

# **New Testament Studies**

## **Letters to the Thessalonians** *(RVS Notes)*

<b>1 Thessalonians Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1 Thessalonians Summary Outline</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1 Thessalonians Notes</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2 Thessalonians Introduction</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2 Thessalonians Summary Outline</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2 Thessalonians Notes</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>17</b>

# 1 Thessalonians—Living With the End in View

**Introduction**—Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was a prosperous seaport and was also located on the Via Egnatia, the main road running to the East from Rome. Originally named Therma for the many hot springs adjacent to the site, the city was renamed by Cassandra, one of the generals of Alexander the Great, for his wife, the half-sister of the Greek conqueror. Some estimate that the city had a population of 200,000 in the first century. There was a well-established Jewish synagogue which provided a natural forum for Paul to preach the gospel according to his custom. Thessalonica was a free city, meaning that it was ruled by a council of citizens and administered by its own “politarchs”.

**Author and occasion**—Paul probably wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians from Corinth during his second missionary journey in the early 50s. Acts 17:1-9 records Paul's time in Thessalonica. He spoke in the local synagogue on three consecutive Sabbaths after which he was forced to leave the synagogue due to the opposition of the Jews. He must have been able to stay, probably with a man named Jason (17:5-9), and continue his ministry for some time after his expulsion because the text records his gainful employment in Thessalonica, the reality that when he did leave the city there was a thriving church, and that he received two significant gifts from the Philippians, a town about 100 miles away. The Jews accused Paul of upsetting society and defying Caesar's decrees and ran he and Silas out of town. They also pressed for the imprisonment of Jason and others who had assisted Paul. Meanwhile Paul moved on to Berea to avoid bringing additional hardship on the brethren in Thessalonica (17:10). Paul's Thessalonian opponents even tracked him to Berea and stirred up trouble for the apostle there.

The missionary team then split up, Paul going on to Athens while Silas and Timothy stay in Macedonia. The two assistants caught up with the beleaguered apostle in Corinth (18:5). Presumably they gave Paul a report of the well-being of the Macedonian believers (including the Thessalonians) and Paul wrote these letters, not long after his initial visit.

**Purpose**—Paul writes to commend the Thessalonians and to encourage them to stand fast amid persecution and opposition. Timothy's report on the Thessalonian congregation (1 Thess. 3:6-7) prompted the apostle to write the letter:

- To give thanks for the healthy condition of the church (1:2-10).
- To encourage the Thessalonians to continue in faith as they had begun, especially in face of opposition (3:6-10).
- To refute attempts to undermine Paul's reputation and question his sincerity (2:1-12, 17-20).
- To clarify misunderstandings concerning the Lord's return (4:13-5:11).
- To address areas in which the Thessalonians needed to improve (4:1-12; 5:12-22).

## Guiding Concepts

**End Times**—The Thessalonian letters are particularly rich in teaching on the end times. The two letters, along with Matthew 24-25, and the book of Revelation constitute the primary eschatological texts in the New Testament. It seems that some of the Thessalonians believed so strongly in the immediacy of Jesus' return that they were asking serious questions about the status of deceased loved ones when the Lord returned. Some were even leaving their jobs and freeloading on the Christian community in the expectation of the Lord's soon return. Paul writes to correct their misunderstandings and address the errors in practical living that resulted from them.

The Lord's coming (*parousia*) relates to many aspects of practical Christian living—

- Salvation and assurance (1:10);

- Evangelism and service (2:19-20);
- Stability in Christian living (3:11-13);
- Strength amid sorrow and suffering (4:13-18);
- Sanctified living (5:23-24).

### ***Summary Outline: 1 Thessalonians—Living With the End in View***

- I. Salutation and Thanksgiving for Conversion and Conduct (1:1-10)
  - A. Salutation and greeting (1:1)
  - B. Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' initial response to the gospel (1:2-10)
- II. Paul's Ministry Among the Thessalonians (2:1-3:13)
  - A. Paul's initial ministry among them (2:1-12)
  - B. Thessalonians' reception of his message and work (2:13-16)
  - C. Paul's concern and longing to see them (2:17-20)
- III. Timothy's Mission and Report; Paul's Prayer (3:1-13)
  - A. Timothy's mission (3:1-5)
  - B. Timothy's good report (3:6-10)
  - C. Paul's thanksgiving and prayer (3:11-13)
- IV. Exhortation to Christian Living: Living to Please God (4:1-12)
  - A. General exhortation (4:1-2)
  - B. Sexual purity (4:3-8)
  - C. Brotherly love (4:9-10)
  - D. Earning one's living; pulling one's weight (4:11-12)
- V. Addressing Concerns About the Lord's return (4:13-5:11)
  - A. Believers who died before the Lord's coming (4:13-18)
  - B. Time and certainty of the Lord's coming (5:1-11)
- VI. Exhortation Regarding Community Life (5:12-22)
  - A. With respect to leaders (5:12-13)
  - B. With respect to body life (5:14-16)
  - C. With respect to personal living (5:17-18)
  - D. With respect to community life and worship (5:19-22)
- VII. Conclusion and Benediction (5:23-28)

# 1 Thessalonians—Living With the End in View

## I. Salutation and Thanksgiving for Conversion and Conduct (1:1-10)—

**A. Salutation and greeting (1:1)**—Three names are given as the writer of this letter—Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Only in the Thessalonian correspondence and in the letter to the Philippians does Paul omit his apostolic office in the salutation. Silas was a gifted prophet and one highly esteemed by the Jerusalem church (15:22, 32), a Roman citizen (Acts 16:36-37), and was chosen to be Paul’s companion of the second missionary journey (Acts 15:40-18:6). He was a reliable and faithful Christian worker who was later associated with the apostle Peter, especially useful in helping to compose and then deliver 1 Peter. Timothy was Paul’s trusted associate and loyal lieutenant. Paul regarded him as the apostle’s son in the faith. For a more complete introduction, see introduction to 1-2 Timothy.

Being in union with the Father and the Son meant a new sphere of life for the Thessalonian believers on an infinitely higher plane. Combining “God the Father” and “the Lord Jesus Christ” under a single preposition (“in”) demonstrates the Lord Jesus’ equality with the Father and hence his deity.

**B. Thanksgiving for Thessalonians’ initial response to the gospel (1:2-10)**—The church there was very young, not more than a few months old and already facing significant difficulties and persecution. Paul gives thanks for them in his prayers (1:2), remembering their work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope (1:3). Theirs was a combination of direct witness (1:8), acts of goodness towards others (4:9-10), and loyalty to Christ in the face of severe opposition (1:6; 3:3-4, 8).

Paul then relates what he knows about the Thessalonians, that the gospel came to them in power, in the Spirit and with deep conviction (1:4-5). Their lives were transformed (1:6-7). They became imitators of the apostolic team (1:6) and a model for other congregations (1:7). Their witness rang out (like reverberating trumpets) from their locale to all Macedonia and Achaia (1:8-10).

Their work of faith made them an elect people, turning from idols and trusting the Lord Jesus. Their labor of love made them an exemplary and enthusiastic people as they lived out the Word of God and shared the gospel. Their patient hope made them an expectant people, looking forward to the Savior’s return.

**1:1-4**—The church (*ekklesia*) is a “called out people”. The church is a group called out to be a new creation by the sovereign Lord Himself. This indicates a divine election, that God calls out a people from the world. The election begins with God (Eph. 1:4), involves God’s deep love (Rom. 5:8), involves faith (Eph. 2:8-9), and changes our lives (1 Thess. 1:3, 9-10).

**1:5-7**—The Thessalonians received the Word eagerly (1:5), became imitators of their spiritual leaders and suffered for Christ (1:6), and they became a model for other churches (1:7). They provoked other assemblies to love and good works.

**1:8-9**—They were witnesses enthusiastically trumpeting the good news of salvation. Their testimony carried a clear and certain sound. Other churches may have heard of the Thessalonians from messengers from Philippi carrying gifts to Paul (2 Cor. 11:9; Phil. 4:15-16) at Thessalonica.

**1:10**—Their patient endurance in hope made them an expectant people, looking forward to the return of the Lord Jesus. The purpose of the Thessalonians’ turning to God was to serve the living and true God and to wait for the Son from heaven. The early Christians expected the near return of the Lord Jesus.

**II. Paul's Ministry Among the Thessalonians (2:1-3:13)**—These chapters are a vindication of the apostle's character and ministry. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 considers Paul's conduct among the Thessalonians and 2:13-16 relates their response. 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 speaks to Paul's deep desire to be with them, defending charges of abandonment by the opponents. He sends Timothy in his own stead (3:1-5) and Timothy supplies a most encouraging report concerning the progress of the Thessalonians in the faith (3:6-10). The section concludes with Paul's prayer that this progress in the faith would continue (3:11-13).

**A. Paul's initial ministry among them (2:1-12)**—With a constant barrage of accusations by Paul's opponents, perhaps the Thessalonians were questioning Paul's sincerity. Paul relates his initial preaching with power even after his mistreatment in Philippi (1:1-2). The apostle and his companions were scandalously treated and humiliated at Philippi prior to coming to Thessalonica (see Acts 16:22-23). Their conduct in Thessalonica was above suspicion of any kind (2:3-4). His message was true (2:2), his motives pure (2:3), his method was without guile (2:3-6). Paul is distinguishing himself from religious and philosophical charlatans widespread in ancient Mediterranean area. He had suffered and that suffering had validated the gospel and had given him a sense of joy and freedom. His responsibility was to deliver the message without regard to his own place and status. He wasn't secretly trying to gain anything from them; he simply and genuinely wanted the love of God to embrace them.

The Thessalonians knew that he had not used flattery, had not been greedy in any way, and had not sought human praise (2:5-6). Contempt for flatterers is one of the most common characteristics of ancient moral literature.

The apostolic team could have been a financial burden on the Thessalonians, but were not, working night and day to preach the Word and to earn their own living through their manual trades (2:7-9). Their religious piety and moral conduct could not be faulted (2:10-11), nor could Paul's fatherly affection and concern be maligned (2:12).

**Query**—Could we describe ourselves as Paul describes himself? Getting past insults, suffering, and strong opposition, with pure motives, speaking the truth out of loyalty to Almighty God, without looking for kudos from people. If we were to describe ourselves like this, would anyone know who we were talking about?

**2:9-12**—These verses speak of Paul's fatherly concern for the Thessalonians and his commendable conduct in their midst. He worked night and day, supporting himself and preaching the gospel. He encouraged, exhorted, comforted, and urged them on to live lives worthy of the Lord Jesus. He was like a parent caring for his children in every way. He wanted them to continue and grow up in every aspect into lifestyle worthy of God. He was the model for them to become:

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one, any day;  
I'd rather one would walk with me than merely show the way.  
The eye's a better pupil, more willing than the ear;  
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear.

**2:9**—Many Jewish teachers had another trade other than teaching. While landowning aristocrats despised manual labor, for most of the ancient world manual labor was the means of livelihood. A manual laborer would begin work by sunrise and could talk with visitors while working. Paul may have used the early afternoon on for direct teaching and evangelism.

**B. Thessalonians' response to Paul's ministry (2:13-16)**—Paul then notes the Thessalonians' response to the apostolic team's ministry, including their ready and eager response to the Word of God (2:13) and their endurance of opposition and persecution that their reception of the Word incurred (2:14-16). The Thessalonians' reception of the truth was sincere and whole-hearted even amid

persecution.

Paul wanted them to know that their suffering did not mean that something had gone wrong with God's purpose for them. They were sharers in the suffering of the Lord Jesus and would like him be vindicated in God's good time. They were on the same road as the first churches in Palestine and as Paul himself. The church, in giving its allegiance to the Lord Jesus, was challenging the powers of a world hostile to the Lord. Caesar would strongly object to the gospel of another king. The Jews would strongly object to including Gentiles in God's salvation purpose. Believing passionately that God's salvation was for them only, they regarded as blasphemous the message of a crucified Messiah who offered salvation to Gentiles on equal terms with Jews.

**2:15-16**—Paul describes the Jewish opponents who had mistreated the Thessalonians and himself. In their stubborn opposition and misguided zeal, they had become adversaries of the Lord God and hostile to people. The wrath of God Paul speaks of in 2:16 is not capricious or malevolent. He does not instantly punish, allowing space for repentance. However, there will come a time when God will say “enough” and bring evil to an end.

**C. Paul's concern and longing to see them (2:17-20)**—In these verses, Paul stresses his deep affection for the Thessalonians, probably to counteract more slander from his opponents that he really didn't care for them and was not interested in seeing them again. Paul speaks of longing to see them and attempting to return several times. The apostle speaks of his reward and crown was the perseverance of the Thessalonians in their faith through severe trials. In times of trouble, believers need to take the long view of things. The prospect of glory and judgment ought to motivate us to faithfulness despite difficulties.

**2:18**—Paul says that “the satan” was behind his inability to visit them. Behind at least some of the ordinary frustrations and thwarted plans common to our humanity is a darker and more malevolent force. This force utilizes human beings and organizations to block God's purposes or hold them up for a while (e.g. Dan. 10:12-14).

### **III. Timothy's mission and report; Paul's prayer (3:1-13)**

**A. Timothy's mission (3:1-5)**—Paul demonstrated his concern for the Thessalonians by sending his most trusted assistant, Timothy, to serve them in his stead. He sends Timothy not just to see how they are, but to strengthen them in faith by his presence, example, and teaching. He emphasizes that suffering is inevitable for those who try to be loyal to the Lord Jesus (e.g. 2 Tim. 1:8).

Paul was left alone in Corinth, for both Silas and Timothy were sent back to the Macedonian churches. Luke omits this from his account in Luke 17-18.

**3:3-4**—Paul tells them not to be unsettled by their trials, for they were destined for them. But they were also destined to escape wrath at the Second Coming of the Lord.

**B. Timothy's good report (3:6-10)**—Timothy returns to Paul at Corinth with a most encouraging report. The Thessalonians had pleasant memories of the apostle and longed to see him as he did them. They had not written him off as an exploiter, disinterested in their welfare.

**3:9-10**—In Paul's prayers, he was asking the Lord to see them again and to supply whatever was lacking in their faith. He does not say nor does he imply that there is anything wrong with their faith at present; only that it needs to grow. Prayer at night was a mark of special devotion in Old Testament and Jewish extrabiblical literature.

**C. Paul's thanksgiving and prayer (3:11-13)**—This section elaborates Paul's requests in 3:10—that he be able to see them again and to strengthen their faith. He prays that their faith would mature

(3:10), their love would abound (3:12), and that their lives would grow in piety and holiness (3:13). Old Testament, Jewish teaching, and the Lord's own teaching looked forward to a future hope that would give meaning to present endurance through trials.

**IV. Exhortations to the Thessalonians; Living to Please God (4:12)**—Paul urges the believers to live to please God. Christian behavior must be pure, a total abstinence from sexual immorality (4:3-8). The believers must be united in brotherly love (4:9-10). Finally, Paul underlines for them the importance of industry and individual responsibility in Christian living (4:11-12). An obedient Christian will have a holy life by abstaining from sexual sin, a harmonious life by loving and doing good to the brethren, and an honest life by working with his or her hands and not meddling in the affairs of others.

**A. General exhortation (4:1-2)**—"Finally" show that the series of admonitions that follow will be the last part of the letter. Sometimes Paul's final words were brief (see 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:8; 2 Tim. 4:8). However, his final words could be extended as here (see Phil. 3:1; 2 Thess. 3:1).

**B. Sexual purity (4:3-8)**—Sexual purity was a critical problem in the churches of that day and in ours. Paul is concerned because of the known sexual looseness of the pagans, probably reinforced by his stay in proverbial immoral Corinth. Greek religion and culture did not provide any disincentive from engaging in sexual immorality.

The word for sexual immorality (*porneia* = fornication) used here includes all types of sexual sins. The Thessalonians lived in a world of unbridled sexual gratification. Pagan temples often doubled as brothels and all sorts of sexual practices were tolerated if not actively encouraged. That the Thessalonians could slip back into that attitude after their conversion would not have been strange. Paul's antidote for sexual immorality is a wholesome marriage. Paul's reasons for this instruction are to avoid wronging one's fellow believers (4:6), that God will punish such offenses (4:6), that they now belonged to a community with values that were very different from the pagan society (4:7), and that in disregarding this concern they would be dissing Almighty God himself (4:8).

Holiness isn't a popular term in our culture. Our modern world has turned sexual desire, preference, and practice into a moral free-for-all, where the only rule is that people must be allowed to express whatever desire happens to be aroused within them. Negatively, holiness conveys the absence of moral fault, which translates in our culture to being proud, petty, and priggish. However, biblical holiness is a positive thing, a shining reflection of the Lord Jesus in human character when we learn to practice what it means to be in God's image.

**4:3**—Paul seems to share the Old Testament idea that premarital sex with someone other than one's future spouse was adultery against your future spouse.

**4:4**—Possessing your own vessel probably means to control your own body. A believer who engages in sexual sin sins against his or her own body (1 Cor. 6:19-20) and is robbing God of the glory that He should receive by the manner in which a believer lives.

**4:6**—"Taking advantage of a brother"—Adultery was usually overlooked but could be seen as wife stealing. In some places, a husband who discovered his wife's adultery had to divorce her or risk being prosecuted for pimping.

**C. Brotherly love (4:9-10)**—On the matter of brotherly love, the Thessalonians had been exemplary (1:3; 3:6). However, further progress was always possible and would be a desirable goal.

**D. Earning one's living; pulling one's weight (4:11-12)**—Paul addresses the problem of idleness among the believers, perhaps due to an emphasis on and a misunderstanding of the Lord's "near"

return. They were misapplying truths about the Lord's return to their daily living. Few things disrupt the peace of a Christian community more than the unwillingness of some members to shoulder their part of the responsibility for the community. They may well have been restless and thus Paul urges them to "lead a quiet life". His exhortation to "mind your own business" implies that some of the believers had a meddlesome spirit. The busybodies were active and needed a reprimand. Paul's further exhortation "to work with your hands" suggests that their idleness tied into some attitudes of pagan Greek culture. The culture had a poor attitude concerning manual labor, seeing it as demeaning. The purpose of this exhortation was twofold—to win the respect of outsiders and to carry their own weight, not being dependent on others when that was not necessary.

**4:11**—Leading a quiet life was wise counsel for a persecuted minority in the first century Roman Empire. Paul is telling them to be inconspicuous, not monastic.

**V. Addressing Concerns About the Lord's Return (4:13-5:11)**—Paul now addresses the Thessalonians' concerns about and misunderstanding of the Day of the Lord. They were concerned with what part their fellow Christians who had already died would have in the Lord's coming (4:13-18) as well as needing information about the Day of the Lord itself (5:1-11).

**A. Believers who died before the Lord's coming (4:13-18)**—Christians were not to grieve the loss of loved ones as pagans grieve because they have a blessed hope. Most pagans grieved in very cathartic grief rituals. Paul believed that the soul lived in heaven until the resurrection of the body and that soul and body would be reunited at the resurrection (2 Cor. 5:1-10).

The believers in Thessalonica were concerned about their loved ones who had died. What if the Lord should return? Would their deceased loved ones be handicapped in any way? Will those who are alive at His coming have an advantage over the believers who had died? Paul assures them that those who have died will not be left out. They will rise first and then those who are still living will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. "Sleep" in 4:13-15 as a metaphor for physical death. Physical death for the believer is a temporary situation as the revelation that follows in this passage clearly indicates.

Note that the early Christians reckoned on the prospect of remaining alive until the Lord returned. They were thinking in terms of an imminent return, expecting to see it before their own death. They were not anticipating an intervening period of eschatological "birth pangs".

**4:14-15**—Paul had related the Lord's coming to salvation (1:9-10), service (2:19-20), and stable living (3:11-13). Now he relates it to sorrow and comforting the broken-hearted (4:14-15). He indicates that the Lord's own word clarifies that the dead in Christ will not be left out of the Lord's return. Believers who are still alive at the Lord's coming will not go to meet Christ before the dead in Christ do.

Questions about the source of "the Lord's own words" abound. Many see this source as a direct revelation to one of the early church prophets, perhaps Paul himself.

**4:17**—Being caught up in the air is paired with the royal coming and normally referred to emissaries from a city going out to meet the dignitaries and to escort them into the city. "Caught up" (*arpagesometha*) was translated by the Latin verb *raptus* and is the source of the popular designation of this event as "the rapture".

**B. Time and certainty of the Lord's return (5:1-11)**—The non-arrival of the Lord's coming was also a perplexing issue for the Thessalonians. They had been instructed with respect to the Lord's return, a day of deliverance for God's people, of judgment for his enemies, and a time of tribulation. Paul tells them that it will come suddenly, like a thief in the night (5:2) when those outside the Lord least expect it (5:3). However, the believers will not be surprised (5:4-11), but must be alert and self-



controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate and hope of salvation as a helmet. They could be assured that they were not appointed to suffer wrath. Their position in Christ guarantees their deliverance. They were to encourage each other with this word.

**5:2**—Paul echoes the Lord in saying that the Day of the Lord (DOL) will come as a thief in the night (Mt. 24:43; also used in 2 Pt. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). The DOL in the Old Testament was a day of judgment. The image of the DOL coming as a thief in the night will be elaborated on for unbelievers (5:3), but differently for believers (5:4-5).

**5:3**—Unbelievers are described as being unaware of events, believing they are experiencing peace and safety without concern. Their tranquility will be interrupted suddenly and tumultuously.

**5:4-11**—In awaiting the Lord's return the believers were to hold fast to the gospel message, and they would find in it all the comfort and strength they needed. As typical, Paul will use numerous word pictures to depict this truth. Light and darkness, alert and asleep, drunk and sober, self-controlled and dissipated. They were to put on faith and love as a breastplate and hope as a helmet. They were to encourage and build up each other.

**5:6-8**—Paul calls the believers to a lifestyle free from moral laxity. Not only self-controlled but alert as well. Inattention to spiritual priorities is utterly out of keeping for those awaiting the Lord's return.

**VI. Exhortations Regarding Community Life (5:12-22)**—These include supporting their leaders (5:12-13), responsibilities towards all believers (5:14-15), concerns for the believers' personal piety (5:16-18), and concerns for corporate life and worship (5:19-22).

**A. With respect to leaders (5:12-13)**—Heading this list of personal responsibilities is the proper attitude towards their leaders. They are called on to respect those in authority, to hold them in esteem, and give them whole-hearted support. Christian leaders are to rule in such a way that the welfare of the church is uppermost in their minds and hearts. They were to "work hard" and admonish the faithful, correcting by word or deed where needed. Both leaders and communicants were to seek earnestly to live in peace with each other.

**B. With respect to body life (5:14-15)**—These are commands for mutual edification. They were to practice an encouraging, forgiving, and compassionate body life (5:14-16). This includes admonishing one another where pertinent, encouraging one another, providing comfort for the timid, helping the weak and those with moral or spiritual debility, and being patient with everyone. Retaliation for wrongs done is off limits.

**C. With respect to personal living (5:16-18)**—Paul now turns to personal piety. He speaks of being joyful even amid difficult circumstances. Their perspective was to be heavenward even when their earthly circumstances seemed dimly sorrowful. Prayer and thanksgiving conclude this set of exhortation. While rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks do not exhaust God's will for us personally, they are vital parts of it. They penetrate the innermost recesses of human personality from which flows all outward obedience.

**D. With respect to community life and worship (5:19-22)**—Paul shifts from personal piety to corporate conduct and public worship. These are rapid fire commands. Don't quench the Spirit or treat prophecies with contempt. Yet they were to test everything, not naively accepting whatever offered. Paul does not specify the nature of this testing. Possibly an honest assessment of whether a positive contribution to the church's edification and mutual love had been made. They were to hold onto the good and avoid all evil.

**VII. Conclusion and Benediction (5:23-28)**—Paul prays for the Thessalonians (5:23-24), requests

prayer for himself and his companions, that they greet one another with a “holy kiss”, and that they read the letter in public worship (5:25-27). Once again, he exhorts to godly living (5:23-24) and to sincere Christian fellowship (5:24-27), before concluding with a benediction (5:28).

**5:23**—How does Paul conceive a human being? The question has been raised based on this text with the words “spirit, soul, and body”. Various views have been offered:

- He did not intend any systematic dissection of human personality. He uses a loose rhetorical expression emphasizing the totality of personality.
- “Spirit” and “soul” are interchangeable, referring to a person’s immaterial substance. “Body” completes the picture, referring to one’s material substance.
- Some break up the triad in translation, indicating that they do not see Paul providing a breakdown of human personality.
- Some think Paul saw human beings as a threefold substance—body, soul, and spirit. They distinguish the immaterial substances by understanding “spirit” as that which enables us to know and communicate with God and “soul” as the sphere of our will, emotion, and self-consciousness.

**5:26**—The church eventually gave up on the “holy kiss” as a personal greeting in worship because of the slander that arose in pagan society. In essence he was telling the Thessalonians to greet one another warmly. Perhaps a handshake or a fist pump is the modern equivalent.

**5:27**—Few people received a formal education, and not all the believers could personally read correspondence for themselves. Thus, Paul’s command to have this letter read in public worship.

## 2 Thessalonians—Encouragement to Stand Firm Through Difficult Times

### Introduction—

**Author and date**—2 Thessalonians probably was written shortly after 1 Thessalonians. Its background is essentially the same as its predecessor letter. The external evidence for the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians is stronger than for 1 Thessalonians, which several church fathers and apostolic fathers clearly referring to it. 2 Thessalonians was recognized as canonical very early.

Critics offer the following objections to Pauline authorship:

- The eschatology of 2 Thessalonians differs from that of 1 Thessalonians, one that represents a Christian perspective that arose after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. Specifically, 2 Thessalonians refers to events that must occur prior to the Day of the Lord while 1 Thessalonians seem to say the Day could happen at any time. The reply to that line of attack is straight forward. Differing circumstances in Thessalonica called for emphasizing different aspects of end-time events.
- The view of the last judgment is allegedly different. The reversal of fates of the faithful persecuted and the unholy persecutors is allegedly not in the Pauline letters the critics will accept. But this just isn't the case. Judgment on the unrighteous is traceable to the Lord Jesus himself (Mt. 24:15-22; 25:31-46; Lk. 21:22). Paul certainly does suggest a stern judgment on unbelievers in Romans 2:5-10.
- Critics say that 2 Thessalonians is post-Pauline in that it assigns divine attributes and functions to the Lord Jesus. They essentially affirm that Paul never believed in the deity of the Lord Jesus. In essence, they remake Paul and have him think as they do.

As for the date, the letter must have been written from Corinth shortly after 1 Thessalonians around 50. Paul, Silas, and Timothy are not known to have been together after that.

**Occasion and purpose**—New developments occasioned the writing of 2 Thessalonians:

- The persecution of and opposition to the believers grew worse;
- Some pseudo-reports and alleged letters from Paul were on the verge of convincing the Thessalonians that the DOL had already occurred;
- The nearness of the Lord's return had been used by some as a basis for shirking their vocational responsibilities and sponging off the community of faith.

Paul's purpose is to provide incentive to persevere (1:3-10), clarified teaching on the Day of the Lord (2:1-12), and issued instructions on disciplinary steps to be taken in correcting the idlers refusing to work (3:6-15).

### Summary Outline: 2 Thessalonians—Encouragement to Stand Firm Through Difficult Times

- I. Salutation; Thanksgiving for progress in faith; Assurance of God's righteous judgment; Prayer (1:1-12)
  - A. Salutation (1:1-2)
  - B. Thanksgiving for faith, love, and perseverance (1:3-4)
  - C. Assurance of deliverance and God's righteous judgment (1:5-10)
  - D. Paul's prayer for Thessalonians (1:11-12)

- II. Instruction on the Lord's Return (2:1-12)
  - A. Rebellion and revealing of the man of lawlessness (2:1-5)
  - B. Reality of lawlessness; removal of restraint (2:6-12)
  - C. Thanksgiving for their calling; encouragement to stand firm (2:13-17)
- III. Exhortations and Instructions; Warning against Idleness (3:1-18)
  - A. Enveloping prayer: Paul personal request and his prayer for the Thessalonians (3:1-5)
  - B. Warning against idleness (3:6-15)
  - C. Concluding prayer and benediction (3:16-18)

## 2 Thessalonians—Encouragement to Stand Firm Through Difficult Times

**I. Salutation; Thanksgiving For Progress in Faith; Assurance of God’s Righteous Judgment; Prayer (1:1-12)**— This section includes Paul’s salutation and greeting (1:1-2), a thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ perseverance through difficult times (1:3-10), including thanksgiving for their healthy spiritual development (1:3-4) and assurance of God’s righteous judgment (1:5-10), and Paul’s prayer for their future inheritance (1:11-12).

Paul owes God a debt of gratitude for all that had happened at Thessalonica. The apostle looked at it all and couldn't help thanking God for entire development. The sovereignty of God in grace, producing faith, love, and patience in the new believers, was matched by the sovereignty of God in judgment. God, in his justice, would repay those who, out of allegiance to idols and their dehumanizing ways of life, had used violence against his people. The suffering the Thessalonians had endured and the patience with which they bore them served as a sign of God's eventual judgment.

**A. Salutation (1:1-2)**—This salutation is identical to the one in 1 Thessalonians except that the Father is described as “God our Father”. He is the father of Christians. The second is the phrase “from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Two persons of the Godhead are specified and Jesus attributed deity in the fullest sense.

**B. Thanksgiving for faith, love, and perseverance (1:3-4)**—Paul thanks God for the spiritual progress of the Thessalonians. He praises God for he had accomplished in their lives. Their faith was growing, their love was abounding, their patient endurance was increasing, and their testimony was helping others. Suffering was producing in them abounding love. They were revealing their faith in God by their faithfulness in trials.

The conduct of his readers “under fire” was so commendable that he could not refrain from giving them credit once again. He bragged on their perseverance and faithfulness and saw it as proof of God’s righteous judgment. Paul emphasizes the reward God has for faithful believers who suffer. Present or imminent tribulation was to be viewed as messianic birth pangs, which must come before the era of the Kingdom.

**C. Assurance of deliverance and God’s righteous judgment (1:5-10)**—Paul speaks of assurance of God’s righteous judgment. He categorizes the participants (1:5b-7a), the circumstances of fulfillment (1:7b), and considers the two types of recompense to be dispensed (1:8-10). The believers’ firm stand in the face of persecution confirmed their relationship with the Lord God and was a pledge of their worthiness before God. They are under the heel of oppressors for the moment, but they will enjoy all privileges in God’s kingdom. However, those responsible for persecuting Christians would be repaid proportionately for the suffering they had caused. Their domination is tolerated now, but at the proper time, roles will be reversed.

**1:6-7**—The righteous receive rest and relief from tribulation only when God vindicates them by his judgment of the wicked. Verse 7 suggests a pattern based on Isaiah 66:15.

**1:8**—Recipients of God’s stern judgment include “those who do not know God”, those coming from a Gentile background, and those who “do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus”, those coming from a Jewish background.

**D. Paul’ prayer for the Thessalonians (1:11-12)**—Paul prays for their worthiness (1:11a) and for their walk in Christ (1:11b), that it would be resolute, empowered, obedient. Finally, he prays for their witness for the Lord Jesus (1:12). Christians must not be complacent in contemplating the final

judgment. Paul desires that the grace of God that had called them by the gospel would now do its full work in them. They were to be people who lived up to their initial call. They must allow the saving lordship of Jesus to have its way in their lives.

**II. Instruction on the Lord's Return (2:1-12)**—The Thessalonians thought that the day of the Lord's return had already come. To calm their hearts and to stabilize their faith, Paul explains to the believers that they had not missed the Lord's return. Certain events needed to occur before the Day arrives. Paul reminds them that a final period of rebellion constituted an essential prerequisite for the Lord's return. Many of the believers there may have only heard Paul's letter read once in the congregation and misunderstood the teaching concerning the Lord's return. In addition, there seemed to be false teaching from prophecy or by false report of another letter allegedly from Paul that alarmed the believers in Thessalonica.

Paul sets down certain features of the day of the Lord's return as a corrective to what some were falsely claiming. The false claim is summarized (2:1-2), the defiance yet to come is described (2:3-4), the delay presently in effect is delineated (2:5-7), the deception and destruction of the man of lawlessness after the delay is outlined (2:8-10), the delusion of the lie and divine judgment is described (2:11-12).

The purpose of prophecy is not to enable us to make a calendar for the future, but to build character for the journey now. Prophecy is not meant to invite speculation but to provide hope to live in the situation we find ourselves with robust faith.

**A. Rebellion and revealing of the man of lawlessness (2:1-5)**—The first prerequisite is the rebellion against God or the general apostasy. Along with that is the revelation of the man of lawlessness, the man doomed to destruction.

**2:1-2**—Paul tells them not to be alarmed by reports that the Day of the Lord had already occurred. How did this happen? False prophecy perhaps. False reports perhaps. Bogus letters allegedly from Paul, perhaps. Paul wants them to know that certain events precede or are included in the Day of the Lord. The return of the Lord should not be understood as a single event. Components include:

- The so-called rapture (1 Thess. 4:14-17);
- The manifestation of the man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:3-4);
- Removal of the restrained or evil (2 Thess. 2:7).

**2:3-4**—The man of lawlessness has several affinities to the beasts of Revelation. This defiant figure must come before or in the first stages of the Day of the Lord's return. He is the epitome of opposition to the laws of God. He is doomed to destruction (the same expression used to describe Judas Iscariot in John 17:12). He exalts himself over God, proclaiming himself to be God, exactly as the Roman emperors were beginning to do. Paul does not use the term "Antichrist" to describe the man of lawlessness. John uses the term elsewhere (1 Jn. 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn. 7). The Greek prefix "anti" has two meanings against and instead of. Antichrist opposes Christ and seeks to be worshiped and obeyed instead of Christ. Many have identified the man of lawlessness as the Antichrist of the last days.

**B. Reality of lawlessness; Removal of restraint (2:6-12)**—Paul speaks of the removal of the restraint of evil (2:6-7) and describes evil unabated (2:9-12), with an emphasis on the delusion that will cause so many to willingly follow and even delight in wickedness (2:11-12). Only the Lord's return will set things right (2:8).

**2:6-7**—There is much discussion among Bible students about who is restraining these evil forces and will be removed in the last days. Many in the early church thought it was the Roman Empire. However, others assert that the restrainer must have supernatural power to accomplish the restraint, causing them to point to the Holy Spirit's operation in the world in the present age. People focusing on the rapture

prior to the Day of the Lord assert that once the church has been caught up to heaven, the Spirit's ministry will revert to what he did for believers in the Old Testament. His function of restraining evil through the body of Christ (see Jn. 16:7-11; 1 Jn. 4:4) will cease like the way he terminated his striving in the days of Noah (Gen. 6:3).

Whoever the restrainer is, it is Paul's clear teaching that a time was coming in which God would judge an idolatrous world and its blasphemous leaders. He also sees afar off the return of the Lord Jesus who will destroy evil and put God's just and truthful judgment into effect. However, the events leading up to the Lord's return have not yet happened. The Lord's return is still future.

**2:8-12**—After the removal of restraint, Satan and his lackies will have an interval to do their worst. Satan is the root of the lawless one's ability to deceive, working all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders. In verse 8, Paul describes the end of the lawless one in terms borrowed from Isaiah 11:4. Those who refuse to believe the truth will believe the lie and be condemned. Not loving the truth leaves them utterly defenseless against the false claims and wiles of the lawless one. Failing to appropriate gospel truth, they willingly choose wickedness instead.

**C. Thanksgiving for their calling; Encouragement to stand firm (2:13-17)**—The Thessalonians are challenged to continue in the truth (2:13-17). Paul thanks God for divine deliverance (2:13-14), calls the Thessalonians to doctrinal adherence (2:15), and prays for their practical compliance with his instructions (2:16-17). They were to believe the truth (2:13-14), hold to and guard the truth (2:15), and practice the truth (2:16-17).

Against the background of the kind of imminent world crisis as described in 2:1-10, the believers could not be lethargic but respond with loyal steadfastness. They were to stand firm in the truth and hold on to the truth tightly. They were to hold on to the basic facts of the gospel, the central acts of a worshipping community, and the fundamental principles of Christian behavior. Then he prays that the ministry and grace of the Lord Jesus and the Father would encourage their hearts to be strengthened in every good deed and word. The end result of their standing firm would be that they would share in the glory of the Lord Jesus himself.

### **III. Exhortations and Instructions; Warning against Idleness (3:1-18)**

**A. Enveloping prayer: Paul personal request and his prayer for the Thessalonians (3:1-5)**—Paul means to surround their respective situations in prayer. Paul asks for prayer in his immediate situation that the word of the Lord might be free to run, so to speak, that it would make its way freely into people's hearts and lives, and that the word would be glorified (3:1-2). Paul also asks them to pray that he may escape the clutches of wicked people. When God shines a light into places where darkness has allowed evil to flourish undetected, it makes the unregenerate nervous, angry, and malicious. Note: Paul, perhaps the preeminent theological thinker of the early church is fervently requesting people a couple of months old in the Lord to hold him up in prayer.

Paul turns to the church's needs (3:3-5). He prays that the faithfulness of the Lord in protecting them from the evil one would be supplemented by the faithfulness of the Lord's people. He is confident that they will continue to live in the way he taught them. They were to focus their hearts and minds on the Lord Jesus. As they meditated on his patient endurance, his strength in suffering, something of that patience and strength would be theirs by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**B. Warning against idleness (3:6-15)**—Some had misinterpreted the teaching about the Lord's return, had left their work, and were living off the generosity of their fellow believers. They were able bodied but idle and yet expected to be supported.

- Paul exhorts them to do their bit; to get to work (3:6). These idlers were “out of rank”, a

military term for disobeying a command from a superior officer.

- Paul points to his own example (3:7-9). He had the right to expect financial support when birthing the Thessalonian ministry, but he didn't utilize that right. He worked day and night so as not to burden the congregation. His policy not only encouraged the new believers but silenced the accusative critics.
- Paul encourages the church (3:10-15). The faithful believers were discouraged by their freeloading brethren. The idlers were to be shunned if they continued in their lazy ways. Any recalcitrant idler was not to be treated as an enemy, cut off for all contact with the church, but was allowed to continue in brotherly status. Lines of communication were to remain open, but with continued warnings about his behavior, not in implied acceptance of it.

**3:10**—Behind this is a strong work ethic. Those who can work, need to do so.

**3:11-12**—Busybodies could refer to those engaged in superfluous activity, wasting their time on irrelevant details, or troublesome meddlers. Note that Cynic philosophers avoided work and with their denunciations of passersby they were certainly meddlers.

**3:14-15**—Full excommunication involved treating a person as an infidel. This is a shunning instruction, not an excommunication. Situations may require church discipline:

- Extreme personal differences between believers (Mt. 18:15-18; Phil. 4:1-3);
- Clear error on central doctrines;
- Believers overtaken by sin (Gal. 6:1-3);
- A repeating troublemaker (Tit. 3:10);
- Open immorality (1 Cor. 5).

**C. Concluding prayer and benediction (3:16-18)**—Paul prays for the Lord to give them peace (3:16), signs the letter with his own hand (3:17; he had been dictating to an amanuensis up to 3:17), and includes a benediction (3:18).



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