

Study of 2 Thessalonians

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2 Thessalonians 1

The church was going through persecution (1:4–7), and some of the believers thought they were already in the Day of the Lord, that time of tribulation in which the whole world will be judged. It is possible that a letter, supposedly from Paul, had come to the church (2:1–2), or that one of the church prophets had given this false message during a public meeting. At any rate, Paul writes to explain God's program for the age and to encourage these suffering Christians to remain true to the Lord. He points out three purposes behind their suffering.

I. Suffering Helps Us to Grow (1:3–5)

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," wrote the Latin church father Tertullian; and history proves that it is true. A devoted Chinese Christian said, "The suffering in China has multiplied the blessings because it has purified the church." The Thessalonian Christians had a reputation for growing faith, abounding hope, and radiant love (1 Thes. 1:3); and their difficult experiences were causing their faith, hope, and love to grow.

Furthermore, their testimony was growing as well, for all the churches heard about them and their stand for the Lord. Paul was able to glory in them among all the churches. Their steadfast endurance was an encouragement to other believers.

Note too that they were growing in patience (v. 4). "Tribulation produces perseverance" (Rom. 5:3, NKJV). Of course, "perseverance" in the New Testament is not simply "waiting it out"; it is steadfast endurance in the Lord, keeping going when the going is tough. The Christian who prays for more patience must expect more tribulation, for tribulation is the spiritual tool God uses to make us patient.

When suffering comes, it will either make us or break us. If we accept the suffering, yield to God's will, and by faith continue to stand true, then the suffering will cause us to grow. If we resist the suffering, complain to God, and give up in unbelief, then the suffering will break us and weaken our testimony. See 1 Peter 4:12–19.

II. Suffering Prepares Us for Glory (1:6–10)

Paul does not look upon suffering as a burden, but as a blessing, a privilege. Suffering for Christ is a gift (Phil. 1:29). When Paul said that they should be counted "worthy of the kingdom" (v. 5), he is not suggesting that they could earn a place in heaven by their own merit. "Worthy" describes fitness, not merit. God fits us through suffering for the glory that lies ahead. Suffering and glory cannot be separated (Matt. 5:10–12; 1 Peter

4:12–14; 5:1). Our suffering here today is but preparation for the glory yet to be revealed (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:16–18).

But steadfastness in suffering is also a testimony to the lost world. It may seem that God is not judging the sins of the world, but this is not true. If we walk in unbelief, we will get discouraged, thinking that God is not vindicating His own (see Ps. 73 and Habakkuk), but God is preparing judgment for the wicked. Knowing this, we can rest in confidence. God will “recompense” judgment; that is, He will mete out to the wicked in the same measure and kind that they have meted out to Christians. Pharaoh drowned the babies of Israel, and God drowned the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. Judas betrayed Jesus to be hanged on a tree, and Judas went out and hanged himself. Saul tried to slay David with a sword, and was slain with a sword himself. Sinners reap what they sow.

When Christ comes to earth with His church, He will judge the wicked who will then be living on earth. They will suffer eternal hell for two reasons: they would not come to know God (willful ignorance, Rom. 1:18–32), and they would not obey God (willful disobedience). God commands sinners to repent (Acts 17:30); rejecting Christ is disobedience. Of course, the world will not be ready for Christ’s sudden return in judgment (Rev. 19:11–21) and His coming will catch them unawares. The order of events is: (1) the secret return of Christ in the air for the church, which can happen at any time; (2) the Day of the Lord (1 Thes. 5:1ff); (3) the rise and increase in power of the Man of Sin; (4) the sudden return of Christ to the earth with the church; (5) judgment on sinners and the binding of Satan for 1,000 years (Rev. 19:11–20:3).

III. Suffering Glorifies Christ Today (1:11–12)

Jesus Christ shall be glorified in His saints in that day (v. 10); but believers ought to glorify Him every day that they live. This is the burden of Paul’s prayer for the believers: that God might fulfill His purpose in their lives, and that the name of Christ might be glorified through them. Paul’s ministry was the Word of God and prayer (see Acts 6:4). He taught the people God’s truths, then prayed for them to live out what he had taught them.

Believers can be confident in suffering because God has chosen us and will never forsake us. The good work that God begins, He will complete (Phil. 1:6). If the sinful world seems to be winning the battle today, we can rest in faith, knowing that they will lose the battle tomorrow. Our responsibility is to live worthy of this high calling (v. 11) and to allow God to work out His perfect will in faith and power. Note the “twin truths” in this chapter: faith and love (v. 3); faith and patience (v. 4); faith and power (v. 11).

What should Christians who are in the will of God do when they go through painful testing and trial? They should: (1) thank God for His salvation and that He is with them; (2) surrender to the will of God without complaining; (3) ask God to give wisdom to understand His will; (4) watch for opportunities to witness and glorify God in the situation; (5) wait patiently until God’s purposes have been fulfilled. Of course, if we are out of the will of God and trouble comes (and it will!), we must accept His chastening hand.

This first chapter is a great encouragement for the believer in these trying days. The world is going downhill toward hell at breakneck speed. People do not want to hear or

heed the Word of God. Faithful Christians are suffering while godless unbelievers prosper. It seems as though God has forsaken His own. Not so, says Paul. The believer can “rest” (v. 7)—and this word means “the relaxation of strain”—knowing that God is at work in the world. One day He will vindicate His own and bring vengeance on the lost.

2 Thessalonians 2

Paul comes in this chapter to the heart of his letter, his explanation about the Day of the Lord and the Man of Sin. The Christians were “shaken” instead of established (1 Thes. 3:2, 13) because they had been told (falsely) that the Day of the Lord was already upon them. “At hand” in v. 2 should be “already present.” Paul explains that certain events must take place before this day of wrath and judgment can come to the world.

I. The Apostasy Must Take Place (2:1–3)

The word “apostasy” means “a falling away.” Here it refers to a falling away from the truth of the Word of God. While there were certainly false teachers in Paul’s day, the church at large was united on the truths of the Word of God. If you met another Christian, you knew he believed in the Word of God, the deity of Christ, and the salvation by faith in Christ. This is certainly not true today! We live in a day of “Christian unbelief”; people say they are Christians, yet deny the deity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and so on.

This apostasy, or falling away from the truth, is promised in 1 Tim. 4 and 2 Tim. 3. We are living in apostate days right now, which indicates that the coming of the Lord is near. The professing church (Christendom) has departed from the faith.

II. The Temple Must Be Rebuilt (2:4–5)

Paul promises the rise of a world dictator, the “man of sin ... son of perdition” (v. 3). He is not talking about a world system, but a person who will head up a world system. This “man of sin” contrasts with Christ, the Savior from sin. He is the son of perdition; Christ is the Son of God. He is the liar; Christ is the Truth. We commonly call this man “the Antichrist,” which means both “against Christ” as well as “instead of Christ.” This world ruler will be energized by the devil and will unite the nations of Europe in a great federation (the ten horns of Daniel’s image, Dan. 7). According to Rev. 17, the Antichrist will cooperate with the apostate world church in his rise to power, and then will destroy this religious system when he doesn’t need it anymore.

The program is as follows: (1) the church will be raptured; (2) the Antichrist will begin his rise to power in a peaceful way; (3) he will unite Europe and make a seven-year covenant with Israel to protect it (see Dan. 9); (4) after three and one-half years he will break that covenant and invade Israel; (5) he will abolish all religion and set himself up to be worshiped (Rev. 13); (6) at the end of the seven-year tribulation period (Day of the Lord), Christ will return to earth and destroy the Antichrist and his system. Both the OT

and NT predict the return of the Jews to Palestine and the rebuilding of the Jewish temple. When the Antichrist sets himself up in the temple, this will mark the “abomination of desolation” of Dan. 11:31 and Matt. 24:15.

III. The Restrainer Must Be Removed (2:6–12)

Satan’s mystery of iniquity is already working in the world, and we can see its godless activities increasing rapidly. What, then, holds back Satan’s evil program and the rise of the Antichrist? God has a “restrainer” in the world, which we believe is the Holy Spirit working in and through the church. God has “times and seasons” marked out (1 Thes. 5:1), and even Satan cannot get God off schedule. The One who hinders in v. 7 is the Spirit, and He will continue to hinder Satan’s activities until He is taken “out of the midst” when the church is raptured. Of course, the Spirit will still work on earth, since people will believe and be saved after the rapture; but His hindering ministry through the body of Christ will end. This will give Satan free course to fill the cup of iniquity to the full.

Satan will work through the Antichrist in miraculous powers (vv. 9–10), just as the magicians in Egypt imitated Moses’ miracles. He will imitate Christ’s powers (see Acts 2:22) and get the world to accept and worship him. Men would rather believe a lie than the truth! Of course, true believers who are saved after the rapture will not be deceived; it is the lost who will be deluded and ultimately end up in hell. They will believe the lie, which is worshiping and serving the creature instead of the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

IV. The Church Must Be Completed (2:13–17)

The Day of the Lord applies to the Gentile nations and the Jews, but not to the church. It is a day of wrath, and the church is not destined for wrath (1 Thes. 1:10; 5:9). The purpose of the Tribulation is the punishment of the Gentiles and the purification of the Jewish nation, which by this time has returned to its own land in unbelief. But Antichrist cannot begin his rise to power until Christ has taken the church from the earth. What a contrast between the church and the followers of Antichrist! We have been saved by believing the Truth; they will be damned because they believe a lie. We have believed the good news of the Gospel; they believe the false promises of the devil. We have been chosen for glory; they are destined for hell.

Paul makes a wonderful application: stand fast! Don’t be moved by world convulsions, political upheavals, or religious apostasy. All these things must take place, but God is still on the throne. As the end of the age draws near, it will be more and more difficult to live for Christ and serve Him. What should the Christian do? Hold on to the Word of God! Don’t listen to the lies of the devil—the teachings of the cults, the sugar-coated promises of false teachers. Hold to the Word of God! We have in Christ and His Word eternal encouragement and good hope.

We must keep on working. “Every good word and work” (v. 17) is a good motto to follow in these dark days. Keep on giving out the Word; keep on working for Christ. As we win others to Christ, we are building up the body. When the body is completed, it will be caught away to glory. This is what Peter means by “hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Peter 3:11–12). As long as the church is in the world, Satan’s program of

wickedness is held back; but once the church is gone, Satan will have more freedom. He will seek to destroy Israel and ruin mankind.

These are great and challenging days. May we be found faithful when He comes!

2 Thessalonians 3

The second coming of Christ is more than a doctrine to examine and study; it is a truth to grip our lives and make us better Christians. It is not enough to know about His coming or to believe it; we must practice it in daily life. Unfortunately, some of the believers at Thessalonica were abusing the doctrine of Christ's return. In this final chapter, Paul exhorted them to change their ways. There are three practical admonitions here.

I. Pray and Be Patient (3:1–5)

What a tremendous power the believer has in prayer! Though Satan is at work in the world, we can still pray to God and see Him answer. Paul's request was that they pray for his ministry of the Word. The only way to counteract Satan's lies is to share the truth of the Word of God. The Word is living (Heb. 4:12), and Paul desires to see it "run freely" (v. 1) throughout the world. Where the Word is ignored, Paul yearns to see it glorified. The Word did have free course among the believers at Thessalonica and was being glorified because they received it and believed it (1 Thes. 2:13; 2 Thes. 2:13).

He also prayed that God's servants might be delivered from wicked men. Wherever we take the Gospel, Satan will raise up unreasonable (perverse) and evil men to oppose us (see Acts 18:1–12). These unbelievers oppose the Word itself and even those who would give out the Word! We cannot trust men, but we can trust our faithful God. "He is faithful" (see v. 3) is the watchword of the steadfast Christian.

Believers need to be patient as they pray and give out the Word. God is able to give us this patience as we grow in our love for Christ. The steward who became impatient as he waited for his Lord had trouble with his heart and obedience (Matt. 24:42–51). Paul tells us to love His appearing (2 Tim. 4:8). Where there is love, there will be patience and hope.

II. Work If You Want to Eat (3:6–13)

Some of the believers had misapplied the teaching concerning the return of Christ. "If the Lord is coming back soon," they reasoned, "then we ought to give up our jobs and wait for Him to come!" Down through the ages, fringe groups have made this same mistake. They have left the world, gone off to a mountain, and waited for the Lord to come back, only to return home embarrassed. How foolish people can be when they resist the clear teaching of the Word of God! Paul admonished the true believers to withdraw from these lazy Christians who were disobeying the Word, that the offenders might be ashamed and correct their foolish ways (vv. 6 and 14). The faithful were to

treat the offenders as brothers and sisters, not as enemies; but they were not to put up with their sin.

He pointed back to his own teaching and example. While with them, Paul worked with his own hands and supported himself and his co-laborers (see 1 Thes. 2:9–12; Acts 20:33–35). He had repeatedly taught them to work faithfully as Christians and care for their own needs. “If any man does not work, he should not eat!” was the principle Paul followed. Of course, the church cared for those who had honest needs and could not work (see Acts 6; 1 Tim. 5); but the church is not obligated to help those who are able to work but who will not. Those who refuse to work become busybodies; they have time on their hands, and they interfere with other people’s business. This creates a bad testimony to the unsaved (see Col. 4:5). The truth of the second coming of Christ ought to impel us to work harder and to be faithful to obey His Word.

When faithful Christians see unfaithful Christians living as they do, it often discourages them. “What’s the use!” they say. Paul encourages them, “Be not weary in well-doing! Don’t give up!” (v. 13) Let’s be found faithful when Jesus comes and we stand before Him.

III. Hear the Word and Do It (3:14–18)

The Word of God is to be heard and obeyed. Those who refuse to obey what Paul has to say were to be marked by the Thessalonian believers and treated accordingly. This action is not official church discipline, such as discussed in 1 Cor. 5, but personal corrective action by individual members of the church. We ought not to encourage laziness. If each Christian would obey the Word of God, the church would be holier, happier, and more effective in witness and service.

One of the strengths of the Thessalonian church was its attitude toward the Word of God. They heard and received the Word, believed it (1 Thes. 1:5–6; 2:13), and shared it with others. But apparently some of the believers were becoming hardened to the Word: they heard it but did not obey it. The evidence of their unbelief and disobedience was seen in the way they lived, and their lives were a disgrace to the church. We must be hearers *and* doers of the Word (James 1:22–27).

Paul’s benediction deals with peace and grace. How these believers needed peace! They were experiencing great tribulation; some of their number had died; some were living disorderly lives. We can have peace in our hearts if we surrender to Christ, believe His promises, and look for His return. Nothing will encourage the tested believer like the expectation of Christ’s return!

This peace comes from His presence: “The Lord be with you all.” This is the God of peace giving us the peace of God (Phil. 4:4–9).

Paul added his personal signature and benediction of grace, which was the way he closed all of his letters, thus guaranteeing their genuineness. Satan has his counterfeits and forgeries, so Paul assured them that this letter was authentic and authoritative. See 1 Cor. 16:21, Gal. 6:11, and Col. 4:18.