

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 18

2 Thessalonians

Last week, we took time to put Paul's First Thessalonians into one lesson in itself. Recognizing that Paul wrote his letters for reading in entirety as well as for sectional studying, we tried to capture the main thought lines of Paul in that letter. This week, we do the same for Paul's Second Thessalonians.

We do not know with certainty which letter was written first. Most consider the placement and terming of "First" Thessalonians as proof it was written first; however, such is not really fair. Scholars are still uncertain how Paul's letters were grouped in the New Testament, but all are agreed it was not based on *when* they were written! Most believe the letters are grouped from longest to shortest. Others note the one exception to the size rule and say the letters were grouped by importance of the churches (Romans followed by Corinth, *etc.*). The answer to whether 1 or 2 Thessalonians was written first must be gleaned from reading the letters themselves. Once scholars do that, compelling arguments are assessed for each position. We urge those interested to study the letters themselves and come to their own conclusions!

Rather than go into more background on Thessalonica and Paul's writing of this second letter, we refer back to last lesson. Here, we merely repeat that Paul likely wrote this letter while on his second missionary journey while in Corinth. Paul had been gone from Thessalonica for at least several months but not likely more than two years.

THE LETTER

Paul writes Second Thessalonians on his own behalf as well as on behalf of his co-missionaries Silas ("Silvanus"¹) and Timothy. Paul addresses the church as he did in First Thessalonians with one minor difference. Paul writes, "To the church of the Thessalonians in God *our* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" rather than "God *the* Father and our Lord Jesus Christ" as in First Thessalonians. Paul begins his letter putting himself in a common position with the Thessalonians. With just a small change, Paul is able to relate to his audience and show the commonality of all believers before God, *our* Father.

¹ Luke uses the common form "Silas" in writing up Paul's second missionary journey. Paul uses the fuller form "Silvanus." Some Bible translations, like the N.I.V., use the shorter version "Silas" even though Paul writes the extended name "Silvanus."

Paul greets the Thessalonians with “grace” and “peace,” but not grace and peace as the world offers. Paul offers the grace and “peace from God *our* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s sense of grace and peace proceeding from God as Father and Jesus as Lord is consistent with his teaching of God as the giver of all good things. We also notice that Paul takes advantage of a second opportunity to identify with the church by using “our” when referencing God the Father. This is something we will notice throughout this letter. Over and over, we will see Paul understanding his own place as one of commonality with the readers.

Paul is also ever thankful to God for their growing faith and increasing love of the church.² Their faith in God was growing, as was their love for each other.³ This so excited Paul that he was taking advantage of opportunities to tell other churches about the faithfulness and steadfastness of the Thessalonians, especially in light of the persecutions the church was enduring. Paul understood there was something special about those who hold to the Lord tightly when circumstances might seem to make a different path more attractive!

We should consider Paul’s use of the word translated “steadfastness” in the ESV (“perseverance” in the NIV). The Greek *hupomone* (υπομονη) means more than simply a passive acceptance. It is a strong and vibrant resolution that difficulties may be endured because they are a prelude to something better. With *hupomone*, the believer is not broken by the strain of affliction and problems. The believer has the confidence that redemption and salvation are assured. So while weeping may last for a night, rejoicing will come in the morning! Leon Morris writes that such perseverance is “the human response to the faithfulness of God. It is the believer’s reliance on God’s faithfulness for all things.”⁴

It makes sense, then, that Paul does not leave the subject of persecution and affliction without noting that a time is coming when our just God will make things right! God’s justice will see that the persecutors are repaid while those seeking God’s mercy will have relief. This will happen, as the Lord Jesus is revealed in

² If indeed Paul wrote this letter after writing 1 Thessalonians, this passage would have special meaning to the church. In 1 Thessalonians 3:10 and 3:12, Paul prayed for the faith and love of the church to grow and increase. This follow up letter then singles out both of those traits as ones that had indeed grown in answer to prayer!

³ Paul adds that this growing love was seen in each member of the church. In this way, Paul affirms everyone in the church, including those he would soon chide over some other issues later in his letter.

⁴ Morris, Leon, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament – The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Eerdmans 1991) at 195. Morris also quotes Calvin demonstrating the obverse side of Paul’s statement, “softness and impatience under adversity betoken unbelief on our part.”

heaven with his angels in flaming fire, “inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

When we see God is over all, a new perspective on our problems surfaces. We know God is not ignorant of what we are going through. God numbers the hairs on our heads and knows the thoughts of our heart before they become words in our mouths. Surely he knows of our sufferings and travails. For some, then, this becomes a great difficulty in itself. Why, they ask, would a kind and loving God allow his children to suffer, only to bring relief later? As Morris points out:

The New Testament does not look on suffering in quite the same way as do most modern people. To us, suffering is an evil in itself, something to be avoided at all costs...Faith is accordingly not some fragile thing, to be kept in a kind of spiritual cotton wool, insulated from all shocks. It is robust. It is to be manifested in the fires of trouble and in the furnace of affliction.⁵

Morris goes on to point out that faith is not only manifested in the heat of suffering but it is shaped there as well.

This is in contrast to the New Testament that teaches suffering as a consequence of a fallen world that God uses nevertheless to cultivate character and teach lessons to the believer. While we might question the love of a God that allows his children to suffer, we should actually do the opposite and find such suffering confirming of God’s love. Which parent loves his child the most—the one who never lets the child experience discomfort or the one willing to let his child learn the lessons and truths that come from discipline and difficulty?

When Paul writes of “those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus,” we need to pause for a moment and make sure we understand what he means by several words he is using. “Gospel,” as we have noted before, refers to *the* good news or message. That good news is that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and resurrected. These were Paul’s terms for what was “gospel” or “good news.” Paul wrote this letter while Paul was in Corinth. It is to the Corinthians that Paul made clear the very point when he used the word “gospel.” Paul would later write of his time in Corinth saying, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day” (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

Since Paul means the death, burial, and resurrection when he speaks of the “gospel,” then some might wonder why Paul speaks of failing to “obey” this gospel. Our English translators are using the word “obey” to translate the Greek *hupakouousin* (υπακουουσιν). This Greek word is a combination of the verb, “to

⁵ *Ibid.* at 197

hear” (*akouo*) with the addition of the word “under” (*hup*). The Greek conveys the idea of hearing and responding or coming under the influence of the gospel. In other words, Paul is speaking of those who hear of the Jesus’ death and resurrection, but instead of responding in faith, they let it fall like water off the back of a duck!

Paul writes that those who hear of the good news but fail to respond are set to “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” How sad to consider spending eternity away from the presence of God. Some scholars see Paul teaching here that for those unsaved, eternity ultimately results in a destruction that lasts forever, as opposed to an eternal conscious pain and suffering. These scholars hone in on these words where Paul writes of those who are destroyed for eternity. These are issues we will consider more carefully when we get to Paul’s theology in Part two of this series.

As sad as that day will be for those who do not respond to the gospel, it will be the exact opposite for the saints. This will be a day when God is glorified among his saints, when those who believe will marvel. The triumphant return of Jesus will bring relief to his people⁶ even as justice comes to the evil.

This is the end result that keeps Paul in prayer. Paul wants the church to live up to its calling! Paul wants the church to find its place working through God’s power in faith to the glory of Jesus and his name!

In chapter two of 2 Thessalonians, Paul writes about the second coming of Jesus in more detail. Paul explains that they should not be concerned or disturbed by any reports that Jesus had already returned! That deception could not be true! Paul explains that before the return of Jesus, several things must occur: “unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he had already told them these things, but apparently some false letter claiming to be from Paul or some verbal explanation had confused the Thessalonians on this point.

The reason the “man of lawlessness” was not yet revealed is that his time was not right. He was restrained, although the mystery of lawlessness was already at

⁶ There is a poetic play of the words used by Paul that we miss in the English. Paul’s word for “affliction” is *thlipsis* (θλιψις). It references being in a state of tension where you are pulled (or pushed) in opposite directions at one time. The pressure from this needs relief! This is the beauty of Paul’s word choice. While the church was afflicted with pressure trying to push and pull the people apart, a day would come when the pressure would be relieved!

work. But the lawless one himself will be revealed in due time. Afterwards, the Lord Jesus will appear, destroying the lawless one and bringing his efforts to nothing. This happens as the lawless one is active by Satan's direction and power, with false signs and wonders, and with wicked deception for the perishing. This comes to those who refuse to love the truth and the salvation of Christ.

Paul says these wicked that refuse Christ will receive a strong delusion from God so that they might believe what is false. These lovers of unrighteousness who refuse to believe the truth will be condemned. But not so the Thessalonian church!

That is why Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians. They were chosen by God as "first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." This was the purpose of their calling. God called them to be made holy by God's Spirit. In this, they obtain the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, as they become like him made pure by his Spirit. So, the lesson Paul draws for them is the importance that the church stand firm and hold to the traditions Paul taught or wrote them.

This causes Paul to reflect in prayer that the loving and comforting God *our* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ would comfort their hearts and establish them in good works and words.

Chapter 3

As Paul begins to bring his letter to a close, he asks the church to pray for his missionary team. Paul wants prayer first for the word of the Lord to go forth rapidly and be received with honor. Paul also asks for prayers for his missionary team's deliverance and protection from evil and wicked men.

While evil men are present, and while there are men without faith, we must always remember that God is faithful! We can trust God to establish and guard his children from the ultimate evil of Satan. This gave Paul confidence that the Thessalonians would continue following Paul's teachings. Paul prays that the Lord would continue to direct their hearts to the love of God and steadfastness of Christ.

Part and parcel of this exhortation and blessing is Paul's instruction that all the church stay busy before God and man. The believers were to "keep away" from those who walked in idleness outside of the tradition Paul taught. Certainly, Paul's example of working and paying his own way while in Thessalonica should have demonstrated the heart of not wanting to burden anyone.

Paul clearly had a right to ask for support from the church, but he did not. He wanted to set an example of the need to work. Paul had gotten reports about the church. There were some who were more intent on being busybodies than on staying busy. Paul said, "No work, no food!" Paul gently yet firmly instructs the busybodies to get busy! To "work quietly and to earn their own living."

Paul exhorts the church to stay fresh in living right and doing good. Paul wants the church to “take note” of those who do not follow Paul’s instructions here. Not because such a one is an enemy, but such a one is a brother who needs to be taught and warned!

With those practical instructions, Paul closes his letter praying for the “Lord of peace himself” to give peace at all times to the Thessalonians “in every way.”

No doubt concerned over false letters claiming to be Paul’s, Paul closes his letter signing his name in his own hand to show its genuineness.

ANALYSIS AND POINTS FOR HOME

1. “God *our* Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1, 2).

Paul wonderfully points to the inclusiveness of the church. We are one body and one church (as he will write later to the Corinthians and Ephesians). It was very important to Paul that everyone understands his common standing with them as well as their common standing with each other. Paul reinforces this with his constant prayers and encouragement on the issue of the church showing each other love. This is worthy of our consideration. Too often in America we live in isolation from others. We have our own cars, our separate homes with separate lots. We no longer go to a common community spot to wash clothes; we do that in the privacies of our homes. We do not jointly hunt for food that we divide; we go to the grocery store as we have time. We sit together at church, but we have a great urge to leave a separate seat between our family unit and the next one. We, in America, like our independence, our individuality, and our insulation and space!

Yet, Paul emphasizes over and over the unique harmony and commonality of the church. We need to fight against our natural inclination to live Lone Ranger Christian lives and join our brothers and sisters in love and unity. In our Sunday School classes that originate these lessons there is a HUGE plug for our connection groups.

Find others and integrate beyond your individual life!

2. “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1).

On the second coming, Paul writes some passages that are very difficult to understand. He speaks of the “man of lawlessness,” the “son of destruction” who “takes his seat in the temple of God.” Identity of the man of lawlessness has caused speculation in the church back to the time, probably, of the Thessalonians themselves! Some have identified the man of lawlessness as the Roman Emperor. Starting with the Reformation, some have decided the man of lawlessness was the line of popes, even though Paul seems to be writing of one particular person, not a line of people.

Another aspect of Paul’s teaching here that has engendered immense speculation in the church is the identity of the “restrainer.” In chapter 2:7 and 8, Paul references “he who now restrains” the man of lawlessness. The restrainer has been identified with the extremes of Paul, the Holy Spirit, the archangel Michael and even Satan himself.

We would suggest that absolute identification of the man of lawlessness with one certain person is impossible at this point in time. If we take Paul at his word, then this is a man who appears right before the second coming. The man has yet to reveal himself as such. We will deal with these matters more carefully when we reach the theological aspects of Paul’s teaching in the second phase of our study on Paul.

So if we are going to set aside more careful consideration of identity, why do we make this a point for home? Simple! Paul is writing to a church out of concern that the church has wrongly understood the second coming in ways that were influencing their daily lives. Some were apparently distraught over having missed a portion of the coming age. Others were evidently not living responsibly out of anticipation that the second coming was so imminent that no one need any longer plan for tomorrow!

Paul does not want the church so caught up in the second coming that they fail to live properly in the here and now. A brief review of church writings on this issue in just the last 30 years shows “confident explanations” of the end times that interpret current events in ways that are at least distracting for the church, if not outright embarrassing. Is Jesus coming again? Absolutely! Can we figure out when? No! Is it fun to try? For some it is. But let us always keep it in perspective. Paul would have us use the fact of the second coming to encourage one another. He would likely cringe to find out that the issue has actually caused church splits and fellowship issues over fine points of dispute over the how’s and when’s.

Know Jesus is returning, Satan will be destroyed, be encouraged by that fact.

3. “Some of you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies” (3:11).

Paul always keeps a foot firmly on earth even while his gaze is toward heaven. Today counts. God has a plan for his people in eternity, and that plan includes today. We should recognize that the future is our hope. It gives us confidence that what we do today has lasting value. When persecution and affliction are our lot, we know in faith that God is with us molding our character and refining our faith. When the day brings pleasantness instead of suffering, we know God is still there and worthy of our praise and attention.

Each day, each minute, we seek to serve him in faith and practice. He is not just God our Father, he is also our Lord!