

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 14 – 2 Thessalonians

Two of the earliest letters that Paul ever wrote to any of the churches were 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The first letter was written to address the problem of severe persecution which these Christians in Thessalonica had to endure from unbelieving Jews living in their area, plus some faulty thinking they themselves had regarding the second coming of Christ. Some of them believed, for instance, that Christ would return very soon, at least in their lifetime, and, if that was so, they wondered what would become of those believers who died before He came.

The second letter was written only two or three months later, and not much had changed in the interim. What, then, was Paul's purpose in writing so soon again? Well, for one thing, the persecution had gotten even worse than before, and now therefore their need for encouragement was greater than ever. And, for another thing, the apostle had discovered an additional dimension to their misunderstanding of our Lord's second coming which he needed to correct.

Previously, those who believed that Christ would return in their lifetime had stopped working, had expected those who continued with their jobs to look after them in the meantime, and those who did this could not see anything wrong with that arrangement which they thought to be temporary anyway, and perhaps even necessary, as they prepared themselves for the great event. Paul had addressed this misconception, telling them to lead a quiet life, to mind their own business, and to work with their own hands rather than be a nuisance to others.

Whether some of these Thessalonians misunderstood this instruction, or simply reacted to it, we do not know. Whatever the case, some in their number came to embrace the notion that Christ had *already* returned – that is right – and they could not see, therefore, why they should get back to work, what purpose such employment could possibly have, and how what they were doing could be considered annoying to others if Christ Jesus had already come back and the end of the world was now very close at hand. Clearly, Paul did not want to leave them under an even darker cloud of error than they were earlier, hence the urgent need for this second epistle to set these matters straight.

In chapter 1 the apostle commends the believers in Thessalonica for their growing faith in Christ and love for one another, especially at this time when they are so heavily persecuted, and he seeks to encourage them with this reminder that such faithfulness and obedience will be richly rewarded in eternity.

At the same time, however, he acknowledges that they are not all doing as well as they should be. In order to stop the spread of any further error in their midst, he tells them in chapter 2 that Christ has not yet come, that His second coming is still a long way off, and that certain other things must happen *before* He comes. The Lord Jesus Christ will indeed come again as promised – and believers should be ready, living every day as if He could come at any time – but it will not be before the appointed day or prior to the fulfillment of all that God has foreordained to happen first.

This is where, without explanation, Paul introduces such notions as the falling away, and the man of sin, the son of perdition, who parades himself pretending to be God. It would seem that the reason for the lack of explanation in this account of impending evil is that Paul had talked about these things when he was still with the Thessalonians (see 2:5), and does not now, as he sees it, need to go into any further detail about it. At any rate, he insists that these things must happen before Christ comes again.

Is this the antichrist that the apostle John writes about? Is this the unbinding of Satan for a little season that he may again deceive the nations as he once did in Old Testament times? It would appear so, in which case that would tie in with the mystery of lawlessness (2:7) and the lawless one who has yet to be revealed.

It needs to be remembered, however, that the Lord will consume and destroy this lawless one (2:8). Those who perish in their sins will be deceived by him, to be sure, deceived because they would not believe the truth and be saved, but God has spared His own people that by His redeeming grace they may be kept from such deception. What a marvelous comfort this is, beloved, and this hope can serve as a sure anchor of the believer's soul in any and every trouble that he may encounter!

To help guard themselves against being deceived, however, Paul writes that Christians are to hold fast the traditions which they have been taught, and it is clear that these traditions he is referring to are not the man-made kind which lay

aside the commandment of God (see Mark 7:8); they are, rather, traditions which are based on what God Himself has commanded, traditions which spring out of the Word of God, whether spoken or written (2:15). The particular tradition he is underscoring here is that of working hard in the service of the Lord until He comes, faithfully waiting *upon* the Lord as well as waiting *for* Him.

In chapter 3 he calls them to withdraw from every brother who does not walk according to this tradition. Notice, he is not warning them here against unbelievers only, against people deliberately promoting heresy and immorality as he does elsewhere, people serving their own agenda, but he is warning them even against brothers in the Lord, fellow Christians who have gotten caught up with well-meaning yet twisted ideas of godly behaviour. In other words, these are not teachers who are going out of their way to deceive. No, not in this case. These are believers sincere in their views – though they are sincerely wrong – yet because they are wrong their teaching and practice must also be resisted.

Paul then makes reference to himself and his missionary team, how it was that they worked night and day among the Thessalonians in order not be a burden to any of them, but to set them instead a good and encouraging example. The rule is this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. Yet there were some among the Thessalonians who did not work at all, but were busybodies. It is better, writes Paul, not to socialize with such people to the end that they may be ashamed of themselves and brought to repentance. Nevertheless, he adds, they are not to be regarded as enemies, but admonished for what they really are, brothers who need lovingly to be corrected.

This brings us back to the fundamental principle for living the Christian life as stated by Paul in the previous letter, 1 Thessalonians 5:21,22, “Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.” It also calls for a special kind of patience and gentleness on the part of believers generally, and office-bearers specifically, who are counselling other believers who too easily get carried away by current trends of thought and practice.

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