

## **Yale Bible Study**

### **1 and 2 Thessalonians**

#### 2 Thessalonians 1: More Thanksgiving

There is good evidence that some of the letters attributed to Paul were written by someone else in Paul's name. Some scholars have thought that 2 Thessalonians is one of those letters. Those who hold this position cite several kinds of evidence:

1.) 2 Thessalonians follows the structure of 1 Thessalonians so closely that it seems likely that someone was using the earlier letter as a template for the second letter.

2.) The understanding of the end of time seems so different in 2 Thessalonians from the understanding in 1 Thessalonians that it appears to represent a different author—not Paul.

3.) The particular features of 2 Thessalonians' anxiety about what is going on in Thessalonica suggest a date later than Paul's own ministry.

4.) The fact that the author insists that it is Paul's hand that signs the final words of the letter may indicate that the pseudonymous author is protesting too much. This is just the kind of emphatic insistence on genuineness that might be expected from someone who has actually made up the whole letter.

Those who defend the authenticity of the letter have responses to each of these claims.

1.) 2 Thessalonians closely follows 1 Thessalonians at some points because Paul would still have the earlier letter very much in mind. Further, both letters follow a structure that is common in first century letter writing, so it is not surprising that structurally they seem to be much the same.

2.) It is impossible to discern what the range of apocalyptic scenarios might be for Paul. 1 Thessalonians is different not only from 2 Thessalonians but from 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 8, each of which was certainly written by Paul. And, of course, we have only a few of the many letters Paul probably wrote; and we have no direct access to the sermons he preached.

3.) Unfortunately, we do not have any independent evidence of the early history of the church at Thessalonica. We can propose plausible scenarios for 2 Thessalonians being written shortly after 1 Thessalonians and plausible scenarios for a later date. Different readers will find different reconstructions of history plausible.

4.) The emphasis on Paul's own signature makes considerable sense since he has been concerned that someone has misinterpreted his eschatological hope to claim that the second coming has already happened. By signing this letter, he authenticates this work over against the other letter or the interpretation that has confused the Thessalonians.

All our attempts to describe the relationship between the two letters are hypotheses. Two such hypotheses seem to us plausible:

First, as Abraham Malherbe suggests, the letter that the Thessalonians misunderstand is in fact the letter we have as 1 Thessalonians. Though this letter does not say what the Thessalonians have been led to believe, i.e., that the Kingdom is already here, it is entirely possible that some of those who read the letter aloud to the congregations or someone who served to interpret that letter provided the misreading that Paul intends to correct.

Malherbe suggests that the other main issue 2 Thessalonians addresses, the laziness of some who receive their livelihood as a dole from the church, is simply a further manifestation of the problem Paul had noted in 1 Thessalonians.

So, according to Malherbe, in a very short time after he sent his first epistle to Thessalonica Paul has learned of their misinterpretation and their disappointing practices and writes a second letter to strengthen what he has urged in the first—patience in waiting for the fullness of the apocalypse and the personal responsibility to work and contribute.

2.) The other possible scenario suggests that 2 Thessalonians is written sometime after 1 Thessalonians—perhaps toward the end of the first century of our era. The second coming has been delayed for a long time; and, not surprisingly, Christians either become discouraged or reinterpret the Kingdom as a purely present reality. The problems that the community experienced in the 50's have been exacerbated in the decades since. One of Paul's followers then writes what he thinks Paul would say to correct the wrong eschatology and to improve the disappointing behavior.

Though we favor the second scenario, we understand the question of the date and authorship of 2 Thessalonians remains unanswerable with the evidence we have. What we can tell from our letter is what is going on in Thessalonica and what the author thinks needs to be done about it.

### *The Initial Salutation (1:1–2)*

As with I Thessalonians Paul, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy are listed as the senders of the letter. Again, as in that earlier letter, this list does not imply that the epistle was written by committee but that Timothy and Silas are with Paul and that the message he writes represents their common opinion.

“Grace,” as we have seen, is a close verbal cousin to the usual salutation in Greek letters, “greetings”. “Peace” translates the Greek word which is the translation of the Hebrew word

“shalom,” which then as now would be a standard greeting. The word also represents the wholeness, fulfillment, and reconciliation that are central to Paul’s gospel (and perhaps here to the gospel of Paul’s disciple, if such a person wrote this letter). (From here on we shall refer to our author as “Paul” without trying to settle the question of original authorship.) It is a fundamental claim of Paul’s writings that “that “grace” and “peace” are gifts of God—sometimes of the Father, sometimes of the Son—here a gift from both.

#### *The first Thanksgiving (1:3-4)*

Like 1 Thessalonians, our letter contains two thanksgiving sections, 1:3-4 and 2:13-15. In other Pauline letters, there is one thanksgiving that strengthens the solidarity of the apostle with his church and sets forth some of the key themes of the letter that follows. Here the two thanksgivings provide a kind of frame (*inclusion*) for the prediction of the consummation of history in 1:5-2:12.

This first thanksgiving reinforces the bond between the author and the congregation. In doing so it uses an appropriate pedagogical device. Paul commends the church for being so faithful and then uses that commendation to nudge them toward fuller faithfulness.

#### *The Coming Judgment, Part one (1:5–12)*

It becomes clear that one theme of the letter will be the issue of tribulations and perhaps even persecutions. We immediately expect that one purpose of the letter is to provide comfort, and that will come. At this point, however, these very tribulations become the entry into Paul’s claims about Christ’s return.

The promise of judgment (v 5) speaks to the issue of the suffering of the faithful in at least two ways. First, suffering strengthens them in faith and makes them worthy of the coming Kingdom. Second, their suffering provides all the evidence God needs to work retribution on those who persecute and harass them.

Again, as in our reading of 1 Thessalonians, we cannot be sure of the nature and extent of the persecution. There is no evidence of widespread martyrdom afflicting these early Christians, and it may be (as in the first letter of Peter) that what they suffer is mostly ostracism and verbal abuse from the pagan society they have left behind. So, what Paul promises is a coming judgment, a kind of tribunal where those who have been unjustly persecuted are rewarded and those who have persecuted unjustly will be punished.

As with 1 Thessalonians, we have a brief but vivid scenario of what that judgment will look like. There will be Jesus' descent from heaven, a retinue of angels, and a flaming fire, presumably a purifying fire rather than a destroying fire (vv 7–8).

When Jesus returns he will be greeted by a host of “saints”—that is of believers. The faithful will not only recognize him; they will glorify him (v 10).

These features of Jesus' return seem to be typical of early Christian apocalyptic literature—literature that deals with the conclusion of history by God's intervention. Matthew 24:9-13 suggests that distress and false prophecy will precede the coming of the end.

Matthew 24:30-31 presents a scenario not unlike that of this letter. “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” (See also Mark 13:26-27)

The prediction of Christ's return echoes Daniel 7:13: "I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven." The scenario is, of course, much further elaborated in the book of Revelation: "Then I looked and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand." (Rev. 14:14). If our letter is in fact written by one of Paul's disciples for the problems of the later part of the first century, Revelation comes from much the same period.

Judgment will be pronounced on any who fall into the following categories:

1. They do not know God.
2. They do not obey the gospel.
3. They afflict believers.
4. They have not believed Paul's testimony about Jesus.

Unlike any other Pauline letter 2 Thessalonians goes on to describe the features of eternal judgment (v 9). On the one hand, the condemned will suffer eternal destruction. On the other hand, they will be separated from the presence and glory of God. It may be that Paul describes not two different punishments but one. To be separated from the glory of God is itself to suffer destruction; apart from God we are nothing.

Verses 11 and 12 bring us back to the thanksgiving prayer, or perhaps represent a continuation of that prayer. Again, the hope is that their faith and obedience may grow from more to more; and we know enough of Paul to suspect that before our letter is over he will be perfectly happy to spell out what that "more and more" looks like.

The end of this, the goal, the *telos* (to use the Greek word) is glory—twofold glory. The goal of Paul's prayers and the believers' lives is that Christ should be glorified and the believers should be glorified in him. This glory surely represents the glory at the end of time when Jesus

judges some for glory and some for separation. But in this letter as in others, the present time also provides the opportunity to glorify Christ and to participate in his glory.

What makes this glory possible is (as we saw in verse 2) “grace”—the unearned generous gift of “our God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” This simply reaffirms the strong emphasis in this paragraph on the strong working of God. It is God who will make the believers worthy of their call to be believers. It is God’s power that they are enabled to be faithful and resolute. Of course, God’s power is yet to be revealed with the fire and the angels and the shouting crowds. But they need only look at their own community to see that power active already. Judgment day will ratify what every day already demonstrates: the gracious power of God.

*Suggestions for Further Reading:*

Edgar Krentz, “Through a Lens: Theology and Fidelity in 2 Thessalonians,” in Jouette M.

Bassler, ed., *Pauline Theology*, Vol. I: *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 52–62.

Robert Jewett, “A Matrix of Grace: The Theology of 2 Thessalonians as a Pauline Letter,” in

Jouette M. Bassler, ed., *Pauline Theology*, Vol. I: *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 63–70.

Paul Foster, “Who Wrote 2 Thessalonians: A New Look at an Old Problem,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 (2012) 150–75.

*Questions for Discussion:*

1. Our discussion suggests that it is possible that 2 Thessalonians was not written by Paul but by a later follower writing in his name. Does this change your sense of how authoritative or helpful the book may be? (The same issue arises with several other letters attributed to Paul.)
2. 2 Thessalonians suggests that the suffering of Christians may serve to strengthen their faith and to make clear the faults of their persecutors. How do you understand human suffering and its relationship to God's love and providence?
3. This letter places stress on the judgment that God will bring on the ungodly at the end of time. In many of our churches we are very reluctant to talk about God's judgment, since we don't want to be judgmental. Can we draw helpfully on the claims that this letter makes about God as judge?