

# **2 Thessalonians:**

## **An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary**

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# **2 Thessalonians: An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary**

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## **Lesson 1: The Struggles and Growth of a Church**

### **Introduction**

In 1 Corinthians 10:13, the apostle Paul reminds us that the temptations and trials of life are common to man, or typically faced by others. The same applies to churches. Every church goes through various struggles and growth pains, and while they are in many ways common to other churches and we should never think of them as totally unique, these struggles do have a way of developing their own character and makeup as a study of the seven churches of Asia Minor illustrates (Rev. 2-3).

I have had the privilege of being part of the leadership of a number of churches in various places in the country. Three of these were new ministries that began with ten to fifteen families with new people coming into the church from week to week. This meant a conglomeration of people not only from all walks of life (teachers, carpenters, students, doctors, farmers, salesmen, and you name it), but from a large mixture of political, religious, social, and even cultural backgrounds. As these new ministries were birthed and grew, there were people from a variety of denominations, and while many of the beliefs of these various denominations were similar, many were very different. Some people were out of the Jesus Movement, and some were saved and came out of the occult and other religions. Some were from broken homes, some had been abused, some had been on drugs, some had been in jail, and on the list goes. And people do not leave their ideas and backgrounds at the door. Each brings his own perspective about life, God, man, and society into the life of the church. This results in a virtual hodgepodge of beliefs with varying responses and understanding of what the Bible really teaches about God, man, salvation, sanctification, prophecy, and other themes.

While the body of Christ is made up of many members with a variety of spiritual gifts given by the Spirit for its growth and health and ministry in the world, the Scripture teaches we are all to be transformed in our thinking and beliefs by the Word of God (Rom. 12:1-2). This forms our authoritative index for a belief and practice that is in keeping with sound doctrine which protects and delivers the church from the delusions and false belief systems of the world (Eph. 4:12-16; note especially vs. 14). God does not want to make us into a group of look-a-likes so we look like we have been cut from the same mold, but He does want us to know, believe, think, and live with the mind of Christ. In the process of this growth—a process that never really ends—every church goes through a variety of struggles and growing pains.

As a part of this process, there will sometimes be those who come into the church with their own agendas seeking to promote their own brand of theology or viewpoint about life. We once had a young man show up in one of our ministries who claimed to be Michael the Archangel from the fifth dimension. He wanted to speak to our flock and claimed he had new revelation from God that we needed to hear. On another occasion years later, I noticed a new couple sitting in our congregation. They were in their late sixties or early seventies. After the service, I went up to greet and welcome them. He immediately said, “We were very pleased to see that none of the ladies were wearing pants, because if we had we would have immediately left.” After talking with him for a few minutes, it was quite obvious that he was there to spread his brand of legalism. When he found out where we stood on such issues, he did just that, he left immediately. Here was not just a weak Christian loaded with legalistic scruples, but one who was set on spreading his legalism. These are extreme cases and all are not as obvious as this, but eventually, some may begin to promote certain doctrinal viewpoints or beliefs that can create problems of various sorts and degrees in any body of Christians.

But there is also, of course, the deep satisfaction and joy that comes from the spiritual change that comes to those who trust in the Savior and grow in the sufficiency of His life. Such joy is seen in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians in the light of the spiritual growth seen in the church at Thessalonica.

Such, then, was the case with the Church at Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul had dealt with certain misconceptions and fears regarding the coming and presence of the Lord, but while the church had continued to grow and was still enduring even greater persecution, certain problems had grown and others had been introduced by the

arrival of false teachers claiming new revelation by the Spirit or a pretended letter from the apostle Paul. This brings us to the background portion of the study of 2 Thessalonians. As always, it is the truth that sets us free and Paul writes to set forth the sanctifying truth of Christ (John 8:32; 17:17).

### Background

#### Author and Title

As with 1 Thessalonians, this letter was written by Paul (cf. 1 Thes. 1:1; 3:17). However, Paul's authorship of this epistle has been questioned more often than that of 1 Thessalonians, even though it has more support from early church writers. There is no evidence among the writings of the early church fathers that his authorship was ever doubted. In fact several fathers seem to mention Paul as the author of this epistle in their writings.

Possible references to it are found in the Didache and Ignatius, and Polycarp has two passages that are almost assuredly from the Epistle. Justin Martyr also clearly refers to it. In addition, the witnesses cited for 1 Thessalonians (cf. p. 232) add their support to the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians and an early recognition of its canonicity (Milligan, pp. lxxvi-lxxvii).<sup>1</sup>

It was not until as late as the 19th century that certain questions were raised about the authorship of this epistle. The doubts came from rationalistic critics who likewise refused to accept the Bible's claim to divine inspiration. Regardless, external and internal evidence support Paul as the author.

Objections are based on internal factors rather than on the adequacy of the statements of the church fathers. It is thought that there are differences in the vocabulary (ten words not used elsewhere), in the style (it is said to be unexpectedly formal) and in the eschatology (the doctrine of the "man of lawlessness" is not taught elsewhere). However, such arguments have not convinced current scholars. A majority still hold to Paul's authorship of 2 Thessalonians.<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with his parental love for these believers (1 Thes. 2:1ff), Paul's concern for these converts did not terminate with the first Epistle. He continued to disciple and build them in their faith and the truth of the Savior. Since this second letter was written only a short time after the first letter, the background of 2 Thessalonians is basically the same as that of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>3</sup> While still in Corinth, Paul somehow received new information about the condition of the church at Thessalonica and wrote this epistle to address the issues there.

#### Date

Because the historical circumstances are very similar to those of 1 Thessalonians, most believe it was written not long after the first letter—perhaps about six months. While conditions in the church were similar, the persecution seems to have grown (1:4-5), and this, with other factors, led Paul to write this letter from Corinth sometime in A.D. 51 or 52 after Silas and Timothy, the bearers of the first letter, had returned with the news of the new developments.

#### Theme and Purpose

Second Thessalonians was evidently prompted by three main developments in the report Paul received from an unknown source. He wrote: (1) to encourage them in view of the report of the increasing persecution which they were facing (1:4-5); (2) to deal with the reports of a pseudo-Pauline letter and other misrepresentations of his teaching regarding the day of the Lord and the rapture of the church (2:1f); and (3) to deal with the way some were responding to belief in the imminent return of the Lord. This belief was still being used as a basis for shirking their vocational responsibilities. So the apostle wrote to deal with the condition of idleness or disorderliness which had increased (3:5-15).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Frank E. Gaebelien, General Editor, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

<sup>2</sup> NIV Study Bible Notes, Zondervan, 1985, electronic media.

<sup>3</sup> See the Introduction to *1 Thessalonians: An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary* on our web site at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

To meet the needs that occasioned this epistle, the apostle wrote to comfort and correct. In doing so he pursued three broad purposes. He wrote: (1) to give an incentive for the Thessalonians to persevere by describing the reward and retribution that will occur in the future judgment of God (1:3-10); (2) to clarify the prominent events belonging to the day of the Lord in order to prove the falsity of the claims that the day had already arrived (2:1-2); and (3) to give detailed instructions covering the disciplinary steps the church should take to correct those who refused to work (3:6-15).

## Key Words

The key words or concepts are “judgment,” “retribution,” and “destruction” with each of these related to the return of the Lord in the day of the Lord. In fact, in this epistle, 18 out of 47 verses (38 percent) deal with this subject. In 1 Thessalonians, the focus was on Christ coming *for His Church* (4:13-18), but in 2 Thessalonians the focus is on Christ’s coming *with His Church* in judgment on an unbelieving world (1:5-10; 2:3, 12).

## Key Verses

- **2:1-5.** Now regarding the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered so as to be with him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, 2:2 that you not be easily shaken from your composure or be disturbed by any kind of spirit or message or letter allegedly from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. 2:3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not be here unless the rebellion comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction. 2:4 He opposes *and exalts himself above every* so-called *god* or object of worship, and as a result *he takes his seat* in God’s temple, displaying himself as God ...
- **3:1-5.** Finally pray for us, brothers and sisters, that the Lord’s message may spread quickly and be honored as in fact it was among you, 3:2 and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil people. For not all have faith. 3:3 But the Lord is faithful and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. 3:4 And we are confident about you in the Lord that you are both doing, and will do, what we are commanding. 3:5 Now may the Lord direct your hearts toward the love of God and the endurance of Christ.
- **3:16.** Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with you all.

## Lessons We Can Learn From This Background Information

**(1) Helping believers grow requires constant diligence and commitment to people.** The first epistle had been sent to encourage and correct the problems at Thessalonica, and one might think the problems had been covered and all would now be well. While we do not know where or how Paul received his report about the continuing and growing difficulties at Thessalonica, it seems obvious from what we know about the apostle that he continued to inquire and pray for this church. The apostle and his team remained committed to the needs of this church even though separated from them. In keeping with this is a second and related lesson.

**(2) Helping believers grow is a continual process that requires a great deal of patience and realistic expectations.** Someone has said, idealism without realism leads to cynicism. Because their expectations are totally unrealistic, church leaders and those who disciple others can become quickly discouraged or impatient. No matter how carefully and accurately one has taught others, that does not guarantee the kind of results he or she might expect. Elijah had clearly proclaimed God’s Word on Mt. Carmel and God had worked mightily to demonstrate He was the only true God. The results, however, were not what Elijah expected and he ended up in severe depression.

**(3) There will always be struggles and growing pains.** Because of the influences of the world in which we live and with Satan always on the prowl, we should never be surprised by struggles and the ever-present reality of growing pains people face (including ourselves!). In this world, we will always have tribulation or pressure and this includes the pressure and frustration that often goes along with godly concern for believers and their growth in Christ. The reality of this can protect us from false expectations. Certainly we can expect God to work and for His Word to work powerfully in the lives of men (1 Thes. 2:13; Heb. 4:12), but this never occurs without struggle and the need to resist the work of Satan (Eph. 6:10f; 1 Pet. 5:8).

**(4) If faithfully proclaiming God's Word, as was Paul and his team, there will also be growth (often a great deal of it) both qualitatively and quantitatively.** There is thus the need to recognize this and to be thankful to God for His grace and what He has done, is doing, and will accomplish. It's far too easy to become occupied with the problems and miss the blessings! The problems must be dealt with, but let's not lose sight of the blessings.

Thus, when news of the problems that had continued reached the apostle, he not only demonstrated patience and love, but he set about to address the issues and minister to these needy believers.

### Outline

Apart from the salutation and benediction, the book easily divides up into three sections:

- I. Christian Greetings, the Salutation (1:1-2)
- II. Commendation and Comfort in the Face of Persecution (1:3-12)
- III. Correction and Challenges Regarding the Day of the Lord (2:1-17)
  - A. In Relation to the Present (2:1-2)
  - B. In Relation to the Apostasy (2:3a)
  - C. In Relation to the Man of Lawlessness (2:3b-4)
  - D. In Relation to the Restrainer (2:5-9)
  - E. In Relation to Unbelievers (2:10-12)
  - F. In Relation to Believers (2:13-17)
- IV. Commands and Challenges Regarding Idleness (3:1-15)
  - A. The Confidence of the Apostle (3:1-5)
  - B. The Commands of the Apostle (3:6-15)
- V. Concluding Benediction and Greeting (3:16-18)



## **Lesson 2: Christian Greetings, the Salutation (1:1-2)**

**1:1** From Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. **1:2** Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

These verses are basically the same as in the first epistle to the Thessalonians,<sup>1</sup> but there are two small changes in the salutation that should be noted. Evidently, the persecution had not only continued, but it had increased as the following verses suggest. The changes here, though small, may be reflected in the missionary team's desire to comfort these believers.

In the first letter Paul said, "to the Thessalonians in God (the) Father," but here he wrote "in God our Father." Some believe the address in the first letter relates God as the Father to Jesus, but here to Christians. That Paul was speaking of the Father in His relationship to Jesus in the first letter is possible (see the exposition in 1 Thessalonians), but not necessarily. Regardless, the emphasis here by way of the pronoun "our" clearly focuses the Thessalonians on their relationship to God as their personal Father who loved and cared for them as His children who had been born into His family through faith in Christ. With the increase of persecution, they needed this reminder.

In the first letter, the apostle simply wrote, "Grace to you and peace," and now he added, "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!" Again, in view of their needs, this strongly focuses the readers on the source of both grace and peace. God is the ultimate source of both and this is found in the two persons of the Godhead mentioned in this passage. The Father and Jesus are connected with one preposition (*apo*), meaning "from." In this context, it denotes the point from which something begins or has its source. The source of grace is not only in both the Father and the Son, but this close connection drives home the reality of the deity of Christ.

This is the only justification for placing his name beside the Father's as co-author of the unmerited favor and harmonious relationship pronounced in this greeting.<sup>2</sup>

If we want to experience the peace of God, it can only come through a personal relationship with God through faith in the person and work of Christ for He is the manifestation of God's grace and the one who is truly the maker and giver of peace (John 14:7; Eph. 2:1ff).

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<sup>1</sup> See comments on the salutation in *1 Thessalonians: An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary* at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Frank E. Gaebelain, General Editor, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

**Lesson 3:**  
**Commendation and Comfort in the Face of Persecution**  
**(1:3-12)**

**The Commendation**  
**(1:3-4)**

**1:3** We ought to thank God always for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith flourishes more and more and the love of each one of you all for one another is ever greater. **1:4** As a result we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and afflictions you are enduring.

**Commendation for Abundant Growth in Faith and Love (vs. 3)**

As is consistent with the grace-oriented thinking of the apostle Paul, he begins with an expression of thanks to God for what had miraculously taken place in the hearts and lives of these believers. We can translate this, “To be giving thanks, we are morally indebted to God always.” To make the issue of our constant indebtedness to God perfectly clear, Paul not only employed the present tense twice (which may point to continuous action) but he added the adverb *pantote*, “always.” “Ought” is the Greek *opheilo*,, “owe, be indebted.” But this word implies a special, personal and moral obligation as distinct from purely a logical necessity, even though it is fit and logical.<sup>1</sup> To further stress this, Paul added, “and rightly so.” Literally this means, “just as it is fitting, worthy.” “Worthy” is *axios*, “worthy, fit, in keeping with what deserves to be done.”

The missionaries never took the growth and spiritual change in the lives of those they ministered to for granted or foolishly attributed it to anything in their own ministry, i.e., their hard work or methods or plans. They were simply the instruments of the grace of God. While it is encouraging to see people blessed and grow through one’s ministry, may we guard our own hearts from foolish pride when such occurs and from undue disappointment when we fail to see the results we had hoped for by always recognizing it is only by the grace of God.

The words, “because your faith flourishes more and more and the love of each one of you all for one another is ever greater,” points us to the reason for their thanksgiving. When going through the difficulties of life we can not only lose sight of God’s design to mature us in Christ, but also of our own spiritual progress of growth. Thus, in order to encourage them even more the apostle used two words for growth or progress, one that focused on their faith and the other on the progress of their love. In the first epistle, he mentioned the triad of faith, love, and hope. Because he does not mention “hope” in this passage, some have taken it as an evidence that their hope was waning, but not necessarily. The emphasis is on their obvious progress by virtue of both faith and love. Further, Paul does mention their endurance and faith in all their affliction in the next verse (but cf. Col. 1:4-5). After all, faith is the “assurance of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1).

“Flourishes more and more” is a word used only here in the New Testament. It is a compound of the preposition *huper*, “over, above, beyond,” and *auxano*,, “to grow, increase,” especially of the natural growth process of plants and that which lives (see Mark 4:8; Matt. 6:28; 13:32; Luke 13:19; 1 Cor. 3:6f). By the addition of the preposition, the apostle painted the picture of the abundant and above normal growth of a fruit-bearing tree. Spiritual growth is the work of God accomplished through the preaching of the Word, the trials of life, and through the prayer of the saints.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, T. & T. Clark, 1973, p. 99. See also Fritz Rienecker, edited by Cleon L. Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976, p. 605.

In the first epistle, Paul had commended the Thessalonian believers for their faith (1:3), but a faith that fails to grow becomes stale and idle or non-productive as we are warned in the epistle of James. Thus, being concerned about the stability and growth of the Thessalonian's faith, he sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them, while they continued to pray earnestly for their growth in faith (1 Thes. 3:1-10). Thankfully, their faith had not only grown, but it had flourished and Paul, being encouraged by this himself, sought to encourage them by this fact as well.

A growing and abundant faith is not only needed to handle the trials of life, but it is the fountain, the source of faithfulness for showing love to others. Thus, the apostle quickly pointed to the love each of them had for one another. "Both faith and love were growing like well-fertilized plants, beyond what would have been normally expected. This was an exceptional church."<sup>2</sup>

The growth of their love was another thing the apostle and his missionary team had prayed for (1 Thes. 3:12) and this too had been answered. Literally, the Greek text has, "the love of each one of you all for one another abounds." The apostle both particularizes this to the individual and extends it to the entire body of believers. It seems to include even those who were disorderly.

Defection in one element does not necessarily indicate that there is defection in all the elements of Christian character, but neither does the vigour of one grace compensate for the absence of another, as some at Thessalonica seemed to think.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of the disorderly is ignored at the moment, but will be addressed later in chapter 3.

### **Commendation for Perseverance and Faith in Their Persecutions and Afflictions (vs. 4)**

"We ourselves" is emphatic and shows that others had evidently spoken of the faith and love and endurance of these believers in the midst of their affliction. But their perseverance and faith were such that the missionary team was constrained to boast about this body of Christians to other churches, undoubtedly as an example of how faith enables us to endure in the midst of suffering, and perhaps also to show or teach the nature and work of suffering as a tool God uses to cause us to grow. One can not truly learn to trust God in the tough places of life by simply reading or being told about suffering. We have to suffer. Suffering is a necessary tool. If even the Lord Jesus learned the meaning of obedience by the things He suffered, how much more must this be true for us (Heb. 5:8)? There is a saying by Goethe, the German poet, that "talent is formed in solitude, but character in the storms of life."

In the vast plains of the Serengeti in southeast Africa, about the only thing that grows are gnarly old acacia bushes. These don't provide very straight arrow shafts for the little bushmen that inhabit the plains, so they've formulated an ingenious process to keep their quivers full. First they go out and find a suitable branch; it doesn't matter if it's got a 30-degree angle in it, just so it's the proper thickness and length. Next they'll build a fire, and right beside the fire they'll drive two rows of pegs into the ground, about six to eight inches apart. Then they'll put the branch into the fire to get its juices flowing making it pliable. When it's hot enough, they'll fish it out of the fire and jam it between the two rows of pegs and let it cool. It's a little straighter. Back to the fire, back to the pegs, back to the fire, back to the pegs ... until finally the pegs are right next to each other, with only an arrow's width between them. When the bushman pulls it out this last time, he's got a perfectly straight arrow that's useful to its maker.

We like the part about "useful to the maker," but it's the fire and that bending we'd just as soon avoid. If you want to be made useful, though, you've got to take the tough with the easy. We learn from the account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel 3 that God doesn't always take His children around the fire—Sometimes He meets them in the middle of the furnace.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983, 1985, electronic media.

<sup>3</sup> C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles To The Thessalonians With Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering & Inglis, London, 1914, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher B. Adsit, *Personal Disciple-Making*, Here's Life Publishers, San Bernardino, 1988, p. 96.

Phillips Brooks once said,

O, do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger men! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle.

The nature of the suffering at Thessalonica is indicated in the words used by the apostle, “persecutions” and “afflictions.” Persecutions is *diogmos*, a word used primarily of religious persecution, and describes the hostile actions of others. “Afflictions” is *thlipsis*, “pressure, stress, tribulation, affliction.”

The former is a special term for external persecutions inflicted by enemies of the gospel; the latter is more general, and denotes tribulation of any kind.<sup>5</sup>

The Thessalonian Christians were valiantly *enduring* these sufferings. “Enduring” is the verb, *anecho*, “to hold up, to bear with, endure.” The present tense aspect suggests that as the suffering was constant so also was their hanging tough day by day, week by week. The persecution that had started when Paul was expelled had continued and even increased. When enduring such persecutions and trials, whatever their nature and source, time can seem like an eternity, but Paul assured them that in God’s eternal plan, the sufferings of this life are only temporary and a glorious relief will follow. Not only can and must we learn to count or consider it all joy when we fall into the variegated trials of life (Jam. 1:2-4), but we must rest in the assurance of future blessing and reward. This truth the apostle takes up in the next section.

### Comfort and Promise in the Face of the Persecution (1:5-12)

**1:5** This is evidence of God’s righteous judgment, to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which in fact you are suffering. **1:6** For it is right for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you **1:7** and to you who are being afflicted to give rest together with us when Jesus Christ is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. **1:8** *With flaming fire he will mete out punishment on those who do not know God*<sup>6</sup> and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. **1:9** They will undergo the penalty of eternal destruction, *away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,*<sup>7</sup> **1:10** when he comes to be glorified among his saints and admired on that day among all who have believed—and you did in fact believe our testimony. **1:11** And in this regard we pray for you always, that our God will make you worthy of his calling and fulfill by his power your every desire for goodness and work of faith, **1:12** that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Future Reward and Vindication (vs. 5)

There are two key thoughts in verse 5. The first is a statement of fact: Their persecutions and sufferings were a clear evidence of righteous judgment, a judgment that thereby vindicates the work of God in their hearts (1:5a). The second is a statement of purpose: believers need to endure persecutions and sufferings that they might be considered worthy to share in Christ’s rule in the kingdom of God for which they are suffering (1:5b).

**The Fact Declared:** As indicated in the italicized *this is*, there is no break or new paragraph at verse 5. The Greek text simply has, “an evidence or sure token of God’s righteous judgment.” “Evidence” is *endeigma*, “evidence, plain indication, proof,” the proof as a result of a test. It is appositional, not to any one word, but as an explanatory equivalent to the general sense of the preceding clause, specifically, their endurance and faith in all the persecutions and afflictions they were enduring.

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<sup>5</sup> Fritz Rienecker, edited by Cleon L. Rogers Jr., *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Regency, p. 605.

<sup>6</sup> An allusion to Jer. 10:25, possibly also to Ps. 79:6 and Isa. 66:15.

<sup>7</sup> An allusion to Isa. 2:10, 19, 21.

The fact that they are enduring persecution and affliction for Christ's sake is a sure token of God's righteous judgment, which will be vindicated in them and in their persecutors at the Advent of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Their endurance in faith and love was an evidence, a proof brought out by the test of their trials suffered because of their faith in Christ. The present suffering itself has sometimes been taken as the evidence of the righteous judgment of God. However, the righteous judgment refers to what will happen in the future as the next clause will explain. Those who were persecuting them were doing so because they had not trusted in Christ, i.e., they had rejected the gospel (cf. vss. 8-10). On the other hand, the endurance and faith in such conditions was clearly the work of God within the hearts of these believers. In the future, each would be dealt with accordingly.

**The Purpose Stated:** "To make (count) you worthy of the kingdom of God" points us to the intended result or purpose. The verb used here is *kataxioo*, "to deem, declare, or count as worthy." It does not mean to make worthy. In other words, their endurance demonstrates their worthiness, not to enter the kingdom, which can only be done by faith in Christ, but to share in the rule and reign of Christ as promised in other places (Rev. 3:21; 2:26; and note particularly 2 Tim. 2:12a, "If we endure, we will also reign with him.")<sup>9</sup>

Withstanding present pressures demonstrates the rightness of God's future judgment. Some have seen present judgment in this reference because *endeixis* ("sign," "proof"), a cognate of *endeigma* ("evidence"), usually speaks of something already in force and because Peter views present suffering as a phase of God's judgment (1 Peter 4:17) (Auberlen and Riggenbach, p. 115; Olshausen, *Biblical Commentary*, 7:463). Yet subsequent descriptions (vv. 6-10) relate so integrally to future accountability with the accompanying thought of reward for sufferers and retaliation against offenders that an understanding of present judgment is practically impossible (Hiebert, p. 285; Moffatt, EGT, 4:45; Lightfoot, p. 100). Quite clearly Paul uses a corresponding term (*dikaiokrisias*, "righteous judgment") in Romans 2:5 with this future sense (Frame, p. 226). The fact is that righteous judgment in 1:5a sets the tone for five and one-half verses about what is to come. The persecuted must understand clearly its twofold nature.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the believers at Thessalonica were being comforted by the fact that their endurance was a proof of God's work within their hearts and a guarantee that He would keep His promises regarding their future reward in the kingdom.

"For which you are in fact suffering." The translation "in fact" understands the conjunction *kai*, which normally means, "and, even, also," to be emphatic here, "indeed, in fact, certainly." If Paul intended the *kai* to have the more common meaning, "also," he was perhaps reminding them they were not alone in their suffering for the Savior. Regardless, the clear intent was to remind them that they were suffering for the kingdom (equivalent to suffering for Christ) and that this was and is never in vain. In God's righteous judgment, things will be made right.

### Future Recompense and Relaxation (vss. 6-10)

With verses 6-10, Paul moves from the general deduction of verse 5 to an explanation of the nature of this future righteous judgment of God just mentioned. This future reckoning of God guarantees a twofold recompense, one a *retribution* on the wicked and one the *kingdom rest* for the righteous. The word recompense simply means "to repay, return what is due."

The first reason persecutions and suffering are an evidence of the future righteous judgment of God is found in the fact of God's absolute holiness. Because God is a holy and righteous God, it is righteous (right and just) for God to recompense tribulation to those who have persecuted believers (1:6). "Repay" is the Greek *antapodido*, "to

<sup>8</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 149.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion on the distinction between entrance into the kingdom of God and receiving one's inheritance and reigning in the kingdom, see Joseph C. Dillow's, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, Schoettle Publishing Co. Hayesville, NC, 1992, chapters 3-5, and Michael Eaton's chapter on "Inheritance" in *No Condemnation, A New Theology of Assurance*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1995, pp. 175f.

<sup>10</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Frank E. Gaebelien, General Editor, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

give back as an equivalent, repay, return.” It is used in Luke 14:14 of rewards at the resurrection, and in Romans 12:19 of the repayment of God’s wrath or retribution on evil doers. In this life, we do not always see justice meted out for wickedness. The apparent prosperity of the wicked and their persecution of those who know and love God has long been a problem for God’s people (see Ps. 73; Hab. 1; Jer. 12:1). Here in verses 6-9 the verb is used of both the recompense of retribution and reward. This is a clear illustration of the truth that people will eventually reap in accordance with what they have sown. People may think they have gotten away with things or proudly think, “I did it my way,” as the late Frank Sinatra so often sang, but that is simply a figment of fallen man’s imagination.

... The Christ rejecting world will receive from God exactly what it gave to God’s people! When God recompenses, He pays in kind; for there is a law of compensation that operates in human history.

Pharaoh tried to drown all the male babies born to the Jews, and his own army was drowned in the Red Sea. Haman plotted to wipe out the Jews, and he and his own sons were wiped out. The advisors of King Darius forced him to arrest Daniel and throw him into a lions’ den, but later they themselves were thrown to the lions. The unbelieving Jewish leaders who sacrificed Christ in order to save the nation (John 11:49-53) in a few years saw their city destroyed and their nation scattered.<sup>11</sup>

The fact of the future recompense of God is begun with the declaration, “for it is right (*dikaiois*, “right, just, righteous”) with God.” “For” is *eiper*, which is emphatic and means “if indeed, or since.” It introduces us to the reason or cause. Such payback stems from the absolute holy character of God. It is right and just for a holy God to judge sin and condemn the sinner who will not repent and come to Christ (see vs. 8, John 3:36). As one who is perfect holiness, God is not one who can ignore sin and rebellion. As the prophet Habakkuk put it, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong” (Hab. 1:13a). People who claim such retribution is inconsistent with a God of love and refuse to believe in a God who would punish people in this way understand neither the holiness of God nor the nature of their own sin and sinfulness. The Bible emphasizes both the holiness (actually emphasized more than any of His attributes, including His love) and the love of God. One part of God’s character will not, indeed cannot, bypass another part. For instance, Scripture tells us that “God cannot lie” (Tit. 1:2). Why? Because it is totally contrary to His holy character. Though God is love, He cannot and will not overlook sin. In His holiness He must deal justly with sin and the sinner, but because He is also love, righteousness, grace, and mercy, He provided the solution through the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### ***Summary verses 7-10***

Verses 7-10 describe in more detail just why persecutions and sufferings are evidence of the righteous nature of the future judgment of God when the Lord returns. Paul is telling them that though suffering now for their faith, God, who is faithful to His promises (see Tit. 1:2), will reward believers like them and the apostolic team with kingdom “rest” when the Lord Jesus returns with His mighty angels from heaven (1:7). This rest and bliss of the future state are a further outworking of the justice of God. At this time, God will pay back retribution to those who have persecuted the church (1:8a) and the reason God will sentence them is because they do not acknowledge God and do not obey the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as had the believers at Thessalonica (1:8b). Furthermore, the nature of their punishment will be eternal destruction from the presence of God (vs. 9). The final accomplishment and design of the future revelation of the Lord at His return is that He will be glorified along with His saints (1:10a) and worshipped by all who believed like the Thessalonians who believed the apostolic witness. (1:10b).

### ***The Participants***

Participants in God’s righteous judgment fall into two characterizations seen in the play made on the words “afflict,” “affliction,” “being afflicted.” The participants are described as (1) those afflicting believers because of unbelief in Christ and (2) those being afflicted because of their faith in Christ. As verses 8 and 10 show, the ultimate issue is knowing God through faith in the gospel. Those who persecute believers do not know the Lord and those who are afflicted do. One is the evidence of the other. The ultimate sin that brings the retribution, then, is the absence of obedience to the gospel, faith in Christ (see John 16:8f).

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<sup>11</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, pp. 129-130.

For one, the future holds the most severe threat. Though their domination is tolerated for the present, when the proper time comes, the roles will be reversed. The second class, though under the heel of the other for the moment, will become the overcomers who will enjoy all privileges in God's kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

In considering the participants, there is another issue that should be discussed. Those who believe in the posttribulational view of the rapture restrict the participants to only those Christians who survive the Tribulation and are alive at the rapture. In this view, the passage only applies to the release of Christians who will be living at the conclusion of the Tribulation. But this is inconsistent with the nature of the reward or rest used as an encouragement here, along with other important considerations. Concerning the participants and the post-trib viewpoint, Ryrie writes:

If that is true, why does Paul seemingly ignore the Thessalonians, who had suffered persecution and who had already died? Death was the means of release for them. Indeed, why does he not mention that avenue of release, which some of those to whom he was writing might yet experience? To be sure, the rapture of the living will bring release from persecution, but only a relatively small percentage of believers will ever experience that means of release, since most will have died prior to the rapture. If release is Paul's chief concern here, and if that release will come at the posttrib rapture, then Paul is offering that hope of release to a very small group of believers.<sup>13</sup>

From the writings of Paul, it is clear that he lived in view of the imminent return of the Lord, but he also knew Christ might not come in his lifetime. As mentioned in the study of 1 Thessalonians, the apostle divided believers into two classes—the living and the dead. Because Christ's return is imminent and yet, because no man knows when it will be, Paul sometimes included himself with: (a) the dead, with those who would experience resurrection (2 Cor. 4:14), (b) sometimes with the living, with the living who would experience transformation (here and 1 Cor. 15:51, 52), (c) and sometimes in the category of either possibility (2 Cor. 5:1-8). Because of the believer's sure and living hope through the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul looked and hoped for the return of the Lord in his day. But here in 2 Thessalonians 1 the apostle had something in mind that would apply to all believers of the past, present, and future, regardless when the rapture occurs.

### ***The Nature of the Recompense***

The recompense naturally falls into two characterization—affliction and rest. The nature of this is developed in verses 8-10.

***First, the affliction is described as “punishment” or “vengeance” and then as “paying a penalty.”*** The penalty is then described as “eternal ruin from the presence of the Lord . . .” “Punishment” in verse 8 is *ekdike*, *sis*, “vengeance, punishment, vindication.” This word suggests full and complete punishment. Hogg and Vine describe it as: “‘that which precedes out of justice;’ not, as is often the case with human vengeance, out of a felling of indignation, or a sense of injury. There is thus no element of vindictiveness, of ‘taking revenge,’ or of self-gratification, in the judgments of God; they are both holy and right, Rev. 16:7.”<sup>14</sup>

We must not, therefore confuse this word with man's idea of *revenge*. This is a punishment or vindication that stems totally from the righteousness of God to satisfy God's holy law and holy character.

But what is the nature of this just punishment that God will inflict? This is spelled out in verse 9. Literally the Greek text says, “Who shall pay a penalty, eternal destruction from the face of the Lord.” The pronoun “who” is a qualitative pronoun, *hostis*. It is often used “to emphasize a characteristic or quality, by which a preceding statement is to be confirmed.”<sup>15</sup> “Penalty” is *dike*, “a penalty that which is right, just.” This word is closely associated with

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Come Quickly Lord Jesus, What You Need To Know About the Rapture*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, 1996, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> Hogg and Vine, p. 231.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

dikaïos, “righteous.” So what is that penalty? It is “eternal destruction from the face of the Lord.” “Destruction” is *olethros*. The key note in this word is that of ruin. “The word does not mean annihilation, but implies the loss of all things that give worth to existence.”<sup>16</sup>

This is “the most express statement in St. Paul’s Epistles of the eternity of future punishment” (Edward Headland and Henry B. Swete, *The Epistle to the Thessalonians*, London: Hatchard, 1863, p. 137). The punishment of the wicked will be neither temporary nor will it be annihilation, but it will continue throughout eternity and those being punished will be conscious. It is eternal death as opposed to eternal life (Matt. 25:46).<sup>17</sup>

The nature of this ruination is seen in the clause that follows: eternal separation away from the face, the presence of the Lord. It is hard for sinful man to grasp the significance of this because of the effects of the fall and man’s alienation from God, but at the heart is the very reason for man’s creation. Man was created to have fellowship with God and to represent Him in a very meaningful, purposeful existence on this earth. Man was created to glorify and serve God and enjoy the bliss of a life full of joy, meaning, and significance. Through faith in Christ, man is not only brought back into a relationship where he can have fellowship with the living God even here on earth, but into a life of significance and purpose. But even this pales in significance with the glory to follow in the future kingdom and eternal state after the coming of Christ. Though it stretches our minds to grasp it, Revelation 21-22 gives us something of the glory and bliss of the eternal future. Thus, to be separated from this glory is truly a ruination of life. And one more point here: we should not lose sight of the fact that it is being in the Lord’s presence that will make heaven truly heaven.

**Second, the reward side of recompense is described as “rest.”** This is *anesis*, “a loosening, a relaxation.” As mentioned, some have sought to understand this as a rest brought about by the removal of the pain of affliction caused by the Tribulation. They have then used this passage to teach a posttribulation return of Christ. If this were Paul’s point, *anapausis*, “a stopping, ceasing” or “rest from labor,” would seem to have been a more appropriate word, but even *anapausis*, due to contextual considerations and its use in similar contexts elsewhere (see Rev. 6:9-11 discussed below), would not necessarily imply rest by removal from the Tribulation. Rather, *anesis* refers to the kingdom rest that all believers of all ages will enjoy when the Lord will deal justly with sin and sinners who have persecuted the saints and ignored, rejected, or even mocked the grace of God and His right to rule over them. This is true whether in Paul’s day, or in our day, or anytime between or after. A good illustration of this is seen in Revelation 6 and 7.

Revelation 6:9-11 speaks about the martyred believers of the Tribulation. They are here seen in the presence of God and no longer suffering in the Tribulation, but they **are not resting**. They are **perplexed** and cry out with a loud voice to God over the lack of the justice being poured on the earth dwellers who had persecuted or martyred them. They want to see the vindication of God’s holiness against sin. Note that they are told **to rest** (the middle voice of *anapauo*, “to take rest, remain quiet”) for a short time. Why? Because soon the Savior would return and would then bring justice or retribution. So the issue here is not one of rest through removal from the affliction of the Tribulation since they are in God’s presence, but an emotional or spiritual rest while awaiting the return of Christ which would bring about justice against sin and establish God’s kingdom rest for His people. This is expressed in the next chapter and in other portions of Revelation.

Then in Revelation 7:10-17 we are given a picture of a great multitude from every tribe, tongue, and nation before the throne of God in heaven, out of reach of the Tribulation and its horrors. As explained by the passage, they are those who will be martyred during the Tribulation. In keeping with the context of Revelation, a context that anticipates the coming of Christ and the establishment of His rule on earth, the focus even for these saints in heaven is on the great salvation that God is about to establish on earth. It is an anticipation of the kingdom rest that will follow with the promise of continuous protection by the Lamb. This **guarantees** that never again will they face such **pain** or **sorrow**, but certainly part of the rest envisioned and the praise to God offered stems from the fact God’s holiness will be vindicated by the recompense to be poured out on a Christ rejecting and rebellious world (see also Rev. 4:11; 5:8-14; 8:1-6; 15:1-8; 16:4-7). We should note especially Revelation 16:4-7:

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<sup>16</sup> Rienecker, pp. 606-7.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983, 1985, electronic media.



**16:4** Then the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and the springs of water, and they turned into blood. **16:5** Now I heard the angel of the waters saying:

“You are just—the one who is and who was,  
the Holy One—because you have passed these judgments,  
**16:6** because they poured out the blood of your saints and prophets,  
so you have given them blood to drink. They got what they deserved!”

**16:7** Then I heard the altar reply, “Yes, Lord God All-Powerful, your judgments are true and just!”

### *The Time of the Recompense*

“When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven . . .” (lit., “in or at the revelation of the Lord Jesus”) identifies the time of God’s righteous judgment. The coming of the Lord Jesus to earth will occasion the recompense, the time of “paying back” (vs. 6) of both those who afflict (unbelievers) and the ones afflicted (believers). See also the comments below on verse 10.

### *Other Circumstances Surrounding the Recompense*

Two other key elements related to the recompense accomplished by the return of Christ are described, first in verses 7b-8a, “when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,” and then in verse 10, “when He comes to be glorified among His saints and admired on that day among all who have believed—and you did in fact believe our testimony.” The first focuses on the recompense of judgment and the other on the glory that will be a central part of the believer’s rest in the coming of the Savior to the earth.

First, from the standpoint of this future judgment, two things characterize the Lord’s return to earth at the end of the Tribulation.

- **He will be attended by His mighty angels.** Angels are not mentioned in connection with Christ’s return for the church in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. When He comes to earth at the end of the Tribulation, He will not only be accompanied by His saints (Rev. 19), but by His angels who have always served as God’s attendants in executing His purposes. They are described as mighty in strength and will serve as His instruments of judgment to execute His power as verse 8 explains. In fact, they are very prominent in carrying out the judgments of the Tribulation that are, of course, concluded by His personal return.
- In keeping with this focus, **He will also return in flaming fire.** This adds to the note of holy judgment and justice to be rendered. The flaming fire may refer to the Shekinah glory associated with the manifestations of God (see Ex. 40:34-38; Ezek. 43:4f; Isa. 6:1; Rev. 15:8), or to fire as an instrument of judgment (cf. Num. 16:35; Lev. 10:2; Ps. 50:3; 97:3) or perhaps both.

Second, following the fact of God’s judgment of retribution, verse 10 brings the glory of God strongly into focus. One of the desires of the saints of all ages and in the church is the desire to see the glory of God manifested in an undiminished way on the earth. This is related to the rest and joy of believers who long for the glory of God when the whole earth will be full of His glory, which naturally includes a time when justice, equity, and righteousness rule (see Ps. 72:19; 96:1-6; Matt. 25:31 and Isa. 11:1-2; 9:6-7; 2:1-4).

But when will all this occur? The timing of the event is marked out by the words, “When He comes” and “in that day.” “When He comes” is literally, “whenever He shall come.” “When” (hotan) is a temporal particle pointing to that which is expected to occur in an indefinite future, but not specified as to the exact time. His coming is certain and so also all the circumstances described in this passage, but the date and time has not been revealed. As stressed in the exposition of 1 Thessalonians, it is always wrong and foolish to set dates for His coming. “In that day” is placed at the end of the verse in the Greek text for emphasis. In *Expositors Commentary*, Robert L. Thomas explains:

“That day” is a frequent OT designation for the day of the Lord (cf. Isa 2:11, 17). In the present verse it solemnly emphasizes a time coincident with “when he comes” as it does repeatedly in the NT (Mark 13:32; 14:25; Luke 21:34; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8) (Milligan, p. 92). Earlier Paul has disclosed how the day of the Lord will encompass in its initial stage a period of wrath and tribulation. The tribulation will be climaxed when Jesus Christ returns personally to judge and to inaugurate his reign on earth. In v. 10, however, Paul has in view an event at the very beginning of the day and before the wrath—the meeting of Christ with his saints in the air (1 Thess 4:17; 2

Thess 1:7a; 2:1). This is the moment of reward for those who have faithfully persevered in all their persecutions and trials (v. 4).<sup>18</sup>

The focus, of course, is not on the **when**, but on the **what**—the glory that will accrue to the Lord Jesus. Glory refers to that which should accrue to the Lord because of who He is and what He has accomplished. It calls attention to His love, grace, mercy, goodness, righteousness, justice, and His gracious provision for sinners who deserved His wrath.

This judgment will take place when the Lord **comes** back to earth and is **glorified** through the lives of believers whom He has transformed by making saints out of sinners. This is not the Rapture (1 Thes. 4:13-18; John 14:2-3), for no judgment accompanies the Rapture. Instead, it is the revelation of Jesus Christ in power and great glory (Ps. 2:1-9; Matt. 25:31), when He will set up His earthly kingdom (Rev. 19:11-20:4). At His return He will destroy the Armageddon armies gathered against Him (Rev. 16:12-16; 19:19-21) and will then judge living Jews (Ezek. 20:33-38) and living Gentiles (Matt. 24:31-46). These judgments are the ones just described (2 Thes. 1:9).

The exact date of His return is not given, of course, but it will be a day of judgment for the lost and a day of glory and marveling for believers. Christ will be “glorified in” (not *by*) His saints, that is, His glory will be mirrored in them. Christians will marvel in that they will admire their Lord for what He has done in them. All believers will marvel—not just those living on the earth and those resurrected when Christ returns, but also those who return to earth with Him, those who had been caught up to be with the Lord at the Rapture.<sup>19</sup>

What an astounding truth of God’s marvelous grace—the glory of the Lord will be mirrored in believers (cf. John 17:1; Eph. 2:7). How? By His grace God lifts sinners, those who deserved His wrath, to the status of sons and saints, those set apart for salvation and His transforming power to make them like His Son, reflectors of His glory (Rom. 8:28-29).

The words, “and admired on that day among all who believe,” calls our attention to two more important facts about His return. The first is described in the word “admired.” This is *thumazo*, “to marvel, wonder, be astonished.” Because His return will so fully display His glory (cf. Rev. 19), it will cause or create pure wonderment, a breathtaking admiration of the Lord. The second focus of attention is on who will do this? It will occur in all those who believe, including of course, the Thessalonians who had believed the witness or testimony of Paul and his missionary team regarding the person and work of the Savior. Those who believe the gospel have taken a totally different position from those who ignore and fail to believe the gospel message (vs. 8). This group of believers will undoubtedly include not just those who see the Lord return, but all believers including those who will return with Him. What an awesome event this will be—it defies our human imagination.

This group, Paul pointed out, would include the Thessalonian believers to whom he wrote this epistle. Because they **believed** Paul’s **testimony** they would share in this great day. Such a hope should strengthen any believer who might be buckling under the pressure of persecution by unbelievers (v. 4). This glimpse into the future undoubtedly encouraged Paul’s readers and it should encourage believers in their trials today.<sup>20</sup>

With this thought in mind, the apostle quickly moves to one of the great purposes of prophesy—living in the light of this glorious future—transformed living.

### Present Requests and Sanctification (vss. 11-12)

**1:11** And in this regard we pray for you always, that our God will make you worthy of his calling and fulfill by his power your every desire for goodness and work of faith, **1:12** that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

<sup>19</sup> Constable, electronic media.

<sup>20</sup> Constable, electronic media.

Whether one is thinking about the rapture, the Judgment Seat of Christ, or this glorious event at the end of the Tribulation, the truth of the coming of the Savior, should not only comfort the heart and mind, but it should impact the hands and feet. What are we doing with the redeemed lives God has given us as His representatives on earth? With this in view, the apostle now turns to the issue of present sanctification.

Verse 11 begins literally, “unto which also we pray always ...,” i.e., “with this end in view we pray for you constantly.” Again we see Paul and his team’s grace/faith perspective that recognizes true spiritual change is always the work of God. The One who accomplishes the three objectives of these verses is God Himself. We should sow and water as instruments of God, but only the Lord can give the increase. Once again we see the consistency of the prayer life of Paul and his associates.

In the Greek text, there seems to be a slight difference in the content of Paul’s prayer as seen in verse 11 and the ultimate purpose given in verse 12. This is suggested by the change from the hina clause, the first “that” which introduces verse 11, to hopo,,s, the “that” which introduces verse 12.<sup>21</sup> The content consists of a worthy walk, the desire of goodness, and a work of faith. Then, the great purpose is a witness that glorifies God.

### ***Prayer for a walk that is worthy (vs. 11a)***

It is important to understand what is meant by, “that God will make you worthy.” “Make you worthy” is axioo,, “to deem or make worthy.” In the gospel of the New Testament, it is the grace of God that imparts worth to people by the imputed righteousness of Christ and their new position in Christ in which they are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (see Eph. 1:3f and Col. 2:10). We can never merit a right standing before God by our works (Tit. 3:5). We can and should, however, walk in a manner that is consistent with our calling, one which will glorify God and lead to rewards for faithful service as we live in the power of His enabling grace (see Eph. 4:1f; Phil. 1:27; and 1 Cor. 3:12f). This is evidently the focus here. The missionaries were praying that, by the sanctifying work of God through the Word and the Spirit and even through their trials, they would live in a manner that was consistent with their holy calling. This calling includes God’s purpose for us here on earth and the believer’s ultimate place in glory.

The context here is that of suffering. Trials test one’s metal, they test the condition of a person’s heart and the condition of his or her faith. They do not make a person worthy, but they can reveal what a person is made of or their spiritual state (see 1 Pet. 1:6-9). Trials may also demonstrate our faith to others and this honors the Savior.

### ***Prayer for every desire of goodness and work of faith (vs. 11b)***

The second request is that God would “fulfill by his power your every desire or resolve for goodness and work of faith.” Literally, “fulfill every desire of goodness and work of faith with or by power.” “Fulfill” is the verb ple,,roo,, which can mean, “accomplish, make effective” (see Rom. 8:4), or even “bring to completion, finish.” Desire is eudokia, “good will, good pleasure,” or “desire, wish.” It is used mostly of God’s will, but also of people, but only of the regenerate (cf. Matt. 11:26; Luke 2:14; 10:21; Eph. 1:5, 9; Phil. 2:13 with Rom. 10:1; Phil. 1:15). Because it is prominently used of God’s good pleasure or elective purposes, some see this as a reference to “God’s elective purpose directed towards the conduct of Christians. Paul therefore prays at the same time that God’s will may be done and reach its goal.”<sup>22</sup>

But as pointed out in this quote, “... it is also possible to understand it as referring to the will of men, may fulfill every good resolve” (RSV).<sup>23</sup> The fact that eudokia is followed by the genitive of agatho,,sunc,, “goodness, uprightness,” supports this second meaning for eudokia in this passage. Agatho,,sunc,, is never used of God, only of regenerate men (cf. Rom. 15:14; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 5:9). The same applies to the adjective, agathos, with the exception of Matthew 19:17. This, combined with the fact “desire of goodness” is coupled with “work of faith,” suggests this is a reference to the desires of the converts themselves. But is this a desire produced by goodness, the fruit of the spirit (Gal. 5:22), or a resolve to do goodness? If it is a desire produced by goodness, it would then be a subjective genitive

<sup>21</sup> See Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

<sup>22</sup> H. Bietenhard, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, General Editor, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976, pp. 819-820.

<sup>23</sup> H. Bietenhard, p. 820.

like the following clause to which it is connected, “a work produced by faith”. But if it is a desire in the sense of a resolve to do goodness, it is an objective genitive. Perhaps this is what some grammarians call a *plenary genitive* where the noun in the genitive (“goodness”) is *both* subjective and objective. In most cases the subjective produces the objective notion.<sup>24</sup> Certainly both are possible and goodness produced by the Spirit is ultimately the source of a resolve for goodness.

In serving the Lord, then, two things are needed—a resolve, a willingness to do what is good as a work of the Spirit, and the doing of good works by faith (cf. Phil. 2:12). Both the desire, the motives, and godly actions of good works need to have their source in the Lord, in a Spirit-empowered life. Thus Paul concludes the request with the words, “by power.” “By power” is last in the clause which makes it somewhat emphatic.

### ***Prayer for a witness that glorifies God (vs. 12)***

As believers, we have been recreated in Christ for good works (Eph. 2:10; 2 Cor. 5:17) that we might bring honor and glory to God in all that we do whether in thought, word, or deed (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17; 1 Pet. 4:11). Since this is one of the chief ends of man and since this will occur in a maximum way when the Lord is glorified in His saints at His coming, the content of Paul’s prayer is that God would even now make the Thessalonians worthy of their calling and that God would enable them to do good works produced by faith. So Paul concludes this chapter with the prayer that the name of Christ might be glorified in the Thessalonians and they in Him.

The “name” of Christ naturally refers to all that He is in both His person and work. The verb, “be glorified,” is *endoxazomai*, “to be held in honor or esteem, to glorify.” To glorify His name means demonstrating to the world what the person and work of Christ is like so that He comes to be held in great honor and esteem because of who He is and all He has accomplished and will accomplish. The clause, “and you in Him” jumps forward to the future when we return with Him in glorified bodies at His glorious return. But it draws our attention to the close union that believers have with the Savior. The doctrine of the believer’s co-identification with Christ is found even in this very early epistle. Today we sit with Christ in the heavenlies at God’s right hand (see Eph. 2:6-7), but the world cannot see this. In this life, believers are often reviled and persecuted even when they demonstrate Christ-like character. Their glorious position at God’s right hand, this heavenly setting cannot be seen, but a day is coming when believers will publicly share in His glory before the world and their persecutors. What an awesome thought to know that we will one day even share in His glory. But how can this be? The clause that immediately follows, “according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” answers the question “How?” It is all attributed to the grace of God and His merciful work for us through our blessed Savior.

## **Conclusion**

Knowing and resting in the fact of such a glorious future should have a triple impact, one that affects the head, the heart, and the hands. First, in case they were beginning to doubt the love of God or were questioning why they were having to suffer as God’s children, the apostolic team wanted to help them keep their thinking straight through the truth just given. Second, in view of the serious persecutions and pain the Thessalonians were enduring, the apostolic team wanted to comfort and encourage the hearts of these believers by helping them do what Paul had learned to do:

2 Cor. 4:17-18. For our momentary light suffering is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, because we are not looking at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

Third, focusing on such a glorious future should also be a great incentive for living godly, Christ-honoring living on a day-by-day basis. So again, we see how prophecy is designed not only to give comfort, but to encourage and motivate us to godliness and fruitful lives. The old adage, “He is so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good” is really not true if one is truly thinking in a biblical manner. It is only when one understands the purpose of this life and its relation to the life to come that we can become truly fruitful in this life from the standpoint of heavenly treasures (Matt. 6:19ff).

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of this possible use see *An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* by Daniel B. Wallace, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp. 119f.

## Lesson 4: Correction Concerning the Day of the Lord—Part 1 (2:1-5)

### Introduction

We can see from content of both 1 and 2 Thessalonians that the apostle never hesitated to teach prophetic truth to even new believers. He taught them much concerning things to come. Indeed, prophecy properly handled is an aspect of truth that is vital for spiritual stability and proper living as is evident by the way Paul used prophetic themes throughout his epistles. Regardless, we often find church leaders hesitant to teach on Bible prophecy. For one thing, it is a difficult and controversial subject in some of its details, but it is also often misused or used as a means promoting false agendas like creating a sense of entertainment or sensationalism. So we are faced with two problems when teaching biblical prophecy: (1) comprehending it properly, and (2) using it biblically. As previously stressed, prophecy is designed to enlighten, comfort, and encourage, but one of the primary purposes should be to motivate us to godly living—living with a view to eternity and the marvelous things to come.

As Wiersbe has accurately warned with a note of humor,

The purpose of Bible prophecy is not for us to make a calendar, but to build character. Paul emphasized this fact in both of his Thessalonian letters, and our Lord warned us not to set dates for His coming (Matt. 24:36, 42). Date-setters are usually upsetters, and that is exactly what happened in the Thessalonian assembly.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter, as with the first chapter and the first epistle, deals with the return of Christ and the gathering of the church unto Him, i.e., the rapture. As is quite obvious from the amount and nature of what is written on things to come, Bible expositors differ widely in their interpretations of prophecy. My position and the one presented in this chapter and in the exposition of 1 Thessalonians is that the church will be raptured (taken up) to meet the Lord in the air prior to the Tribulation or the judgment portion of the day of the Lord. But let us not lose sight of the spiritual and practical truth in debates over such issues as the pre-trib versus the post-trib views. Let us not condemn or look down on those who hold differing views. Rather, let us live in view of His glorious coming, the eternal blessings that will follow, and anticipate the return of our blessed Savior. May we echo the expression, “Come quickly Lord Jesus.”

### The First Exhortation: That Day and Its Relation to the Present (2:1-2)

**2:1** Now regarding the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered so as to be with him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, **2:2** that you not be easily shaken from your composure or be disturbed by any kind of spirit or message or letter allegedly from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.

### The Subject and the Concern (vs. 1)

The verse actually begins with “we ask you brothers and sisters.”<sup>2</sup> As in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, Paul used the verb *cro,tao,,* a word used of a request from a friend. This word is more intimate and personal than the stronger

<sup>1</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Be Ready, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> For the translation, “brothers and sisters,” the *NET Bible* has the following translator’s note: “The Greek text only has “brothers,” but the Greek word may be used for “brothers and sisters” or “fellow Christians” as here (cf. BAGD 16 s.v. *ajdelfov*\* 1, where considerable nonbiblical evidence for the plural *ajdelphoiv* [*adelphoi*] meaning “brothers and sisters” is cited).”

parakalco,, of verse 14, “I urge, exhort.” While this amounts to an exhortation, this formula not only provides a transition to the primary subject, but may suggest the personal concern of his heart for the misunderstanding of the issues involved. This request provides a transition from the subject of chapter one to a specific problem related to “the day of the Lord.” Because of the false claims that the day of the Lord was then present (vs. 2), the apostle wrote in the interest of the truth about the coming (parousia) of the Lord and the gathering of the saints to be with Him. We should note that the subject is not two-fold, the coming of the Lord and our gathering, but a single subject, the coming of the Lord which includes our gathering together to Him. The Greek has one article with both nouns indicating that the “coming” and “our gathering to Him” are complementary elements of one event.<sup>3</sup>

“Regarding” is the Greek *huper*, which is sometimes used for *peri* in the sense of “about, with reference to.” But after words expressing prayer or requests, it normally means “in the interest of, on behalf of.” Rather than Paul’s typical use of *peri* or *peri de* to point to another subject (1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; 1 Thes. 4:9; 5:1), he chose *huper* which not only points us to the subject, but adds the idea of advocacy not found in the simple preposition *peri*. Hogg and Vine translate it for this context as, “with a view to correcting your thoughts about.”<sup>4</sup> The apostle was not simply writing about this subject, but in the interest of its truth and what that truth means to believers, particularly as it relates to the day of the Lord which will begin as a time of wrath (see 1 Thes. 1:10; 5:9-10).

“Coming” is *parousia*, the word Paul used in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 4:15 where it is used of the Lord’s coming for the church before the judgment portion of the day of the Lord, i.e., the Tribulation, a time of terrible wrath as described in 1 Thessalonians 5:1. As previously discussed,<sup>5</sup> *parousia* may be used of Christ’s return for the church as described in 4:15 or of His return to earth at the end of the Tribulation (Matt. 24:27, 37, 39). That it is used here of His coming for the church before the day of the Lord is evident by the phrase, “and our gathering together to Him.” Because some see the term *parousia* as a technical or categorizing term that must refer to Christ’s return in glory at the end of the Tribulation, they take this as evidence for a post-tribulation rapture of the church. Even though only implied, Williams suggests this when he writes, “A single event comprises the return of Jesus (visibly, in glory, cf. 1:10) and the Rapture of the saints.”<sup>6</sup> But again, see the comments in the exposition of 1 Thessalonians 4:15-16 on this issue. In other words, there is a *parousia* for the church before the day of the Lord and a *parousia* at the close of the time of wrath.

“Gathering together” is *episunago,,ge,,s*, “a gathering together, an assembly.” This is clearly a reference to the event described in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. *Episunago,,ge,,s* is used only here and in Hebrews 10:25 of the congregation of believers. Thus, the subject of the passage concerns the coming of Christ, but especially that coming which concerns our being gathered together to meet Him in the air as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13f. The rest of the chapter will deal with the day of the Lord, but the purpose of chapter 2 is in the interest of an understanding that protects the truth of believers being gathered together at His coming for the church, i.e., before the day of the Lord. The error that was being taught about the day of the Lord was undermining the truth and meaning or blessed hope of the rapture which promises our deliverance from the wrath to come (1 Thes. 1:10; 5:9-10). Thomas has an excellent discussion of this issue.

He must explain what he means by “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him” or else the solution to the problem cannot be grasped. *Episynagoges* (“being gathered”) defines what part of the *parousias* (“coming”) Paul has in mind. This is the great event he has described more fully in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17—i.e., the gathering of those in Christ to meet him in the air enroute to the Father in heaven. This begins the day of the Lord. What relationship this happening bears to the tribulation phase of the day of the Lord so frequently mentioned in these Epistles is important. Some limit the *parousia* to a single event and insist that it comes after the tribulation (Morris, pp. 151, 152; Gundry, pp. 113, 114). It is hardly possible, though, to explain the variety of relationships belonging to *parousia* in these Epistles if it is understood only as a single event. Even the meaning of the word suggests a longer duration.

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<sup>3</sup> C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles To The Thessalonians With Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering & Inglis, London, 1914, p. 242.

<sup>4</sup> Hogg and Vine, p. 242.

<sup>5</sup> For a more complete discussion of *parousia* see the discussion at 2:19 and at 4:15f in the exposition of 1 Thessalonians on our web site.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Williams, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, 1992, p. 122.

Another problem is encountered if the *parousia* that initiates the day of the Lord is considered only the single event of Christ's return to earth following the tribulation. If Paul had given oral or written instruction to this effect, the false claim that the day of the Lord was already present could hardly have alarmed these Christians. According to this scheme, the day of the Lord could not begin without Christ's personal reappearance. His continued absence was obvious to all.

Yet the claim was made and accepted to the extent that the church was troubled. This implies Paul had not taught that a one-phase *parousia* after the period of wrath will begin the day of the Lord. He had told them that the coming of the Lord to gather his saints into heaven would initiate both the tribulation and the day of the Lord. They were promised immediate "rest" (1:7) and glorification with Christ (1:10), not increased persecution.

The false instruction had, however, denied them an imminent "rest." They would first have to undergo the severe persecution of the tribulation and possibly even suffer martyrdom before Christ's coming, according to these misrepresentations. They were even told that their current suffering indicated the arrival of the expected tribulation. 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4, 8-12 speaks of this future period in terms quite similar to those of Revelation 13 and 17. The man of lawlessness has a number of affinities with the beasts of Revelation, enough to show that the two books describe the same period (R. H. Charles, *Eschatology* [New York: Schocken Books, 1963], p. 441n). Though 2 Thessalonians does not specifically mention the beast's war with the saints and their martyrdom, Revelation 13:7, 10 declares it explicitly. If this is a possibility for the church, why did Paul at no point teach this kind of anticipation? The answer must lie in the removal of Christians (including the Thessalonian believers) from earth before this persecution. It is another group of God's people, following the church's translation, who must face the terror of this archenemy.

Despite their "persecutions and trials" (1:4) these Thessalonian Christians were not living in the day of the Lord as they had been erroneously told. A right understanding of "being gathered to him" reveals that they could not be so enmeshed, because for them Christ's *parousia* will antedate the awful period to come. In fact, their "being gathered to him" will be the event that signals the day's beginning.<sup>7</sup>

## The Shaken Condition and Its Cause (vs. 2)

The teaching or claims that they were then in the day of the Lord was undermining the meaning and significance of the coming of the Lord for the body of Christ for it was this event that would keep them out of that day. This was naturally having a devastating effect on the composure of the Thessalonian church. Verse 2, then, points us to Paul's objective in writing this chapter. The "that" (is eis to plus the infinitive showing purpose or intended result), which introduces verse 2, points us to the objective or goal. We might translate it, "to the end that." Requesting as a friend, he wrote to keep them from being easily shaken from their composure and from being disturbed by the false reports that had led to their misunderstanding.

**The Shaken Condition:** "That you not be easily shaken from your composure" describes the first effect of the false teaching. "Easily" is the Greek *tacheo*,s, "quickly, hastily, soon." But the idea is ultimately that of "easily" in the sense of too quickly without due thought and study. They needed to carefully reflect on the teaching Paul had given them (cf. vs. 5). This should have protected their minds from such instability (see also 2:15).

"Shaken" is *saleuo*,s, "to agitate, shake, unsettle, cause to waver." It was used of moving away from something, like a ship which was suddenly torn away from her moorings by strong winds and waves. Paul used the aorist tense with the verb "shaken," but changed to the present tense with the verb, "disturbed." This change of tenses may suggest a sudden shaking or move followed by a condition that continued.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Frank E. Gaebelien, General Editor, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

## 2 Thessalonians: An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary

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“From your composure” is literally, “from your mind.” “Mind” is nous, “mind, understanding,” and “denotes the faculty of physical and intellectual perception, then also the power to arrive at moral judgments.”<sup>8</sup> It may also refer to “one’s attitude, way of thinking,” or of the result of one’s thinking, i.e., one’s “opinion, viewpoint, perspective.” The words, “and be disturbed,” point us to the abiding results of what happened because they had been shaken in their understanding of God’s truth. “Disturbed” is throco,, “to be inwardly disturbed, aroused, frightened.”<sup>9</sup>

For these believers, God’s truth or Word consisted of the Old Testament and the teachings of the apostle (see 1 Thes. 2:13; 2 Thes. 2:15). For us today, it consists of the completed canon of Scripture, Genesis to Revelation. Through the study of God’s Word, Christians are to know and become **anchored** in the Truth. The goal is that they become **transformed** by that truth through the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:1-2), not shaken from that truth and thus in a state of worry or disturbance by the many turbulent waves and winds of false doctrine promoted by the false teaching of men (see Eph. 4:14).

**The Cause:** The *cause* of the disturbance was evidently made on the basis of three distinct sources of information: (1) by any kind of spirit (2) or message (3) or letter allegedly from us. Following the previous negatives (“may not be shaken ... or be disturbed”), each false claim is preceded by the Greek, me,,te, “and not” or “neither ... nor.” This suggests that those who were bothering the church with the false information were making three distinct claims as to its source.

(1) Literally, the first was, “neither by a spirit.” This undoubtedly refers to the claim of some to a prophetic utterance made in the power of the Spirit of God. There were evidently those in the church with the gift of prophecy, but the church and the leaders were to carefully examine and accept only what was from God. In other words, was it in keeping with both the Old Testament and with what they had heard from Paul, an apostle (1 Thes. 5:19-20; 2 Thes. 2:15)?

(2) The second, “nor by a word.” Here, “word” (logos, “word, statement, speech, assertion, etc.”) is distinguished from the claim to a spirit of prophecy or divine revelation. It may have been just someone’s opinion in view of the conditions or perhaps the claim of a verbal message from the missionaries.

(3) “Nor by a letter as (*as* is ho,,s, which means ‘as so represented, purporting to be’) from us.” This points us to the final and third claim regarding the source of the false teaching. Some had evidently forged a letter claiming it was from Paul and his associates, but it was in direct contradiction to what they had taught them (again, see 2:15). Some writers see this as a reference to a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of Paul’s previous letter, but in view of Paul’s comment in 3:15, this seems unlikely. Further, for a clear reference to a former letter one would expect something like the adjective “former” or “first” or the pronoun “my” or something more precise (see Col. 4:6; 2 Cor. 7:8).

**The Nature of the Claims:** The precise *nature* of the disturbance is seen in the words, “to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here (or *present*).” Literally, the Greek text says, “as that the day of the Lord is present.” “As that” is the combination of the particle ho,,s and the conjunction hoti. This unusual combination (but see 2 Cor. 5:19; 11:21) may, in this context, point to that which is purely alleged, but not true. F. F. Bruce suggests that it imparts a subjective flavor to the clause.<sup>10</sup>

Some have sought to take, “is present” to mean “is imminent,” but the consistent meaning of the Greek eniste,,mi in past tenses is “be present, have come.”<sup>11</sup> This is especially true of the perfect used here. Paul is not denying the imminency of the day of the Lord, but its presence. The Thessalonians believers were being told the day of the Lord had arrived and was present. As is clear from the first epistle, the apostle had taught these believers about the nature of the day of the Lord (1 Thes. 5:2). They knew that in its beginning phase, it would be a time of the wrath of God poured out on the world, but they also undoubtedly knew it would be a time of intense persecution for

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

<sup>9</sup> Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, electronic media.

<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, electronic media.



tribulation saints. Thus, in view of the intensity of their persecution, someone was attempting to convince them that they were then in the intense portion of the day of the Lord.

Their suffering had already been so severe that someone tried to convince them that the period was already in progress, even though the Lord had not yet come to gather them to heaven (Auberlen and Riegenbach, p. 126; Moffatt, EGT, 4:47; Hogg and Vine, p. 245; Morris, p. 217; Hiebert, p. 304). They knew of the time of trouble and the Lord's return to culminate it (1:7-9). They had been led to believe, however, that his coming for them would spare them the anguish of that hour (1 Thess 5:9). But here were people telling them, with Paul's apparent backing, that such a deliverance was not to be.

Therefore they were in great need of an authentic word from Paul assuring them that they had understood him correctly in his first epistle. They needed to know that the *parousia* (coming) of Christ for his church would mark the beginning of the future day of trouble and consequently that the day had not yet arrived. To accomplish this, Paul proceeds to describe features, obviously not yet present, that will characterize the day's early stages.<sup>12</sup>

Paul now addresses the truth as it relates to the day of the Lord.

**The First Explanation:  
That Day and Its Relation to the  
Rebellion and the Man of Lawlessness  
(2:3-4)**

**2:3** Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not be here unless the rebellion comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction. **2:4** He opposes *and exalts himself above every so-called god* or object of worship, and as a result *he takes his seat* in God's temple, displaying himself as God.

Paul's explanation is actually begun with a short exhortation, "Let no one deceive you in any way." This serves both as a warning or note of caution and a summary of what was said in verse 2. "Deceive" is a compound verb, *exapatao*, a strengthened form of *apatao*. It means "to deceive completely" or perhaps "deceive successfully." It is used of Satan's deception of Eve in 2 Corinthians 11:3 and 1 Timothy 2:14. The use of this word with the phrase, "in any way" reminds us of our need to be wary of the many devices of deception Satan uses to lead us away from the truth of Scripture. We do not know what promoted the false teaching or who was involved in its promotion. It may well have been misinformed believers who did not understand God's grace. Yes, even well meaning believers can fall prey to Satan's deceptions, being deceived and deceiving others. Surely, then, we need first to be like the Bereans who searched the Scripture daily as their index for truth (Acts 17:11), and second, in that search, we need to follow Paul's exhortation to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 and learn to handle the Scriptures accurately and carefully.

Anyone who is not properly grounded in the truth of God's Word (see again Eph. 4:14) tends to be gullible, but the sad fact is that all people, including Christians, are too easily misled by impressive personalities and spectacular appeals. The antidote to false teaching is sound teaching according to God's Word. Thus, the apostle pointed them to the truth as it pertains to the day of the Lord.

The first evidence the apostle gives that the day of the Lord was not present is found in the two important occurrences that had not taken place. A third important and related event will follow in verses 6 and 7. These together provided the proof that they were not then in the day of the Lord. An important question is whether these first two occurrences must take place before the day of the Lord begins, or are they evidences that the day has begun or is present. This question arises because the clause, "For that day will not be here" is not in the Greek text, but expresses an ellipsis. This or something similar is needed or must be understood to supply the missing thought. The NIV has "that day will not come," the NASB has "it will not come," and the NET Bible has "that day will not be here." An equally valid possibility is "For that day is not present unless ..." This ellipsis is the main clause (the apodosis) of the conditional sentence (the protasis). The conditional sentence is seen in the words "unless (can me,, "if not," "except," "unless") the rebellion comes first ..."

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

Thus, Paul says either (1) that day cannot come **or** (2) the day cannot be present without certain events being in place first. So how should we understand the missing statement? Based on the context and similar grammatical constructions used elsewhere, Thomas suggests the following reasons in support of understanding the ellipsis as “for the day is not present unless ...”

Grammatically similar constructions elsewhere (Matt 12:29; Mark 3:27; John 7:51; Rom 15:24) show these two happenings are conceived of as within the day of the Lord, not prior to it. The day of the Lord had not yet arrived because these two conspicuous phenomena that will dominate the day’s opening phase had not yet happened.

Some wonder how the failure of these two to arrive can be a proof of the nonarrival of the day. The answer lies in understanding Paul’s reference to these phenomena as his way of identifying the very earliest stage of this eschatological period. The readers had not missed the rapture (1 Thess 4:15-17) and were not in the day of the Lord (v. 2) because these two clear indicators of the day’s presence had not yet appeared (cf. Introduction to 1 Thessalonians, pp. 233-234).<sup>13</sup>

The absence of these two occurrences, which are so essential to the presence of the day of the Lord in its beginning phase, is the apostle’s proof that the Thessalonians were not then in the day of the Lord. Though Paul was not directly discussing the timing of the rapture, the fact he was writing in the interest of the coming of the Lord and the gathering of the Church together to meet Him in the air,<sup>14</sup> the implication is that the rapture must occur before this day begins. Why else would these believers be shaken by the idea that they might then be in the day of the Lord unless they had expected to be taken up to meet the Lord prior to that time?

Thus, two phenomena are needed for the day of the Lord to be present. These are (1) the rebellion that must come first, and (2) the revealing of the man of lawlessness that quickly follows.

### **The Rebellion and the Day of the Lord (vs. 3a)**

“Rebellion” is the Greek *apostasia*, “apostasy, abandonment, revolt, rebellion.” Literally, the Greek has “the rebellion.” The presence of the article suggests Paul is not talking about just any rebellion or apostasy, but something well known as a result of the teaching of Paul and his missionary team.

As explained by Thomas in the previous footnote, the words “must come first” refer not to the day of the Lord, but to the revealing of the man of lawlessness. Typically, the popular view takes this to mean there must first be a worldwide rebellion before the judgment part of the day of the Lord can even begin. For instance, Charles Ryrie writes:

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas, electronic format. The notes referred to in the above quote are as follows:

“The preference of most English translations for a future tense apodosis in v. 3 is probably explained by the frequency of that tense with conditional clauses with *ejavn* (*ean*, “if”; with *mhV* [*me*, “not”] = “if not,” “unless”; NIV, “until”). Circumstances here justify a present tense in the apodosis, however, the carry-over thought from *ejnevsthken* (*enesteken*, “is present”) (v. 2) being a prime consideration (cf. Robertson, RHG, p. 1019). Other NT combinations of *ejavn* ... *prw'ton* (*ean* ... *proton*, “if ... first”) (Matt 12:29; Mark 3:27; John 7:51; Rom 15:24) reveal preference elsewhere for a present-tense apodosis under similar circumstances. They also reveal that actions of the conditional clause are included within the scope of the apodosis. These other passages show that *prw'ton* (*proton*, “first”) in the protasis does not indicate priority to the apodosis, but priority to another action contained in (or implied by) the protasis—i.e., the rebellion precedes the revelation of the lawless one. All this confirms what is necessitated by Paul’s viewpoint throughout the rest of these Epistles: the *parousia* for the church and the launching of the day of the Lord can come at any moment. The apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness are not necessary preludes to them, but follow the church’s gathering to Christ and lie within the day of the Lord.”

<sup>14</sup> I.e., in the interest of what the coming of Christ means to believers—deliverance from wrath (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9-11),

... It is *the* apostasy which will come before the day of the Lord. *Apostasia*, translated apostasy, does not mean merely disbelieving but rather an aggressive and positive revolt (Acts 21:21; Heb. 3:12). Paul himself later wrote in detail concerning the details of this great departure from the faith in I Timothy 4:1-3 and II Timothy 3:1-5; 4:3-4. In these passages he says that this defection would occur in the last days. It is as though the infidelity of those who profess to be religious will prepare the way and perhaps even furnish the occasion for the final display of revolting against God in the person of the Man of sin. But the day of the Lord will not be present until this great apostasy sweeps the earth.<sup>15</sup>

So also, in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Thomas Constable writes:

This is a revolt, a departure, an abandoning of a position once held. This rebellion, which will take place within the professing church, will be a departure from the truth that God has revealed in His Word. True, apostasy has characterized the church almost from its inception, but Paul referred to a specific distinguishable apostasy that will come in the future (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Peter 2; 3:3-6; Jude). He had already told his readers about it (2 Thes. 2:5).<sup>16</sup>

The *apostasy* or *rebellion* clearly refers to a special departure and rebellion against the true God. This will become a worldwide movement and will provide the seed bed for the great system of revolt which will be headed up in the person of the Beast who will be the very personification of Satan himself. As just illustrated, some apply this to the period just before the day of the Lord, i.e., the last days of the church. Others, as Robert L. Thomas (cited earlier), would apply this to the day of the Lord itself which I have come to believe is a better understanding of this passage. Obviously, a growing worldwide departure has been going on for centuries and the apostle even speaks of this in his day (“for the hidden power of lawlessness is already at work” [vs. 7]). In verse 3, however, I believe Paul has in mind the worldwide revolt that occurs in the beginning of the day of the Lord and that opens the way for the system of the man of lawlessness. This fits consistently with the concept of the imminency of both the coming of Christ for the church and that of beginning of the day of the Lord.

### The Revelation and Rebellion of the Antichrist (vss. 3b-4)

The second phenomenon necessary for the day of the Lord to be present is the revelation of one whom Paul called “the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction.”<sup>17</sup> But this person can be none other than the one known by another New Testament term, *the antichrist*, as used by John (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). This is the name so often used to identify the last great world dictator. As Ryrie points out:

While we are warned that there will appear from time to time evil men in the world—and so evil that they may be called antichrists (1 John 2:18)—this person is the personification of evil and the culmination of all that is opposed to God.<sup>18</sup>

The prefix *anti* on the term *antichrist* from the Greek *antichristos* has two prominent ideas: “against” and “in place of.” The *antichrist*, as Satan’s tool, both opposes God and Christ, but he is also presented as one who is to be worshipped and obeyed in place of Christ. Furthermore, he is known in the Bible by other descriptive titles like “the little horn” (Dan. 7:8), the “prince that shall come” (Dan. 9:26), the “willful king” (Dan. 11:36), “the beast out of the sea” (Rev. 13:1-10), and as the one who, standing in the future rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, will commit the “abomination of desolation” as described by Daniel and attested to by the Lord Jesus (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; Matt. 24:15).

<sup>15</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1959, pp. 103-104.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas L. Constable, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983, 1985, electronic media.

<sup>17</sup> Some manuscripts (A D F G Y *Byz* lat) read “of sin” here, but other important manuscripts (B 1739 *et pauci*) read “of lawlessness.” External support for “of sin” is broader, but that word occurs much more frequently in Paul’s writings than “lawlessness.” On internal grounds the later mention of “lawlessness” in v. 7 and the description “the lawless one” in v. 8 seem to presuppose *ajnomiva* (anomias) here (Translators Note from the NET Bible).

<sup>18</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Come Quickly Lord Jesus, What You Need to Know About the Rapture*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, 1996, p. 105.

This person is described as being (passive voice) “revealed.” “Revealed” is *apokalupto*,, “unveil, disclose, bring to light.” This passive voice verb suggests that he will be present and very much a part of the political scene, but unknown as to his character and purpose until certain historical conditions occur that unveil his presence and whereabouts. We are not told who or what it is that reveals his person or to whom he is specifically revealed, however, for those who know something about Scripture, that which first reveals him will undoubtedly be the covenant he will make with the Jewish people (Dan. 9:27). Revelation teaches us that the early stages of the Tribulation will unveil one who, appearing as a White Horse rider, will conquer many by peaceful tactics (Rev. 6:2). It is not until the middle of the Tribulation that his true colors manifest themselves (Rev. 13).

Following and in conjunction with the apostasy will come the unveiling of a mighty figure embodying everything opposed to God. His whereabouts before his unveiling are not given. He will be alive for years before his unveiling, but his dramatic public presentation will occur after the rebellion begins.<sup>19</sup>

Speaking of the true character of this future dictator as it will eventually be manifested, the apostle describes him by three statements:

**(1) He is described as “the man of lawlessness.”** Note first this is a man (Greek, *anthropos*, “human being, man”) not an angel or sin personified, but a living human being who will arise on the scene of human history. Though the KJV has “the man of sin,” the evidence for “man of lawlessness” agrees with verses 7-8 and also the statement by John in 1 John 3:4, “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; indeed, sin is lawlessness.” He will stand as the epitome of opposition to the laws of God. As one opposed to God, he (a) is opposed to public order for the good of mankind as God designed human government to function (Rom. 13:1f), and (b) to any kind of divine authority.

**(2) Paul describes him as “the son of destruction.”** The phrase “son of” is a Hebrew idiom that may indicate character as in “son of peace” (Luke 10:6) or destiny as with “son of death” (1 Sam. 20:31). He belongs to a class described by the attached phrase, i.e., one destined for destruction as was the case with Judas, another who was called “the son of destruction” (John 17:12; Acts 1:25).

... If ‘man of lawlessness’ refers to character, then “son of perdition” refers to the proper destiny of such a one, who, like Judas, must “go to his own place,” Acts 1:25, cp. Phil. 3:19, and Rev. 17:8,11.<sup>20</sup>

“Destruction” is *apo,,leia*, “destruction, ruin, doom, waste.” Like “destruction” (*olethros*) of 1:9, in none of the uses of *apo,,leia* in the New Testament is the idea of annihilation or cessation necessarily involved. Rather, it is a general term for disaster, waste, ruin, or doom and the context must define the nature of the destruction. It is often a term which points to divine judgment. For the judgment of this individual, see Revelation 19:20. “*Olethros*” refers to a ruin brought on us by another as in a judgment, or discipline, etc., “*apo,,leia*” may refer to a destruction which one causes to himself. Both are, however, true of this person. By his own hardness, cruelty toward others, and rejection of God, he brings God’s judgment on himself.

**(3) He is also described in terms of his religious activity and goals as one “who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, and as a result he takes his seat in God’s temple, displaying himself as God.”** Everything about this future person reeks of Satan from whom he will get his authority and power (see Rev. 13:4ff). Paul describes him by two participles that mark out his primary characteristics, *opposition* to God and his attempt at *self-exaltation* even above God. The first participle is *antikeimenos*, which is a very interesting choice of words. It is used in the Septuagint in 1 Kings 11:23 to translate the Hebrew term *satan*, “adversary.” The Greek equivalent in the New Testament is *ho satanas*, “the adversary.” But Paul also uses this same participle, *ho antikeimenos*, and the accusative form of *ho satanas* in 1 Timothy 5:14 to refer to Satan who is the arch enemy of God and Christ.

In keeping with Satan’s purposes to oppose God and believers is Satan’s desire to exalt himself above God as seen in the five “I wills” expressed in Isaiah 14:13-14. As such, this puppet of Satan seeks to exalt himself above

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

<sup>20</sup> Hogg and Vine, p. 248.

anything that is worshipped. This not only includes the true God, but anything that is worshipped, even the false gods. Thus, these two things—opposition to God and self-exaltation—will be the prominent features of this future person.

As an outgrowth of his demand to be worshipped, he will develop a religious system that will find its center in the temple of Jerusalem. In view of Daniel’s prophecies and Christ’s warnings (see Dan. 9:27; 11:31; Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14) “sitting in the temple” surely refers to a temple that will be rebuilt in the first half of the Tribulation (Daniel’s seventieth week) in connection with the covenant previously made with the Jewish people when he first appears as the peacemaker. This opens the way for sacrifices and worship to begin when the temple is completed. In the middle of Daniel’s seventieth week, however, the covenant will be broken by the man of lawlessness who will stand in this holy place and demand the worship of men all over the world. Some have suggested this is a figurative portrayal to his occupying the most holy place in human worship, which rightfully belongs only to God, but as Thomas points out, there is no good reason to take this view.

... This evidently is a Jewish temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem in the future. Dependence of these words on Daniel 9:26, 27; 11:31, 36, 37; 12:11 (cf. Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14) demands such a reference. There is no impressive evidence for understanding *naon* (“temple”) in a nonliteral sense. The well-known “abomination that causes desolation” is sometimes regarded as a person and sometimes as an act of desecration by that person (Mark 13:14) (Hubbard, *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1364). The act of desecration to which this verse looks will transpire half-way through the seventieth prophetic week of Daniel 9:24-27, when the covenant made earlier with the Jewish people is broken. This will mark the climax of this lawless one’s career. Historically, a foreshadowing of this blasphemous intrusion happened when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple in Jerusalem just before the Maccabean revolt ...

The relationship of this apocalyptic portion of 2 Thessalonians to Christ’s *parousia* (coming) confirms the impression that Paul must be referring to a single historical personage. Quests for such a person in the past and present have proved fruitless. Resemblances to Antiochus Epiphanes, Nero, Diocletian, one of the popes, and others may be admitted. But fulfillment of all details of the prophecy must await the future period of this man’s prominence. It is futile to suppose that Judas Iscariot, Antiochus Epiphanes, or Nero will be brought back to life to fill this role. “The man of lawlessness” will be a new historical figure whom Satan will energize to do his will in the world. As “man of God” in the OT regularly designates a divine prophet, the present “man of lawlessness” designates a false prophet, probably to be identified with the second beast of Revelation 13 (Rev 13:11 ff.; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10) (Best, pp. 283, 284, 288). His primary function will be to preside over the religious apostasy in cooperation with the beast out of the sea (Rev 13:1 ff.), who leads political opposition to God. As God’s chief opponent in Jerusalem whose background is probably Jewish (cf. Dan 11:36, 37), the lawless one will give religious leadership to complement the dominance of his associate over governments of the world’s nations.

The presence of such an apostasy and counterfeit god will not escape international observation. The nonpresence of these things when Paul wrote proves his thesis regarding the nonarrival of the day of the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Second Exhortation: Their Former Teaching on These Matters (2:5)**

**2:5** Surely you recall that I used to tell you these things while I was still with you.”

From this statement, it is clear that Paul had taught the Thessalonians these same truths when he was with them in Thessalonica. This is evident from the statement, “I used to tell you these things.” The verb here is in the imperfect tense and indicates he repeatedly explained these matters concerning the coming of Christ for the church

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

and the period that would follow, the day of the Lord. There is in this verse a slight rebuke and warning in the words, “surely you recall,” or better, “do you not remember that ... I used to tell you these things?”

### **Conclusion**

May I suggest two very practical points that come out of this part of chapter 2 and especially verse 5. First, if we do not continue to study, retain, and stay occupied with the truth of Scripture, it can't protect us from the winds and currents of false doctrine. The unsettled condition that occurred among the believers in Thessalonica was the result of failing to remember and reflect on what they had been taught.

Second, the fact that the apostle repeatedly taught on the subject of prophecy should show us this is an important theme of Scripture that needs to be taught and never ignored even when teaching young believers in Christ. Unfortunately today, it seems that churches swing in one of two directions like a pendulum and they often miss a biblical balance. Either they ignore prophecy almost altogether, or it becomes a hobby horse that is ridden to death so that the rest of Scripture is often ignored until some other agenda comes up for consideration—like the annual budget.

## **Lesson 5: Correction Concerning the Day of the Lord—Part 2 (2:6-8)**

### **Introduction**

In this next section, vss. 6-12, the apostle is still writing to refute the idea that the Day of the Lord was present. The fundamental objective again, however, was protect the truth of the parousia and our gathering together unto Him, i.e., what that means to the church as the “blessed hope.” The apostle had appealed to the Thessalonians to not be shaken or easily unsettled about the false claims that they were then in the Day of the Lord. His appeal was first based on two facts: that day cannot be present without the presence of the great future rebellion that must come first before the second necessary ingredient—the unveiling of one called “the man of lawlessness.” This rebellion is not the mystery of lawlessness already set in motion, but evidently a future, sudden, and final revolt that provides the final seed bed for the unveiling of the lawless one’s presence.

Throughout history, it has been the desire of Satan to exalt himself above the throne of God and to be worshipped. This one who will come, “the lawless one,” is Satan’s man, the product of the working of Satan himself (vs. 9). So why hasn’t Satan been able to reveal his man before now? Though the identity of the restrainer is very difficult by way of interpretation, part of the answer to this question is found in these verses in the concept of the restrainer. Satan, as the arch enemy of God and man, is now active night and day seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8). This nefarious creature would have long ago brought the kingdoms of this world to even greater ruin and raised up his own kingdom so that he might be worshipped if it were not for the sovereign restraint of God’s grace.

Both the activities of Satan before the flood and God’s response at that time illustrate this principle. Before the flood, the wickedness of man was extreme and the intent of his heart bent only on evil (Gen. 6:5). Satan’s activity was certainly part of the cause for the extreme conditions that existed, but the point is that God did not allow this to continue. Genesis 6:3-4 states the divine intention to halt these conditions in the declaration, “Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years’” (NIV). Or as the NET Bible translates, “So the LORD said, ‘My Spirit will not always protect mankind—his days will be a hundred and twenty years.’” Regardless of how the word “contend”<sup>1</sup> is translated, the point of the text “... seems to be that the Lord would not allow the race to continue on in such debauchery; rather, there would be a limit.”<sup>2</sup>

Clearly then, because God restrains the forces of evil in the world today, Satan can only do what he does by the permissive will of God as with Job (see Job 1-2). But a day is coming when that restraint is going to be removed and then Satan will move quickly to set up his end time system of horror.

### **The Second Explanation: The Day of the Lord and Its Relation to the Restrainer (2:6-8)**

**2:6** And so you know what holds him back, so that he will be revealed in his own time. **2:7** For the hidden power of lawlessness is already at work. However, the one who holds him back will do so

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word here is *ya,do,n*, which has been translated “strive” is in question because it is found only here in the Old Testament. Some take it to mean “strive” in the sense of the Holy Spirit’s work of judging or executing judgment. Some take it to mean “protect, shield,” based on an Akkadian cognate. Others prefer the Septuagint translation of “remain” in the sense that the human spirit placed there by God would not always abide because man was doomed to death.

<sup>2</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 183.

until he is taken out of the way, **2:8** and then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will destroy by the breath of his mouth and wipe out by the manifestation of his coming.

### The Delay of the Day of the Lord (2:6-7)

Paul has shown us that the Day of the Lord cannot be present without the two phenomena mentioned, “the rebellion” and the “revelation of the man of lawlessness,” but now a third important phenomenon is brought into the picture that must also occur before the Day of the Lord can be present. Verse 8 begins with *tote*, “then, at that time.” It is an adverb of time which shows a sequence of events. This stands in strong contrast with the focus on the present seen in verse 7 which is brought out more forcefully in the translations of the NIV and the NASB. The NIV has, “For the secret power of lawlessness is **already** at work; but the one who **now** holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way” (emphasis mine). Note the words “already” and “now.” “Already” is *e,,de,,*, an adverb of time meaning, “now, already.”<sup>3</sup> “Now” is the Greek *arti*, another adverb which may refer to the present time in general, “now, at the present time.”<sup>4</sup> The point is that the mystery of lawlessness is now at work and the Thessalonians were facing suffering because that lawless system was already at work, but the man of lawlessness—one of the vital evidences for the Day of the Lord—could not be revealed until the restrainer is removed.

But who or what is *the restrainer* mentioned by the apostle in verses 6 and 7? While we know God is at work restraining evil in general, the exact identification of the restrainer has always baffled expositors with multiple solutions offered. It’s clear that Paul told the Thessalonians what or who the restrainer was for he says, “you know what holds him back,” but he does not tell us in this or in any other of his letters. What he does tell us is that the restrainer is now at work until he or it is no longer present. Before tackling the identity of the restrainer, let’s look at some of the details of verses 6-7.

Literally, verse 6a reads, “And now you know what holds back (or restrains).” “Now” is *nun*, an adverb which may be understood in a temporal sense, “now, at the present time.” Taken as such it would modify “holds back” as in the translation of the NASB, “And you know what restrains him **now**.” Or *nun* may be taken in a logical or resumptive sense in which case it modifies “you know,” as in the NET Bible, “And so you know,” or “as it is (in view of the previous teaching) you know.” The word order and flow of the argument seems to fit the logical sense better.

“What holds back” is *katechon*, from the verb *katecho,,*, “to hold back, hinder, check, restrain.” Grammatically, it is a present neuter substantival participle which means, “you know **that which is restraining**” or “**the restraining thing**.” *Katecho,,* occurs again in verse 7, only there it occurs in the masculine, “he who” or “the one who restrains.” It should be noted the object restrained is actually not mentioned in verse 6 or 7. Most translations have something like, “restrain him” referring to the lawless one, but it could just as easily be the mystery of lawlessness that is being restrained. This restraint naturally hinders Satan’s end-time plans from developing and so also the historical arrival and revelation of the man of lawlessness as verse 6b explains, “so that he will be revealed in his own time.” It will be **then** (*tote*), and not before. “Time” is *kairos* which looks at a definite future and fixed time, but primarily from the standpoint of the *characteristics* of that period when he will be revealed, not the date. Only God knows the date, but we can know something of the characteristics of this time of lawlessness as it is described in other portions of Scripture like Revelation 6-19 and portions of Daniel, for instance.

While **verse 6b** draws our attention to the intended result or purpose of the restraint, “so that he (the man of lawlessness) will be revealed in his own time,” **verse 7** focuses the reader on the present state of affairs, “for the hidden power (mystery) of lawlessness is already at work, only the one who restrains *will continue to do so* until he (the restrainer) is (taken) out of the midst.” The restraint of this present spirit of lawlessness will continue according to God’s sovereign purposes until things are ripe for the lawless one himself to be fully developed and revealed.

But what is meant by the *mystery of lawlessness*? “Mystery” is *muste,,rion*, which in the New Testament is something that lies beyond man’s natural reach and can only be known by divine revelation.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

<sup>4</sup> Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, electronic media.



**The word “mystery” can be summarized as follows:**<sup>5</sup> The term *mystery* as it is used in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek word *mysterion* from *mysterion*, “to initiate into (the mysteries),” i.e., to make known special secrets. Thus, *mysterion* meant a secret rite or teaching which the initiate knew but no one else could know; something not publicly disclosed. The root idea then is information known only to those on the inside, but hidden to those who are without (Mark 4:11). Most often in the New Testament, though not always, it refers to information which has been kept secret or veiled, but has now been disclosed by God’s revelation (see Rom. 16:25-26).

The term *mystery* does not refer to something mysterious in that it eludes all comprehension or explanation. Rather, as used in the Bible, it refers to God’s secrets, His counsels, purposes, and other truths not naturally known to man apart from His special revelation in Scripture or by His prophets (see Dan. 2:18-23; 27-30).

In the context of 2 Thessalonians, *the mystery of lawlessness* refers to the continuation and gradual build up of the state of lawlessness (see 2 Tim. 3:1-13; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pet. 3:3) which will culminate in the man of lawlessness once the restrainer is removed. *Mysterion*, because it has the article, points to something specific and well known to the readers, obviously by the teaching of Paul and the missionary team. But in what sense is this a mystery? It is a mystery in the sense that humankind does not recognize the insidious forces of Satan at work behind the scenes to create a state of lawlessness the world over. And we should note that this lawlessness is not necessarily confusion and disorder or even the absence of law. The man of lawlessness will invoke all sorts of hideous laws through his tyrannical governmental system by which he seeks to control mankind. Lawlessness, then, refers to the presence of rebellion against God’s established rule and purposes. It speaks of the aim of Satan and his hosts of wickedness in spiritual places to overthrow the human government as ordained by God and other institutions like marriage and the family that God has designed for the blessing and protection of mankind.

Finally, referring again to the restrainer, most translations have something like, “until he is taken out of the way” or “removed” (cf. NASB, NIV, KJV, NET, and NRSV). Literally, however, the text simply has, “until he comes (*ginomai*, “to be, come to be, happen”) to be out of the midst (*ek*, “out of,” + *mesos*, “middle, midst”).” The possible significance of this will be suggested in the discussion regarding the identity of the restrainer.

Who then is the restrainer? Multiple suggestions have been made, but ultimately, it seems it must boil down to what or who is powerful enough to restrain Satan’s activities and who or what would do so. Most expositors commenting on these verses in their commentaries list a number of proposed solutions with perhaps most identifying the restrainer as the Roman Empire of Paul’s day or even government in general as a divine institution (Rom. 13:1f) since government is designed to hold back evil by its system of laws. The problem with this view is that it is government and specifically, the revived Roman Empire that the lawless (*anomos*) one will use in the last days. Government does not restrain him. Rather than a restraint to the mystery of lawlessness and so to the antichrist, government will become the very vehicle he will use to propel his system into existence.

To identify the restrainer, then, certain requirements need to be met.

1. The restrainer must be able to fit the description of the neuter (*to katechon*, “that which restrains”) and the masculine (*ho katechon*, “he who restrains”).
2. The restrainer must be both powerful enough and willing to restrain or hold back Satan because the mystery of lawlessness lies under Satan’s control.
3. The restrainer should be one who is seen in other portions of Scripture as engaged in the restraint of the mystery of lawlessness.
4. The restrainer must be able to fit the description of someone or something that “comes to be out of the midst.”

So who or what fits these requirements? Regarding some of the proposed identifications of the restrainer and especially the view that it is the Roman Empire, Thomas writes:

Proposed identifications of *to katechon* have been multiple. Because of inability to explain the neuter-masculine combination, such suggestions as the preaching of the gospel, the Jewish state, the binding of Satan, the church, Gentile world dominion, and human government are improbable.

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<sup>5</sup> See Addendum for an overview of the meaning and use of *mystery* in the New Testament.

To identify *to katechon* with a supernatural force or person hostile to God is difficult in a paragraph such as this because the restrainer is limiting Satan (vv. 7-9), not cooperating with him (Best, pp. 298-301). A popular understanding since early times has been that this is a reference to the Roman Empire (neuter) and its ruler (masc.) (See George Ladd, *NT Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], pp. 530, 560). Paul had several times benefited from the intervention of the Roman government (Acts 17:6 ff.; 18:6 ff.). In other writings he limits the role of human government to its dealing with wrong-doing (Rom 13:1, 3) (Milligan, p. 101). Though preferable to some other solutions, this explanation is disappointing in several ways. To predict the demise of the Roman Empire (cf. v. 7) is very uncharacteristic of Paul (Frame, p. 260). Then too, the Roman emperors sometimes precipitated anti-Christian activities rather than restrained them (Auberlen and Riggenbach, p. 139; Hogg and Vine, p. 260). Elimination of this solution is sealed when we remember that the Roman Empire has long since ceased to exist, and the appearance of Christ or the lawless one has yet to take place (Hogg and Vine, p. 259).<sup>6</sup>

The restrainer must be God Himself and particularly as the Godhead operates through the power and ministry of the Spirit of God. This is supported by the following:

(1) This fits well with the reality that in the final analysis only God is able to hold back Satan and his activity. As Ryrie points out,

Ultimately a decision as to the identity of the restrainer will be made on the basis of answering the question, Who is powerful enough to hold back Satan. The obvious and only answer to that question is God. Therefore, the restrainer must be God Himself. In this view the neuter in verse 6 would remind us of the power of God in general, and the masculine in verse 7 would point to the person of God.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas adds the following helpful comment on this issue of the power needed to accomplish the restraint.

It is evident that the restrainer, to accomplish his mission, must have supernatural power to hold back a supernatural enemy (v. 9). God and the outworking of his providence is the natural answer (Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 95). Reference to God is favored by the restrainer's harmony with divine purpose and a divine timetable ("at the proper time," v. 6) (Hiebert, p. 313; Delling, TDNT, 3:460, 461).<sup>8</sup>

(2) This view that the restrainer is God as the Godhead operates through the ministry of the Spirit also fits well with the way Paul varied the gender in his description of the restrainer and in the way the Holy Spirit is referred to in Scripture. The Greek word for *Spirit* is neuter, but on several occasions masculine nouns or pronouns are used for the person of the Spirit as in John 15:26; 16:13-14 and Ephesians 1:13-14.

... Either gender is appropriate, depending on whether the speaker (or writer) thinks of natural agreement (masc. because of the Spirit's personality) or grammatical (neuter because of the noun *pneuma*; see John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 14) (Robertson, RHG, pp. 208, 209). This identification of the restrainer with deep roots in church history (Alford, 3:57, 58) is most appealing. The special presence of the Spirit as the indweller of saints will terminate abruptly at the *parousia* as it began abruptly at Pentecost.<sup>9</sup>

(3) This view also fits well with the activity of God as previously illustrated in Genesis 6 and God's activity to restrain the evil intentions of pre-diluvian man. The Holy Spirit who is omnipresent and always at work in the world is also present and at work in the church to accomplish God's purposes. Since the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and in keeping with both Old and New Testament promises, this age has been known as the age of the Spirit. It is a time characterized by the fact of the indwelling of the Spirit in the body of Christ (John 14:16-17; 16:8f; 1 Cor. 6:19; Eph.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Moody, Chicago, 1959, pp. 110-111.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

1:13f; 4:30, etc.). So obviously, much of the Spirit's ministry of restraint is now being accomplished by the work of the Spirit in the body of Christ in ways far beyond our imagination.

(4) While the Spirit cannot be removed from the world as the omnipresent one, there is the sense in which He can come to be out of the midst as described in verse 7 through the removal of the church, the body of Christ. With the absence of the church, the Spirit's ministry will then revert back to that of the Old Testament times when the Spirit was *with* believers in some special way, but was evidently not *in* them the way He is today. Jesus spoke of this difference when He told the disciples, "Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it does not see him or know him. But you know him, because he resides *with you* and will be *in you*" (emphasis mine) (John 14:16-17 in the NET Bible). Thus, while the Spirit will not be taken *out of the world*, a reference to His *presence* (otherwise no one could be saved in the Tribulation and millions will be), He will come *to be out of the midst*, a reference to His special *residence* in the church. This removal of His residence will allow Satan to quickly bring about the great rebellion and reveal the man of lawlessness.

... every person of the Godhead has been, is, and always will be present in the world simply because God is omnipresent. But the persons of the Godhead and particularly the Holy Spirit have not always been resident within the hearts of God's either permanently or universally (see John 14:17), ... Today God has bound Himself to be resident within the hearts of all of His people and always ... Thus, to say that the restrainer is removed is not to say that the presence of God is taken away from the earth, nor is it to imply that God (or specifically the Holy Spirit) will cease to work in the world in any way including the work of regeneration. Many will be saved in the tribulation period (cf. Rev. 7:14), and God will be the One who accomplishes that work just as He did in Old Testament times. God's universal and permanent residence in His people is a distinctive relationship in this day of grace, and certainly the removal of His residence (including those believers in whom He resides) does not mean the withdrawal of His presence or the cessation of His activity. No other interpretation does full justice to all the facts and implications of this passage.<sup>10</sup>

### The Destruction of the Lawless One (2:8)

By the temporal adverb, "then,"<sup>11</sup> verse 8 shows the unveiling of "the lawless one"<sup>12</sup> will not occur until the restrainer is removed or is no longer resident in the midst as a restraining force in the church. Thus, verse 8 functions as a kind of transition to the next section, verses 9-12. These verses focus on the rise of the lawless one and so also on the Day of the Lord as the product of Satan's work or activity of *deception* in the world. But before the apostle moves to that subject, he calls our attention to the sure destruction of this one who is the product of Satan's work. Though hideous beyond belief, the rise and activity of the lawless one, and so also his governmental and religious system, will be short lived. The temporary nature and sure end of the rule and life of the lawless one is brought out by two statements of the apostle which stress the action accomplished and the means employed: (1) "whom the Lord will destroy by the breath of his mouth," and (2) "wipe out by the manifestation of his coming." While such details are not mentioned in this passage, verse 8 spans the seven-year reign of the antichrist from the time he makes a covenant with Israel (Dan. 9:26-27) following the rapture, until his destruction by the true Christ at His glorious return at the end of the Tribulation (see Rev. 19:11-21).

Thus, verse 8b strongly focuses us on God's sovereignty, the Lordship of Christ, and His absolute power. The world will stand in awe of the lawless one, but he is not even a feather in the wind when compared to the Lord Jesus.

**The First Statement of the Demise of the Lawless One:** "whom the Lord will destroy by the breath of his mouth."

<sup>10</sup> Ryrie, pp. 113-114.

<sup>11</sup> "Then" is the Greek *tote*, used here to introduce that which follows in time.

<sup>12</sup> The unveiling of the lawless one has already been mentioned in vs. 3, which is a sure sign of the presence of the Day of the Lord.

**The action against the lawless one:** “Destroy” is *anaireo*,,, “to take away, remove, destroy.” The word was mostly used of “killing by violence, in battle, by execution, murder, or assassination.”<sup>13</sup> Revelation 19:19-20 describes what is meant by “destroy.” The lawless one will not be annihilated, i.e., cease to exist, but removed and thrown alive into the lake of fire.

Revelation 19:19-20 Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies assembled to do battle with the one who rode the horse and with his army. Now the beast was seized, and along with him the false prophet who had performed the signs on his behalf—signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. Both of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulfur.

**The means used by Christ:** “With the breadth of his mouth” is fundamentally a quote from Isaiah 11:4 (see also Rev. 19:15). Truly, as Martin Luther put it in the great old hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, “A word shall quickly fell him.” Whether “the breath of his mouth” is a figurative reference to a word spoken by Christ or to His literal breath, it highlights the ease by which He will remove the lawless one and his lawless and godless system from the earth.

**The Second Statement of the Demise of the Lawless One:** “and wipe out by the manifestation of his coming.”

**The action against the lawless one:** “Wipe out” is *katargeo*,,, which means (1) “to make ineffective, to nullify, make powerless, idle,” or (2) “abolish, wipe out, set aside.” The idea here is that the lawless one’s power, presence, and rule will be brought to an end and rendered impotent as far as the world is concerned. His fate is the lake of fire.

**The means used by Christ:** “by the manifestation of his coming.” The very manifestation and splendor (see Tit. 2:13) of the Savior’s presence when He arrives at the end of the Tribulation will render the antichrist impotent and defeated.

Though different words are used in the Greek text, there are two unveilings spoken of in verse 8, that of the man of lawlessness (the antichrist), and that of Christ Himself. For the manifestation of Christ, the apostle used the Greek word *epiphaneia*, “appearance, manifestation.” It was often used as a religious technical term in the sense of a visible manifestation of a hidden divinity, either in the form of a personal appearance, or by some deed of power by which its presence is made known.<sup>14</sup>

The apostle used *epiphaneia* a number of times for the coming of Christ. In each case he used it to focus on some aspect of the purpose of Christ’s appearance or on the glorious nature of His appearing or both. These include the destruction of the man of lawlessness (2 Thes. 2:8), the fact of God’s sovereign rule (1 Tim. 6:14), of Christ’s first appearing to destroy death and give life (2 Tim. 1:10), the judgment of the living and the dead and God’s rule (2 Tim. 4:1), the awarding of crowns (2 Tim. 4:1), and the glorious nature of His appearing as an incentive to godly living now (Tit. 2:13). Here then, is a strong note of encouragement. Yes, there is a mystery of lawlessness at work now; and yes, the man of lawlessness (Satan’s man) will have his day of power and rule, but it will be short lived. The Lord Jesus, the Lamb who is also the Lion and the one who will have already come for the church, will return with His bride (Rev. 19) and His worldwide and glorious manifestation will become the very means of rendering powerless Satan’s man.

### Conclusion

No wonder the author of Hebrews, warning his audience against going back into the legalism of Judaism, spoke of what Christ has accomplished and of what we have in Christ now and in the future as our “so great salvation” (Heb. 2:3). Our salvation in Christ not only frees us from the clutches of sin, both its penalty and power, and from the power of Satan, but it promises us a glorious future by the literal return of the Savior in great glory and power. First, as declared in 1 Thessalonians, He will come *for us* to deliver us from the wrath to come, but then He will come *with us* to defeat Satan’s end-time system and establish His glorious rule on earth. It is for this reason Paul speaks of this event as “the blessed hope and (or “even”) the appearing of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

<sup>14</sup> Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, electronic media.

But lest we forget, it is a hope that not only gives comfort for the future, but strong instruction and motivation for godly living now.

**2:11** For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. **2:12** It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, **2:13** as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. **2:14** He gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good. **2:15** So communicate these things with the sort of exhortation or rebuke that carries full authority (Titus 2:11-15).

Further, as we reflect on these verses, we should never underestimate the way God is using the church today. As Wiersbe writes:

In spite of its weakness and seeming failure, never underestimate the importance of the church in the world. People who criticize the church do not realize that the presence of the people of God in this world gives unsaved people opportunity to be saved. The presence of the church is delaying the coming of judgment. Lot was not a dedicated man, but his presence in Sodom held back the wrath of God (Gen. 19:12-29).

There are two programs at work in the world today: God's program of salvation, and Satan's program of sin, "the mystery of iniquity." God has a timetable for his program, and nothing Satan does can change that timetable. Just as there was a "fulness of time" for the coming of Christ (Gal. 4:4), so there is a "fulness of the time" for the appearance of antichrist; and nothing will be off schedule. Once the restraining ministry of the Spirit of God has ended, the next event can take place.<sup>15</sup>

Whether one realizes it or not, through the preaching of the gospel and bringing people into a relationship with Christ, the church has been the cause of more transforming changes for good than any other source or movement in history. Perhaps, the following two illustrations will help to show this.

First, in his book, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?*, Dr. James Kennedy first gives an overview of a number of the awesome results of the life of Jesus Christ and then documents and explains how Christianity has impacted society in detail with illustration after illustration in the rest of the book. Today, many take these things for granted, especially in our country, but as Kennedy shows, things were by no means always like this. Here are a few of those transforming results summarized: (1) The development of hospitals which essentially began during the Middle Ages. (2) Universities, which also began in the Middle Ages. In addition, most of the world's greatest universities were started by Christians for Christian purposes. (3) Literacy and education for the masses. (4) Capitalism and free-enterprise. (5) Representative government, particularly as it has been seen in the American experiment. (6) Civil liberties. (7) The abolition of slavery, both in antiquity and in more modern times. (8) Modern science. (9) The elevation of women. (10) Benevolence and charity; the Good Samaritan ethic. (11) The condemnation of adultery, homosexuality, and other sexual perversions. This has helped to preserve the human race, and it has spared many from heartache. (12) High regard for human life because people are seen as created in the image of God. (13) The civilizing of many barbarian and primitive cultures.<sup>16</sup>

Second, I was recently reminded of this restraining influence of the church by Dr. Ted Baehr, author of *The Media Wise Family* and Chairman of The Christian Film and Television Commission/Good News Communications, who spoke at the church my wife and I attend. In his message as well as in his book, he gives statistic after statistic based on numerous polls and surveys that show the church is a lot more healthy than one might suppose in view of what is seen and heard via the media. The same applied to the morals of American people and that in spite of the fact that many movies and TV shows today promote morals that fall completely in line with the mystery of lawlessness. Though the church is far from what it should be, it appears the restrainer is at work regardless of the fact the Bible is not being proclaimed as clearly and with the depth as it should. For instance,

<sup>15</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 1979, pp. 139-140.

<sup>16</sup> D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1994, p. 3.

A *USA Today* / CNN / Gallup poll dealt with broader entertainment industry issues. This survey of 65,142 viewers found: 96% are very concerned or somewhat concerned about sex on TV. 97% are very or somewhat concerned about vulgar language on TV. (7% are very or somewhat concerned about violence on TV. 83% said the entertainment industry should make serious effort to reduce sex and violence in movies and music and TV. 68% believe that reducing the amount of sex and violence in movies and music and on TV would significantly improve the moral climate of the U.S. 65% felt the entertainment industry is seriously out of touch with the values of the American people...<sup>17</sup>

In another place, Baehr points out another interesting report.

The spiritual sea change in America is influencing the box office in some startling ways. Movies with strong Christian content are becoming extremely profitable at the box office. In 1996, movies with strong Christian content, such as *Dead Man Walking*, and not just movies with wedding or funeral homilies, earned 37.5 million on average at the box office, ...

... The shift in values and attitudes has left movies with excessive sexual content and violence in the dust. Therefore, much to the dismay of Hollywood executives, many big-budget porno-violent films have flopped at the box office.<sup>18</sup>

What does all this show us? Again, even though there is a crisis in evangelical Christianity and though in some ways we have been losing the war, we can see that a church in whom the Spirit of God is resident is still having an impact of restraint. But a day is coming when the restrainer is going to be removed and I believe this is through the rapture of the church, and then that awful rebellion or apostasy will occur and the lawless one will be revealed.

### **Addendum: The Word “Mystery”**

The term *mystery* as it is found in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek word *musteion* from *meuo*,, “to initiate into (the mysteries),” i.e., to make known special secrets. Thus, *musteion* meant a secret rite or teaching which the initiate knew but no one else could know. The root idea then is information known only to those on the inside, but hidden to those who are without (Mark 4:11). Most often in the New Testament it refers to information which has been kept secret or veiled, but has now been disclosed by God’s revelation (Rom. 16:25-26).

### **The Biblical Significance and Use of the Term**

As mentioned in the body of this study, the term *mystery* does not refer to something mysterious in that it eludes all comprehension or explanation. Rather, as used in the Bible, it refers to God’s secrets, His counsels, purposes, and other truths which are not naturally known to man apart from His special revelation in Scripture or by His prophets (Dan. 2:18-23; 27-30).

In many cases in the New Testament it refers to church truth which was unknown in Old Testament times, but has been revealed in the New Testament revelation (cf. Eph. 3:1-9). The Old Testament revealed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the salvation of the Gentiles, etc., but there was no mention of the church and certain aspects of the church age. These things Paul called *mysteries* (Rom. 16:25-26).

It is also used of spiritual truth revealed in Scripture (Old or New Testament truth) but which remains a secret or veiled to unbelievers because they cannot spiritually understand ideas due to their unregenerate condition. In this sense, it refers to truth that man cannot comprehend by experience, by trial and error, by human testing, or by his own reason or human philosophy (1 Cor. 2:6-14; Mark 4:11). Through the revelation of the Word of God, the new capacity given in the new nature, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the believer becomes the initiate of God’s

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<sup>17</sup> Ted Baehr, *The Media Wise Family*, Chariot Victor Publishing, Colorado Springs, CO, 1998, pp. 31-32.

<sup>18</sup> Baehr, pp. 42-44.

mysteries (cf. Phil. 4:12 where Paul uses the Greek word *mueo*). For this more general use, compare also 1 Cor. 4:1 and perhaps Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3; and 1 Tim. 3:9.

### **A Summary of the Mysteries of the New Testament**

1. The mystery of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13). The mystery of the interim program of God between Christ's first and second advents.
2. The mystery of the blindness of Israel and God's purpose with Israel's blindness (Rom. 11:1-25).
3. The mystery of the departure of the church at the end of this age (1 Cor. 15:51-57; 1 Thes. 4:13f).
4. The mystery of the church as the body of Christ where Jew and Gentile become one new man in Christ (Eph. 3:1-11; 2:11f).
5. The mystery of the church as the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-32).
6. The mystery of the indwelling of Christ as the hope of glory or spiritual deliverance by the power of the indwelling Christ (Col. 1:26-27; 2:2).
7. The mystery of lawlessness—the continuation and gradual build up of the state of lawlessness which will culminate in the man of lawlessness (1 Thess. 2:7). Lawlessness is not necessarily confusion and disorder or even the absence of law, but rather the presence of rebellion against God's established rule and purposes. It speaks of the aim of Satan and his hosts of wickedness to overthrow the divine government and established ordinances of God as He designed them.
8. The mystery of godliness, or the process by which man becomes God-like in character through the person, work and life of Jesus Christ as He is faithfully proclaimed and defended by the church of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 3:16).
9. The mystery of the church as the seven stars (Rev. 1:20).
10. The mystery of God, the answer to the age old question, why has God allowed Satan and evil to continue to exist (Rev. 10:7).

Please note that the answer to this is found in Scripture, it was preached to God's prophets. There are two key parts to this answer: (a) To resolve the angelic warfare, to answer and demonstrate that Satan, the accuser and slanderer of God's character is wrong in his accusations and that he is worthy of God's judgment for his sin. (b) To demonstrate God's patience and love and to provide ample opportunity for men to come to Christ (2 Pet. 3:7-8).

So when the angel of Revelation 10:7 says "*time shall be no more*" he means that once the seventh trumpet is sounded, this time of demonstrating God's character and of demonstrating man and Satan for what they are, this time of allowing Satan and rebellion to continue, will be over; God will act swiftly now to establish His rule of righteousness on earth. This period of the patience of God is over.

11. The mystery of Babylon, the truth regarding the source of the ancient and godless mother-child cult (Rev. 17:5, 7).

**Lesson 6:**  
**The Third Explanation:**  
**Deception, Delusion, and Divine Judgment in the Day of the Lord**  
**(2:9-12)**

**Introduction**

Though the Day of the Lord will eventually usher in a glorious day of millennial blessing for those left after the Tribulation and the return of Christ to earth, it will begin with a time of judgment, a day of wrath, as described in Revelation 6-19. While millions will come to Christ beginning with the sealing and salvation of 144,000 Jews (12,000 from each tribe of Israel) and extending to a great multitude of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue (Rev. 7), the world as a whole will be in stark rebellion and will follow after the man of lawlessness in blind obedience and worship. That such is the product of man's rebellion is obvious by the unrepentant heart described in several places even though the inhabitants of the world seem to know they are under the judgment of God's divine wrath (see Rev. 6:14-17; 9:20-21; 16:9, 11).

How is it that man, in utter defiance, even in the face of what is obviously the outpouring of God's wrath against man's sin, still raises up his fist in God's face and continues to follow after the beast and his system of government? The passage before us gives us insight into that question. Though there are issues beyond our comprehension here, it is centered around man's delusion and deception, which occurs as a result of God's judgment because of man's failure to love the truth. Many get all bent out of shape over matters like God's sovereignty, election, and predestination on one side, and on the other, the issues of man's free will or responsibility to believe. The fact is, however, God's Word teaches both elements of truth, and there is no place more evident than in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 and again in verses 13-14. Verses 9-12 deal with the unbelieving world and their responsibility and verses 13-14 with believers as the chosen of God, but through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and faith in the truth.

**The Coming of the Lawless One and Satan's Deception**  
**(2:9-10)**

**2:9** The coming of the lawless one will be by Satan's working with all kinds of miracles and signs and false wonders, **2:10** and with every kind of evil deception directed against those who are perishing, because they found no place in their hearts for the truth so as to be saved.

**The Rise of Antichrist by the Counterfeit Work of Satan (2:9-10a)**

In these verses we actually see the second effect and detail regarding the man of lawlessness. The first was his unveiling, but this is quickly countered by the promise of his destruction by the manifestation of the *parousia* of Christ at His advent to earth. Now another detail is given, namely, the source of the lawless one's coming (*parousia*) and deceptive working in the world. It will "be by Satan's working." Literally, "whose coming is in accordance with a working of Satan." This answers the question, "Why and how will the lawless one be able to so quickly deceive the world into following him to the point they even worship him"? As it was also revealed to John in Revelation 13, it is because he is Satan's man; he is Satan-inspired, enabled, and indwelt, and evidently, the world will understand this and won't care.

... And the whole world followed the beast in amazement; they worshiped the dragon because he had given ruling authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast too, saying: "Who is like the beast?" and "Who is able to make war against him?" The beast was given a mouth speaking proud words and blasphemies, and he was permitted to exercise ruling authority for forty-two months. So the beast opened his mouth to blaspheme against God—to blaspheme both his name and his dwelling place, that is, those who dwell in heaven. The beast was permitted to go to war against the saints and conquer them. He was given ruling authority over every tribe, people, language, and



nation, and all those who live on the earth will worship the beast, everyone whose name has not been written since the foundation of the world in the book of life belonging to the Lamb who was killed. If anyone has an ear, he had better hear! (Rev. 13:3-9).

Because of the mystery of lawlessness at work even today, such deception is actually not new. The masses have been deluded into following such tyrants and demonically-inspired men before as was so evident in the rise of Hitler. The difference seems to be one of degree. While most of the world recognized Hitler for who and what he was and finally gathered together to oppose him in World War II, just the opposite will occur when the man of sin is revealed. There will be those who resist the lawless one because of their faith in Christ, but the world as a whole will follow after the beast in amazement even to the point of believing that he is God.

The apostle explains that it is because his “coming is in accord with the working of Satan with all kinds of miracles and signs and false wonders,” the very things God used to authenticate the message and lay the foundation for the church (see Acts 2:22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4). By the superhuman power of Satan, this will be redirected to accomplish Satan’s deception on an unbelieving world.

“In accord with” represents the Greek preposition *kata* used here with the word “working” in the accusative case. In such a context, this construction is used “to introduce the norm which governs something.” Sometimes, as here, the norm merges into the reason or the cause.<sup>1</sup> With the restrainer removed, there is nothing to hinder the working of Satan. “Working” is *energeia*, “working, operation, action,” but in the New Testament it is typically used of that which is supernatural, either of the enabling power of God or of satanic operations (Eph. 1:19; 3:7; 4:16; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:29; 2:12; 2 Thes. 2:9, 11).

The activity of Satan is described with the words, “with all kinds of miracles and signs and false wonders and with every kind of evil deception.” “All” is the adjective *pas*, which, when used without the article, may include “everything belonging, in kind, to the class designated by the noun *every kind of, all sorts of.*”<sup>2</sup> Satan will reach into his bag of tricks to use everything he has at his disposal. These are defined as “miracles, signs, and false wonders.”

“Miracles” is *dunamis*, “inherent ability, power,” but it often is used of the outward expressions of power, “deeds of power” or “miracles”—that which is beyond normal human ability. This word stresses the fact of the performance or display of miracles or powers, while “signs and wonders” look at the immediate effect on the people in two different ways.

“Sign” is *semeion*, “a sign or distinguishing mark by which something is known.”<sup>3</sup> It refers to an event which is regarded as having some special meaning. This work points to the purpose and goal of the miracles from the standpoint of what the miracles are designed to communicate, i.e., the ideas and beliefs Satan wants to pawn off on the world. People will be thinking this man, this great leader of ours must be god incarnate because he does claim to be god and seems to have the power to prove it. He must be the answer to the world’s needs; surely he and he alone can mold the world into unity and peace and give us a life of great prosperity.

“Wonders” is *teras*, “wonder, marvel.” In the New Testament *teras* is always combined with *semeion* because it looks at another effect of the miracle or the *dunamis* in the sense it gets people’s attention and causes them to marvel or stand in amazement at what they have seen. But Paul calls them “false” or “lying” (NASB) wonders. “False” is *pseudos*, “a falsehood, a lie.” It may refer just to the wonders or (as is more probable) to both the signs and wonders or even all three nouns (miracles, signs, wonders). This looks at the purpose of these miracles as signs and wonders. They are designed to deceive. But this in no way denies the miraculous nature of the miracles. They are not like the slight-of-hand tricks of a magician. They are real, but they are designed to lead to belief in a lie (vs. 11). They are real miracles that are designed to deceive. *Pseudos* is the word Jesus used of Satan in John 8:44 as the one in whom there is no truth because he is a liar and the father of lies. This word often stands in contrast to *aletheia*, “truth” (cf. John 8:44; 1 Thes. 2:11-12).

<sup>1</sup> Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

<sup>2</sup> Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, electronic media.

<sup>3</sup> Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, electronic media.

Thus, the combination of these words or expressions are used to point to a supernatural component, but one with very definite and important religious implications, especially since the performance of such miracles implies divine power. In the life of the Lord and in the early church, they were used to authenticate the messenger and so his message. He was one speaking the truth. In the case of the apostles and prophets, they were those who became the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:22).<sup>4</sup> But in the case of the apostle and prophets of the New Testament, they performed miraculous acts that authenticated a message that was in keeping with the Old Testament and its fulfillment. What will occur in the future is just the opposite.

The apostle Paul adds one more very interesting and explanatory statement, “and with every kind of evil deception.” This clinches the previous statement. Literally, the text says, “with every kind of deception of unrighteousness.” “Unrighteousness” may simply be an adjectival genitive, “unrighteous” deception, but it may also point us to the **result**, deception that leads to unrighteousness, or to the **source**, deception that proceeds from unrighteousness, which is probably best considering the context. However, maybe this is one of those plenary situations where all the grammatical possibilities could apply. Certainly, the deception proceeds from the evil nature of Satan’s system and it will lead to an unrighteousness that is unparalleled in history.

But the question still remains, “Who is it that will fall for his schemes, and how could the world become so amazed by his miraculous powers and so deluded that it will follow after the lawless one?”

### **The Reason for the Deception in Those Who Are Perishing (2:10b)**

The reason is indicated in the words, “directed against those who are perishing, because they found no place in their hearts for the truth ...” What irony! First, those for whom the lying wonders are designed are described as “those who are perishing (tois apollumenois),” because they will follow “the son of destruction (apo.,leia).” The second stroke of irony is seen in the reason given. They will believe the lie of Satan because “they found no place in their hearts for the truth.” Literally, “because the love of the truth they did not welcome.” While this is an unusual expression, it points us to the fundamental reason why they will believe Satan’s lie rather than believe the gospel that they might be saved. It will not be a matter of the evidence for the truth of Christ, but a moral matter. The Lord put it this way in John 3.

**John 3:17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him. **3:18** The one who believes in him is not condemned. The one who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God. **3:19** Now this is the basis for judging: that the light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. **3:20** For everyone who does evil deeds hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed. **3:21** But the one who practices the truth comes to the light, so that it may be plainly evident that his deeds have been done in God.

The gospel will be preached to all the world in the Day of the Lord and millions will turn to the Savior and be saved (Rev. 7). It won’t be a matter of not hearing the gospel, as the book of Revelation makes clear. Rather, it will be a matter of rebellion and loving the darkness rather than the light. When people reject the truth, it leaves them open to all manner of evil and false beliefs as Romans 1:18-28 and Ephesians 4:17-19 teach us. To reject the knowledge of God and the light God gives leads to a further darkening of one’s understanding and a perverted mind that takes pleasure in every kind of impurity in the sphere of greediness for more and more.

### **The Judgment of God and the Deluding Influence (2:11-12)**

**2:11** Consequently God sends on them a deluding influence that they may believe what is false.

**2:12** And so they will all be judged who have not believed the truth but have delighted in evil.

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<sup>4</sup> Because the prophets appear after the mention of the apostles in Ephesians 2:20 and because they are linked together in 3:5 as recipients of revelation about the church, they should to be regarded not as Old Testament prophets, but as New Testament prophets. Thus, as Jesus Himself is regarded as the chief corner stone, so the apostles and prophets themselves should be regarded as the foundation.

“Consequently” (Greek, *dia touto*, “for this reason”) looks back to the previous verse and the refusal to love the truth by those who are perishing. As such, it also introduces us to the consequence, the moral judgment of God. They consign themselves and are thus consigned to judgment. We must not lose sight of the fact the judgment here proceeds from man’s own choice. Because of its immoral indifference to the truth, God will not only let the world believe a lie, but will send a deluding influence to promote it. “A deluding influence” is literally, “a working of error or delusion.” “Working” is *energeia*, “working, operation, action,” but in the New Testament, always of what is supernatural.<sup>5</sup> “Error” is *plane*, a “wandering, roaming.” In the New Testament it is used only figuratively of wandering from the path of truth in the sense of *error, delusion, deceit, deception* to which one becomes subject.<sup>6</sup> We should contrast this with the powerful working of the Word in those who believe in 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

... Here God sends “a working of delusion” in the sense that to be misled by falsehood is the divine judgment inevitably incurred in a moral universe by those who close their eyes to the truth. But the true God is not the deliberate author of this infatuation; it is, as Paul put it in 2 Cor 4:4, “the god of this aeon” (cf. the “activity of Satan” in v 9 above) who “has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

“That they may believe what is false” (*cis* to + the infinitive *pisteusai*, “to believe”) points us to the intended result or divine purpose, that which is the product of failing to love the truth. But the text literally says, “that they might believe *the lie*.” As in Romans 1:25, “lie” has the article and looks at something specific. What then is *the lie*? Some, as Bruce, believe it is,

... the fundamental truth that God is God; it is the rejection of his self-revelation as Creator and Savior, righteous and merciful Judge of all, which leads to the worship due to him alone being offered to another, such as the “man of lawlessness.”<sup>8</sup>

While this is fundamental and lies at the root of all of man’s unbelief, the context suggests *the lie* refers to verse 4, the belief that the man of lawlessness is God and has the ability to meet the needs of the world (see also 1 Thes. 5:1). Certainly also, this all goes back to Satan’s original lie to Eve in claiming that by choosing to eat of the tree of good and evil, man can become like God (cf. Gen. 3:5; John 8:44).

With verse 12, the apostle takes us to the ultimate consequence of failing to love the truth so that they might be saved and avoid the lie of Satan. The NET Bible has, “and so they will all be judged,” but the Greek text continues the preceding focus with the more forceful, “in order that they all might be judged.” While Paul does not describe the nature of the judgment in view, several judgments come to mind: (1) the judgment to falling for the lie, (2) the judgments of the Tribulation, and (3) the judgment of the Great White Throne (Rev. 20).

The ultimate consequences for them will be condemnation. Failing to appropriate the truth of the gospel, they willingly choose wickedness instead. They cannot blame circumstances. Retrospect will show their own wrongly directed personal delight to be the cause of God’s adverse judgment against them (cf. 1:9). What an incentive this powerful passage is for non-Christians to turn to God before the rebellion and delusion arrive.<sup>9</sup>

But the primary focus here is seen in the word order of the Greek text. Literally, “in order that they might all be judged, those who did not believe the truth, but (*alla*, a conjunction of strong contrast), delighted in unrighteousness.” Thus, the focus is on the words, “who have not believed the truth but have delighted in evil.” Again, we are brought face to face with the root issue of man’s unbelief. It’s man’s inherent desire to live in unrighteousness. This is expressed in “have delighted in evil.” “Delighted” is *eudoko*, “to think well of, approve, be well pleased, take delight or pleasure in.” “Evil” is *adikia*, “wrong doing, injustice, unrighteousness, wickedness.” It was used in 2:10, “every kind of deception of wickedness.” But what is the fundamental issue or nature of man’s

<sup>5</sup> Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, electronic media.

<sup>6</sup> See in Bauer, Gingrich, Danker, electronic media.

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> F. F. Bruce, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Frank E. Gaebelien, General Editor, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

wrong doing or unrighteousness? As from the very beginning when Adam and Eve swallowed Satan's big lie, is it not man's attempt to live life independently of God and to be, as constantly tempted by Satan, to become like God himself?

### Conclusion

Certainly one of the key points of these verses is the very sobering truth that people can so resist the truth that God finally gives them over to greater and greater delusion where they literally wander further and further away so that they believe one lie after another. Plainly, there is no walking the fence, no neutral ground that men may take—either we respond to the revelation of God in Christ and His truth as we find it in the Bible, or we will believe Satan's lies. To love not the truth leads to rejecting the truth and ultimately to receiving Satan's and the world's lies.

This is a sobering thought and explains, at least in part, why people can be so easily duped into following the wildest and weirdest cults imaginable. As McGee has put it,

I have been simply amazed at some intelligent people who have sat in church, heard the gospel, rejected it, and then turned to the wildest cult imaginable. They will follow some individual who is absolutely a phony—not giving out the Word of God at all. Why? Because God says that is the way it is: When people reject the truth, they will believe the lie.

God is separating the sheep from the goats. God uses the best way in the world to do it. If people will not receive the love of the truth, then God sends them a “strong delusion, that they should believe a lie.” What is the “lie”?<sup>10</sup>

When people are negative to God's truth, they become totally defenseless against the many deceptions of the devil. So in the Day of the Lord, they will be defenseless against the false claims of the lawless one (v. 4) and his perversion as they are centered in the Antichrist. As mentioned, it will be nothing more than a repeat of the same basic lie that deceived Eve in Genesis 3, only, in the man of lawlessness, that lie will be embodied in Satan's end-time master of deceit.

Note the three steps in falling for Satan's lies and his end-time lie:

1. Those who are perishing will fail to love the truth; they will be negative toward truth in their pursuit of the darkness or unrighteousness (vss. 10, 12).
2. As the first step of judgment, God sends a deluding influence that they might believe the lie (vs. 11). The man of lawlessness is Satan's ultimate lie (see John 8:44 and Rev. 13:1f).
3. This leads to God's judgments, those experienced in the Tribulation and at the Great White Throne. The reason is failure to believe the truth, but this is really a judgment for failing to love truth.

Here is a moral law of the universe as established by a holy and righteous God: God gives the wicked over to the wickedness they have chosen as declared in Romans 1:18-28; Ephesians 4:17-19; and Proverbs 5:22.

Some general lessons for verses 1-12:

1. False doctrine and ignorance of doctrine causes instability (2:2)
2. God wants us to know and understand Bible prophecy and the signs of the end times (2:3-5; Matt. 16:1-3)
3. The world will not become better and better, but worse as we move closer and closer to the Day of the Lord. We should expect this and be prepared (2:3, 7; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-13; 2 Pet. 3; Jude).
4. It seems Satan always has a potential man of sin in the wings ready for the removal of the restrainer.
5. Both Christ and the Holy Spirit are more powerful than Satan and we need to rest in this truth (1 John. 4:4; 2 Thes. 2:6-8).
6. If people reject the truth, the only thing left to believe is Satan's lies and ultimately, his end time lie (2:10).

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<sup>10</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, Vol. 5, 1 Corinthians—Revelation, Thru The Bible Radio, Pasadena, CA, p. 416.

7. Miracles by themselves do not prove the truth (2:9). Then, how do we know what the truth is? By observing the man and his message according to the truth of Scripture, the Holy Bible.

**Lesson 7:**  
**Challenges to Believers in View of the Day of the Lord**  
**(2:13-17)**

**Introduction**

In strong contrast to the future of the perishing as just described in verses 10-12, Paul and his team give thanks for the drastically different and glorious future of the Thessalonian believers now described in verses 13-14. Here the believer's future is described both from the standpoint of God's sovereign activity and man's personal responsibility. In these verses we see a beautiful balance that is so often missed as theologians discuss the issues of God's sovereign election in salvation versus man's responsibility. In these two verses the apostle shows us the necessity and fact of both in man's salvation. The unfortunate tendency is man's bent to swing the pendulum from one extreme to the other so that the whole of God's truth is not only missed, but one side is blown out of proportion into such a grotesque caricature that the other side is completely overshadowed. Scripture teaches both truths and this passage among others is one of the proofs of that fact.

Can we understand it? Not really, for the more profound a truth is, the greater the difficulty finite man has in understanding it. What is needed is the humility to face this as a part of our own finiteness. For what is the Bible? It is the divine and special revelation of the mind of an infinite God, which means the human reader is often brought beyond the limits of his own intelligence, beyond his capacity of comprehension. Unless we come to recognize that our own wisdom and intelligence are not enough, we will continue to distort what Scripture teaches on such difficult issues. We must be ready to listen to God's greater wisdom. Jesus alluded to this when He prayed to God, "you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Luke 10:21). Too often men take the position of the wise and seek to use or apply their own human logic to these difficult concepts of Scripture like divine sovereignty and human volition, the trinity, and the divine/human natures of Christ united in one person. As a result, they end up either rejecting, or misinterpreting, or distorting the plain teaching of the Bible on these truths. They become as gods and act as though they have become God's instructors. But may we be reminded of the words of Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:13-14. Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor?  
Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that  
taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? (NIV)

Consequently, having assured these believers that they were not then in the Day of the Lord and having contrasted their glorious future with that of the unbelieving world, the apostle returns to matters at hand in verses 14-17, namely the present danger of failing to hold to what they had been taught so that they might find their comfort and strength in that truth for fruitful living in this present world. In this we see the necessary balance between prophecy and practical Christian living.

Paul was a balanced Christian who had a balanced ministry; and we see evidence of this as he brought his letter to a close. He moved from prophecy to practical Christian living. He turned from the negative (Satan's lies) to the positive (God's truth), and from warning to thanksgiving and prayer ...

Paul's emphasis was on the truth of God's Word in contrast to Satan's great lie which Paul discussed in the previous section ...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 151.

## The Believer's Position and Deliverance (2:13-14)

**2:13** But we ought to give thanks for you always, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. **2:14** He called you to this salvation through our gospel, so that you may possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### The Thanksgiving of Paul and His Associates (2:13a)

“But we ought to give thanks for you always.” In characteristic fashion of a man who understood the grace perspective of life, the apostle again gives thanks to God for the Thessalonians (see 1 Thes. 1:2, 2:13; 3:9; 2 Thes. 1:3) whose very salvation was, of course, the result of the love of God. But as in 1:3, the apostle expresses this as a constant moral obligation that arises out of the nature of God's saving grace. As in 1:3, he again combines the present continuous tense of *opheilo*,, “to owe, be indebted,” with the adverb *pantote*, “at all times,” to stress the point of our obligation to recognize the gracious and loving work of God in the salvation of men.

The apostle then describes them literally as “brethren, beloved by the Lord.” To do this he used the perfect passive participle of *agapao*,, “to love.” The participle is appositional (an explanatory equivalent) to “brethren.” As brethren, they are “beloved by the Lord.” Contextually, this is what we would call an *intensive* perfect because it stresses being loved as an abiding state resulting from past action. As believers in Christ, having been loved by God in the past, we are the constant recipients of God's love in the present (see Rom. 8:39). Whatever has been done for us in Christ springs from the eternal love of God, but as God's children we continue to remain recipients of that love. It was at the cross that God proved His love for sinners (Rom. 5:8).

With the word “because” (*hoti*, used here as a causal conjunction, “because, since”), Paul described the stages of salvation as the outworking of His love.

### God's Sovereign Activity in Salvation (2:13b, 14a)

**(1) He chose them from the beginning for salvation (2:13b).** In this statement, as it springs from God's eternal love, we see the ultimate **cause** and **source** of our salvation in Christ—divine selection. “Chose” is from the verb *airo*,, “to pick, take,” but in the middle voice it means “to choose.” The form of the verb (an aorist indicative middle of past action) plus the words, “from the beginning,”<sup>2</sup> point to the pre-temporal choice of God which the apostle usually places alongside their historical call (vs. 14). This choice was not on the basis of their love for God (1 John 4:10) or any merit on their part, but because of God's love for them. The middle voice (an intensive middle, “he chose *for* or *by* Himself) stresses this truth. The next clause, however, will expand on this. The words, “for salvation,” express the purpose or goal. What is stated here is said in contrast to those who are perishing because they have no love for the truth (vs. 12). Thus, Paul states that the goal is salvation for those chosen by the sanctifying work of the Spirit and belief in the truth, the gospel. “Salvation” is *so,te,ria*, “deliverance, salvation.” But again, the New Testament teaches us that our salvation in Christ has three phases or aspects. The **past**, saved from the penalty of sin, the **present**, being delivered from the reign and power of sin, and the **future**, being in the presence of God throughout eternity. This salvation is a matter of present confidence, enjoyment, and future anticipation in contrast to those who will go through the Day of the Lord.

**(2) He sanctified them (set them apart) by the Spirit (2:13c).** Exactly how God chose them *for* or *by* Himself is now amplified. First, it was “through the sanctification by the Spirit.” “Sanctification” is the Greek *hagiasmos* from *hagiazō*,, “to consecrate, set apart, sanctify.” It carries the idea of a “setting apart” from the secular to that which is holy or reserved for God's special purposes. In this there is the **present, progressive** sanctifying work of the Spirit designed to bring believers to spiritual maturity and conform them into the character of Christ. But in the

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<sup>2</sup> There is some debate over whether the text should read *aparche*,,n, “first fruits,” or *ap' arche*,,s, “from the beginning.” “Some manuscripts (B F G 33 1739 *al*) read “as a first-fruit” (i.e., as the first converts), but this is more likely to be a change by scribes who thought of the early churches in this way. Paul would not be likely to call the Thessalonians “the first-fruits” among his converts. The reading in the text is supported by ? D Y *Byz*.” (Textual critical note from the *NET Bible*, The Biblical Studies Press).

context here, Paul refers to the **preliminary** work of the Spirit to illuminate, convict, and lead a person to faith in Christ (cf. John 16:8f; Acts 1:8; 16:14; 1 Pet. 1:2). This reminds us of the principle that we may (and should) sow and water the seed of the Word, but ultimately, it is God who brings the increase or enables the seed to germinate and sprout up in the heart of those to whom we witness.

The second means God uses is “faith in the truth.” This will be covered below under “Man’s Responsibility in Salvation.”

**(3) He called them to this salvation through the Gospel (2:14a).** Literally, the Greek text reads, “unto which (referring to *salvation*, the main idea of verse 13) He called you through our gospel.” “Our gospel” naturally refers to the message about the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is also “the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (1:8). In verse 13 Paul spoke of God’s pre-temporal choosing of the Thessalonians for salvation. Here he speaks of the actual work of bringing them to Himself by calling them through the message of the gospel. “Call” is aorist of the verb *kaleo*,, “call, invite.” The aorist tense looks back to the time when the missionaries visited Thessalonica and they heard the gospel in what the missionaries preached.

**(4) He gave them the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2:14b).** “So that you may possess the glory of our Lord Jesus” points us to the ultimate goal—sharing in the glory of eternity with the Lord Jesus. Here we see what began in His past eternal councils finds its ultimate fulfillment in eternity future. However, as seen in 1:10, sharing in the glory of Christ will begin with His *parousia* when He comes with the church to be glorified in His saints (see also 1 Thes. 5:9).

... What begins with grace always leads to glory. This is quite a contrast to the future assigned to the lost (2 Thes. 1:8-10). Believers already possess God’s glory within (John 17:22; not the past tense in Rom. 8:30— “glorified”). We are awaiting Christ’s return, and then the glory shall be revealed (2 Thes. 1:10; Rom. 8:17-19).

When sinners believe God’s truth, God saves them. When they believe Satan’s lie, and reject the love of the truth, they cannot be saved (2 Thes. 2:10-12). Being neutral about God’s truth is a dangerous thing. It has tragic eternal consequences.<sup>3</sup>

### Man’s Responsibility in Salvation (2:13d)

As pointed to above, this is brought out in the words, “... and faith in the truth.” As the God who ordained the *end* and chose us for salvation and the possession of the glory of Christ, so likewise He has ordained the *means* as it pertains to man’s responsibility. This responsibility is linked, of course, to the sanctifying work of the Spirit. That responsibility is faith in the truth as it is found in the gospel message of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Repeatedly, the apostle has referred to the personal faith of the Thessalonians (see 1 Thes. 1:3 with 1:9; 2:13; 2 Thes. 1:10). God’s election in no way bypasses the need of personal faith in Christ. These two must be held in balance.

It is dangerous to engage in idle speculation about divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Both are taught in the Bible. We know that “salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9), and that lost sinners can never save themselves. We must admit that there are *mysteries* to our salvation; but we can rejoice that there are *certainties* on which we can rest. We must not use the doctrine of election to divide the church or disturb the weak, but to glorify the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

### The Believer’s Practice and Responsibility (2:15-17)

#### Hold Firmly to the Truth (2:15)

**2:15** Therefore, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to the traditions that we taught you, whether by speech or by letter.

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<sup>3</sup> Wiersbe, pp. 153-154.

<sup>4</sup> Wiersbe, p. 153.



Paul now turns to a practical responsibility that flows out of all that has been said in verses 1-14. They are called on to stand firm (1) because of the glorious deliverance that awaited them at the coming of the Lord (2:1), (2) because of the false teaching that had disturbed them (2:2-3), and (3) because of Satan's working of error and the tragic future of those who had not believed the truth (2:9-10).

"Therefore" is *ara oun*. *Ara* is a coordinating or inferential conjunction, "so then, consequently," but here it is strengthened with *oun*, another conjunction (inferential and transitional) meaning "therefore, then." *Ara* points to the inference drawn from the preceding context and *oun* to the transitional focus or exhortation that should result.<sup>5</sup>

Even though they were not in the Day of the Lord and could never be because they had not been appointed to wrath, but to deliverance (1 Thes. 1:10; 5:9), still they, as all believers in the church age, are living in a time when the mystery of lawlessness is always at work. In this regard there is a *present* danger of deception and a growing apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1f; 2 Tim. 3:1f). Thus, believers must stand firm and hold on with a strong grip to the truth Paul and his associates had taught them. With the words "stand firm" we have the *call* for stability in contrast to being shaken or disturbed (2:2). With the words "hold on to the traditions ..." we have the *means* to maintain the needed stability.

Both "stand firm" and "hold on" are in the continuous present tense and the imperative mood, the mood of command. In this context, where some had been shaken from their composure (2:2), it carries the force of "begin and continue to stand firm and hold on." The verb "stand firm" is *ste,ko,,* "to stand," but it is used figuratively in the sense of "standing firm" or "being steadfast." It calls for believers to become spiritually stable because of the many and strong winds of false doctrine that always blow across the landscape of human history (see Eph. 4:14). The means for stability is found in the command to "hold on." "Hold on" is the verb *krateo,,* which first means, "to be strong, mighty," hence, "to rule, be master, prevail." From this it came to mean "to hold on to something strongly or tightly so that it cannot be lost or taken away." The focus, of course, is on the object to be held tightly, "the traditions that we taught you" because this provides the source of stability like a sailor clinging to the mast of a ship in rough seas.

"Traditions" is *paradosis*, which is literally, "a handing down" or "passing on." The verb form, *paradido,,mi*, "to hand over," and its noun cognate, *paradosis*, should not be taken lightly. They do not mean *tradition* as it is often understood in modern English in the sense of mere human customs that one can simply accept or reject. It refers here to "a tradition of teaching, that which is passed on to others," but the nature and value of the tradition depends on the context.

Negatively, *paradosis* is used in the New Testament of the teaching of the Jewish Rabbis (Matt. 15:2-6; Mark 7:5, 9, 13; see also Gal. 1:14). In Matthew 15 and Mark 7, the Lord rebuked the Pharisees because they had raised their religious traditions above Scripture so that they had nullified the authority of the Word of God itself. Paul uses it in Colossians 2:8 to describe the Colossian heresy, of human traditions, of that which had its source in man's ideas.

Positively, however, *paradosis* and *paradido,,mi* are often theologically rich and in essence refer to the God-breathed teachings of God's Word through the apostolic traditions received from the Lord Himself (see John 16:12-16; 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3). Thus, here and in 3:6, it is used of the teachings handed down by the apostle and his missionary team which in turn had been handed down to them by the Lord (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3). The important point here is that Paul's use of this word points to its divine authority in contrast to the mere human traditions as in the Colossian heresy (Col. 2:8) or to any other teaching contrary to what they had received from Paul. Paul's teaching and that of his associates did not originate from man, but had its source in God Himself, "through revelation from Jesus Christ" (see 1 Thes. 2:13; Gal. 1:12). Thus, whether through Paul or through the other Apostles, these traditions had their source in God Himself by divine revelation and constituted "the faith ... once for all delivered (*paradido,,mi*) unto the saints" (see Jude 3).

It is these traditions of divine revelation that he had passed on to the Thessalonians, "whether by speech or by letter." Thus, they were to cling to these as the source and means for standing firm against not only all forms of false teaching but against the various storms of life, regardless of their source.

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

### Practice the Truth (2:16-17)

**2:16** Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, **2:17** encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good thing you do or say.

Before moving on to other practical matters, Paul concludes his exhortation with a short but powerful prayer as part of their appeal for practical compliance and as an expression of the desire or wish of the apostolic team. The reason for the prayer is threefold: First, believing and holding on to the truth should lead to its practice. Second, Paul and his team knew that only the Lord Himself could effectively bring about the needed encouragement and stability, the kind that would lead to the practice of the truth in word and deed in the midst of a pagan environment. And third, such a wishful prayer is appropriate and possible because of what God the Son and the Father have done for us by grace in the person of His Son. Verse 16, then, becomes the basis for the specific request in verse 17.

This prayer also reveals a great deal about Paul's theology, especially his Christology and Trinitarian perspective of God or the Godhead.

... Addressing his prayer to the first two persons of the Trinity, Paul names the Son before the Father (contra 1 Thess 3:11), probably in line with the Son's worthiness of equal honor with the Father and his special prominence in the chapter's emphasis on future salvation and glory. Yet the two persons are one God as shown by several structural features in vv. 16, 17: (1) The pronoun *autos* ("himself," v. 16) is singular and probably should be understood as emphasizing both persons— "our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father himself" (cf. 1 Thess 3:11). (2) "Loved us and ... gave us" (v. 16) represents two singular participles whose actions are applicable to both the Son and the Father. The singular number is explained by Paul's conception of the two persons as one God. (3) "Encourage and strengthen" (v. 17) are likewise singular in number though they express the action of a compound subject. This grammatical feature is attributable to the oneness of essence among the persons of the Godhead (cf. John 10:30). Paul conceived of Jesus Christ as God in the same full sense as he conceived of God the Father. No other explanation of this unusual combination of grammatical features is satisfying.<sup>6</sup>

The statement, "who loved us," points in general to the work of God the Father and the Son and forms the basis or foundation for the eternal comfort and good hope that God (Father and Son) are able to give. Compare the following verses of Scripture.

The love of God the Father is seen in this, that He sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins, I John 4.10, and in that He quickened us with Him, and raised us up with Him and made us to sit in the heavens in Christ Jesus, Eph. 2.4-6. The love of the Son is seen in this, that He laid down His life for us, I John 3.16.<sup>7</sup>

Having loved us, God also give us two wonderful gifts:

**(1) Eternal Comfort.** "Eternal comfort" puts the future of the Thessalonian believers (and all believers) in strong contrast with those previously described as perishing (2:10-12). "Comfort" is the Greek *parakle,,sis*, which means in this context "comfort, consolation, encouragement." This comfort is, of course, not simply for the future but something which we may know now through the Scripture (Rom. 15:4f; 2 Cor. 1:3-7). But that this *comfort* is called "eternal" reminds us that all our present affliction is temporary while our recompense and future glory is permanent (see 2 Cor. 4:16-18). Whatever we may face in this life will pass, but our comfort is here to stay. Of course, our present enjoyment of that comfort can only occur as we hold tightly to the promises of God's Word (Rom. 15:4).

**(2) Good Hope.** In our modern setting, people often think of hope as a kind of unsure optimism. The modern idea for hope is "to wish for, to expect, but without much certainty, to desire very much, but with no real assurance

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<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Frank E. Gaebelein, General Editor Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

<sup>7</sup> C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Pickering & Inglis LTD, London, 1914, p. 278.

of getting your desire.” But such is not the New Testament concept of “hope.” The Greek term used here is *elpis*, which refers to a confident expectation and generally has a future focus. Hope may refer to the *activity* of hoping, or to the *object* hoped for, the content of one’s hope. By its very nature, hope stresses two things: (a) futurity, and (b) invisibility. It deals with things one cannot see or hasn’t received or both (cf. Rom. 8:24-25).

Biblically, from the standpoint of the object hoped for, hope is somewhat synonymous with salvation and its many blessings as promised in Scripture—past, present, and future. This is true, it would seem, even with what we have already received as believers because such blessings come under the category of what we cannot see with our physical eyesight. We may see some of the results, but it still requires faith and hope.

As an illustration, we do not see the justifying work of God, the imputation of righteousness to our account. We did not see the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when we were saved or the baptizing work of the Spirit which joined us into union with Christ. We believe this to be a reality, but this is still a matter of faith and hope—the confident expectation in its reality. We believe in the testimony of God in the Word like Romans 6 and hope for the results in our lives—victory over the flesh.

Hope is the confident expectation, the sure certainty that what God has promised in the Word is true, that it either has occurred or will occur in accordance with the sure promises of His Word. Such a hope, then, naturally flows out of the eternal comfort and is also a present possession of those who rest in the sure promises of the Word. The focus in the word “hope” is generally, as in this context of 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2, on the future glory and rest already mentioned (1:7; 2:14). For a similar thrust and connection of “comfort” and “hope” see Romans 15:4f.

Finally, we should note that this *hope* is described as “good.” This is the adjective *agathos*. *Agathos* refers to what is morally and practically good because it is beneficial. The implication is that there are other kinds of hope—those that are evil because they will not come to pass or are based on that which is futile, like the hope mankind will have in the promises of the lawless one or in man’s ideas of a great society or the hopes men have in false religious systems. I can remember when there was the hope that the atomic bomb would bring an end to war because of the military dominance it would give this nation, but that was a false hope.

Finally, following the word order of the original Greek text, the apostle concludes with the words, “by grace.” All that we have—being the objects of God’s love and the recipients of comfort and hope—is by grace and never by what we deserve, no matter how faithful we might be. It’s all a matter of God’s *amazing grace*.

With the preceding as the basis for Paul’s prayer and desire, he moved to the specific requests in verse 17 for encouragement and strength, “... encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good thing you do or say.” The Thessalonians needed comfort and encouragement (the verb “**encourage**” [*parakalesai*] suggests both “comfort” and “encourage”; sometimes it means “urge” as in 1 Thes. 4:1, 10; 2 Thes. 3:12) in view of their recent anxiety created by false information concerning the day of the Lord. “Strengthen” is the verb *stexomai*, “set up, fix firmly, establish, support.” From this it came to be used figuratively in the sense of “confirm, establish, strengthen” (it was used in 1 Thes. 3:2, 13). It carries with it the idea of stability.

But certainly the concluding words, “by grace,” are significant for the need of encouragement and strength. Nothing can encourage the heart and bring stability like a firm grasp on God’s grace. It is grace that saved us, it is grace that keeps us, and it is grace that will enter us into God’s presence. In keeping with the words of verse 17, I am reminded of the exhortation of Hebrews which reads: “Do not be carried away by all sorts of strange teachings. For it is good for the heart **to be strengthened by grace**, not ritual meals, which have never benefited those who participated in them (Hebrews 13:9, emphasis mine)

Strange teachings, those not based on the Word and the amazing grace of God and His finished work in Jesus Christ, must of necessity lead to a false or evil hope. Not only can they not truly comfort, but they cannot strengthen the heart or give true biblical stability in the face of all that life may bring.

Verse 17 records Paul’s desire and prayer for the Thessalonians and stands as a model of concern for all of us. He wanted God to *encourage* their hearts and *strengthen* them in their spiritual lives in every good thing they might *say* and *do* (i.e., in word and work or in talk and walk). Again we see the practical pastoral heart of the apostle and his team seeking to encourage and strengthen them as a father does his children (1 Thes. 2:11). Thus, encouragement and strengthening (or establishment) are two themes repeated in the Thessalonians epistles.

When Paul was with them, he *encouraged* them individually as a father does his children (1 Thes. 2:11). He sent Timothy to encourage them (3:2), and Paul himself was greatly encouraged with Timothy's report of their faithfulness (3:7).

Paul encouraged them to walk to please God (4:1), and to grow in their love for others (4:10). He taught them about the rapture of the church in order that they might encourage each other (4:18). To calm their fears, he explained the Day of the Lord to them (5:11). In addition to his teaching, he urged them to minister to each other (5:18).

*Establishment* in the Lord is also an important theme. Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica that he might establish them in their faith (1 Thes. 3:2); and Paul prayed that God might establish them (3:13). The child must be taught to stand before he can learn to walk or run.

It is God who establishes, but He uses people to accomplish His work. A great need in our churches is for Christians who will take time to establish the younger believer. Group Bible studies are very valuable, as are the public meetings of the church; but individual discipling is also important. Paul encouraged the Thessalonian believers on a one-to-one basis, and we should follow his example.<sup>8</sup>

But let's not forget the aim of these two themes which is expressed in the clause, "in every good thing you do and say." This focuses on two aspects of the believer's life, his or her *words* and *walk*. Both of these should manifest the character of the Lord Jesus and be consistent with one another. But for that to be so, the believer must think with the truth of God's Word as one who holds firmly to the "traditions," the teachings of the Word. The aim here is expressed by the psalmist in Psalm 19:14, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer" (NASB). Of course, we are never saved by works (Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:4-5), but part of the aim of our salvation is unto good works and ministry in a world in need of the Savior.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we may do them.

Titus 2:11–3:7 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. **2:12** It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, **2:13** as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. **2:14** He gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good. **2:15** So communicate these things with the sort of exhortation or rebuke that carries full authority.

**3:1** Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work. **3:2** They must not slander anyone, but be peaceable, gentle, showing complete courtesy to all people. **3:3** For we too were once foolish, disobedient, misled, enslaved to various passions and desires, spending our lives in evil and envy, hateful and hating one another. **3:4** But "when the kindness of God our Savior appeared and his love for mankind, **3:5** He saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of his mercy, through the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, **3:6** whom he poured out on us in full measure through Jesus Christ our Savior. **3:7** And so, since we have been justified by his grace, we become heirs with the confident expectation of eternal life."

### Conclusion

Life is certainly filled with tests or trials of every sort and size and this includes being confronted with false doctrine as were the Thessalonians and the unsettling effects this can cause when we are not anchored solidly in the Word. These tests, however, can be a source of growth and a means to experience God's strength for spiritual stability, or they can cause us to become uneasy and shaken in our composure. The difference depends on how well we know and are holding firmly to God's truth and resting in His matchless grace.

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<sup>8</sup> Wiersbe, p. 157.

Anyone who has lived or worked in a skyscraper knows tall buildings sway in the wind. There's no danger; the engineers know it will happen, but the sway is uncomfortable for people inside. When engineers and architects designed Citicorp Center in New York, they decided to do something about it.

At the top of the fifty-nine story building, they installed a machine called a tuned mass damper. The machine, writes Joe Morgenstern in *New Yorker* magazine, "was essentially a four-hundred-and-ten-ton block of concrete, attached to huge springs and floating on a film of oil. When the building swayed, the block's inertia worked to damp the movement and calm tenants' queasy stomachs."<sup>9</sup>

When the winds of life gust all around us, we too have a source of stability in the sure promises and truth of the Bible which can calm our spiritual queasiness.

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<sup>9</sup> Craig Brian Larson, *Contemporary Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 273.

## **Lesson 8: Final Confidences in God's Grace Expressed (3:1-5)**

### **Introduction**

With chapter 3 Paul begins to bring this epistle to a close, but in doing so, we are privileged to see a wonderful model as Paul demonstrates how his team's confidence lay not in human plans, promotion, programs, or human personalities, but in the Lord Himself. Their confidence for whatever they might need and face was an unending trust in the provision and faithfulness of the Lord and His powerful Word. The Lord Jesus said emphatically, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." While God uses frail human instruments in accomplishing His work on earth, the ultimate accomplishment of the work depends on the work and faithfulness of the Lord and His Word.

Our modern 'go-go' tendency is to be quick to plan and act rather than pray, wait on the Lord, and then in God's timing and leading, work in His strength, leading, and provision. This is not only the position of wisdom but of humility as we put our trust not in ourselves, but in a sovereign God and Savior. Again, the apostle provides us with a model, not just for ministry but for life.

### **Paul's Confidence in Prayer (3:1-2)**

**3:1** Finally pray for us, brothers and sisters, that the Lord's message may spread quickly and be honored as in fact it was among you, **3:2** and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil people. For not all have faith.

With the word "finally" (Greek *loipon*, a particle of transition often found toward the end of a letter) the apostle indicates that he is coming to the close of the letter, but not necessarily implying that he was immediately ending the letter or that other matters might not be discussed.<sup>1</sup>

As is 1 Thessalonians 5:25, Paul asks for prayer on behalf of their missionary team. He says, "Pray, brethren (the plural *adelphoi* used as a vocative of address), for us." The use of the vocative (as in 1 Thes. 5:25) puts some emphasis on the request and the sense of Paul's awareness of his need of God's hand and the important part the prayer of the saints has on our ministries. Thus, it was not unusual for Paul, who consistently prayed for his converts, to ask for prayer himself (see Rom. 15:30; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:19, 20; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3-4). Too much Christian work is attempted today by human plans and promotion with far too much dependence on the methods employed and in the dynamic personalities of people rather than on a prayerful dependence on the Lord.

There is an important lesson in this for all of us. Here was a giant among men and one used mightily by the Lord. Paul gave us more books of the New Testament than any other of the apostles or their associates, yet this great man of God humbly sought the prayer of those he and his team had led to Christ and were teaching to help them grow in Christ. Thus, recognizing their own inadequacy and need of God's enablement, the apostle and his team humbly sought the prayer support of others.

The content of their prayer is spelled out in two specific requests. They did not just ask for prayer in general (i.e., pray for us), but they were specific with two primary requests seen in the clauses introduced by "that" (two *hina* clauses introducing the content of the request). Significantly, both of these requests ultimately related to the progress of the gospel, even though the second request was more personal.

**The First Request:** Literally, "that the message (ho logos, the word) of the Lord may run and be glorified just

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<sup>1</sup> Compare 4:1 where he was only marking a transition in the subject matter; see also Philippians 3:1.

as also with you.” The message of the word is the message of gospel, the divine revelation which God breathed and which thereby comes with God’s authority behind it.

**(1) The first need is that it may run.** This is the present continuous tense of the Greek word *trecho*,, which means literally, “run” but it is used figuratively of “proceeding quickly without hindrance.” This is, then, a prayer that God’s message will continue to *progress swiftly and without hindrance* to and within the hearts of men and women as it had done so powerfully among the Thessalonians (see 1 Thes. 1 and 2:13). Note first that the focus here is on the message rather than the messenger for in the final analysis it is the message that transforms people. Again, we get a glimpse of Paul’s confidence. It is in God and His precious Word. Second, the very nature of such a request calls to mind the fact that Satan and this world is always at work to throw up hindrances or barriers against the message. If the message is to run swiftly, it must have the sovereign work of God make clear the way (cf. 1 Thes. 2:18 with 3:11-13).

**(2) The second need spelled out in this first request is that the message may continue to be glorified.** The verb here is continuous present of *doxazo*,, “to honor, magnify, praise.” The idea is that God’s message, and thus God Himself, may be honored among men as they recognize its authority and submit their lives to its glorious truth in faith and continued obedience and growth. For an example of this and as a further encouragement to the Thessalonians, he quickly added, “... just as it was with you.” This recalls the amazing success of the message in Thessalonica as described in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 6, 8 and 2:13. This is the kind of response Paul and his team wanted to see wherever the gospel is proclaimed.

**The Second Request:** “And that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith.” This request is certainly more personal, but it is still related to the first request for the speedy and unhindered progress of the Word for they were messengers of the message. The Word of God is not bound or imprisoned (2 Ti. 2:9) and Satan is impotent against the Word when it is accurately proclaimed. He may deny it, attack it, try to add to it or subtract from it, but his primary attacks must come against those who proclaim it (see 1 Thes. 2:18). He will seek to use those under his influence and who do not have faith to imprison, kill, distract, detain, or in some way through temptation and deception to negate the testimony of the messenger. This had happened in Philippi and in Thessalonica (cf. 1 Thes. 2:1; Acts 16:22f). There was undoubtedly the element of self-preservation in this request, but the primary aim is for the purpose of spreading the gospel.

“May be delivered” is the aorist of the verb *ruomai*, “to deliver, rescue, preserve.” The aorist could possibly express Paul’s desire for deliverance from a particular situation he was then facing, or it could express his desire as a whole, from beginning to end, knowing that there would always be those who would seek to hinder his ministry. In view of Acts 18:9-11, it is significant that though Paul had already received the Lord’s promise of personal safety while he was in Corinth, this fact did not cause Paul to take the Lord for granted or make him independent from the prayer of the saints. Knowing God’s will and having His assurances should never lead to prayerlessness and a spirit of independence.

Literally, the text has, “from the perverse and evil men.” The presence of the article could indicate a specific group of men, but more likely this is an illustration of a generic article and points to a class of individuals, a class of men that form a very real obstacle for messengers of the gospel. As such, it *categorizes* rather than *particularizes*. What is the category of men like? They are first of all “perverse.” This is the adjective *atopos*, “out of place, strange, outrageous,” and thus, “morally evil, perverse, improper” (see Luke 23:41; Acts 25:5). “Evil” is *ponēros*, which, in the physical sense means, “painful, virulent, serious, spoiled, worthless,” but ethically, it means “wicked, evil, base, vicious, degenerate.” It often refers to an active malignant kind of evil, one that affects others in some negative way. In comparing *kakos*, “bad, evil, wicked,” with *ponēros*, Trench writes, “The *kakos* may be content to perish in his own corruption, but the *ponēros* is not content unless he is corrupting others as well, and drawing them into the same destruction with himself.”<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Satan is called *ho ponēros*, the evil one.

The next clause, “for not all have faith” points us to the reason for this category of men. Since “faith” has the article (*he*, *pistis*) this could be understood as “the faith,” the objective body of truth, but the following contrast, “the Lord is faithful” puts the focus more on the subjective aspect of “trust.” They are what they are because they have no faith or trust in the Lord.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, James Clarke & Co., London, 1961 edition, p. 296.

### Paul's Confidence in Continued Growth (3:3-5)

**3:3** But the Lord is faithful and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. **3:4** And we are confident about you in the Lord that you are both doing, and will do, what we are commanding. **3:5** Now may the Lord direct your hearts toward the love of God and the endurance of Christ.

With the human unbelief and behavior just described, the apostle quickly turns to focus the Thessalonians on the Lord and His faithfulness. Literally, “But faithful is the Lord.” The term “faithful” is put first for emphasis and displays a definite contrast. As the last word of the previous sentence of the Greek text was “faith,” *pistis*, and focused on the unbelief of evil men, so the first word of this sentence is *pistos*, “faithful, trustworthy,” which turns our attention to the Lord and His character.<sup>3</sup> While there are many who do not have faith in the Lord and may oppose the gospel and its messengers, we can rest in the Lord because He is faithful or trustworthy.

As the apostle thinks of the Lord's character, he thinks also of the spiritual and emotional needs of the Thessalonians and quickly assures them that the Lord who is faithful will “strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.” English Bibles typically translate this as simply another independent clause, but in the Greek text we have a relative clause which more tightly describes or clarifies the nature of the Lord as one who is faithful. Literally, “But faithful is the Lord, who will strengthen and guard you ...” Both verbs are what could be called *gnomic futures* in that they portray that which is true of the Lord at any time. Thus, in the future, or as the need arises, they can count on Him as the One who will strengthen and guard or protect them from the evil one. For the word “strengthen” (*ste,,rizo,,*), see the comments in lesson 7 at 2:17. “Protect” is *phulasso,,* “to guard, protect, defend.” It naturally suggests the presence of some form of danger which Paul defines as “the evil one.” Above the apostle mentioned evil (*pone,,ros*) men. Part of the reason they are actively evil and mentioned above is because they are unbelievers, but behind their unbelief and their evil activity is the evil one himself. “Evil” is again the Greek term *pone,,ros* but here it has the article, *ho pone,,ros*. This is a common name for Satan in the New Testament (Matt. 5:37; 6:13; 13:19, 38; John 17:15; Eph. 6:16; 1 John 2:13f; 5:18f) and calls to mind his character and constant work of actively causing evil, especially against the people of God. It is he who is behind the “mystery of lawlessness” (2:7).

Having mentioned the Lord's faithfulness, in verse 4 Paul expresses their confidence that the Thessalonians were doing and would do the things the missionary team had commanded them (continue in the apostolic teaching). But the key to that confidence is seen in the words, “in the Lord.” Literally, “But we are confident in the Lord about you.” Their confidence was rooted in the Lord. The missionary team trusted the faithful Lord to be at work to maintain them in growth and obedience because of their relationship to Him as those who were “in the Lord.”

Now in verse 5, though confident in the Lord, we see that they did not take the Lord for granted, but expressed that confidence in a request to Lord. The verb in “may the Lord *direct* your hearts” is *kateuthunai*, an optative of *kateuthuno,,* “make straight, direct, lead.” This verb is repeatedly used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) in 1 and 2 Chronicles (1 Chr. 2:18; 2 Chr. 12:14; 19:3 20:33). The optative mood represents a strong wish which they expressed to the Lord. In the first epistle (3:11), Paul used *kateuthuno,,* in his prayer that God might direct their way, undoubtedly by removing obstacles and opening doors that they might return to the Thessalonians. But here the verb is used of the “heart,” which often refers to the whole inner person—mind, emotions, and will, or it may simply be used as a synonym for the personal pronoun. The apostle desired to see the Lord so lead that they might experience both the love of God and the endurance of Christ. But what does this mean? Each of these expressions, the love of God and the endurance of Christ, are capable of more than one meaning.

**The love of God:** A prayer (1) that they might be led more deeply in their love for God (an objective genitive); (2) that they might be led to apprehend more and more the love that God has for them (a subjective genitive); (3) that they might experience God's love for each other as God has loved them (see 1 John 4:7f, perhaps an attributive genitive, godly love). But perhaps this is plenary and includes all three ideas. “The comprehensiveness of the term is

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<sup>3</sup> Both the noun *pistis* and the adjective *pistos* can have an active and a passive meaning. In the active sense, *pistis* can mean, “faith, belief, trust, confidence,” or in the passive sense, “fidelity, faithfulness.” In the active sense, *pistos* can mean “believing, trusting, relying,” or in the passive sense, (1) of persons, “faithful, trustworthy,” or (2) of things, “trustworthy, reliable, sure.”



probably designed to include every aspect of the love of God, and every possible effect of that love upon the hearers.”<sup>4</sup>

**The endurance of Christ:** Endurance is hupomone,, “patience, endurance, fortitude, perseverance,” etc. This is a prayer (1) that they might wait patiently for the coming Savior as translated by the KJV (objective genitive); (2) that they might have the kind of endurance that Christ gives, an endurance that comes from relationship with Him (subjective genitive); (3) that they might experience the kind of endurance that belongs to Christ or that was demonstrated in His sufferings on earth and that He is demonstrating even now as He waits for His enemies to be made a footstool for His feet (Heb. 12:2; 10:13, either a possessive or attributive genitive). Again, all three are true and perhaps all are intended. While a too rigid exegesis is to be avoided, it may, perhaps, be permissible to paraphrase: “the Lord teach and enable you to love as God loves, and to be patient as Christ is patient.”<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

In verses 1-2, we have seen how the apostolic team humbly turned to their students for prayer for their ministry. Though requesting prayer for deliverance from evil men who have no faith in the gospel, the focus was not so much for personal deliverance as it was for the ministry of the Word of the Lord, that it might have speedy and unhindered progress as men honor it by responding in faith and obedience to its message.

But the Lord is faithful and so there follows an emphasis that comes out of this vital truth. There is, then, an intimate connection, somewhat like cause and effect, between the key thoughts in verses 3, 4, and 5. In verse 3, the emphasis is on “the faithfulness” of the Lord in contrast to the unbelief and persecution of evil men. In verse 4, the focus is on human obedience to this glorious message, but such obedience must come from the believer’s relationship with the Lord (“in the Lord”), and thus in verse 5, the focus is on their growth in the love of God and endurance of Christ which is always the root of obedience to the Word. In the background of all of this is the confident expectation of the sure return of the Savior, which we must all anticipate.

The writers pray that the risen Lord will lead their Thessalonian friends into a growing appreciation of God’s love for them (which will inevitably increase their love for him and for one another) and into a still greater participation in the steadfast endurance of Christ. Even if there is no explicit reference to his Advent in this wish-prayer, their steadfast endurance will in any case be strengthened by their confident expectation of that consummation of their hope.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Pickering & Inglis, London, 1914, reprinted in 1959, p. 285.

<sup>5</sup> Hogg and Vine, p. 285.

<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Vol. 45, Word Books, Waco, 1982, p. 202.

## **Lesson 9: Final Exhortations Regarding Idleness in the Church (3:6-18)**

### **Introduction**

If left untreated, disorder in the church, like physical ailments, will only increase causing greater and greater sickness and pain. Because of a wrong response to the imminent return of the Lord, the problem of idleness touched on briefly in 1 Thessalonians, seems to have only grown worse. There were those in the church at Thessalonica who had evidently stopped working and were running about in excited idleness from house to house in anticipation of the Lord's return at any moment. This wrong response to prophetic truth not only led to idleness and the lack of ability to support oneself and family, but it had resulted in becoming busybodies. It appears they also expected the church to support them. It is entirely possible that it was this group that had been spreading some or perhaps all of the false teaching discussed in chapter 2 of this epistle. Further, they were probably guilty of spreading rumors or gossip about others in the church. As Wiersbe puts it, "They had time on their hands and gossip on their lips, but they defended themselves by arguing, 'The Lord is coming soon!'"<sup>1</sup>

In the previous epistle, Paul had warned these busybodies to stop such idleness and get back to quietly working with their own hands (1 Thess. 4:11-12). He later urged the believers there to admonish the unruly or undisciplined (*ataktos*, "out of order, disorderly, undisciplined"). In view of this chapter, it is clear that either they had not heeded Paul's admonishment or they had not listened to the admonishments from the church body.

This is a sad illustration of either wrong interpretation or wrong application of biblical truth. The New Testament does teach the imminent, any-moment possibility of the return of the Savior for His church; it is imminent, but no one know when He will return. It could be today, but it might not be, as has been the case for hundreds of years. The principle is that we are to live as though it will be today while working and continuing on in life as though it won't be for years to come. We must hold both truths in proper balance. As seen previously, the coming of the Lord with all that it means to believers is to be a strong motivation to godliness and obedience to the directives of God's Word through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Misinterpretations and misapplications of the truths of God's Word can cause endless trouble. History records the foolishness of people who set dates, sold their possessions, and sat on mountains waiting for the Lord to return. Any teaching that encourages us to disobey another divine teaching is not Bible teaching.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Exhortations of the Apostolic Team (3:6)**

**3:6** But we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from any brother who lives an undisciplined life and not according to the tradition you received from us.

The seriousness of this exhortation is seen in the use of the word "command," in Paul's appeal in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the nature of the command "to keep away." "Command" is *parangello*, "give orders, command, instruct with authority." It was used for various directions given from persons in authority like human rulers, Jesus, and the apostles. Paul used this strong word in connection with the idle busybodies in the first epistle (4:11 and the noun form, *parangellia*, in 4:2) and in this epistle in 3:4, 6, 10, & 12. *Parangello*, was a military word often used of a command by a superior officer. The lesson here is simple: the church is engaged in spiritual warfare

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<sup>1</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Ready*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1979, p. 164.

<sup>2</sup> Wiersbe, p. 164.

(Eph. 6:10ff) with each believer a soldier whom God has enlisted into His army. When we fail to follow the directives of the Savior, it leads to disorderly conduct which hurts our effectiveness (see 2 Tim. 2:3-4; 1 Tim. 1:18). Thus, the apostle used another military term to describe the problem at Thessalonica. Some of the saints were “undisciplined,” literally, “out of order” or “out of rank.” “Undisciplined” is *ataкто*,s, an adverb meaning “disorderly, out of rank” (see also 3:11 and the verb form, *ataктео*,,, in 3:7). This family of words was used of soldiers who were out of step or moving in disarray. For another passage that uses military metaphors, we might compare by way of contrast two words the apostle used in Colossians 2:5 when he wrote, “For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit, rejoicing to see the *order* and the *firmness* of your faith in Christ.” (emphasis mine) Here the apostle was thankful for the orderly way the Colossians had closed ranks and presented a solid front of soldiers in standing for the cause of Christ. “Order” is *τάξις*, “a fixed succession or order.” It was a military term used of a rank or orderly array. “Firmness” is *στερεομα*, “a solid body,” and so “steadfastness, firmness.” But this too was a military word and continues the military metaphor and means, “a solid front,” a closed phalanx as it was used of Roman soldiers marching shoulder to shoulder with their spears pointing forward.

In this regard, Paul appealed to the Thessalonians in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Commander-in-Chief of the army of God. In essence, then, these commands came by the authority of Christ. Paul was passing on authoritative instructions as an apostle, one sent by the Lord Jesus to plant or establish churches and to lay the biblical foundation for the body of Christ (Eph. 2:20). To disobey Paul’s directives was to disobey the Lord.

“To keep away from any brother who lives an undisciplined life and not according to the tradition you received from us” spells out the specific command. “To keep away” is the middle voice of the verb *στέλλω*,,. It originally meant “to set, place, arrange, fit out as an army for an expedition”; hence “to prepare, equip.” Then it came to mean “to bring together” or “to gather up” as when one furls the sails of a ship (so used in Homer). Hence, “to shrink back, to restrain, check,” and in the middle voice, “to restrain or withdraw oneself, hold aloof, avoid.”

“From any brother” or literally, “from every brother” stresses the principle and need of impartiality. The tendency in exercising church discipline is to show partiality to some because of their standing in the community or in the church, or because of financial status, or simply because they are very likable people, but such cannot purify and toughen up God’s army for spiritual warfare. As we are warned in 1 Corinthians 5, a little leaven eventually leavens the whole lump.

“Who live an undisciplined life and not according ...” pinpoints the specific problem. “Who live” is literally, “walking in a disorderly way.” “Walking” (present continuous tense of *περιπατέω*,,, “to walk about”) is a common idiom for one’s way of life or conduct in general. “Undisciplined” is the adverb *атакто*,s, mentioned previously, a vivid word that describes the nature of their behavior. “... The word means *to play truant*. It occurs, for instance, in the papyri, in an apprentice’s contract in which the father agrees that his son must make good any days on which he absents himself from duty or plays truant. The Thessalonians in their excited idleness were truants from duty and from work.”<sup>3</sup> Such truant behavior was foolish because of the natural consequences and because no one knows when the Lord will return. But it was more than just foolish, it was rebellion because it was contrary to the tradition of truth handed down to the Thessalonians previously (1 Thess. 4:11, 12; 5:14) and to the teaching of the Word in general. In essence, this constituted walking in disobedience to the Word of God. This was rebellion and no excuse could justify such behavior. So strong measures were needed.

What does the Bible teach about manual (or mental) labor? For one thing, labor was a part of man’s life *before* sin entered the scene. God gave Adam the job of dressing and guarding the Garden (Gen. 2:15). Although sin turned labor into almost hopeless toil (Gen. 3:17-19), it must never be thought that the necessity for work is a result of sin. Man needs work for the fulfillment of his own person. God created him to work.

Have you noticed that God called people who were busy at work? Moses was caring for sheep (Ex. 3). Joshua was Moses’ servant before he became Moses’ successor (Ex. 33:11). Gideon was threshing wheat when God called him (Jud. 6:11ff), and David was caring for his father’s sheep (1 Sam. 16:11ff). Our Lord called four fishermen to serve as His disciples, and He Himself had worked as a carpenter. Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:1-3) and used his trade to support his own

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1954, p. 252.

ministry.

The Jews honored honest labor and required all their rabbis to have a trade. But the Greeks despised manual labor and left it to their slaves. This Greek influence, plus their wrong ideas about the doctrine of the Lord's return, led these believers into an unchristian way of life.<sup>4</sup>

Later, the apostle will show that the issue here was ultimately one of unwillingness. The circumstances of life (sickness, loss of a job, economic conditions) sometimes keep people from working, so the question was not one of *inability* but *unwillingness* (see vs. 10, "if anyone is not willing to work, ...").

### The Example of the Apostolic Team (3:7-10)

**3:7** For you know yourselves how you must imitate us, because we did not behave without discipline among you, **3:8** and we did not eat anyone's food without paying. Instead in toil and drudgery we worked night and day in order not to burden any of you. **3:9** It was not because we do not have that right, but to give ourselves as an example for you to imitate. **3:10** For even when we were with you we used to give you this command: "If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat."

The apostle was always deeply concerned about his own example of Christ-likeness for he knew that a student will become like his teacher (Luke 6:40). His great concern for this is evident in his statement in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 when he said, "... for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved (literally, "came to be") to be among you for your sake."

In these verses, then, Paul was able to turn to his own example and that of his team. "Imitate" is the Greek *mimomai*, from which we get our word "mimic." As mentioned previously (see exposition on 1 Thes. 1:6-7), this word has no negative connotation as the word *imitate* sometimes does in our language. As a quick review: The idea of this word is that of modeling, becoming like, or following after another. It stresses the nature of a particular kind of behavior modeled by another that we are to follow. In the New Testament, it has a spiritual, ethical or moral emphasis and is generally linked with an obligation to a certain kind of conduct or character as a product of faith in the directives of the Bible and the example of the apostles or other leaders who were also following the Lord Jesus as our ultimate example. It is linked to certain ones who are living examples for the life of faith and the character of Christ.

This the apostle states is a moral and logical obligation. He said, "you *must* imitate us." "Must" is the impersonal verb *dei*, "one must, ought, it is necessary." It may refer to the compulsion of duty, of law, of custom, or of an inner necessity that grows out of the situation. Here it is the moral necessity that arises out of the fact these men were their spiritual mentors who followed the Lord Jesus and who had provided them with a godly example.

Thus, Paul added, "because we did not behave without discipline among you, ..." As always, though they had the right to receive support from the Thessalonians, they set aside that right in order to provide a fitting example of Christ-like behavior (see vs. 9). This not only provided an example to new Christians, but was a way of answering the false accusations of their accusers (see exposition of 1 Thes. 2). "Without discipline" is *atakteo*, "to be out of order, out of line." It's the verb form of the word used and discussed above in verse 6.

Paul himself was not idle. His readers could verify this claim ("you yourselves know," v. 7; cf. 1 Thess 2:1; 3:3; 4:2; 5:2). In imitating Paul, they would be imitating the Lord himself (1 Thess 1:6) because Paul's life was so carefully patterned after his Lord's. He did not loaf at Thessalonica (v. 7b), nor depend on others to supply him with free food (v. 8a). He supported himself in spite of much fatigue ("laboring," v. 8) and many obstacles ("toiling," v. 8; cf. 1 Thess 2:9) in order to relieve the new Christians in Thessalonica of the burden of maintaining him.

Paul did not have to exert himself so tirelessly. As an apostle, he had "the right to such help" (v. 9; cf. 1 Cor 9:4 ff.; 1 Thess 2:7) from his converts. He decided, however, to forego this privilege and

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<sup>4</sup> Wiersbe, p. 166-167.

leave an example for them to imitate.<sup>5</sup>

With verse 10, the apostle reinforced their example by reminding them of their previous instruction as it pertained to working and supporting oneself and family. As mentioned previously, the instruction here is aimed at those who are “unwilling to work.” Also, this instruction was not just a matter of some cultural tendency they may have noted in the Thessalonians, but of a fundamental biblical principle. God is Himself a worker. After all, He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. As such, He designed a working vocation as a necessary part of life even before the fall and He expects each of us to be involved in some form of vocation that we might support ourselves, find a sense of significance and destiny in our labor, and be a productive member of society. Thus, denying support to those who are unwilling to work is not cruel, but becomes a basic form of discipline to force idlers into reality and into the responsibility of becoming productive people. This kind of discipline is tough love and provides a protection to both the individual and to the society.

### **Further Exhortations of the Apostolic Team (3:11-15)**

**3:11** For we hear that some among you are living an undisciplined life, not doing their own work but meddling in the work of others. **3:12** Now such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and so provide their own food to eat. **3:13** But you, brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing what is right. **3:14** But if anyone does not obey our message through this epistle, take note of him and do not associate closely with him, to put him to shame. **3:15** Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

In verse 11, the apostle first mentions the reports they had received regarding those who were leading an undisciplined (idle) life. Two things characterized their behavior: doing no work at all and as a further result, meddling in the affairs of others; they became busybodies rather than busy self-supporting workers engaged in a productive occupation. By working they would become a blessing to themselves and to others, but their idleness had led to the opposite. The Greek word for “meddling” is *periergazomai*, from *peri*, “around,” and *ergazomai*, “to work, labor.” It literally means “to work around or in a circle.” It thus came to mean “to do something useless, to be busy, but accomplishing nothing.” You have heard people say or perhaps said this yourself, “I feel like I have been going in circles.” What we mean is obvious. We mean that, though busy, we feel like we have been getting nowhere fast. Though not mentioned here, 1 Timothy 5:13 describes the results of such behavior, “And besides that, going around from house to house (*perierchomai*, “to go around or about”) they learn to be lazy; and they are not only lazy, but also gossips and busybodies (*periergos*, “a meddler, busybody,” the noun form of *periergazomai*), talking about things they should not.

Almost every culture has its saying about idleness. The Romans said, “By doing nothing, men learn to do evil.” Isaac Watts wrote: “For Satan finds some mischief still, for idle hands to do.” The Jewish rabbis taught, “He who does not teach his son a trade, teaches him to be a thief.”<sup>6</sup>

My mother and grandmother use to say to me, “Idleness, Hampton, is the devil’s workshop.” And of course, they were right. Now, based on the reports mentioned in verse 11, the rule of verse 10 is reinforced in verses 12-15 with three more instructions.

First, in verse 12 and with the words, “in or by the authority of the Lord Jesus,” Paul specifically addressed the idle meddlers who are commanded (*parangello*,) and urged (*parakaleo*,, either “to comfort, encourage,” or as here, “to exhort, appeal to, urge”) “to work quietly and to provide for their own food to eat.” This instruction gives us further insight into the behavior of these idlers. First, their false views about the return of Christ had evidently led them into a kind of feverish excitement which they were seeking to spread from person to person as they went about from household to household. Second, they eventually ran out of money and food and began to expect others to support them. Thus, Paul commands and urges them to settle down and then to go back to work.

But what if these idlers again refuse to follow these instructions (see 1 Thes. 4:11-12; 5:14)? With this

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<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Frank E. Gaebelien, General Editor, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

<sup>6</sup> Wiersbe, p. 169.

possibility in view, the apostle gives instructions to the rest of the Thessalonian Christians to show them how they should deal with idlers who might not obey these instructions (3:13-15).

**(1) They are urged to not grow weary in doing what is right.** “Grow weary” is the verb *enkakeo*, “to become tired, weary,” and then “to loose heart, despair.” One is often the result of the other. In struggling with a matter one often becomes weary which may then lead to losing heart. This suggests that some might lose heart in struggling with their idle brothers. Doing what is right would include remaining examples themselves by working, by reprimanding the disorderly idlers of verse 10, and by refusing to support those who refused to work. To continue to support those who refuse to work is wrong for all concerned.

**(2) The apostle speaks to the matter of church discipline (verse 14).** This is a subject that is too often avoided today, but not without serious consequences to the body of Christ. It is applied here to those who refused to obey their instruction, which clearly illustrated a rebellious spirit and a wrong relationship to the Savior Himself. Thus, specific and tough measures were needed. First, they were to take special note of such people. “Take note” is the Greek *se,mcioo*, “to mark, note.” It’s in the plural and in the middle voice which suggests “note for oneself,” with the implication that all the members of the congregation were to take responsibility for following these instructions. Church discipline will have little effect if not followed by the whole body. Second, they were not to associate closely with an idler, one who refused to work. The verb here is *sun-ana-mignumi*, a triple compound word meaning “to mix up together,” and then “to associate closely with.”

There is a difference between acquaintanceship, friendship, and fellowship; for fellowship means “to have in common.” For obedient saints to treat disobedient Christians with the same friendship they show to other dedicated saints is to give approval to their sins.<sup>7</sup>

In essence, these idlers were to be ostracized from intimate fellowship with the believers of the assembly as a means of shaming them into repentance and change. This should not be confused with formal excommunication as in Matthew 18. Rather it appears to be more a matter of group disapproval and social ostracism. In our country today, Christians will often just change churches to avoid such discipline, but this was a serious thing for believers at that time in a heathen society and the same would apply to many countries today where believers are faced with serious persecution for their faith.<sup>8</sup>

**(3) They are not to be regarded as enemies, but to be admonished as brothers.** That this was not total excommunication is suggested by the third instruction given in verse 15, “Yet do not regard (*he,geomai*, “to think of, consider, regard”) him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” “Not as an enemy” means “not as one who is opposed to Christ.” “But as a brother” could be taken to mean “as though he were a brother,” but the idea is “because he is a brother, i.e., a fellow member of the body of Christ.” This draws our attention to a couple of important principles in church discipline. First is the fact that the goal of church discipline is never punishment, but tough actions of love done with a view to *reformation* and *restoration* to fellowship with Christ and the body of Christ. Second is the issue of extremes. Rather than being balanced as with the Lord Jesus who was full of “grace and truth,” people tend to go to extremes—they are either too lenient or too harsh. Thus, Paul stresses they were not to be treated as enemies, but admonished as brethren, as fellow believers.

“Admonish” is *noutheteo*, “to admonish, warn, instruct.” The fundamental idea is to put sense or biblical wisdom into the mind so that it changes behavior. It includes an admonishment to change through instruction regarding the principles, consequences of sin, and godly aims, etc. “To sum up, the recalcitrant idler was not to be treated as an enemy cut off from all contacts, but was allowed to continue in a brotherly status. So lines of communication were kept open for continued warnings about his behavior.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Necessary Enablement of the Lord (3:16-18)**

**3:16** Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord

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<sup>7</sup> Wiersbe, p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> For a concise study on the issue of church discipline, see the study on our web site entitled, *Church Discipline* under the “Bible Studies / Theology / Ecclesiology” section.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

be with you all. **3:17** I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, which is how I write in every letter. **3:18** The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

### **The Prayer for Peace and the Lord's Presence (3:16)**

With these words the apostle not only brings the epistle to a close, but these words also remind us that spiritual change in the lives of men, or ministry to people of any kind that effectively brings peace at all times (continually) and in every way (in all circumstances) is not something we can do or experience alone. It requires the supernatural and gracious hand of the Lord Himself. "Himself" is emphatic and stresses this very point. Here the Lord—a reference to the Lord Jesus (cf. vs. 18)—is called the Lord of peace. They, as all believers, had come to have peace with God through faith in the Lord Jesus (Rom. 5:1). Further, faith in Christ also means the capacity for peace with one another (Phil. 4:9; Col. 3:15), and in one's own heart through the gospel message that brings people into a vital relationship with the Savior, the Prince of Peace, the Peacemaker (see Phil. 1:7; Eph. 2:14-17). Here the Lord Jesus is called "the Lord of peace" because He is the author and source of peace. If they or we are to know real peace, we must walk in intimate fellowship with the Savior and be in obedience to His commands (see John 14:27). Interestingly, in Paul's concluding remarks in the first epistle he used the phrase, "the God of Peace" (1 Thes. 5:23) and now he concludes with "the Lord of Peace," which certainly demonstrates his estimation of Christ as being Himself God.

The closing emphasis or focus here on "peace" and "at all times and in every way" also reminds us that life is loaded with trouble and circumstances that can unsettle us, as it had occurred in the church at Thessalonica. But whether it is trouble brought about from false doctrine or from undisciplined believers, it is the *Lord Himself* who gives us peace and such will only occur when we allow Him to have the place of Lord and reign in our lives.

In the statement "the Lord be with you all," Paul was praying that they might experience the power and blessing of the Lord on their lives for spiritual growth and well being. There is a sense in which the Lord is always with us. He has in fact promised that He is always with us and will never leave nor forsake us (cf. Heb. 13:5; Matt. 28:20), but we may ignore His presence and fail to experience it. So the apostle prays that this might not be the case.

### **The Personalized Benediction (3:17-18)**

With verse 17, the apostle picked up the pen of his amanuensis (the one writing the letter as Paul dictated it to him) and closed with this personal greeting and sign of authority and authenticity.

**3:17, 18** Paul was dictating to an amanuensis up to 3:17 (cf. Rom 16:22; 1 Cor 16:21; Col 4:18). At this point he took the pen into his own hand to add a closing greeting. Though he undoubtedly did this quite frequently, he has called attention to it only here, in 1 Corinthians 16:21, and in Colossians 4:18. The greeting in his own hand, "which is the distinguishing mark" in all his letters (v. 17), includes also the benediction of v. 18. Apparently Paul followed this practice consistently, expecting churches where he had served to recall his distinctive handwriting. It was particularly needed in this Epistle as a deterrent against any future attempt to forge a letter in his name (cf. 2:2). The practice was customary in ancient times (Frame, p. 312). When Paul says "in all my letters" (v. 17), he does not mean just the letters previous to this, for he was also to follow this procedure later. Neither is the expression to be limited only to books found in the NT, because he is known to have written other Epistles besides these (cf. 1 Cor 5:9). The handwriting furnished a key by which his Thessalonian readers could recognize a spurious Epistle bearing his name.<sup>10</sup>

With verse 18, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all," we are reminded of (1) the necessity of the grace of the Lord Jesus for the Christian life, and (2) with the word "all," God's desire that all Christians experience this in life. He had commended some and censured others, but his final benediction was upon all. There is here a final appeal for unity, obedience, and blessing including, of course, the idlers.

### **Conclusion**

Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians have stressed the return of the Savior and shown us how this should and should not

<sup>10</sup> Thomas, electronic media.

## 2 Thessalonians: An Exegetical and Devotional Commentary

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impact our daily lives. The fact that the Savior is coming again and could come today should promote godly living and give great peace, comfort, joy, and encouragement to endure the trials of life. Such stability is one of the key purposes of prophecy. By contrast, it should never lead to the kind of idleness or to a kind of idle feverishness as had occurred with some at Thessalonica. When this occurs, it hurts the cause of Christ by causing ridicule from the world and unrest within the body of Christ.

When believers act like the idlers at Thessalonica, they become disobedient soldiers who are out of rank and a poor testimony for the Savior. It shows they are indifferent, if not walking in direct rebellion against the specific instructions of the Word and the commands of their Savior. As disorderly Christians, they are a cause of disorder in the church, but church problems are always individual problems and can only be solved when Christians start listening to the instructions of Scripture.

The Lord is coming again and He is coming for His church, the bride of Christ. May we live properly in the light of His any moment return, which means obediently to Scripture. Come quickly Lord Jesus.