



Reflections On 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Don Merritt

Introduction

I'm really not sure what to call this; is it a book, a Bible study, a devotional, a small group study, a commentary? To be honest, it isn't quite any of those things, yet it has aspects of all three. It's hardly long enough to be a book; it isn't complete enough to be a commentary. It's not quite a devotional, but it could be used for devotions. It's not quite a Bible study, but it could easily be used for that, too. If you're creative, it could also be used to teach a class, but it isn't in a proper format to be curriculum.

One thing differs here from the first two collections I have released. For this collection, I have not included discussion questions, but anyone could make up their own for use in a discussion or class setting.

This little "document" is freely given to you. By all means, feel free to share it with others for free. Please do not use any of this for commercial purposes! Make use of whatever helps you grow in your relationship with our Lord and anything here that isn't helpful, by all means set it aside. Helping other believers in their walk with Christ is my only purpose here!

All blessings to you in Christ!

Don Merritt

donmerritt5@gmail.com

www.lifereference.wordpress.com

www.donmerrittonline.com

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Paul Writes to Thessalonica

The letters that Paul wrote to that church are much discussed today, if for all of the wrong reasons. His first letter, written about 50 – 51 AD is very likely Paul's first pastoral letter. This was done during the time of Paul's second missionary journey, after he had visited Thessalonica, and while he was staying in Corinth. We can easily see what occasioned his writing: The Thessalonian church was a very young church, having been in existence for only a short time. It was located in a challenging environment, where it was finding itself under serious persecution right from the start. Paul wrote to this church to urge them to remain in the faith □ to urge them to continue down the road of discipleship as followers of Christ. As we read this letter, it is vital that we keep this in mind, lest we make the mistake of reading it in light of current day theories about things that Paul is *not* discussing in the letter.

The letter follows the typical Pauline pattern, one common in his day of letter writing. It begins with a greeting in which the writer identifies himself, and then moves on into a thanksgiving passage. Next comes the body of the letter, and it ends with a final greeting. Paul varies from this format only once in chapter 2 where he includes a second thanksgiving and we'll cover it when we arrive at that point.

This is a letter that all of us should concern ourselves with for it has much to teach us. Of course, you can say that about any book of Scripture, but the letters to the Thessalonians have more than most that applies directly to our circumstances in the modern world. Most of us don't live under anything that can be called persecution, but I would imagine that most of us experience temptations similar to those of Thessalonica, namely to avoid standing out in our communities as being "different" so as to avoid embarrassment or the wagging tongues of those who are not followers of our Lord. Obviously, the Thessalonians had far more serious repercussions to deal with than most of us do, and as I see it that should make the silliness of our fears all the more starkly obvious.

Well dear reader, there is the "preview": We'll begin in earnest tomorrow as we charge ahead into chapter one of a most amazing new adventure into Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church; see you then!

Chapter 1

Greetings and Thanksgiving

Paul begins the letter with the customary greeting, identifying himself along with Silas and Timothy as its source. I highly doubt that the three of them co-wrote the letter; however Silas and Timothy had actually spent more time in Thessalonica than Paul had, and by mentioning them here, he probably intended to convey that they all stood as one in the things he was writing about.

Verses 2-10 contain the balance of Paul's greeting in the form of thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians themselves. This is not quite as perfunctory as it might seem at first, for in these few verses, Paul tells the brief history of the church, and begins to reveal why he has written this letter to them.

Very quickly Paul mentions that they, apparently more than many other churches, jumped right into the work of the gospel, as a response to the love of Christ. Notice verse 5 in which Paul says the gospel came to them with more than words, but with power and the Spirit since they immediately became imitators of Paul, and thus of Christ. Wouldn't it be something if our churches today were more prone to this! They knew *how* Paul lived among them, and they copied Paul's way of living, right off the bat. As they did this, they encountered opposition in the community in the form of persecution, but they kept at it, and in so doing the church in Thessalonica became the model for all of the churches in the region; quite a success story.

It would seem that they had so completely turned from Pagan worship to being followers of Jesus Christ that news of this spread far and wide, beyond their own provinces, so Paul makes it clear that he is not writing to correct the way they have responded to the gospel; there is something else on his mind. Paul will have more to say about the Thessalonians as he continues into the next chapter, and we will pick up his narrative in the next installment...

Chapter 2

Reminders of Paul's Visit

1Thessalonians 2:1-16

At first glance, this is an odd section; is this part of the introduction or has Paul been challenged somehow? Has someone called him a fraud since he left them? When he wrote to the Galatians and Corinthians that was the case... but not here, for as far as we know, Paul's authority and motives had not be challenged in Thessalonica. Thus, if that is the case, why would he write like this?

In the section, Paul reminds the Thessalonians how he behaved in their midst. He had been badly treated in Philippi and had come to their city. In Thessalonica, his message was quickly opposed, but Paul preached the gospel anyway, because it was pleasing to God. He didn't concern himself with the approval of people, for God's approval was enough. He wasn't looking for money; indeed he supported himself by working while he was there.

Many received the gospel message, and these he cared for as though he was their father, with encouragement and loving concern, yet now he feels it necessary to remind them of this. Has he suddenly felt a need to hear their praise?

I think the answer to this riddle will provide us with some fascinating insight into both the psyche of Paul and into what is expected of all Christians □ as well as helping to achieve the purpose for which Paul is writing. You will no doubt recall that Paul is writing them to encourage everyone in Thessalonica to remain in their faith while under persecution, and so this part of the letter should encourage them, but how?

Look carefully at the passage and you will see that Paul has linked together the message of the gospel with the way he is living his life. Notice in particular that he is trying to show that his motives are in harmony with his message, and that he acted it out. The message of the gospel is a message of love on God's part, but delivering the gospel message was an act of love on Paul's part, even more so after his treatment in Philippi and with the opposition in Thessalonica; he did it anyway to please God and so that they might be saved because Paul loved God and because Paul loved the Thessalonians: This was Paul's love in action. There is no greater act of love than to share the gospel message.

What should the church at Thessalonica do to hold firm to the faith while being persecuted? Live their faith in love every day. What should we as Christians be doing every day? We should be living our faith in love in all that we do.

By taking this approach, Paul is also setting up the emphasis of the remainder of the letter.; again, his message to them (and to us) is that we must put the message we preach into practice in our lives.

Paul's Love for the Thessalonians

1Thessalonians 2:17-3:10

Paul takes this opportunity to express his love for the church as he laments his absence; he misses them. He has wanted to return to them, but Satan has prevented it. Oh how I wish he would have mentioned the how and why of this, but since he didn't, I guess we'll never know exactly what Satan did to prevent his return to Thessalonica. It is interesting however to note that Paul clearly attributes his inability to return there to the work of Satan. Think about it: Paul left the city and persecution came upon the church, and now Paul cannot return. I can only assume that Paul had done a mighty work there, mighty enough that Satan was making a major effort to destroy it; thus goes the spiritual battle that still rages today.

For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

1Thessalonians 2:19-20

The church in Thessalonica is Paul's "glory" for in starting that body of faithful believers, he has indeed done the Lord's work to build the Kingdom and give glory to God, so much so in fact, that Satan has found it necessary to become involved *personally*.

We should pay close attention to Paul's words in 3:1-5, for in these verses he reveals something very interesting. It was driving him crazy that he couldn't get back to Thessalonica, and when he could stand it no longer, he sent Timothy there to find out about their *faith!* If I had started a new church somewhere and then heard that it was under persecution, I would worry about their health, if anyone had been hurt or killed, but Paul was worried about their faith; would they falter and return to the old ways? Paul's priorities were not the same as mine! Doesn't that mean that I need to rethink my priorities?

Next Paul tells them of the occasion of his writing: Timothy has just returned to him with the news that their *faith* is secure. Notice that he doesn't say anything about the physical effects of the persecution; was anyone hurt or killed... just that their faith is firm. Paul expresses quite intimately how thankful he is that their faith is secure, about his joy at the news, and how he prays that he may return to them so that he might provide for their *spiritual* needs.

I can't recall the last time I heard anyone talk like that in my lifetime, can you?

Chapter 3

So what do we have so far? In 2:1-3:10 we have Paul talking about putting the message of the gospel into the way we live our lives, and in this passage we have Paul placing spiritual truth above physical distress in an act of love. Then he offers a prayer both for himself and for his readers:

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

1Thessalonians 3:11-13

He prays that he will be able to return to Thessalonica in v. 11. He prays that their love would increase and overflow in v. 12. He prays that God will strengthen them so they will be “blameless” when Jesus returns in v. 13.

Is there anything missing in this prayer, something we would pray for that Paul didn't?

Hint: Did Paul mention anything about their persecution?

Chapter 4

Turning to other matters...

1Thessalonians 4:1-12

The time has come for Paul to give instruction more explicitly and in a way we are familiar with in his other letters. Notice as we go through these verses, however, that unlike some of the other churches he writes to, the Thessalonians are doing quite well, even under persecution. Of course, we can always do better and we must keep growing; this is the major emphasis in the section.

The first 2 verses bear this out: They had been taught how to live to please the Lord, and they are doing so. Now gang, let's kick it up a notch and do even better!

Verses 3-8 provide a warning reminder that they should not go back to their old pagan ways, living in sexual immorality, passions and lust, and they must never take advantage of other people. With these words, Paul is reminding them (and us) of what they were taught from the beginning, that we are to live as a holy, set apart people; set apart from the ways of this world, for God.

For me, the real crux of this passage is found in verses 9-12:

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

God has shown them that they should love one another, and they have, and continue, to do so. Let's do so even more! Notice that this is linked to living quiet lives, working with your hands and being respected by outsiders and a burden to no one. Loving one another and living quiet lives: What do these have in common? If we love one another in community, then we must necessarily be considerate of one another, for to do otherwise wouldn't be loving. People who lead quiet lives are people who aren't creating controversy, showing off or lording it over others. To work with one's hands means that they are self-supporting and not a burden on the community, which unless I am mistaken, is also being considerate of others. A quiet, steady community of hard working people who don't cause problems and who demonstrate selfless love for one another would surely earn the respect of outsiders; it might even gain a hearing for the gospel, and isn't that ultimately the point?

I should say so!

Those who Have Died

1Thessalonians 4:13-18

This passage (and the next for that matter) can either be simple to understand or difficult; the choice is ours to make. If you prefer simple, as I do, then all we need to do is to remember Paul's purpose for writing this letter. If on the other hand, you like your texts to be hard, then forget the context and have at it...

Why did Paul write to the Thessalonians?

They were a new church that came very quickly under serious persecution, and Paul wrote to encourage them to hold onto their faith. So far, they had been able to do this, much to Paul's relief and thanksgiving, and Paul is encouraging them to continue, even to increase their faith and good works, as I'm sure you will remember. I'm also sure that you will remember that when he mentioned the persecution they have been experiencing, that he was primarily interested in the condition of their faith, and not their physical condition; at least he hasn't mentioned it yet. Now, he is suddenly writing about what happens when you die: Does this strike you as odd, or does it strike you as a sudden discourse on eschatology?

Here, let me put that another way: He hasn't mentioned anything about the physical realities of a persecution in the first century up to this point, for that really isn't his main concern, for his main concern is the condition of their faith. This is because if they keep their faith in Jesus Christ intact, they have nothing to fear even if they are killed in the persecution. Thus, this section is neither odd, nor is it a sudden discourse on eschatology; it is an encouragement to hold onto their faith, just as the rest of the letter is.

Guess what? This passage just became simple to understand.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. (4:13)

Persecution was a violent and bloody thing; people were being killed for their faith. Even so, death has no power over us, so do not grieve like the pagans do.

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. (4:14-15)

Jesus rose from the grave, and this confirms that we also will rise from the grave, in fact, the dead will rise first!

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. (4:16)

When the Lord returns, and that could happen at any time, He will return with those who have died before His coming.

After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (4:17)

When Jesus returns, which may happen at any time, the dead will rise from the grave first, and then those of us who are still alive will meet Jesus in the heavens, where we will remain with Him forever.

Therefore encourage one another with these words. (4:18)

During this terrible time of persecution and death, encourage one another with this: Death has no hold on us! By the way, this verse confirms that the context is to encourage those in persecution, and is not intended as an eschatological (End Times)dissertation, because “therefore” denotes Paul’s conclusion from the evidence he has cited.

This is a message of hope and joy for all us as we go through our lives and deal with grief, sorrow, illness, and eventually with our own mortality, rather than an opportunity to jump on our hobby horse and ride off into the nearest tangent.

Chapter 5

More Encouragement from Paul

1Thessalonians 5:1-11

Paul continues the discussion he began in 4:13-18 and in a sense repeats himself in slightly different words. He has been talking about what happens with those who have died, and as we saw last time, this is a continuation of his theme throughout the letter, which is encouragement in a time of persecution. Once again, his priority has been on the people remaining steadfast in their faith during this trial. He spoke of the dead to encourage people to hold onto their faith so that death will be powerless over them at the time of Christ's coming; he continues along those lines here...

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. (5:1-3)

Since we are keeping our study in context, this is an easy passage to understand: We don't know when Jesus will return to raise the dead, it will be quite sudden and entirely without warning, so don't waste any time or energy trying to figure it out; it could happen this very minute! If you've held onto your faith, it will be great. If you've turned your back on your faith, judgment will be problematic for you.

See, this is simple!

The next several verses use a metaphor of night and day; darkness and light to illustrate our situation in Christ. Those who are in darkness, in the night sleep or get drunk, and when the thief comes will be in a bad state. Those of us who hold onto our faith will be people of the day, so we will remain "awake" and when the Lord should come for us, we will have nothing to fear. You see, dear reader, there is no great mystery to these verses. Paul continues:

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (5:8-11)

Paul has told the Thessalonians to live as they have been taught, not as they did before they responded to the gospel. Here, he is simply telling them to keep it up and everything will turn out just fine for them. Notice in particular verse 11 where he draws essentially the same conclusion that he drew at the end of chapter 4: Keep living in Christ and you have nothing to fear either now or in the future, for death has no hold on you.

In our day, we love to argue about these verses, and we love to use them to teach all kinds of theories, and who knows, maybe those theories are right. But, if we just assign these verses to

an end of the world theory, might we be missing the greatest of blessings? That great blessing that assures us that if we remain faithful, no matter what may happen in this life we will spend all eternity with our Lord in glory.

I couldn't possibly speak for anyone else, but the way I see it is that with such a blessing as this, who cares about a bunch of theories?

Bonus Topic: Conditions in Thessalonica

Thessalonica was located on the Macedonian coast with a large natural harbor, which would explain its founding there in 315 B.C. by Casander, a general of Alexander the Great. In 146 B.C. the Romans made it the capital of Macedonia and when the Egyptian Way was constructed along the length of Macedonia, Thessalonica was a main point along the highway that connected Rome with the East. Having both a great harbor, and being a key point on the main highway, Thessalonica was a main transportation hub. It was also situated beside a large fertile plain which could not only supply the needs of a large city, but the surrounding region as well.

The city was a major center of pagan worship with major influence from the cults of Dionysus and Cabirus, and it also included a Jewish community that was large enough for at least one synagogue according to Acts 17. Being large, vibrant and prosperous, Thessalonica was ideally situated for the Gospel to take hold there... and for the Gospel to be strongly opposed, both of which were clearly the case at the time 1 Thessalonians was written.

Acts 17:1-9 tells the story of Paul's arrival there, and both the fertile ground that it was for the Gospel, and the violent reaction of some of the Jewish leaders that resulted in a riot. An interesting point from the Acts account is found in 17:4 where "God-fearing Gentiles" are found accepting the gospel. There apparently were a large number of these God-fearing Gentiles there, who were Gentiles that accepted the God of Israel, but who never became Jews; it would seem that they became Christians instead.

From the tumult of Thessalonica, Paul went onto Berea (Acts 17:10-15) and the opponents from Thessalonica followed him there with the result being that after initial success, the crowds were again agitated into violence and Paul left there and travelled to Athens, leaving instructions for Silas and Timothy to meet him there. By the time they were reunited, Paul was in Corinth, and their report is discussed in 1 Thessalonians, as we have already seen in chapter 2.

One final note about Paul's travels is that he appears to have been following the main highway, stopping in the towns along the way to preach and establish churches that are connected to the transportation systems so they would be situated to make it easy for the Gospel to spread throughout the region; clearly Paul had a strategic plan for his missionary activities.

Rejoice Always

1Thessalonians 5:12-28

Paul closes out this first letter to the Thessalonian church in these verses; the NIV calls this his “Final Instructions” yet somehow to me at least, that doesn’t quite describe it. It might be that in a technical sense, these are indeed “instructions”, but if that is true, they are not the sort of instructions that we can very well check off on a “to do” list. To me, this reads a lot more like a recipe or a formula.

This reads to me like the recipe for brotherly love, or the formula for a church community of unity and selfless service. No, “instructions” just doesn’t quite do it for me.

In verses 12-13, Paul admonishes the people to love and respect their teachers and leaders in the Body of Christ, something that many would rather not do these days. In 14-15, he seems to be encouraging the people to put others first, even when that is hard, and even if that might mean saying what they do not wish to hear, always in selfless love. And then, Paul says this:

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. (5:16-18)

Why did Paul write this letter to the Thessalonians; do you remember? If you do, does this surprise you? Would you have written this to the Thessalonians?

If you don’t remember the reason for the letter, it was to encourage these mostly new Christians to hold onto their faith in a time of serious persecution. The recipients of this letter were being arrested, beaten, tortured, murdered... and Paul tells them to rejoice and be thankful!

Once again, our modern view might be a little different, for we have difficulty rejoicing and being thankful when someone is rude, or we don’t get something we wanted, but the Thessalonians were apparently made of sterner stuff than we.

Or... maybe they had a much better appreciation for all they had in Christ, and we are more oriented to comfort and convenience, and the things of this world; it strikes me that we might need an attitude adjustment, and I include myself in this remark.

Verses 19-24 are an exhortation to hold firmly to the faith, and he ends the letter asking for prayer. Taken in its entirety, this letter may give us a great deal to ponder and contemplate. Not the least of these ponderings should be about just how seriously we take our faith, and just how much more we can do to give Him glory on this earth, in our own communities. I will admit to you, dear reader, that as daunting a task as this may be, I am thankful for having read this amazing letter, for this morning it is my number one tool in the never ending fight against complacency in the faith.

2 Thessalonians

Introduction to 2Thessalonians

Having completed First Thessalonians, we now come to Second Thessalonians, which is also quite an interesting little letter. While it only contains three chapters, it packs quite a punch for us today, and it is surrounded by controversy.

The first area of controversy is who actually wrote the letter? The traditional view is that it was written by Paul, and clearly the letter itself says so in 1:1. You might rightly ask why the controversy over authorship if the text itself says Paul wrote it, and to be honest with you, the answer is better suited to a Bonus Topic, and that is what I will write later in the week. For the purposes of these posts on 2Thessalonians, I will assume Paul is the author.

The second layer of controversy concerns when the letter was written. The traditional view is that it was written as a follow up to the first letter, and that is the assumption in these posts. However, a case can be made that this was actually the first letter, and the second is the follow up. The third layer of controversy swirls around the eschatology of the letter and the “Man of Lawlessness.” This controversy depends largely upon one’s point of view concerning millennial theories and their doctrines or lack of doctrines concerning “The Antichrist.” For the purposes of these observations, I will attempt to keep the texts in chapter 2 within the context of the letter, and let others speculate about whether or not there is another layer of significance.

Finally, there is also controversy concerning Paul’s teaching about unemployment, work and self-sufficiency in chapter 3. This controversy is much more recent than the others, and stems largely from modern day politics. It comes down to whether or not Paul is “mean spirited” when he expresses his thoughts on idleness, and whether or not the church should support members who do not choose to work for a living. I suppose that for many just phrasing it the way I have here would seem “mean spirited” but I simply put it the way Paul did, without volunteering my own thoughts on the subject. I will say, however, that in my personal view, interjecting modern politics into Scripture, whatever one’s opinions may be, is a dubious concept on its best day.

With all of that said, in my view, this letter was written by Paul as a follow up to his first letter for the purpose of encouragement in times of severe trial, and to correct some errors that had come to his attention after his first writing. We’ll begin in earnest in our tour through 2Thessalonians tomorrow morning a 6 am Eastern Time; see you then!

Chapter 1

Wait and See!

If anything, the persecution of the church in Thessalonica has increased since the last letter; yes, this seems certain. Paul's writings here, after the initial opening, seem to place even more urgency on the situation as he tries to keep the people focused on the thing that is most important of all: their faith.

He begins in verses 3-7 by letting them know that they are held in very high esteem by all of the brethren for their steadfastness in persecution, that they are a model to all other churches. Then, he brings in another element to the discussion, God's good judgment. God, it would seem, was of the opinion that they were not being given any more than they were able to handle, and that this has been borne out by the fact that they have almost profited by their ordeal, as their faith and love appear to have actually increased through trials. The result of all this is that they will remain firm until the end, when they will receive ample reward. (4-5)

Next, Paul introduces a new idea: Those who have persecuted the church will be sorry for what they have done when the time comes. Verses 6-10 tell of the day when Jesus returns; He will return for judgment. Those who have refused to follow God, those who have caused the faithful to suffer, will be met with judgment and everlasting destruction. Those who have been faithful will have relief and remain in His presence forever. Thus, Paul is seeking to encourage them by letting them know that their plight is known to God, and that He will deliver all of those who are oppressed for His sake; their future is so bright as to make their present difficulties worth the effort.

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so 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

2Thessalonians 1:11-12

It is important that we read these verses carefully, for they contain insight that is easy to pass right over. In particular, note these words: "*and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.*" Paul is praying for this, that God will provide their every desire for goodness, and every deed prompted by faith. He isn't asking God to take away their trial, or grant their every wish, he's asking for God to provide everything they need to give Him glory through their trial. Once again, to me at least, this doesn't sound like a modern day prayer, for Paul is giving God's will the priority, not human will. Surely, those people would prefer for the trial to go away, wouldn't you? Yet it would appear that there is a much larger battle going on in Thessalonica, a battle for the souls of men and women everywhere, for all time.

I'd like to share a theory with you, and naturally, you are free to discard it if you don't find it useful to aid your understanding; fair enough?

Jesus Messiah came, and Satan opposed Him with everything at his disposal, and finally was able to have Him killed, and in so doing, Old Satan stepped right into a trap. I would imagine that round about the time of the resurrection, or at the latest at Pentecost, he recognized that Christ's Kingdom, indwelt by the Holy Spirit spreading across the planet was his worst nightmare, and thus almost immediately, he launched an all out frontal attack against it. He used everything he could muster to try and destroy the fledgling Kingdom, concentrating his strength in the power and might of the Romans. Those good brothers and sisters of ours in Thessalonica found themselves under attack on the front lines of this assault, as did others in various places over the next one or two hundred years.

God, thinking for the long term, did not directly intervene to take away the attack, remember that His most notable attribute is restraint, not the unlimited exercise of His awesome power. Instead, God provided those people the spiritual resources that would be necessary for them to not only survive this attack, but to actually grow and prosper spiritually while it continued, for the time had not yet come for Jesus to return. The more Satan tried to destroy the church, the more it grew, and eventually, Satan was forced to change his tactics. Even though the battle rages on, the result of God's strategy is that literally billions more people became part of God's Kingdom, including you and me.

Chapter 2

The Day of the Lord

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

2Thessalonians 2:1-4

Right away, we have three things to wonder about: What happened in Thessalonica to give them the idea that Jesus had come back, and they had missed it? What rebellion? Who is this "man of lawlessness"?

The short answer to all three of these is that Paul doesn't quite say.

It seems clear enough that someone has told these poor brothers and sisters that Jesus returned, and He had not done so. It would also appear that whoever this was, told them he got the word from Paul, and he had not gotten this from Paul. At this point, it might be helpful if you think about Jesus and what He told the people about listening to those who would later tell them that the Christ either had appeared, or was about to appear: He told His disciples never to listen to them! Now Paul is telling the Thessalonians the same thing.

Paul, however, goes further than that and tells them that something will happen first: a rebellion. The question we are left with is "what rebellion?" It probably wasn't the rebellion of the 13 colonies in 1776 or the southern states in 1861; those are the first 2 to pop into my mind... Could it be the uprising of the Jews in 70 AD? Some have suggested that.

There are dozens of theories about this question, along with hundreds of books written. I suppose I could outline them for you, but that would probably require 30,000 words, and it would just confuse everyone... I wonder what Paul could be talking about.

Starting at the very beginning, we know that Satan was rebelling against God, and that he caused humanity to rebel against God in the Garden, and we know that Jesus came to redeem humanity by His blood on the cross. We know that the church was established at Pentecost, that it was thus the Kingdom of God from that point forward, and that it brought the good news everywhere it went, including Thessalonica, and we also know that the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica were living under persecution when Paul wrote this and that he was writing to encourage them to continue in their faith. Could it be possible that Paul is referring to this rebellion?

Yes, it is possible, but not many like to teach it that way.

Let's come back to that one. Who is the man of lawlessness? Why didn't Paul just name names? OK, here's what we know about him so far: He will be "revealed" thus, he won't be a secret. He is doomed to destruction. He will oppose everything that is called God; that sounds kind of like a rebellion to me. He will also exalt himself over everything that is called God; isn't that what Lucifer tried to do back in the day, that got him thrown out of heaven? Yes, I think that was it. He will also oppose and exalt himself over everything called worship. Then he will set himself up in God's temple and call himself God. That sounds a little like something Satan would do to me; is Paul referring to Satan?

Maybe, but not many teach it that way. The popular thing today is to say that he is "The Antichrist" from Revelation, but I'm dubious about that; it's too easy just to say that, and besides, "The Antichrist" isn't even mentioned in Revelation, at least not in so many words. ("antichrist" is found only in 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7)

What about "God's temple"; is Paul talking about the one in Jerusalem? Many think so, but then wouldn't that be kind of strange, considering that the Thessalonians were living under the New Covenant; doesn't Hebrews tell us that all that Old Covenant stuff is useless and obsolete? What would be the point of that?

My head is spinning!

Let's take a break, and when we get back together, maybe we can make sense of this. If you have some time, think about these verses, and our questions; try to avoid just looking up what somebody says. I'm going through this to see if we can figure it out before we worry about what others think; then look it up in your favorite commentary.

There is a Problem Here!

Earlier, we took a look at 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4, and ended up with a couple of ideas, and a bunch of questions. The next step is to have a closer look at the text itself. Since the ideas we came up with have led to more questions than answers, a closer look at the actual text is one way to see which way "the wind is blowing". Any time I begin to wonder about the translation of the NIV (the example I've been using here) I first look at the NASB translation. The NASB (New American Standard Bible) is more difficult to read for many, because it is very literal, resulting sometimes in cumbersome English sentences. However, when you are looking at a passage that is hard to figure out, and you didn't just want to jump onto another writer's bandwagon, it is a great tool to get a sense of the text, to see if your translation might be what is making the text hard to understand, or harder than necessary to understand. I began by comparing our current text (2:1-4) and here is what I found:

NIV:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, ²not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the

Lord has already come.³ Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴ He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

NASB:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, ² that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one in any way deceive you, for *it will not come* unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

Well now, isn't that interesting □ do you see what I see? No, not just that some words are slightly different, not that the NASB puts added words in italics and NIV does not; how about the tense in verse 4...

NIV:

⁴ He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

NASB:

who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

The NIV speaks in *future tense* while the NASB speaks in *present tense*, and if the NASB is correct, *that changes everything*. Here's why: Remember in the earlier post when I asked what good it would do for Paul to insert a chapter with information that is for "us" in our time, in a letter written to encourage the Thessalonians in *their time*? This is the type of question that should set off alarm bells in your head, because it tells you there is a possibility that the text might be taken out of context, and we do not want to do that, for it often leads to difficulty in understanding, and even outright error.

Yet, to be fair, we aren't finished quite yet, for the NASB, like any other translation, can be the one that is wrong; we need to check the Greek, so grab your interlinear.

I. The Greek words in question here are *antikeimai* (to oppose) and *hyperairo* (to lift one's self up, be exalted, be haughty). Both are in the present tense; there is no word in the original for "will". Thus, I conclude that the NASB has it more correctly translated than the NIV does. Of course, I tested that conclusion by doing the same comparison in the rest of the passage, and here are the results of that investigation:

2:9

NIV:

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie,

NASB:

that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders,

2:6-7:

NIV:

And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. ⁷ 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.

NASB:

And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains *will do so* until he is taken out of the way.

Once again, I have checked the Greek to confirm the NASB rendering, and found it to be the more accurate of the two. In verse 9, we can again see the addition of future tense into the verse; that should be present tense to be faithful to the Greek. I also noticed an interesting variance in 6-7, in which the NIV adds the definite article “the one who” where the NASB (and Greek) have “he who”. Now this might not be a big deal; we haven’t gotten that far yet, but here’s why I mention it: If the NIV is right then there is only one person holding lawlessness back, and that is probably God. However, if the NIV is not right, then there may be more than one holding lawlessness back; just think about that! Without the definite article, which isn’t found in the Greek, God might be holding lawlessness back all by Himself, yet it could also turn out to be the faith of the Thessalonians (Body of Christ) that holds it (or him) back, and wouldn’t that put a whole different look to things? I guess that might make our investigation all the more interesting to complete...

Over the years, I’ve had a number of people ask questions like, “How do you figure these passages out?” That’s why I’ve taken you through all of this, to show you some ways you can look into these kinds of tough passages on your own; of course if you are an old pro at this sort of thing, you might find it a little bit dull. In any case, I hope it’s been helpful to some. One last thing, I mentioned that we just grab our interlinear, and I realize that most people probably don’t have one, particularly since I write this blog for “regular people” rather than for “academics”. If you don’t have one, there are several available on the internet for free; there is one you can **check out here** if you like.

Next time, we’ll start finding answers to our questions; see you then!

Let’s Try This Again

OK, let’s have another run at our passage, 2Thessalonians 2:1-4. We’re in much better shape now that we have done some investigating; we’ll apply what we learned. To do this, I’ll switch

from the NIV to the NASB for this entire passage so that we can keep those anomalies we found from causing confusion again. Here's the text:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

2Thessalonians 2:1-4 (NASB)

The first time we looked at this passage, we got through the first two verses pretty easily; the Thessalonians had somehow gotten the idea that the Lord had already returned. Paul set them straight on that, telling them not to listen to any such nonsense. In 3-4, he is amplifying this statement by reminding them that there is a way they could tell this for themselves.

Jesus isn't coming (returning) until the apostasy has come and the man of lawlessness has been revealed. The NIV used the word "rebellion" instead of apostasy, and for me the word rebellion is the one I would normally use, since it is a more commonly understood word. "Apostasy" on the other hand is a word that always requires definition, since it is not commonly used outside of religious circles. It means a departure from God and the ways of righteousness. In this particular case, it is handy because it makes the nature of rebellion clearer: Humanity will turn away from God and His ways.

Before we get too giddy with end of the world excitement, please allow me to remind you that this rebellion or apostasy happened in Genesis 3. The relationship between God and Man since Genesis 3 has been like a roller coaster ride. At times, things seem to calm down, and many are faithful to Him, but most of the time, there is more rebelling and apostasy going on than not. The persecution of the Thessalonians is an example of people turning away from God and His ways by persecuting His church, and as long as this is going on, the Lord hasn't returned.

What was happening at the time of this writing, therefore, could be what Paul is talking about, but to be fair it could also refer to something in the future; the grammar is neutral on the time factor. Yet Paul clearly indicates elsewhere that this apostasy has begun. Remember those false teachers in First and Second Timothy, Jude and 1 John for instance? There is also the concern Paul expresses about those Jews who have rejected Christ and opposed His church (1Thessalonians 2:14-16; Romans 9-11) which also would qualify as "apostasy". Think about this carefully: If apostasy means falling away from God and His ways, who could possibly be more apostate than the Jews who refused to follow the gospel that their God had foretold of, promised, and then went to such extreme lengths to bring to fruition right in their very midst?

Since the Thessalonians were being persecuted because of local Jewish instigation, it would be altogether logical and contextual to conclude Paul had it in mind when he was writing this.

Now we come to the man of lawlessness; whoever this is, he will one day be revealed. The immediate reaction of most people would be to assume that this guy "will come" some day, but I would suggest that we read a little more carefully, asking ourselves what "revealed" means. It could mean that some latent force or personality, one that has been inactive and waiting for just the right moment bursts upon the scene, like a sleeper cell that suddenly comes out and blows

something up. It could also mean a puppet-master who has been pulling the strings behind the scenes and is suddenly exposed for who he really is.

Isn't this fun; don't you love doing this?

Let's keep in mind how this discussion began: Somebody was trying to deceive the Thessalonians into thinking that the Lord had already come, but that He hadn't come for them; they might just as well forget all about their faith and give it up!

Thankfully, Paul cleared things up for them in the first 2 verses. Now he's talking about this man of lawlessness who will be revealed or exposed before or at the time of Jesus' return: What do you *think* he's talking about?

who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (2:4)

Now can you see why it was so important to get the tense right here? Whoever this dude is, he is already at work in the mid-first century, and is not a person who comes along later. The Thessalonians are suffering at his hand... but who is he? Come on Paul, name names!

Hold on, Paul did name a name... "the son of destruction" at the end of verse 3. Who is the son of destruction? It sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it?

There is another place in the New Testament where the same Greek words are found that the NASB renders "son of destruction" and that is John 17:12 where they are rendered "son of perdition". (*apoteia*) Who was that, you ask? Why it was Judas Iscariot, the guy into whom Satan went when he betrayed the Lord.

But Paul isn't talking about Judas Iscariot, is he? No, he's talking about Satan!

Who invented apostasy (rebellion) in heaven? Satan did. Who instigated apostasy (rebellion) on earth? Satan did. Who opposed God all throughout the Old Testament? Satan did. Who opposed Jesus during His earthly ministry? Satan did. When the Pharisees were arguing with Jesus, who did He tell them their father was? Satan. Who was pulling the strings when Jesus went to the cross? Satan. Who was at work among the Jews who instigated the persecution of the church? Satan. Who will be exposed before the whole world for the fraud he has always been when Jesus returns? Satan.

Who was and is the man of lawlessness?

Out of the Frying Pan...

...and into the fire.

We figured out what was going on in verses 1-4 with some detective work, and now we must grab our sleuth garb once more as we continue into these verses:

Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? ⁶ And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. ⁸ Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His ^[7]coming; ⁹ that is, the one whose ^[9]coming

is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and ^[h]signs and false wonders, ¹⁰ and with ^[i]all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

2Thessalonians 2:5-10 (NASB)

I usually don't do this, but for this discussion, I've left the verse and footnote markers in place; they will be important for us here.

Verse 5 is easy to understand, but it also makes our caution lights go on; Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that he has already taught them about all of this, so they should already understand what's going on. While this statement might have reminded them of his earlier teachings and thus helped them understand their current situation, it tells us that Paul might not feel the need to mention every detail again, and since we were not present when he taught the Thessalonians in the first place, our job is likely to be made more difficult, as is the case. Verse 6 is not the best literary sentence Paul ever came up with, and not his easiest for us to follow.

It follows his teaching of verses 3-4, so that we now know all about the man of lawlessness, all we need to figure out is this "holding back" business. Since the man of lawlessness is Satan, and "lawlessness" is sin, rebellion... apostasy, then who might be holding him back until the time comes for him to be revealed (exposed)? Only God can fill this bill entirely, so let's assume Paul is referring to God for now, and see if that is confirmed in the rest of the text.

This brings us to verse 7, which is the crucial verse. As I read it, the "mystery of lawlessness" is Satan because he is the "man of lawlessness" who deceives, and who has not yet been revealed or exposed, thus he is mysterious. The man of lawlessness is "already at work" as the Thessalonians are well aware (remember this!) but he and his work are being restrained. That might have come as a surprise to the Thessalonians who were being harshly persecuted, as it may also come as a surprise to many today who see Satan and his works seemingly running rampant all over the world, but he is being restrained or held back even now.

Do you recall my little theory from a few passages back? I mentioned there that God was restraining the works of Satan, and cited at least one example: Why did they arrest and kill Jesus, but not also arrest and kill His disciples? Why didn't the temple guards arrest and kill the Apostles at Pentecost? God will not permit His eternal purpose to be destroyed by Satan. Satan has leeway right now, but he can only go so far, for he is being restrained even now. If you're sharp, you're recalling the story of Job right about now...

Continuing in verse 7: "...only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way" we need to consider who is going to be taken out of the way. The word "he" appears here twice. The first "he" is God, but is God also the second "he"? Unless we can think of someone who can actually remove God from the situation, I highly doubt it. The subject of the sentence is "the mystery of lawlessness", thus the second "he" is the mystery of lawlessness, and we've solved that particular mystery already; it is Satan. So here's the picture: Satan is busy at work trying to ruin God's plan. God is allowing this to play out for now, but is only letting Satan go so far, until the time comes for God to take Satan out for good.

Verse 8 confirms this picture, but does verse 9?

This is why I left the footnotes in place; the footnotes in the NASB for both verses 8 and 9 are the same, for the Greek word is the same. The footnote says: "or presence". The Greek word is *parousia* which means "presence" or "coming" and the tense is determined by the context. Since

verse 7 clearly tells us that the man of lawlessness is already on the scene and hard at work, context should tell us that verse 9 should have been rendered “presence” and verse 8 “coming” because the whole point of this chapter is that Jesus hasn’t come yet, but Satan is here now. Therefore, both verses 8 and 9 confirm our understanding of verses 7 and 8.

Oh! In all of the excitement, I almost forgot to mention that Paul finally names names in verse 9. The presence of the man of lawlessness is in accord with the works of... (drum roll please)... Satan: of course it is, for the man of lawlessness *is* Satan. The result of all of Satan’s activities is that he not only deceives, but that he does so with wickedness for those he deceives, for their lack of love for the truth results in their utter destruction.

When we pick up next, we’ll be in the home stretch, see you then!

God Cannot be Mocked

For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

2Thessalonians 2:11-12 (NASB)

This is a tough passage, not because it is hard to understand; the meaning is abundantly clear. It is tough because it is such a stern warning for what awaits those who insist upon loving the lie and hating the truth; nobody “plays” God for a fool.

Paul has made it quite clear in verses 9-10 that those who fall to Satan’s deceit have done so by their own choice, and let no man suggest that these poor little dears are victims. We know this because the Thessalonians did not allow themselves to fall into this wickedness, for they also had choices to make, and they chose to remain faithful to the truth of God even through persecution; nobody was forced to persecute them and their persecutors did so of their own free will. If you want to be deceived, God will grant you deception.

This is not unique in Scripture. Remember the story of Pharaoh and Moses where Pharaoh kept making the wrong choice and God hardened his heart? Remember when Saul’s stubborn disobedience to God resulted in God sending an evil spirit to trouble him? How about Paul’s discussion in Romans 1 about God giving people over to idolatry and degeneracy because they chose not to have knowledge of God? (Rom. 1:18-22)

I used to tell students that God is pro choice to an audible gasp, and complete the sentence by adding that He expects us to make the right choice. God has granted us the ability to choose our way right to the gates of hell if we want to, but if we do that, there are consequences.

Yep, this is a tough couple of verses, make no mistake, but what would you have God do? I guess He could have made us robots instead of humans with free will, but I’m glad He didn’t do that. However, that isn’t the whole picture, is it? God has done everything to save us from ourselves, and when we accept His grace we are welcomed as children of God with open and loving arms, and He pours out blessing upon blessing. His patience, love and mercy are unfathomable, yet He is still God, and if our response to His grace is our middle finger in His face, we will have problems.

Paul isn't quite finished just yet however, and good things are coming our way as he concludes this chapter!

Encouragement

2Thessalonians 2:13-17

Paul has written this second letter to the believers in Thessalonica to encourage them in their time of persecution and to address an attempt by a person or persons unknown to us to deceive them into thinking that Jesus had already returned and left them behind. In this final portion of chapter 2, after his discussion of what was really going on in their midst, the larger picture of the great battle between God and Satan, he returns to encouragement. For anyone who still doubts what has been under discussion in 2:1-12, this should set the record straight, for Paul set up the context of the letter as encouragement, addressed the problem of the attempted deception, and now returns to encouragement. This is not the context of Paul delivering a section for the sole purpose of teaching eschatology and events that would happen thousands of years in the future.

In the first 2 verses, Paul expresses his thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonians, not just because they are persevering in a hard time, but because they are among the very first to respond to God's call to salvation through the gospel. To be sure, that call was also made to their oppressors, but their oppressors refused to respond, preferring to attack God's message in league with the one who will one day be exposed, to their everlasting shame. For those who have responded in faith to the call of the gospel, this is a glorious message.

Verse 15 comes to the main point as Paul tells them to stand firm in their faith and to hold on to all that he has taught them, whether in person or in his letters to them. For us, the admonition is the same today: Stand firm in your faith no matter what this world may throw at you, for you are in a glorious position through your faith in Jesus Christ. This position is so wonderful, that no trial or hardship in this life can begin to cast even so much as a shadow over it.

Verses 16-17 are Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians, that God would give them all of the strength and endurance they would need to hold firm, that God would continue to bless them by working in and through them to advance the same gospel by which they have been saved from slavery to sin and death, and into the glorious freedom that we have in Christ Jesus.

It is my hope and prayer that each one of us would take the same encouragement from our study of these things, that we would learn the lessons as Paul taught them, and that we too might come to stand firm in our faith no matter what our circumstances may be, and that in and through each one of us, God's truth and call to repentance would shine forth in a dark world as a beacon of hope to everyone we encounter along our journey through this life as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pause and Regroup

Now that we have completed 2Thessalonians 2, I thought it might be a good idea for us to sit back, relax and consider what we have discovered there. Oh yes, dear reader, we have made a major discovery in this chapter, and if you haven't seen it before, I would recommend that you pause and let it sink in, for we have discovered a portal through which we can get a rare glimpse of what is really going on all around us, every hour of every day. We can see that there

is much more to this life than the things that we can see, touch, feel, taste and smell. We can also begin to understand the very forces behind human history in this rare glimpse into eternity.

Am I overstating my case here? No, not a chance!

Most of the time, readers of this chapter miss this opportunity, for most teachers these days pull the text out of its actual context to use it as supporting material for one or another eschatological doctrine. Now this may seem natural enough to many, but Paul wasn't writing about the *end of time* here, he was writing about *all time*, and when we come to that realization, so many things become clear. It is almost as if a veil has been removed so that we can see clearly. That is why I was so painstaking in the way I covered these 12 verses.

We began with a little theory:

Jesus Messiah came, and Satan opposed Him with everything at his disposal, and finally was able to have Him killed, and in so doing, Old Satan stepped right into a trap. I would imagine that round about the time of the resurrection, or at the latest at Pentecost, he recognized that Christ's Kingdom, indwelt by the Holy Spirit spreading across the planet was his worst nightmare, and thus almost immediately, he launched an all out frontal attack against it. He used everything he could muster to try and destroy the fledgling Kingdom, concentrating his strength in the power and might of the Romans. Those good brothers and sisters of ours in Thessalonica found themselves under attack on the front lines of this assault, as did others in various places over the next one or two hundred years.

God, thinking for the long term, did not directly intervene to take away the attack, remember that His most notable attribute is restraint, not the unlimited exercise of His awesome power. Instead, God provided those people the spiritual resources that would be necessary for them to not only survive this attack, but to actually grow and prosper spiritually while it continued, for the time had not yet come for Jesus to return. The more Satan tried to destroy the church, the more it grew, and eventually, Satan was forced to change his tactics. Even though the battle rages on, the result of God's strategy is that literally billions more people became part of God's Kingdom, including you and me.

If you read through the posts on this section, you saw that this working theory was borne out. Now that we have finished the section, we can add a few details.

The "man of lawlessness" is not someone who will come to the scene one day, for he is Satan, who has been working in opposition to God and His purposes since the very beginning, was doing so when Paul wrote the letters to the Thessalonians, and is still hard at work today. As he does so, God restrains him, and he can only go so far. God's purpose will be done in full when God sees fit to complete it and Jesus returns, and Satan will not be allowed to keep God from accomplishing this. We do not know when that will be, but based upon what Paul has told us in 2Thessalonians 2:1-12, it could be at any time.

Satan uses multiple tactics in his fight against God. In the time of the Thessalonians, he was using a direct tactic, persecution. If you were paying close attention, you will have also noticed that Satan used an indirect method, when person or persons unknown attempted to deceive the Thessalonica Christians into thinking that Jesus had already returned. If the Thessalonica believers had allowed themselves to believe this, there would have been little point in their remaining faithful to the Lord, but to God's glory, they did not falter.

Does Satan engage in other deceptions? Well, you know the answer to that; he was a liar from the beginning and the father of lies. We see them everywhere around us in every area of life, and each has as its object the frustration of God's purpose of redemption and the ruin of those who accept the lie. Joseph Goebbels reportedly said that people will always believe the lie and the bigger the lie, the more readily it is believed. Since he was Hitler's propaganda minister, I guess he must have known what he was talking about.

The Thessalonians must have wondered why God didn't just put an end to their persecution; why Jesus didn't just come back. We today might wonder the same thing: "Why doesn't Jesus just return today?"

I can't answer that question, for I don't know. I do know this however: If Jesus had come back in the days of Paul and the Thessalonians, you and I would never have had the opportunity to share in the inheritance of our Lord.

Well dear reader, that's probably enough for now; suffice it say that I could go on and on with this subject. Think on these things, then have a look around you, and think some more. You might be surprised how much you see.

Bonus Post: Authorship of 2 Thessalonians

Throughout the centuries, there has been some discussion about whether or not Paul really wrote 2 Thessalonians. While this discussion has been primarily in the scholarly sphere, in recent years it has grown in intensity with many coming to the conclusion that the letter was written by another person after Paul's death; some have even suggested that it was written to an entirely different church. Most of the time, I leave these discussions to others, but in this instance, I thought you might find it interesting to take a look...

Most often, challenges to Pauline authorship fall into four main areas. First, some argue on the grounds that Paul seems to some to have changed his view of eschatology. Adherents to this view claim that in the first letter, Paul expressed the immediate likelihood of the Lord's return, and in the second letter that he placed a series on things in the way that must happen before Jesus can return, claiming also that these signs have not yet been accomplished even in our time.

Second, some have argued that the tone of the second letter is much more cool and formal than the first letter, which expressed great personal warmth between Paul and his recipients.

Third, some have asserted that Paul wrote the first letter to a largely Gentile audience, while the second letter appears to be written to a Jewish audience, because of references it contains that only someone with a Jewish background could have understood. Once again, these are eschatological in nature, and found in 2:2-14, with the "Temple of God" being at the fore.

A final observation from some is that Paul's sentence structure in 2:2-14 is more complex, with a more frequent use of the genitive and subordination of conjunctions, which is not found in other Pauline writing.

As I write this, I hope you will understand that I am only giving a brief and basic synopsis of the positions on both sides of the 'debate' that scholars would be making here, but then I'm writing a humble blog post and not a piece for an academic journal. I am trying to lay it out simply here in

a way that anyone can follow, and would suggest a more academically minded person seek out further information if interested.

The argument for Pauline authorship usually relies on a couple of relatively simple facts: First, not only did the eschatology not change, but Paul isn't writing this to be an eschatological statement, for his purpose in writing the second letter is to address a specific problem, namely that the Thessalonians have been misinformed in an attempt to deceive them, and he wished to prove Jesus had not yet returned. Secondly, in both his first mention of the Lord's return in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, and in 2 Thessalonians 2, the Lord is portrayed as able to return at any time, for as we saw when we carefully looked at the text, there is nothing to indicate a series of future events or signs that precede His return, but instead the second letter portrays a present reality, not a future series of signs.

As to the second point, the tone of the letter is different from that of the first, but so is the occasion of the second letter. Paul's first letter was written to them to express his deep personal concern for them and to encourage them, the second letter was written to address a specific problem that had come up. .. and to encourage them. Obviously, these 2 letters would have a different tone!

The third point seems dubious at best that the two letters are written to different audiences. Again, in our discussion of 2 Thessalonians 2, we saw what role his reference to the Temple of God was, and that it wasn't a literal prediction, but rather that it carried a much larger and more important purpose. If it did refer to the literal Jerusalem Temple, and it was written several years after Paul's death, then it would have already been destroyed, making the likelihood of another author passing it off as terribly unlikely.

As to the sentence structure in 2 Thessalonians being different than other of Paul's writings, I must point out that Paul's writing style wasn't all that consistent, and that there are other cases where Paul wrote in a way that is unique in his writings. We need search no further than Romans for such an instance, a book that is universally accepted as being written by Paul. He uses a rhetorical question frequently in Romans: "What shall we say then?" (3:5; 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 30) where else does he do this in his writings? As for me, I think this concern for style is seriously over-stated.

At the end of the day, good scholarship requires asking many questions and investigating many working theories, and to be clear, this is as it should be. I would certainly invite anyone who wants more information or study on this subject to dig deeper; by all means arrive at your own conclusion. As for me, I always ask myself if the search is worth it; no really, that's what I ask myself. You see, we can research and dig and compose brilliant theological pieces about our investigation, and we can try to prove many things, but if we aren't making disciples in the process, we aren't doing the thing the Lord asked us to do; it's as if we've gone down a trail that's off the main road where Jesus is walking, and when all the dust settles, I'd rather be at His side on the main trail, than lost in the woods somewhere along the way.

Chapter 3

Let Us Pray

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Paul signals a transition from the discussion of chapter 2 into a new discussion that takes the form of a final exhortation and instructions that is so typical of his writings. He begins asking for prayer that the message of the gospel would spread rapidly and take hold quickly as it did in Thessalonica. It is interesting once again to note the priority of placement for this part of the prayer: First, God's will is the first priority of the prayer □ that the Gospel would spread.

Verse 2 is part of the same sentence as verse 1 in the Greek, and asks for prayer for his safety, for he is also being opposed harshly. I mention the continuation of the sentence, because it makes more clear the fact that Paul isn't just asking for an easy ride, he is asking them to pray that he is able to continue spreading the Gospel, thus doing God's will.

Not everyone has faith, and so some actively oppose the message, but God is faithful. This provides clear insight into the contrast between the faithlessness of men and the faithfulness of God and brings the strong insinuation that we can depend upon God to always be faithful. This is a reminder of Paul's reason for writing, which is to encourage the brethren to hang onto their faith. Thus, the Lord can be counted on to provide us the resources we need to persevere and will protect us from the evil one. This should not be understood to mean that we will always have clean sailing, that the evil one will never bother us. Instead it recognizes the reason for the evil one's interest in harming us, that we might be separated from the love of God and lose all that we have in Christ, and this is what God will protect us from if we remain steadfast.

The end of this paragraph expresses Paul's confidence that they will hold on, that they will continue to do what is right in God's eyes and that they will continue to take his instruction to heart, for they are about to receive some more instruction!

Paul Gives Instruction

2Thessalonians 3:6-13

In these verses Paul pulls no punches as he gives instruction to the Thessalonians regarding Christians who are idle. A common view of this text is that people within the church became idle because they believed that the Lord would return immediately □ and quit working to support themselves and their families. Actually, this is the way I was taught to understand this, but upon closer investigation, it seems unlikely.

Paul wrote about Jesus' return in chapter 2. He writes about idleness here in chapter 3; why didn't he link them together directly? What he actually did was to separate them, to place a bridge of transition in between and then raise a new subject, keeping these two points apart. If

he wanted to tell people that Jesus wasn't coming back any time soon (which he did NOT tell them) then it would have been a great deal more effective for him to have told them to get back to work in chapter 2. If you combine that with the fact that he wasn't telling them that Jesus would return in a long time, he was writing to tell them He hadn't come back yet; the notion of eschatology being the reason for the idleness seems very unlikely indeed.

A more likely approach to this text is that some had stopped working because the believing community of the first century was so generous with each other that they just didn't feel it was necessary to work; thus they were taking advantage of the generosity of others, placing an added burden on the ones who had to provide for them, which is no way to present the gospel to the larger community. Paul's point here is that they must not allow this kind of behavior in the church.

Paul's seriousness is evident right off the bat as he "commands" in the Lord's name that this must stop. (v. 6) In 7-9, Paul reminds everyone that when he was with them, he worked every day to pay for his own food, and that he did so as an example to be followed by all.

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." (3:10)

This verse makes a very clear point that one who is *unwilling* to work isn't to be helped in the church. The New Testament writers, including Paul are very clear that the ones who are *unable* to work are to receive help of all kinds, and those who are in a temporary bad way are to be helped, but those who just want to be lazy are to be permitted to reap the harvest they have sown for their own edification.

Verses 11-12 go on to mention that at least some of these idlers were using their leisure to insert themselves into the business of others, and of course that also must stop.

In the centuries that have passed, some have taken this as teaching for non-church governmental bodies and outside social policy, and this view misses the point of Paul's message entirely. First, Paul is speaking of life within the church, not in the outside community. In the first century, there were some provisions made for the poor and destitute, although nothing like we have today in most places; Paul did not mention this or comment upon it at all. His instruction here is within the strict confines of church discipline and the way believers should behave.

Final Greetings... and Questions

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

2Thessalonians 3:16-18

As was customary, Paul wraps up the second letter to the Thessalonian church with final greetings. In this case, there is a final hope/prayer in verse 16, authentication in verse 17, and a closing in verse 18.

First, Paul expresses his wish that God will grant to his recipients peace in the midst of their persecution. If you think about it, peace is almost the opposite of what they are going through at this time, and this wish expressed by Paul reminds us that even in the most difficult of times, we can be at peace in Christ, for we may realize that in Him we not only have all that we need, but the hope of a greater and more wonderful future that will set us at peace even now as we live through the strife and trials of this world.

The next verse is the authentication. Those who claim that the letter was written after Paul's death would suggest that either (a) this was done to enhance the chances people would accept the fraud, and (b) that it was a grave error because Paul didn't authenticate his letters in this way. To my mind, both of these are absurd because if Paul didn't normally do this, it is likely to stand out and bring questions upon the letter, thus defeating the supposed purpose. Yet the fact remains that Paul did authenticate several of his letters by writing in his own hand at the end. (1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18; Gal. 6:11; Phlm. 19) It would be fair to ask why he chose to do it here however, and to answer that question, I would suggest that we consider the fact that one of his reasons for writing was to correct the false teaching, outright lie actually, that Jesus had already returned but had left the Thessalonians on their own in persecution.

He made much in this letter of following his teachings and instructions, and rejecting contrary teaching from others, and thus it makes perfect sense that he would want to add his own hand to the letter to validate that this is his own teaching, much as he did in Galatians where he was contradicting the teachings of those who claimed that a Gentile must first become a Jew.

Finally, Paul concludes with a statement that the grace of our Lord is with his recipients. This is one of those sentences that we often race past, and assume it is a wish that the grace will be (one day) with us because of the word "be" instead of the word "is". This happens sometimes when Greek is translated into English, but notice that the word "will" does not precede "be" (will be). Bearing in mind that "be" and "is" are conjugations of the same verb with "will be" being future tense and "is" being present tense, we assume therefore that this indicated the future. To be very precise, this sentence actually means that the grace of our Lord *is* with you, and *will continue to be* with you, which is a wonderful meaning for all of us.

On that wonderful note, our little adventure through Paul's letters to the Thessalonians draws to a close.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.