xxxix.

writings, assuming Galatians was his first. A few scholars argued that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians before 1 Thessalonians.³ But this view has not found wide acceptance.⁴

"The external evidence for the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians is stronger than for 1 Thessalonians."⁵

PURPOSE

Three purposes are evident from the contents of the epistle. Paul wrote to encourage the Thessalonian believers to continue to persevere in the face of continuing persecution (1:3-10). He also wanted to clarify the events—and their chronological order—preceding the day of the Lord, in order to dispel false teaching (2:1-12). Finally, he instructed the church how to deal with lazy Christians in their midst (3:6-15).

OUTLINE⁶

- I. Salutation 1:1-2
- II. Commendation for past progress 1:3-12
 - A. Thanksgiving for growth 1:3-4
 - B. Encouragement to persevere 1:5-10
 - C. Prayer for success 1:11-12
- III. Correction of present error 2:1-12
 - A. The beginning of the day of the Lord 2:1-5
 - B. The mystery of lawlessness 2:6-12
- IV. Thanksgiving and prayer 2:13-17
 - A. Thanksgiving for calling 2:13-15
 - B. Prayer for strength 2:16-17
- V. Exhortations for future growth 3:1-15
 - A. Reciprocal prayer 3:1-5
 1. Prayer for the missionaries 3:1-2
 2. Prayer for the Thessalonians 3:3-5
 - B. Church discipline 3:6-15
 1. General principles respecting disorderly conduct 3:6-10
 2. Specific instructions concerning the idle 3:11-13
 3. Further discipline for the unrepentant 3:14-15
- VI. Conclusion 3:16-18

³E.g., T. W. Manson, "St. Paul in Greece: The Letters to the Thessalonians," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 35 (1952-53):438-46; and Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, pp. 37-45.

⁴See Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 543-44; and Milligan, p. xxxix.

⁵Robert L. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 302.

⁶For an outline based on rhetorical analysis, see Wanamaker, p. 51.

MESSAGE

We could contrast 1 and 2 Thessalonians by saying that Paul wrote the first epistle primarily to comfort the Thessalonians, whereas he wrote the second epistle primarily to correct them.

Paul had said some things in his first epistle from which his readers drew a false conclusion. He had said that Christ would return, and that His return could be very soon (1 Thess. 4:15-18). He also said that the day of the Lord would come as a thief in the night: unexpectedly (1 Thess. 5:2).

In view of what Paul had taught the Thessalonians about "the day of the Lord" when he was with them (2 Thess. 2:5), they wondered if that "day" had already begun. They wondered if they were in the Tribulation, and if the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. Teaching from several other sources had confirmed their suspicions (2 Thess. 2:2), and intensified their questions about Paul's statements, regarding future events, that he had written in 1 Thessalonians.

The apostle wrote 2 Thessalonians to correct these erroneous ideas. The "return of Christ," about which Paul had written, was not His Second Coming, but the Rapture. While "the day of the Lord" would arrive unexpectedly, it would be unexpected only by unbelievers. Several predicted events would precede its commencement.

The central message of this epistle is the truth about the day of the Lord.

Paul made an important distinction in this epistle about future events. In 1 Thessalonians, he had taught that the Lord's return *could* take place "very soon," and that the day of the Lord *would* come as a "thief in the night." Consequently, he urged his readers to wait expectantly for the Lord (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 5:2). In 2 Thessalonians, he wrote that the day of the Lord cannot begin immediately. Therefore his readers should continue their work (2 Thess. 2). These statements may seem contradictory, but they are not. Paul distinguished these two truths in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2. The distinction is between "our gathering together to Him" (v. 1) and "the day of the Lord" (v. 2). He wrote verses 1-12 to show the difference between the first event and the second period.

Paul also gave definite new revelation about the day of the Lord.

First, he said that presently "the mystery of lawlessness is at work" (2:7a). Paul did not say the mystery of "sin" or of evil, but of "lawlessness." He did so because "lawlessness" (rebellion against divine law) is the root trouble with human life individually, socially, nationally, and in every other sphere of life. The "mystery" of lawlessness is the new revelation he expounded here, concerning the course of lawlessness in the world and history, in space and time.

Second, he revealed that in the future God will remove what is presently restraining lawlessness (2:7b). "The restrainer" probably refers to the church, which is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Lawlessness produces *corruption*, but the church is the "salt of the earth," and "salt" prevents the spread of corruption. Lawlessness also produces *darkness*, but the

church is the "light of the world," and "light" dispels darkness. Lawlessness is presently working, but what keeps it from running wild is the Holy Spirit's ministry through Christian men and women. The Holy Spirit will not leave the earth when the Rapture occurs, since He is *always* omnipresent. But His ministry of restraining lawlessness through Christians in the church will cease, because the people whom He presently indwells will leave the earth.

Third, Paul announced that in the future there will also be a crisis: the "man of lawlessness" will be revealed (2:8a). When will God withdraw the Spirit's present restraining ministry from the world? He will do so when He withdraws the church from the world. When will He withdraw the church from the world? He will do so at "our gathering together to Him" (v. 1, i.e., the Rapture).⁷ After that, the human leader of lawlessness will appear. He will be entirely godless, but he will be such a remarkable character that he will convince most people that he is divine. This man is the Antichrist.

Finally, Paul taught that after this crisis, Jesus Christ will return to the earth to set up His kingdom (2:8b). Jesus will come at the end of the Tribulation, when the "man of lawlessness" is the prominent character on the stage of history. However, when Christ comes, He will destroy this Antichrist and curtail lawlessness (cf. Ps. 2).

In view of this revelation, Paul called on his readers to do two things:

First, he called on them to be *courageous*. He did not want them to be mentally upset (2:2), but comforted and established (2:17). A clear understanding of the course of future events and the time of the Lord's return is essential for the mental and spiritual encouragement and stability of Christians. We need this to be courageous in the face of all the *lawlessness* we encounter in the world.

Second, Paul called his readers to *responsible conduct*. He instructed them to go on with life, to wait but also to work. Christians must behave responsibly by providing for their own needs. The hope of Christ's imminent return at the Rapture is no excuse for irresponsibility. Paul was not just urging activity (witnessing, praying, etc.) but, specifically: earning a living.

The gravest danger we face in our world today is not socialism, or communism, or fascism, or terrorism—but *lawlessness*, specifically: refusal to submit to God's laws. The person who lives this way is *anti-Christ*. We need to recognize this danger for what it is, and combat it, by being "salt" and "light" in the world. However, we should also remember that Christ will eventually be victorious. This will keep us from becoming frantic and losing our stability.

Each of us also needs to make sure that lawlessness does not characterize our personal lives. We must be submissive to divine rule if we would be consistent and confident Christians.⁸

⁷See my comments on 2:7.

⁸Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:27-45.

Exposition

I. SALUTATION 1:1-2

The Apostle Paul opened this epistle by identifying himself and his companions to the recipients. He also wished God's "grace" and "peace" for them, to introduce himself, and to express his continuing good will toward his children in the faith.

Verses 1 and 2 are almost identical to 1 Thessalonians 1:1. One change is that Paul called God "our" Father here rather than "the" Father.

The benediction (v. 2) is fuller than the one in 1 Thessalonians 1:1. Paul mentioned both "grace" (God's unmerited favor and divine enablement) and "peace" (the cessation of hostility and the fullness of divine blessing) again, but he identified their Source here. Both blessings come from "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He again asserted the deity of Christ, and he balanced the fatherhood of God with Christ's Lordship over the church and the believer.

II. COMMENDATION FOR PAST PROGRESS 1:3-12

Paul thanked God for the spiritual growth of his readers, encouraged them to persevere in their trials, and assured them of his prayers for them. He did so in order to motivate them to continue to endure hardship, and thereby develop in their faith (cf. James 1:2-4).

"Just as 1 Th. begins with a thanksgiving which slides over with no real break into a description of how the readers became Christians, so too in this letter the opening expression of thanks comes to a climax in the thought of the readers' steadfastness in enduring persecution and then slides over into a comment on the situation which is meant to encourage them to continue to hold to their Christian beliefs."⁹

A. THANKSGIVING FOR GROWTH 1:3-4

1:3 In his earlier epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul prayed for them to grow in faith (1 Thess. 4:10) and to increase in love (1 Thess. 3:12). He now rejoiced that they were doing both of these things (v. 3). This is one clue that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians after 1 Thessalonians. God had answered his prayer. Paul began each of his epistles, except Galatians, with thanksgiving for the spiritual progress of his readers. The word translated "greatly enlarged," which Paul used to describe their "faith," occurs only here in the New Testament, and means "grown exceedingly," not just at a normal rate. The Thessalonians' growth had been unusual. They were a model congregation in this respect. In the Greek text, verses 3-10 are one sentence.

⁹I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 169.

"We ought to give thanks" means "We must give thanks" (cf. 2:13). Paul was not saying he knew he should give thanks but did not, but rather that he felt obligated to give thanks and did so.

"Clearly in this entire passage . . . the writers reveal themselves as men who are elated . . . rather than reluctant, exuberant rather than hesitant."¹⁰

"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. . . . Instead of criticizing, he is eager to commend."¹¹

1:4 No wonder Paul said he recommended the Thessalonians to other churches as an example to follow! This growth had come in the midst of *persecution*, and this made it even more commendable. "Faith" (Gr. *pistis*) usually refers to faith in someone or something, but often it means "faithfulness" (e.g., Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22; Titus 2:10). It probably has the latter meaning here. His readers were enduring hostile actions ("persecutions") as well as other painful experiences ("afflictions") at the hands of both Jews and Gentiles because of their Christian faith (cf. 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; Acts 17:5-9).

"The former is a special term for external persecutions inflicted by the enemies of the Gospel; the latter is more general, and denotes tribulation of any kind."¹²

B. ENCOURAGEMENT TO PERSEVERE 1:5-10

These verses explain what God's future righteous judgment is.

1:5 Paul explained that "suffering" for Christ demonstrates the believer's worthiness to participate in God's "kingdom" (cf. Luke 20:35).¹³ A hot fire burning under gold ore separates the gold from the dross, and reveals the "gold" to be what it actually is. In the same way, the fire of trials can separate the Christian from the unsaved, and show him to be what he really is. He is what he is by God's grace. It is God's grace that qualifies a person for millennial service and heaven, not suffering. Suffering, if properly responded to, only exposes the quality of the person whom God's grace is transforming.

¹⁰William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of I and II Thessalonians*, p. 154.

¹¹D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 280.

¹²J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of Paul*, p. 99.

¹³See René A. López, "A Study of Pauline Passages on Inheriting the Kingdom," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:672 (October-December 2011):458-59.

Paul taught elsewhere that God will reward Christians, who endure the temptation to abandon their commitment to Jesus Christ, with the privilege of reigning with Christ in His millennial kingdom (2 Tim. 2:12). Whereas all Christians will return to earth with Christ at His Second Coming, and enter His kingdom, only those who follow Him faithfully in this life will reign with Him.¹⁴

"Jesus encouraged his disciples to rejoice when they were persecuted for his sake because, he said, 'your reward is great in heaven' (Matt 5:11, 12 par. Luke 6:22, 23). This note recurs again and again throughout the NT."¹⁵

1:6-8 In the future, God in His justice would punish ("repay with affliction") the Thessalonians' persecutors, and "give rest (relief)" to his readers, as well as to all Christians who suffer affliction for the gospel. This will take place when Jesus Christ returns to the earth in judgment. This is not a reference to the Rapture. The judgments described in the following verses (vv. 9-10) will not take place then. It is a reference to Christ's (Second) Coming at the end of the Tribulation (cf. Ps. 2:1-9; Matt. 25:31). Then Christ will appear "in flaming fire," and punish unbelievers, "dealing out retribution" to "those who do not know God" (cf. Rom. 1:18-32; Jer. 10:25; Ps. 79:6; Isa. 66:15), and to "those who do not obey the gospel" (cf. John 3:36). The former group may be Gentiles, and the latter, Jews.¹⁶ However, this is probably a case of synonymous parallelism in which both descriptions refer to both Jews and Gentiles.¹⁷ Christ will put them to death, and will not allow them to enter the Millennium (cf. Ps. 2; Ezek. 20:33-38; Joel 3:1-2, 12; Zeph. 3:8; Zech. 14:1-19; Matt. 25:31-46).¹⁸

". . . the revelation of Christ will in itself inflict the severest punishment on the wicked, by opening their eyes to what they have lost."¹⁹

"This is the only passage in which Paul welcomes God's vengeance on the enemies of the church as an element in the recompense of Christians."²⁰

¹⁴See Zane C. Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, pp. 69-77.

¹⁵F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 154.

¹⁶Thomas, p. 313; James E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 233; Marshall, pp. 177-78.

¹⁷Wanamaker, p. 227.

¹⁸For further information concerning the judgments on Israel and the Gentiles at the Second Coming, see John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pp. 276-95.

¹⁹Lightfoot, p. 102.

²⁰James Moffatt, "The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 4:45.

Note the contrasts between the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4 and the Second Coming in 2 Thessalonians 1.²¹

1 Thessalonians 4	2 Thessalonians 1
Christ returns in the air.	Christ returns to the earth.
He comes secretly for the church.	He comes openly with the church.
Believers escape the Tribulation.	Unbelievers experience tribulation and judgment.
The Rapture occurs at an undisclosed time.	The Second Coming occurs at the end of the Tribulation in the day of the Lord.

1:9 These non-Christians will suffer, literally "pay a penalty," of "eternal destruction." Their fate is eternal separation from the person of Christ ("presence of the Lord") and from the manifestation of His "glory" (i.e., eternal death; cf. Isa. 2:10, 19, 21). This is Paul's most explicit reference to the eternal duration of unbelievers' judgment in all his writings. It is both ironic and talionic, that those who reject Christ will, in turn, experience God's rejection.

"*Olethros* ('destruction') does not refer to annihilation, which cannot be 'everlasting' (Hendriksen, p. 160). The word in LXX and NT usages never has this meaning but rather turns on the thought of separation from God and loss of everything worthwhile in life . . ." ²²

"The phrase *everlasting destruction* occurs only here in the New Testament and is everything opposite from eternal life." ²³

"Heaven is primarily the presence of God. Hell is the loss of that presence." ²⁴

1:10 When Christ returns to earth, His "saints" will accompany Him (cf. 1 Thess. 3:13). Paul referred here specifically to Christians (i.e., believers of the Church Age who previously experienced the Rapture), not all believers. Old Testament saints will not experience resurrection until the

²¹Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, p. 131.

²²Thomas, p. 313. Cf. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "*olethros*," by J. Schneider, 5 (1967):169; Leon Morris *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 205; D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, p. 213; Wanamaker, p. 229; Marshall, pp. 178-79; and Robert A. Peterson, "Does the Bible Teach Annihilationism?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:621 (January-March 1999):13-27.

²³Ryrie, p. 95.

²⁴E. J. Bicknell, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 70.

Second Coming (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2). However, one writer argued that the "saints" are Old Testament believers, and that "all who have believed" are Church Age believers.²⁵ Jesus Christ's Second Coming will be a day of great glory and vindication for Him.

"The idea is that the glory of that day will far surpass anything of which we can have any idea before we behold it, and when we do behold it we shall be lost in amazement."²⁶

Paul's readers would participate in this day because they had "believed" Paul's "testimony" when he had preached the gospel among them. The Thessalonians will reflect Christ's glory, as will all other believers who will accompany Him ("when He comes to be glorified in His saints") at His Second Coming (i.e., all Christians).

"Just as Paul is elusive about the nature of the vengeance to be inflicted by the Lord Jesus, he is also elusive about the nature of the reward to be bestowed."²⁷

"That day" is a clear reference to "the day of the Lord" (cf. Isa. 2:11, 17). It will include Jesus Christ's return to the earth at His Second Coming (cf. Mark 13:32; 14:25; Luke 21:34; 2 Tim. 1:12, 18; 4:8).²⁸ Then He will be glorified "in the presence of" His saints (the locative use of the Greek preposition *en*).²⁹ By using the Greek preposition *en*, Paul could have meant that Christ will be glorified both "among" them and "in" them.

At first reading, it may appear that verses 5-10 offer hope that God would judge the Thessalonians' persecutors very soon, and that the Thessalonian Christians would find "relief" (v. 7) in the Rapture. However, the return of Christ in "fire" (v. 7), dealing out punishment (vv. 8-9) when He comes "with His saints" (v. 10), must refer to the Second Coming. Thus it appears in this section as though the Second Coming follows the Rapture immediately. This is what posttribulationists believe. It is also what amillennialists and postmillennialists believe.³⁰ However, the seven-year Tribulation will first precede the Second Coming, as posttribulationists agree. Paul proceeded to explain that the Thessalonians were not in the Tribulation (2:1-12). Only if they were already in the Tribulation could the hope of relief by a posttribulation Rapture have been a comfort to them. Consequently, it seems that in 1:5-10, Paul was seeking to comfort his

²⁵Bruce A. Baker, "The Two Peoples of God in 2 Thessalonians 1:10," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 13 (April 2009):5-40.

²⁶Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 120.

²⁷Wanamaker, p. 230.

²⁸Thomas, p. 314. Cf. Milligan, p. 92.

²⁹Wanamaker, pp. 230-31.

³⁰See Vern S. Poythress, "2 Thessalonians 1 Supports Amillennialism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:4 (December 1994):529-38.

readers by assuring them that *ultimately* they would experience relief by entering rest in the Millennium—following Christ's Second Coming. *Ultimately* God would punish their persecutors at the Great White Throne judgment, at the end of the Millennium (Rev. 20:11-15).

Thomas, a pretribulationist, understood the revelation of Jesus Christ, spoken of in verses 5-10, to be a general one that embraces both the Rapture and the Second Coming.

"Many have chosen to limit *apokalypsei* ('revelation,' 'appearance') to a single event, identifying it with Christ's return to earth at the close of the tribulation. The role of 'his powerful angels' in the revelation favors this understanding in the light of Matthew 24:30, 31; 25:31. It is more persuasive, however, to explain *apokalypsei* as a complex of events, including various phases of end-time happenings. The present context associates the word with Christ's coming for his own as well as his coming to deal with opponents. Since the primary thrust of vv. 5-10 is to encourage suffering Christians, the meaning of *apokalypsei* for them should receive the emphasis. God's dealings with the rest of the world are included only to enhance the 'relief' experienced by believers at the righteous judgment of God."³¹

It seems to me, as I have tried to explain above, that the references to what will happen at this appearing describe the Second Coming exclusively. Thomas admitted that the *full* "enjoyment" (worldwide appreciation and experiencing) of the future *glory* of Christ's coming—and only His Second Coming will be characterized by universally observed *glory*—is the leading idea of this chapter.³²

C. PRAYER FOR SUCCESS 1:11-12

Paul and his companions "always" prayed that the Thessalonians would continue to experience purification through their trials, rather than experience apostasy.³³ They also prayed that God would note and approve their worth ("count you worthy of your calling"). It may be *final* acceptance that the apostle had in mind here: that God would count them worthy to be called to the kingdom of His glory.³⁴ On the other hand, Paul may have meant that God would count them worthy of the calling that they had received to become His children.

"God counts men worthy as they consent to and endeavor to do that which He works in them."³⁵

³¹Thomas, p. 312.

³²Ibid., p. 315. Cf. Lightfoot, p. 105.

³³See my comments on 2:3-4

³⁴Lightfoot, p. 105.

³⁵Hiebert, p. 296.

The apostle also asked that God would, by His "power," bring to full expression every good purpose ("fulfill every desire for goodness") of his readers to glorify God, and every act motivated by their faith in Him ("the work of faith"). The ultimate goal was the glory of the Lord Jesus manifested through the Thessalonian believers ("the name of our Lord Jesus . . . glorified in you, and you in Him").

"The 'name' in Biblical times stood for the whole personality and was an expression of the personality."³⁶

This is the first of five prayers for the Thessalonians contained in this short letter (cf. 2:16-17; 3:5, 16, 18).

"The duties of a preacher or evangelist do not cease with the utterance of his message."³⁷

". . . Christlike behavior is more important than words of praise in the glorifying of the Lord. For praise from a life transformed by the power of the Spirit rings true and sweet, but godless living makes a mockery of praise."³⁸

"Here strict syntax requires, since there is only one article with *theou* [God] and *kurios* [lord] that one person be meant, Jesus Christ, as is certainly true in Titus 2:13; II Peter 1:1 . . . This otherwise conclusive syntactical argument . . . is weakened a bit by the fact that *Kurios* is often employed as a proper name without the article, a thing not true of *soter* [savior] in Titus 2:13 and II Peter 1:1. So in Eph. 5:5 *en tei basileiai tou Christou kai theou* the natural meaning is *in the Kingdom of Christ and God* regarded as one, but here again *theos*, like *Kurios*, often occurs as a proper name without the article. So it has to be admitted that here Paul may mean 'according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ,' though he may also mean 'according to the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ.'"³⁹

This section of verses (1:3-12) gives us great insight into God's reasons for allowing His saints to undergo affliction for their faith (cf. James 1). Persecution can be a great blessing from God, and can bring great glory to our Lord Jesus Christ, both now and in the future.

III. CORRECTION OF PRESENT ERROR 2:1-12

Paul next dealt with a doctrinal error that had come into the Thessalonian church, in order to correct this error and to stabilize the church.

³⁶Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 122.

³⁷Moffatt, 4:46.

³⁸Martin, p. 219.

³⁹A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:46.

Verses 1-12 contain truth about the end times revealed nowhere else in Scripture, as well as some familiar truth. This section is key to understanding future events, and it is central to the argument of this epistle.

"There are few passages in the N.T. for which more varied interpretations have been proposed than for 2 Thess. ii. 1—12."⁴⁰

A. THE BEGINNING OF THE DAY OF THE LORD 2:1-5

2:1-2 Paul introduced his teaching by urging his readers "not [to] be quickly (or easily) shaken" from their adherence to the truth he had taught them by what they were hearing from others. The issue centered on Paul's instructions concerning the Rapture (v. 1, cf. 1 Thess. 4:13-18). Other teachers were telling the Thessalonians that "the day of the Lord" had already begun ("has come"; v. 2). This seemed to be a distinct possibility to them, since Scripture describes that day as a time of tribulation as well as blessing. The Thessalonians were experiencing intense persecution, or *tribulation*, for their faith.

"False starts have been a common phenomenon among movements predicting the imminent end of the age as people's expectations exceed their patience."⁴¹

Many people throughout church history have confused the teaching of the apostles, that Christ *could* come at any moment (for believers at the Rapture), with the unbiblical idea that He *would* come soon. The first, correct view, is the doctrine of imminence, but the second, incorrect view, involves date setting.

The false message seems to have gained a hearing, also, because it came from several different sources. Paul referred to three sources: alleged prophetic revelation, the recent teaching of other recognized authorities, and a letter Paul had supposedly written that had arrived in Thessalonica (cf. 3:17). If "the day of the Lord" (starting with the Tribulation) had begun, how could Paul teach that the Lord's return for His own would precede that "day" (1 Thess. 1:10; 4:15-18; 5:9)? Note that Paul had taught them a pretribulation Rapture.⁴²

"The supposed doctrinal difficulty lies in the failure to distinguish between *parousia* [appearing] and the day of the Lord. The advocates of the false teaching at Thessalonica conceived that the day of the Lord was not

⁴⁰Milligan, p. 166. See his note "On the interpretation of 2 Thess. ii. 1—12," pp. 166-73.

⁴¹Wanamaker, p. 238.

⁴²See Thomas R. Edgar, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 207-11; and David A. Dean, "Does 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 Exclude the Pretribulation Rapture?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:670 (April-June 2011);196-216.

merely 'at hand,' which was true (Ro 13:12), but actually 'present,' which Paul denied. Such a view denied the believer the hope of the imminent rapture."⁴³

The subject of verses 1-12 is "the day of the Lord" (v. 2). This day, as the Old Testament and the New Testament refer to it, includes the Tribulation, the Second Coming, the Millennium, and the Great White Throne judgment (cf. Ps. 2:9; Isa. 11:1-12; 13; Joel 2; Amos 5:18; Zeph. 3:14-20; et al.).⁴⁴

Some premillenarians include the Rapture ("our gathering together to Him," v. 1) in the day of the Lord.⁴⁵ But others exclude it.⁴⁶ Those who include it point to the Rapture as the beginning of God's direct intervention in human history again. They also stress that the *parousia* ("coming" or "appearing") refers in Scripture to the Lord's coming and to events that follow the Lord's coming. Those who exclude it do so for two reasons. The Rapture is a church event, whereas "the day of the Lord" is an Israel event, and the beginning of that day resumes the chronology of Daniel's seventy weeks. The seventieth week begins when the Antichrist signs a covenant with Israel, allowing the Jews to return to their land (Dan. 9:27). I favor the second view. While the term *parousia* is broad and refers to the Rapture and to many events that follow it, the term "the day of the Lord" seems more narrowly defined in Scripture and nowhere specifically includes the Rapture.

"This great contrast of attitudes toward the beginning judgment phase of the Day of the Lord and the Rapture [in these verses] is another indicator that the Rapture is not the beginning or any part of the Day of the Lord. Rather, it will be a separate event. Therefore, Paul's reference to the Day of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 is not a reference to the Rapture."⁴⁷

"The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" refers to His Second Coming, and "our gathering together to Him" refers to the Rapture of the church.

2:3-4 Paul explained that three events had to take place before the judgments of the day of the Lord began (i.e., the judgments of the Tribulation). These were: "the apostasy" (v. 3), the unveiling of "the man of lawlessness" (vv. 3-4, 8), and the removal of the restraint of lawlessness (vv. 6-7). The

⁴³Hiebert, p. 304. See Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, pp. 223-29, for an extended exegetical discussion of these verses that imply a pretribulation Rapture.

⁴⁴See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:110.

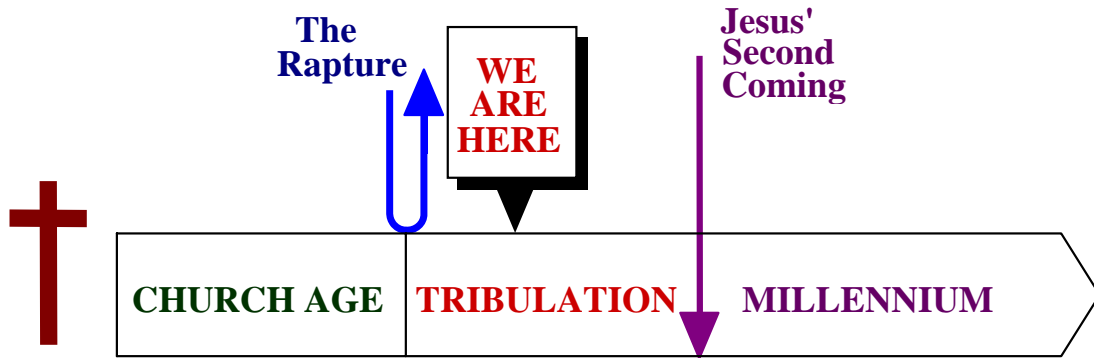
⁴⁵E.g., Thomas, pp. 318, 319; and Bruce, p. 163. Cf. Marshall, p. 185.

⁴⁶E.g., John F. Walvoord, *The Thessalonian Epistles*, p. 73.

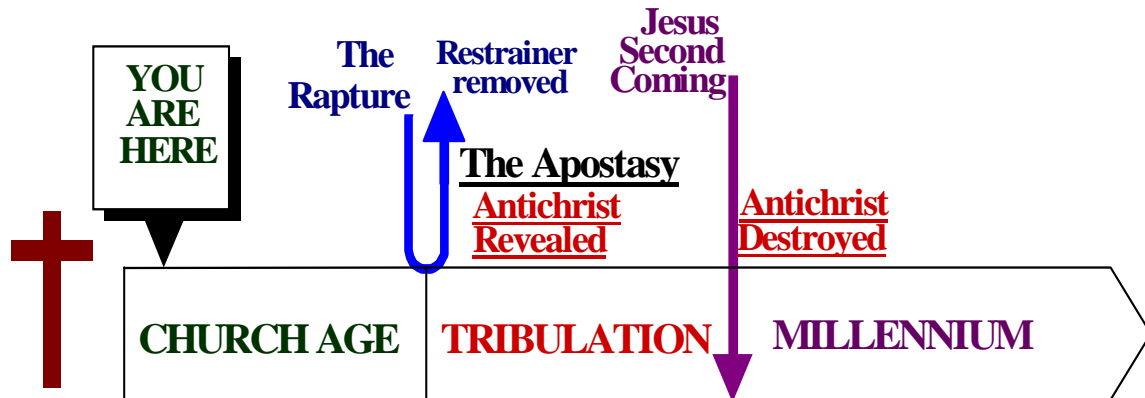
⁴⁷Showers, p. 66.

apostle presented these in logical, rather than chronological, order in this passage. The word "first" refers to the fact that the apostasy will occur at the very beginning of the day of the Lord, and before the revelation of the man of sin.⁴⁸

The Thessalonians' False Idea



Paul's Correction of their Error



One major event is the "apostasy" (v. 3, lit. "falling away"). The English word "apostasy" is a transliteration of the Greek word *apostasia*. By definition an apostasy is a departure, an abandoning of a position formerly held (cf. Josh. 22:22 LXX; Acts 21:21). It does not mean simply disbelieving, but an aggressive and positive revolt (cf. Acts 21:21; Heb. 3:12).

"In classical Greek the word *apostasia* denoted a political or military rebellion; but in the Greek Old Testament we find it used of rebellion against God (e.g. Jos. xxii. 22), and

⁴⁸Thomas, pp. 320-21; idem, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, pp. 72-75.

this becomes the accepted Biblical usage. Paul's thought is that in the last times there will be an outstanding manifestation of the powers of evil arrayed against God."⁴⁹

It seems that Paul was referring here to the departure from the Christian faith of *professing* (not genuine) Christians, soon *after* the Rapture, at the beginning of "the day of the Lord."⁵⁰ This was not the same "apostasy" that he and other apostles wrote and spoke of elsewhere, when they warned of departure from the faith *before* the Rapture (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Pet. 2; 3:3-6; Jude).

"It is not so much forsaking one's first love and drifting into apathy that is meant, as setting oneself in opposition to God."⁵¹

". . . it seems likely that the apostasy Paul had in mind expanded on Jewish apocalyptic expectations and envisioned a dramatic and climactic falling away from the worship of the true God (by both Jews and some portion of the Christian church) as a part of the complex of events at the end of the age."⁵²

The "portion" of the Christian church, in Paul's view, would be the *non-genuine* Christians who compose Christendom. "Christendom" refers to all professing Christians, genuine and non-genuine. Such a departure had begun in Paul's day (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Pet. 2; 3:3-6; Jude). However, it had not yet reached the proportions predicted to characterize "the apostasy" about which Paul had instructed his readers when he was with them (cf. v. 5). When the Rapture takes place, and all true Christians leave the earth, this *great* "apostasy," which is connected with a worldwide delusion or deception, will overwhelm the human race.

"This worldwide anti-God movement will be so universal as to earn for itself a special designation: '*the* apostasy'—i.e., the climax of the increasing apostate tendencies evident before the rapture of the church."⁵³

"It appears more probable from the context that a general abandonment of the basis of civil order is envisaged. This is not only rebellion against the law of Moses; it is a large-scale revolt against public order, and since public order is maintained by the 'governing authorities' who 'have been

⁴⁹Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 126.

⁵⁰See Frame, p. 251.

⁵¹Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 219.

⁵²Martin, p. 234.

⁵³Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," p. 322.

instituted by God,' any assault on it is an assault on a divine ordinance (Rom 13:1, 2). It is, in fact, the whole concept of divine authority over the world that is set at defiance in 'the rebellion' par excellence."⁵⁴

Some pretribulationists take a different view. They believe this "apostasy" is a reference to the Rapture, and some of them find support for their view in Paul's reference to the Rapture (v. 1).⁵⁵ But the meaning of the word "apostasy" itself, as a revolt, argues against this view.

"Nowhere else does the Scripture speak of the rapture as 'the departure.' A departure denotes an act on the part of the individual or company departing. But the rapture is not an act of departure on the part of the saints. In the rapture the church is passive, not active. At the rapture the church is 'caught up' or 'snatched away,' an event wherein the Lord acts to transport believers from earth into His presence (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Everything that takes place with the believers at the rapture is initiated by the Lord and done by Him. Paul has just referred to the rapture as 'our gathering together unto him' (v. 1); why then should he now use this unlikely term to mean the same thing?"⁵⁶

J. Vernon McGee believed that the apostasy referred to here will involve both things:

". . . (1) the organization of the church [as contrasted with the true church] has separated from the faith—it has apostatized and (2) there has been another departure, the departure of the true church from the earth. The departure of the true church leads into the total apostatizing of the organized church."⁵⁷

Another major event, in addition to "the apostasy," is the unveiling of "the man of lawlessness" (v. 3). This is a person yet to appear who will be completely lawless and whom God will doom to everlasting destruction. The prophet Daniel spoke of such a person. He will make a covenant with the Jews but then break it after three and a half years (Dan. 9:27). The breaking of that covenant seems to be the event that unmasks this individual for who he is, the opponent of Christ. He will eventually seek to make everyone worship himself and will claim to be God (cf. Rev. 13:5-

⁵⁴Bruce, p. 167. Cf. David A. Hubbard, "The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1363.

⁵⁵E.g., E. Schuyler English, *Re-Thinking the Rapture*, pp. 67-71; John R. Rice, *The Coming Kingdom of Christ*, p. 188-91; and Kenneth S. Wuest, *Prophetic Light in the Present Darkness*, pp. 38-41.

⁵⁶Hiebert, p. 306.

⁵⁷J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:413.

8). The reference to him taking his seat in the temple of God (v. 4) may be figurative representing him as taking the highest position possible. More likely it is literal in which case the material temple of God that will stand in Jerusalem during the second half, at least, of the Tribulation is in view (cf. Dan. 11:36).⁵⁸ Amillennialists, who do not believe in a future reign of Christ on the present earth, take this temple as the one that stood in Jerusalem when Paul wrote this epistle.⁵⁹ This person, the Antichrist, had not yet appeared when Paul wrote, nor has he appeared yet (cf. 1 John 2:18).⁶⁰

"In A.D. 40, only a few years before Paul wrote this letter, Gaius Caesar (Caligula), who had declared his own divinity, attempted to have his image set up in the holy of holies in Jerusalem."⁶¹

"All attempts to equate the Man of Lawlessness with historical personages break down on the fact that Paul was speaking of someone who would appear only at the end of the age."⁶²

2:5 Paul reminded his readers that he had told them of "these things" when he "was with" them. Since Paul was evidently only in Thessalonica a few weeks, this reference is very significant. Paul did not regard prophecy as too deep, or unimportant, or controversial for even new Christians. Many Christians today play down the importance of this part of God's revelation. Paul believed prophetic truth was a vital part of the whole counsel of God, essential to victorious Christian living. Consequently he taught it without hesitation or apology. So should we.

B. THE MYSTERY OF LAWLESSNESS 2:6-12

Paul continued his instruction concerning the events that must take place at the beginning of "the day of the Lord," and stressed the lawlessness of that period. His purpose was to explain, more clearly, that his readers had not missed the Rapture, and had not entered the eschatological "day of the Lord."

2:6 When he had been with them previously, Paul had told the Thessalonians "what" was restraining the unveiling of the "man of lawlessness" (i.e., Antichrist, v. 3; cf. 1 John 2:18). However, he did not restate the *identity*

⁵⁸See John F. Walvoord, "Will Israel Build a Temple in Jerusalem?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125:498 (April-June 1968):99-106; Thomas S. McCall, "How Soon the Tribulation Temple?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128:512 (October-December 1971):341-51; idem, "Problems in Rebuilding the Tribulation Temple," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139:513 (January-March 1972):75-80; and Bruce, p. 169.

⁵⁹E.g., Wanamaker, p. 246.

⁶⁰See the excursus on Antichrist in *ibid.*, pp. 179-88.

⁶¹Martin, p. 237.

⁶²Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 221.

of the restrainer ("what [or who] restrains") in this passage. Nevertheless, it seems that the *Holy Spirit* is the restraining influence in view.⁶³

"To one familiar with the Lord Jesus' Upper Room Discourse, as Paul undoubtedly was, fluctuation between neuter and masculine recalls how the Holy Spirit is spoken of. Either gender is appropriate, depending on whether the speaker (or writer) thinks of natural agreement (masc. because of the Spirit's personality) or grammatical (neuter because of the [neuter] noun *pneuma*; see John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 14) . . ."⁶⁴

Posttribulationists, and some pretribulationists, have suggested other possible restrainers. These include the Roman Empire⁶⁵ and or the emperor,⁶⁶ God,⁶⁷ Antichrist, Satan, and human government (or law and order).⁶⁸ Marvin Rosenthal, the "pre-wrath rapturist," believed the restrainer is Michael the archangel.⁶⁹ These suggestions do not fit Paul's description.⁷⁰ The restrainer must be more powerful than Satan, since He presently restrains evil in the world. Some scholars eventually confess ignorance.⁷¹

The Holy Spirit accomplishes His ministry of restraining lawlessness, in the world, mainly through the influence of Christians whom He indwells, especially through their gospel preaching.⁷²

"One of the distinctive features of the dispensation of grace in contrast to prior periods is the fact that the Holy Spirit indwells everyone who is regenerated. In the coming period of the kingdom on earth this divine blessing will also be a prominent feature and everyone who is saved will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

"There is little evidence that believers will be indwelt by the Spirit during the tribulation. The possibility of a universal indwelling of all believers in the tribulation is

⁶³See Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, pp. 92-107, for a full discussion, and Ryrie, pp. 108-14, for a shorter one.

⁶⁴Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," p. 324.

⁶⁵William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, p. 247.

⁶⁶Wanamaker, p. 256.

⁶⁷George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 95; Marshall, p. 199.

⁶⁸Bruce, pp. 171-72; Hubbard, p. 1364; Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 129; Milligan, p. 101.

⁶⁹Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*, pp. 257-61. See John A. McLean, "Another Look at Rosenthal's 'Pre-Wrath Rapture,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):395-96; and Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique*.

⁷⁰For refutation of the major views, see Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 122-25.

⁷¹E.g., Frame, p. 262; Morris, p. 130.

⁷²See Charles E. Powell, "The Identity of the 'Restraint' in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):329.

opposed by the revelation of 2 Thessalonians 2:7, that the one restraining the world from sin, i.e., the Holy Spirit, will be 'taken out of the way' during the tribulation. Unrestrained evil characterizes the tribulation, though the lack of restraint is not total (cf. Rev. 7:2; 12:6, 14-16). The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the saints in itself would contribute to the restraint of sin, and it, therefore, is taken away. The tribulation period, also, seems to revert back to Old Testament conditions in several ways; and in the Old Testament period, saints were never permanently indwelt except in isolated instances, though a number of instances of the filling of the Spirit and of empowerment for service are found. Taking all the factors into consideration, there is no evidence for the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in believers in the tribulation."⁷³

Many interpreters use the absence of specific revelation about the Spirit's indwelling during the Tribulation to their advantage. Some (e.g., normative dispensationalists) believe the silence argues for no indwelling. Others (e.g., progressive dispensationalists) believe it assumes that indwelling continues.

2:7 The "mystery" (truth previously not revealed but now made known) Paul referred to here is the revelation of a future climax of lawlessness that would follow the removal of the restrainer. This lawless movement was already underway in Paul's day, but God was holding it back until His appointed time. Then He will remove the restraining influence. This removal is probably a reference to the Rapture, when God's restraint of evil through His people will end as He removes the church from the earth.⁷⁴ God will remove the Holy Spirit's restraining influence from the earth ("[H]e is taken out of the way"), in the sense that God will remove *those* whom He indwells. He will not entirely abandon the earth, of course, since God the Holy Spirit is omnipresent. "He," rather than "it," describes the Holy Spirit acting as a human person, preventing evil from taking control like a strong teacher, law enforcement official, or a good king—now working *through* Christians whom He indwells, presently restraining lawlessness, but in the future Tribulation Period will cease to restrain it.

I once heard someone describe this removal this way: It is presently as though the Holy Spirit was blocking the doorway so that Lawlessness (personified) could not enter. But at the Rapture, He will step aside, and

⁷³John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 151, 230. Cf. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," p. 325; and Charles C. Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, p. 113.

⁷⁴See Theodore H. Epp, "The Restrainer Removed," *Good News Broadcaster*, March 1975, pp. 20-22.

Lawlessness will rush in.⁷⁵ Even though lawlessness is already at work, after the Rapture it will overwhelm the world.

Gundry believed the restrainer is the Holy Spirit's ministry of restraining lawlessness—apart from the influence of Christians—that is in view here.⁷⁶ His conclusion grows out of the belief that the Holy Spirit will permanently indwell *all believers* since Pentecost—including those in the Tribulation. Yet compare 1 Corinthians 12:13, where Paul said the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit places believers into the "one body" of Christ. The "body of Christ" is a term that always describes "the church"—which began on the day of Pentecost—and which goes to heaven at the Rapture. For the Christian, Spirit-indwelling takes place at the same time as Spirit-baptism, namely: at the time of regeneration. Since people whom God will justify during the Tribulation will not experience *Spirit-baptism* into "the body of Christ," it is unwarranted to assume that the Spirit will permanently indwell them also. The "body of Christ" will be in heaven then, rather than on earth.

"Since the removal of the Restrainer takes place before the manifestation of the lawless one, this identification implies a pretribulational rapture."⁷⁷

- 2:8 After the Rapture, "the lawless one" will have greater freedom to enact his lawless policies. He will do things that will eventually result in his being identified as the Antichrist. However, the mere "breath" of the Lord Jesus' "mouth . . . will slay (overthrow)" him when Christ comes with His saints at the Second Coming ("by the appearance of His coming"; 1:10). The Lord's "appearance" (Gr. *epiphaneia*) is a different, and later event in His "coming" (Gr. *parousia*), than the "gathering" (Gr. *episynagoges*) event (v. 1). The first event is the Rapture, and the second is the Second Coming.
- 2:9-10 The "lawless one" will be Satan's instrument. Scripture also calls him "the beast coming out of the sea" (Rev. 13:1-10), "the scarlet beast" (Rev. 17:3), and simply "the beast" (Rev. 17:8, 16; 19:19-20; 20:10). Satan will empower him to deceive many people into thinking *he is God*, by enabling him to perform awe-inspiring, powerful miracles (cf. Rev. 13:2-4; 17:8). The Greek word for "power" used here (*dunamis*) refers to potential power, not power in action (*energeia*).⁷⁸

⁷⁵Pastor Steve Dye, Crossway International Baptist Church of Berlin, Germany, in a sermon there on April 28, 2013.

⁷⁶Gundry, pp. 125-28.

⁷⁷Hiebert, p. 313.

⁷⁸See Milligan, p. 104.

"The use of *parousia* here probably suggests a parody of Christ's Parousia (v 8)."⁷⁹

2:11-12 Thousands of people, but only a small proportion of the entire population, will place their faith in Jesus Christ during the Tribulation (Rev. 6:9-11; 7:4, 9-17; et al.). Some interpreters have concluded from these verses (vv. 11-12) that no one who has heard the gospel and rejected it, before the Rapture, will be able to be saved during the Tribulation. This view rests on taking the antecedents of "them" and "they" as referring to "those who perish" (v. 10), and interpreting "those who perish" as referring to those who heard but rejected the gospel before the Rapture. However, it seems more likely that verse 10 describes all unbelievers in the Tribulation, not just those who heard and rejected the gospel before the Rapture. Satan's "power," "signs," "wonders," and evil "deception" (vv. 9-10) will impress all people living on the earth during the Tribulation. Paul could say that those people "did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved" (v. 10), and that they "did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness" (v. 12). He could do so since these phrases describe all unbelievers, not just those who hear the gospel and willfully rejected it before the Rapture (cf. John 3:19, Rom. 1:24-32).⁸⁰

"Those who refuse to believe and accept the truth find that judgment comes upon them in the form of an inability to accept the truth."⁸¹

"By 'the lie ['what is false']' is apparently meant the denial of the fundamental truth that God is God; it is the rejection of his self-revelation as Creator and Savior, righteous and merciful Judge of all, which leads to the worship due to him alone being offered to another, such as the 'man of lawlessness.'"⁸²

"It is a solemn thought that when men begin by rejecting the good they inevitably end by forwarding evil."⁸³

"It becomes clear that divine condemnation results not from human intellectual errors but much rather from delight in what is evil and immoral."⁸⁴

⁷⁹Bruce, p. 173.

⁸⁰See Larry R. Thornton, "Salvation in the Tribulation in Light of God's 'Working unto Delusion'," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 3:2 (Fall 1987):26-49.

⁸¹Marshall, p. 204.

⁸²Bruce, p. 174.

⁸³Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 134.

⁸⁴Marshall, p. 205.

Verses 10-12 present the same downward career of the wicked that Paul wrote about in Romans 1:18-32: First, they set themselves against the truth. Second, God gives them over to their desires so that they become slaves to their passions. Third, He punishes them eternally.

If Paul wanted to correct the Thessalonians' erroneous conclusion, that they were *then* in "the day of the Lord," why did he not just tell them that the Rapture had not yet taken place? Evidently he did not do so, because he wanted to reemphasize the *order of events* resulting in the culmination—and destruction—of lawlessness in the world. The timing of the lawlessness of the Tribulation, and the fear of having missed the Rapture, were their primary areas of concern.

Paul's readers could, therefore, be confident that "the day of the Lord" had not yet begun. The tribulations they were experiencing were not those of "the day of the Lord," about which Paul had taught them while he was with them. Furthermore, three prerequisite events had not yet taken place. Following the *general apostasy* that started in the first century and has subsequently increased throughout the Church Age, they are: (1) the removal of the restrainer at the Rapture (v. 7), (2) the departure from the Word of God by many, or the *great apostasy* (v. 3), and (3) the revelation of the man of lawlessness, Antichrist (v. 3). This is the chronological order of these events.⁸⁵

IV. THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER 2:13-17

Paul proceeded to give thanks for his readers' salvation, and to pray for their steadfastness, to help them appreciate their secure position in holding fast to apostolic teaching. These verses form a transition between the didactic and hortatory sections of the epistle.

A. THANKSGIVING FOR CALLING 2:13-15

2:13 In contrast to the lawless unbelievers just referred to (v. 12), Paul was grateful that he could "always give thanks" for his readers. Moreover he did so (cf. 1:3). The ground for his joy was God's choice of them for salvation before He created the world ("the beginning," v. 13; cf. Eph. 1:4). Though God loves all people (John 3:16), He does not choose all "for salvation." Paul consistently taught what the rest of Scripture reveals, namely, that the initiative in salvation comes from God, not man. God accomplishes salvation through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 6:11-12; 1 Thess. 4:7-8; 1 Pet. 1:2).⁸⁶ He makes it efficacious when individuals believe the gospel. Even though unbelievers oppose us, we can take courage because God loves us, and He will deliver us.

⁸⁵For a helpful summary of posttribulational interpretations of these verses, see John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, chapter 10: "Is the Tribulation Before the Rapture in 2 Thessalonians?"

⁸⁶Cf. Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, pp. 314-15.

"It is a travesty of God's electing grace to suppose that, because he chooses some for salvation, all the others are thereby consigned to perdition. On the contrary, if some are chosen for special blessing, it is in order that others may be blessed through them and with them. This is a constant feature in the pattern of divine election throughout the Bible story, from Abraham onward. Those who are chosen constitute the firstfruits, bearing the promise of a rich harvest to come."⁸⁷

This writer did not believe in the universal salvation of all people, so perhaps he meant that the blessings that the lost receive because of the elect are temporal rather than eternal.

2:14 God's purpose in choosing the Thessalonians was that they might one day share in the splendor and honor ("gain the glory") that their Lord does and will enjoy, beginning at the Rapture. Ultimate glorification is in view. Note the same three stages (i.e., predestination, calling, and glorification) in Romans 8:29-30.

2:15 In view of their calling, Paul urged his readers not to abandon what he and his associates had taught them in person and by letter. He wanted them to "hold" firmly to the inspired instructions that he handed on to them (i.e., "the traditions").

"The prominent idea of *paradosis* [tradition] then in the New Testament is that of an authority external to the teacher himself."⁸⁸

"We are almost incurably convinced that the use of notebooks is essential to the learning process. This, however, was not the case in the first century. Then it was often held that if a man had to look something up in a book he did not really know it. The true scholar was a person who had committed to memory the things he had learned. Until a man had a teaching in his memory he was not considered really to have mastered it."⁸⁹

"There is a distinction in the Pauline writings between the gospel received by revelation (as in Gal 1:12) and the gospel received by tradition (as in 1 Cor 15:3), and the language of *didache* ["teaching"] and *paradosis* ["tradition"] is appropriate to the latter, not to the former.

⁸⁷Bruce, p. 191.

⁸⁸Lightfoot, p. 121.

⁸⁹Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: Revised Edition*, pp. 38-39.

Even communications made *dia pneumatos* ["by the Spirit"] must be tested by their conformity to the *paradosis* and if they conflict with it they are to be refused (cf. 1 Thess 5:19-22)."⁹⁰

B. PRAYER FOR STRENGTH 2:16-17

As part of a bridge between his instructions (2:1-12) and exhortations (3:1-15), Paul added this prayer for the Thessalonians. He petitioned God for their encouragement ("comfort") and strength (cf. 1 Thess. 3:2, 13; 2 Thess. 3:3).

"Addressing his prayer to the first two persons of the Trinity, Paul names the Son before the Father (contra 1 Thess 3:11), probably in line with the Son's worthiness of equal honor with the Father and his special prominence in the chapter's emphasis on future salvation and glory."⁹¹

God's "grace" is the basis for "eternal encouragement (comfort)" in the face of temporary distress. Our "hope" is beneficial ("good") because it motivates us to live in the light of our victorious Savior's return, resulting in "every good work and word."

"The phrase 'good hope' was used by non-Christian writers to refer to life after death."⁹²

The Thessalonians needed comforting encouragement, in view of their recent anxiety that false teaching had produced. They also needed God's grace, to enable them to stand firm and to do everything as unto the Lord (cf. 3:7-13). In addition, they needed His grace as they continued proclaiming the gospel.

V. EXHORTATIONS FOR FUTURE GROWTH 3:1-15

Paul requested the Thessalonians' prayers for him, and he assured them that he was praying for them. He also encouraged them to deal with problems that needed correction in their assembly. Obedience in these matters would result in continued growth toward maturity for these believers.

"We cannot fail to be struck with the similarity of structure between the first and second Epistles. Both are divided into two parts, the first being chiefly narrative or explanatory, and the second hortatory: the second part in both commences in much the same way (compare 1 Thess. iv. 1 . . . with 2 Thess. iii. 1 . . .): and each part in both Epistles concludes with a prayer couched in similar language . . ."⁹³

⁹⁰Bruce, pp. 193-94.

⁹¹Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," p. 330.

⁹²Martin, p. 259.

⁹³Lightfoot, p. 122.

A. RECIPROCAL PRAYER 3:1-5

Paul requested the prayers of his readers, and he assured them of his own prayers for them: that they would be strengthened in their mutual bonds in Christ and in the gospel.

1. Prayer for the missionaries 3:1-2

3:1 "Finally" introduces the last major section of the epistle. As was so often his custom, Paul first exhorted his readers to "pray" (1 Tim. 2:1-2; cf. 1 Thess. 5:25; et al.). He realized that God will work in response to the requests of His people. To fail to pray is to fail to receive God's blessings (James 4:2). Specifically, Paul asked the Thessalonians to ask God to facilitate the rapid and wide dissemination of the gospel—and thus glorify His Word. Paul's readers had seen God do this in their midst when Paul and his fellow missionaries first visited their city.

"Paul was a very great apostle. But his greatness consisted not so much in sheer native ability (though he had his share of that) as in his recognition of his dependence on God. It arises out of this that he so often requests the prayers of those to whom he ministers."⁹⁴

3:2 Also Paul desired that God would grant him and his colleagues deliverance from unreasonable and harmful unbelievers ("perverse and evil men") who sought to limit the spread of the gospel. This is the negative side of the former, positive request. To oppose the spread of the gospel is *unreasonable* behavior, since the gospel brings spiritual life to those who are dead in sin. These men were probably unbelieving Jews who were opposing Paul in Corinth (cf. Acts 18:5-6, 12-13).

"I find that the spreading of the gospel is hindered more by people in the church than by anything else. No liquor industry, no barroom, no gangster ring has ever attacked me—at least I have never known about it. But I have had so-called saints in the churches attack me."⁹⁵

"There is something deeply moving in the thought of this giant among men asking for the prayers of the Thessalonians who so well recognized their own weakness. Nowhere is Paul's humility more clear to see. And the fact that he, as it were, threw himself on their hearts, must have done much to bind even his opponents to him, because it is very difficult to dislike a man who asks you to pray for him."⁹⁶

⁹⁴Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 244.

⁹⁵McGee, 5:419.

⁹⁶Barclay, p. 250.

2. Prayer for the Thessalonians 3:3-5

3:3 Paul was confident that God would provide strength and protection for the Thessalonians, in view of His promises to provide for His own.

"Christians need to be established. Right now the home is in disarray, the church is in disarray, and the lives of believers are in disarray. We need to be *established*. How can you as a believer be established? By coming to the Word of God and letting it have its influence in your life. The Lord operates through His Word. The Word of God will keep you from evil. Someone has said, 'The Bible will keep you from sin, and sin will keep you from the Bible.'"⁹⁷

"Probably we are to understand it ["the evil *one*"] as a reference to Satan here in light of Paul's previous concern as expressed in 1 Thessalonians 3:5."⁹⁸

3:4 He was also confident that his readers, strengthened by the Lord, would "*continue*" to follow apostolic instruction ("do what we command you"), as they had in the past. Paul had confidence in these Christians. Note the chiasmic structure of Paul's thought in verses 1-4.

3:5 He also prayed that God would give these brothers and sisters a greater appreciation of ("May the Lord direct your hearts into") God's "love" for them, and of Christ's "steadfastness" in the midst of His earthly afflictions.⁹⁹ He wanted this so their love and patient endurance might increase (cf. 1 Chron. 29:18; 2 Chron. 12:14). Paul may have meant both God's love for them, and their love for God.¹⁰⁰

"Consistent Christian behavior can result only from genuine inward commitment."¹⁰¹

B. CHURCH DISCIPLINE 3:6-15

The false teaching that had entered the church had produced some inappropriate behavior in some. Paul wrote what to do about this situation: to guide the Thessalonians in bringing their behavior, as well as their belief, back into conformity with God's will.

". . . his attitude throughout is not that of an apostle exercising his apostolic authority but that of a brother appealing to brothers in the name of a common authority, the Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁰²

⁹⁷McGee, 5:419.

⁹⁸Ryrie, p. 121. Cf. Lightfoot, p. 126.

⁹⁹Wanamaker, p. 279; Marshall, pp. 217-18.

¹⁰⁰Lightfoot, p. 128.

¹⁰¹Martin, p. 269.

¹⁰²Frame, p. 297.

"As important as it is to identify the cause and nature of the problem behavior addressed in vv. 6-15, we should not ignore the fact that our passage both begins (v. 6) and ends (vv. 14-15) with exhortations, not to the idle but to the rest of the church. The admonition addressed directly to those Christians who were living improperly (v. 12) is, in fact, rather brief."¹⁰³

1. General principles respecting disorderly conduct 3:6-10

3:6 Paul introduced the words that follow to help the readers realize that obedience was essential. This was a "command" given with the full authority of ("in the name of") the "Lord Jesus Christ." The faithful majority in the church was to separate, probably individually and socially, from the "unruly"—to alert the offenders to the fact that their behavior was not acceptable (cf. v. 14).¹⁰⁴ The desired result was that they would repent. Paul had earlier warned those who were *idle* (1 Thess. 5:14), but evidently they had not responded. Now firmer measures were necessary (cf. Matt. 18:15-17). The offenders constituted a minority who lived undisciplined lives, contrary to the teaching and example of the missionaries ("the tradition which you received from us").

"The tradition to which Paul refers has a twofold character, as vv. 7-12 indicate. In vv. 7-9 the apostle elaborates on his and his colleagues' example as a guide for responsible behavior for their converts. The introductory words of v. 7 reveal that his and his fellow missionaries' behavior was intended to have the normative character of a received tradition. In addition, as a matter of course, Paul issued ethical instruction to new converts in order to regulate their behavior as Christians. In v. 10 he cites the specific tradition involved with regard to work."¹⁰⁵

3:7-9 Evidently some in the church were not working to support themselves, but were living off the charity of their brethren. In Thessalonica, as elsewhere, Paul and his companions sometimes supported themselves by "making tents" to give their converts an "example" (v. 7) of responsible Christian living ("a model," v. 9; cf. 1 Cor. 9:3-14; 1 Tim. 5:18). They had the right to receive monetary support in payment for their spiritual ministry (Gal. 6:6), but they often gave up this right for the greater needs of their converts.

3:10 Paul reminded his readers of his well-known instruction that he frequently repeated when he was with them. "If anyone refused (was not willing) to work," his brothers and sisters in Christ should not provide for him ("then

¹⁰³Martin, p. 271.

¹⁰⁴Marshall, p. 220.

¹⁰⁵Wanamaker, pp. 282-83.

he is not to eat, either"). Paul may have been alluding to a Jewish proverb based on Gen. 3:19a: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread."¹⁰⁶ The idle in this case were not *unable* to work, but "unwilling" to work.

2. Specific instructions concerning the idle 3:11-13

3:11 The teaching that Christ could return at any moment had led some of the believers into idleness. They had quit their jobs and were *idle*, "doing no work at all," and were simply waiting for the Lord to return. This interpretation seems justified, and is certainly consistent with life. Clearly these idle ones believed in the imminent return of Christ for them. Such deductions have led other Christians to do the same thing at various other times throughout church history. When people are not busy with their own work, they may tend to meddle in the business of others. They may become "busybodies," rather than busy, neglecting their own business in order to mind *everybody else's* business but their own.

3:12-13 Paul commanded the idle to settle down ("work in quiet fashion") and to support themselves ("eat their own bread"; cf. 1 Thess. 4:11; Gen. 3:19). For the obedient majority ("But as for you, brethren"), he counseled them to endure this added affliction patiently, and to continue doing right ("do not grow weary in doing good").

"'With quietness,' emphatic by its forward position [in the Greek text], points to the quality of mind that is to be associated with their working. It denotes a condition of inward peace and tranquillity reflecting itself in outward calmness; it is the opposite of their fussy activity as busybodies."¹⁰⁷

"Exemplary conduct serves as a constant reprimand to wrongdoers and is an incentive for them to turn from their delinquency."¹⁰⁸

Why were these Thessalonians not working? The answer probably lies in the phrase "in quiet fashion."

"The root trouble apparently was their excitability. The thought of the nearness of the Parousia had thrown them into a flutter, and this had led to unwelcome consequences of which their idleness was the outstanding feature."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Robertson, 4:59.

¹⁰⁷Hiebert, p. 347.

¹⁰⁸Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," p. 335.

¹⁰⁹Morris, *The First . . .*, p. 256.

This clause, "in quietness," ". . . is to be understood as the opposite of . . . the feverish excitement of mind stimulated by the belief that the *Parousia* was at hand . . ."110

"It seems apparent, then, that these idle Christians believed in the imminent coming of Christ; however, they had concluded wrongly that 'imminent' equals 'soon.' Thus, instead of believing that Christ *could* come soon, they were convinced that He definitely *would* come soon, and work was therefore no longer necessary for them.

"Why did the Thessalonian Christians believe in the imminent coming of Christ? It must have been because they had been taught the imminent coming of Christ by a person whose authority they trusted. It would appear that Paul is the one who taught them the imminent coming of Christ. His negative reaction to their actions, however, implies that their wrong conduct was the result of a perversion of his teaching (cp. vv. 6, 10). Contrary to them, Paul did not equate 'imminent' with 'soon' and think, therefore, that work was unnecessary."111

3. Further discipline for the unrepentant 3:14-15

3:14 Failure to abandon the idle lifestyle, after having received the further warnings in this epistle, should result in increased ostracism (cf. Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:9, 11; 2 Cor. 2:6-7; Titus 3:10-11).

". . . they [the idle] must be deprived of intimate association with the rest of their fellows (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9, 11). But even so, absolute separation from the companionship of the brethren is not in mind; for Paul does not add here, as he does in 1 Cor. 5:11, the *mede sunesthiein* ["not even to eat with"]; and above all he does add here the significant v. 15.)"112

This discipline would, hopefully, embarrass ("shame") the offender into changing his or her ways.

". . . allowing a believer to persist in blatantly unchristian, exploitive, and disruptive behavior is not a kindness—neither to the church nor to the errant believer nor to the watching non-Christian public."113

110Frame, p. 307.

111Showers, *Maranatha* . . . , p. 134. See also Stanton's discussion of imminency, pp. 108-37.

112Frame, pp. 308-9.

113Martin, p. 285.

Paul put social pressure to good use here. It is regrettable that in our day social pressure often has very little influence on erring brethren. Rather than submit to church discipline, many Christians simply change churches. Strong measures may be necessary ("do not associate with him"), in some cases, so the offender will feel the need to repent ("so that he will be put to shame"), and to live in harmony with the will of God.¹¹⁴

"The treatment of such a man is to withdraw from close fellowship with him. . . . It [the Greek verb *sunanamignusthai*] literally means 'Don't mix yourselves up with him'."¹¹⁵

"Church discipline is ultimately the denying of fellowship to a believer in Christ who is involved in open sin. Church discipline involves Christians engaged in overt sin (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:9-13), especially sexual immorality; those creating division within the body of Christ (Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10); and those in open defiance of God's appointed leadership in the church (3:6, 7, 14; Heb. 13:17). A church must exercise discipline because the church must remain pure (1 Cor. 5:8). The goal of church discipline is to cause the sinning person to repent (James 5:19, 20); to 'gain back' or restore an erring brother (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1); to make the sinful person feel ashamed enough to change (3:14). There are several distinct steps to church discipline. First, meet one-on-one with the person. Second, if necessary meet with the person and another church member. Third, if there is no change in behavior, announce the matter to the congregation so that the whole church can corporately encourage the person to repent. Finally, if all else fails put the sinning person out of the assembly (Matt. 18:15-17). The tone of church discipline should be firm gentleness (Gal. 6:1). The people exercising church discipline should put away any spite, hatred, or malice so that they can facilitate true restoration."¹¹⁶

3:15 However, Paul warned against overreacting. The church should always treat the offender "as a brother," not "an enemy." We warn brothers, but we denounce and condemn enemies. The aim of all church discipline must be repentance followed by restoration.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:12:5-11.

¹¹⁵Morris, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 149.

¹¹⁶*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 2036.

¹¹⁷See J. Carl Laney, "The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143:572 (October-December 1986):353-64; and Ted G. Kitchens, "Perimeters of Corrective Church Discipline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:590 (April-June 1991):201-13.

"The situation is different from that envisaged at Corinth, where 'someone who is called a brother' (*ean tis adelphos onomazomenos . . .*) lives and acts in such a way as to give the lie to his Christian profession; that person is to be treated as an unbeliever, with no entitlement to the privileges of Christian fellowship (1 Cor 5:11)."¹¹⁸

VI. CONCLUSION 3:16-18

Paul concluded this epistle with an emphasis on unity in the church, in order to motivate his readers to work out their problems and reestablish peaceful conditions that would glorify God.

3:16 He concluded with two more prayers, his fourth and fifth (v. 16) in this epistle (cf. 1:11-12; 2:16-17; 3:5). He knew that without the Lord's convicting work, his instructions and exhortations would be ineffective. His main concern was for "peace" in the church, that could only take place as all the Christians obeyed the truth. God is the source of peace ("the Lord of peace Himself") that a church enjoys, to the extent that all of its members relate submissively to the will of God. Peace from God is possible "in every circumstance," even in the midst of persecution (cf. John 16:33).

3:17 In view of the false letter claiming to have been Paul's, that the Thessalonians had previously received (2:2), the apostle felt it necessary to prove that the present one really came from him. He added a word of "greeting" in his "own hand," here, as he usually did to authenticate his epistles for the benefit of his recipients (cf. Gal. 6:11; 1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18). An assistant evidently penned the rest of the letter (cf. Rom. 16:22).

"It was no uncommon thing in ancient letter-writing for the sender, having dictated the bulk of the letter, to write the last sentence or two in his own hand. This is the best explanation of the change of script at the end of several papyrus letters which have been preserved. This practice would help to authenticate the letter (for readers who recognized the sender's writing); a more general purpose would be to make the letter look more personal than one written entirely by an amanuensis."¹¹⁹

3:18 The final benediction is the same as the one that ends 1 Thessalonians, except for the addition of the word "all" here.

¹¹⁸Bruce, p. 210.

¹¹⁹Ibid., pp. 215-16.

"If any theological point is to be made from the inclusion of 'all,' it is perhaps that Paul asked for Christ's grace even on those who were not holding to the Christian pattern of behavior regarding work."¹²⁰

Paul's concern for the peace and unity of the whole Thessalonian church ("you all") was his great passion in this epistle.

¹²⁰Wanamaker, p. 293.

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