

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 37

II Thessalonians

I. BACKGROUND

The background to II Thessalonians is much like that already covered in I Thessalonians. Rather than repeat that material here, we simply reference the last lesson on I Thessalonians. This section will address differences between the two letters.

As noted before, there is no clear consensus on which letter was written first; although, the majority of scholars place I Thessalonians prior to II Thessalonians. The second letter has some distinctions that have caused some scholars to question whether Paul wrote it. For example, there are ten words in the letter that are not found in Paul's other writings, and the style of the letter is much more formal than I Thessalonians.

These differences, however, do not mandate a different author. I daresay if you look at all the lessons I've created for this class, some will have unique vocabulary and different styles. Yet, I assure you, I have written them all! Certainly, some lessons were written in the middle of the night, some while relaxed, and some while pushing deadlines. I've written while in a good mood, and while in a poor one! I've written fat and happy, and I've written miserable and dieting. One should always be concerned about writing off authorship on such minor points.¹

There is another significant reason to have no surprise over the change in style and additional vocabulary: Paul was not alone in writing. Both letters are from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Which one did the writing? Was there an amanuensis (secretary)? If so, which one did the dictating? One can see them sitting around a fire with Paul or Silas taking the lead in dictating/writing while the others chimed in on pertinent parts. Paul did add a personal note in II Thessalonians in his own writing (3:17). It is important to realize that the early church saw this second letter as authentically Pauline.

More so than even I Thessalonians, this letter deals with "eschatology." "Eschatology" comes from the Greek word *εσχατος*, meaning "last" (The

¹ Another reason cited for non-Pauline authorship is that the doctrine of the "man of lawlessness" (2:3) is not found elsewhere in Paul's writings. This mention could merely mean that nowhere else does Paul have a need to discuss that point.

“-ology” ending merely means “the study of”). So, scholars use the word “eschatology” to reference the study of the last days. The second Thessalonian letter is 38 percent dedicated to this subject (18 of 47 verses).

II. TEXT

II Thessalonians consists of three chapters which basically outline as follows:

- A. Greeting and Prayer for the Thessalonians (Chp. 1)
- B. Teaching on the Parousia (Second Coming) (2:1-12)
- C. Encouragement (2:13-17)
- D. Request for Prayer (3:1-5)
- E. Instruction on Living and Conclusion (3:6-18)

A. *Greeting and Prayer for the Thessalonians*

After the standard introduction of most any first century letter, Paul, Silas, and Timothy start II Thessalonians with personal notes and prayer (Chapter One). Paul thanks God for the ever-growing faith and love of the Thessalonians. By putting this front and center in the letter, Paul both acknowledges the importance of our efforts in spiritual growth as well as god’s role in helping us grow in the virtues he desires. Hence, we strive and work for growth in faith and love, but we do so recognizing that we need God to grow these virtues within us. As they grow, we thank him, rather than take personal pride in our growing virtue.

Paul notes and commends the way the Thessalonians faith is working in the midst of suffering. Paul sees this perseverance as evidence that God is at work. No suffering occurs without the awareness and presence of God. No one knew better than Paul that we live in a fallen world that produces tsunamis and catastrophes. This world is under a curse and is not as God intended at creation. Paul also knew well that the ruler of this world seeks to destroy and punish those who follow God. Paul understood these things within the context of the larger picture: It will not always be this way. There is a day coming when “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels” (1:8). At this time, those who persecute the godly will receive punishment, while those who are troubled will find relief. On that day, believers will marvel at Jesus glorified in us, while those alienated from God will be punished with final alienation and destruction (1:5-10).

This recognition of what is to come and what it means in the here and now sends Paul to God in prayer for the Thessalonians. Paul prays that God would fulfill every good purpose and act that comes from their faith. Paul prays this prayer knowing that these good purposes and deeds bring glory to Jesus and his name (his reputation).

B. Teaching the Parousia (Second Coming)

In chapter two, Paul goes into more detail concerning the second coming of Jesus. Paul first reassures the Thessalonians that they haven't missed the second coming. Contrary to what others may have said, using Paul's name, "the day of the Lord" had not yet come. Paul explained that before that day comes, "rebellion" will occur and the "man of lawlessness" will be revealed. This man will set himself up to be God while opposing everything godly (2:1-4).

This man of lawlessness has been held back, Paul explains, until the proper time. The power of lawlessness, however, is already at work. This would be the power that works in the world and in the ungodly to wreak havoc and distress.² We do not know all about this evil, but God does. God is in control, not subject to the whims and fancies of the evil one. In fact, Paul explains the Lord Jesus himself will overthrow the man of lawlessness with merely his breath and the splendor of his coming. At that time, the destruction will visit those who refuse God and his truth, siding instead with the lawless one and all his fakery and chicanery (including even counterfeit miracles and signs) (2:5-12).

C. Encouragement (2:13-17)

Where does this leave the Thessalonians (or us for that matter)? First, none of us (Paul, the Thessalonians, or us) know the intricacies of evil, Satan, God's exercise of his control, or the time of the second coming. But, we do know that God is in control, that Satan and evil lose, and that Jesus will come again. And with that knowledge, we thank God. For God has chosen us to be sanctified

² Throughout history, many have tried to identify this "Man of Lawlessness." Many have understood "him" to be the Roman Emperors. Some specifically saw him as the Emperor Nero. Since the Reformation, some have identified him as the Pope. John Chrysostom, a preacher in Antioch toward the end of the 300's, identified the Man of Lawlessness as "the Antichrist," a "man in whom Satan fully works."

by the Spirit instead of destroyed by evil. We can hold firm in faith that we are destined for greater glory. Our hearts should be strengthened knowing our hope and confidence that God works in all the junk that surrounds us (2:13-17).

D. Request for Prayer (3:1-5)

Paul then requests similar prayer from the Thessalonians which Paul offers on their behalf. How amazing to think that Paul believes in the power of prayer such that he has the students pray for the teacher! Truly Paul sees God at work in all things, the Thessalonians, as well as himself. Paul seeks prayer that the word of God would spread rapidly and with honor. Paul seeks prayer that he, Silas, and Timothy are delivered from evil as well. Paul seeks these prayers with confidence that the Lord is faithful and will hear (3:1-4).

E. Instruction on Living and Conclusion (3:6-18)

Before ending the letter, Paul gives some additional instructions on living to the Thessalonians. Paul is especially concerned that the Christians not be idle. Evidently, “idleness” was a response of many to the teaching that we should live expecting Jesus’ imminent return. In other words, if Christ is returning tomorrow, then why go to work today?

Paul refutes this reasoning. Paul reminds them he worked while in their midst. Paul even gave them a rule, “if a man will not work, he shall not eat.” Historically, this passage has served as the backbone behind some harsh social policies. This “Puritan work ethic” certainly teaches the importance of work, but not necessarily the way it has been used to justify a lack of love or care. Work for some may not mean doing work that creates income. For some, that ability may be limited to taking care of children, or cleaning up from a church meal, or any number of non-income work. We should remember in the Greek language, work (εργος) is not our English equivalent of wage producing labor. Rather, it denotes “activity” or “the doing of things” as opposed to merely thinking about things (3:6-10).

So, Paul is concerned that some of the Thessalonians are not busy, but are merely busybodies! Paul wants these folks to settle down

and behave better! Those that refuse to honor what Paul says are to be ignored as a way of bringing them around (3:11-15).

Paul closes his letter praying the Lord will be with the Thessalonians, giving them peace at all times and in every way. (3:16-18).

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Grow in Faith and Love
2. Thank God for your growth.
3. In the midst of suffering remember: God is in control.
4. Confidence in God outweighs the need for full understanding.
5. Jesus will come again.
6. Meanwhile be busy, not busybodies.