

LESSON 9

The Afflictors and the Afflicted (2 Thess. 1:1–12)

The Place of the Passage

Paul opens his second letter to the Thessalonians (the first letter is referenced in 2 Thess. 2:15) in typical fashion, with an introductory greeting (2 Thess. 1:1–2) and a statement of gratitude for God’s grace in the church’s life (2 Thess. 1:3–4) before launching into the body of the letter (2 Thess. 1:5–12). His pastoral heart is on display as he seeks to comfort his readers with a vision of their future. King Jesus will surely return to judge their enemies and grant them endless relief and joy.

The Big Picture

In 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12, Paul greets the church, commends them for embodying God’s grace, and reminds them of Christ’s promised return to punish their persecutors and grant them unending rest.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete text for this study, 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12. Then review the following questions concerning this opening passage of 2 Thessalonians and record your responses.

Greeting and Gratitude (2 Thess. 1:1–4)

In 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Paul insists that it is “right” to verbalize gratitude to God for the Thessalonians. Why do you think he uses this word? What does this imply about ingratitude?

How do the virtues and characteristics Paul identifies in 2 Thessalonians 1:3–4 correspond to the ones he highlighted in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and 1 Thessalonians 5:8?

How does Paul’s statement in 2 Thessalonians 1:3 correspond to his prayer for the church in 1 Thessalonians 3:12?

What does it mean to “boast” (2 Thess. 1:4)? What is the difference between this kind of boasting and sinful boasting?

A Day of Justice and Mercy (2 Thess. 1:5–12)

How does Paul describe God’s judgment in 2 Thessalonians 1:5? Is this how you think of it? How does viewing God’s judgment this way matter on a practical level?

In the middle of 2 Thessalonians 1:7, Paul turns on a dime from speaking of “God” (2 Thess. 1:5–7a) to speaking of “the Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7b–10). Compare the identity of the one “repaying with affliction” (2 Thess. 1:6) to the identity of the one “inflicting vengeance” (2

Thess. 1:8). What does a careful look at this passage indicate about the nature of the relationship between God and Jesus?

Reread Paul's description of Christ's return in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. How does that passage compare to 2 Thessalonians 1:5–12? Is Paul referring to the same event or different ones?

What do we learn about the nature of hell from 2 Thessalonians 1:9?

According to 2 Thessalonians 1:10, for whom is Jesus returning, and by what criteria are they identified? Given this description, is he coming back for you?

What happens to our every “resolve for good” and “work of faith” (2 Thess. 1:11) if we remove God from the equation? How should the language of Paul's prayerful challenge in 2 Thessalonians 1:11–12 shape our perspective on the relationship between God's work and ours? What effect should this have on our hearts?

How does 2 Thessalonians 1:2, 12 frame 2 Thessalonians 1? Why is this significant?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to consider the Personal Implications these sections may have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

OBEY THE GOSPEL. Paul speaks of those who “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:8). This is intriguing, since “obey” is not the typical imperative associated with our gospel response (but see Rom. 10:16 and 1 Pet. 4:17). Obeying the gospel means embracing it, submitting to it, and responding gladly to its inherent demand to repent and believe in King Jesus. Sometimes this demand is explicit (e.g., Acts 20:21); other times it is implied. The notion of obeying the gospel also has implications for how we conduct evangelism. In 1 Thessalonians 2, it is interesting that Paul's shorthand for “we [declared] to you the gospel” (1 Thess. 2:2) is simply “our appeal” (1 Thess. 2:3). This is because evangelism is inherently persuasive (see 2 Cor. 5:11, 20). If you have not yet implored someone to repent and believe, then your evangelism—your “gospeling”—is not yet complete.

Definition: Evangelism

Declaring the gospel (the evangel) of Jesus the King, in the power of the Spirit, and calling for response—while leaving the results to God.

Whole-Bible Connections

DIVINE RETRIBUTION. While taking vengeance is not appropriate for Christ's people (see “Whole-Bible Connections” for 1 Thessalonians 5:12–28), the Old Testament concept of proportional repayment or retributive justice is entirely right for a God of righteousness who never overreacts and whose punishment always fits the crime. God's people can take comfort

in knowing that he sides with them, identifies with them, will fight for them, and will win. Ever since God's covenant promise to Abraham that "him who dishonors you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3), the Scriptures pulse with the conviction that God takes his people's persecution personally and will repay their afflictors with justice (see, e.g., Ex. 23:22; Deut. 30:7; Ps. 137:8; Jer. 25:14; 30:20; 46:10; 50:15, 28–29; 51:6, 11, 24, 36, 56; Ezek. 35:15; Joel 3:4, 7; Obad. 15; Hab. 2:8). In 2 Thessalonians 1, Paul assures the beleaguered church that God will "repay with affliction" their afflictors (2 Thess. 1:6) by means of his vengeance-inflicting Son (2 Thess. 1:7–8). It is significant that Paul, without embarrassment or explanation, applies Old Testament language for Yahweh directly to Jesus. The man from Nazareth will mediate heaven's justice on behalf of those for whom he died.

Theological Soundings

KINGDOM OF GOD. Referenced in 2 Thessalonians 1:5, God's "kingdom" is the realm of his redemptive reign. It refers not only to his geographical ownership but also to his comprehensive rule. His kingdom, then, is a function of his kingship. And God's kingdom is inescapably tied to salvation. Regrettably, many who define the kingdom without reference to God's saving activity in Christ propose a definition any theist—such as a Jew or a Muslim—could support, but God's kingdom is inseparably tied to God's King (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 17:21; John 18:36). Although Old Testament precedent for the kingdom certainly exists (e.g., Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 18, 23, 27; Isa. 9:2ff.; 11:1ff.; 24:23; Zeph. 3:15; Zech. 14:9ff.; Obad. 21; Amos 9:11ff.), it is the arrival of Jesus that is presented as the arrival of the kingdom. This is why we say that God's kingdom is both a present (e.g., Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 11:11–12; 12:28; 13:41) and a future (e.g., Matt. 6:10; 8:11; 13:43; 16:28; 18:1–4; 19:24–25; 25:31, 34; 26:29) reality. Jesus inaugurated it when he came, and he will consummate it when he returns. Although God's kingdom extends over every square inch of his universe, it is uniquely present where his Son is uniquely present—that is, in the church. God has given the local church the "keys of the kingdom" to declare on heaven's behalf the identity of those who belong to Jesus (see Matt 16:16–19; 18:17–20; 28:18–20). Every local church is a colony of the kingdom—an embassy of heaven on earth. Ultimately, the clearest picture of "kingdom life" is seen in the final chapters of Revelation, where the fullness of God's kingdom unilaterally and climactically descends as a new heaven and a new earth (Matt. 21:1–5).

ETERNAL DESTRUCTION. According to 2 Thessalonians 1:9, the "destruction" of the condemned will not be momentary but "eternal." Hell will be every bit as eternal as heaven will be (e.g., note the parallel between "eternal punishment" and "eternal life" in Matt. 25:46). Indeed, this sentence of God's endless justice (see 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rom. 2:5) is fair and right. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25; see also 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:8). However, those who know God (1 Thess. 1:8)—who obey the gospel (2 Thess. 1:8) by trusting the Son (2 Thess. 1:10)—will be saved from this deserved verdict. And saved persons will anticipate and "marvel at" (2 Thess. 1:10; see also 2 Tim. 4:8) their beautiful Redeemer's return.

Definition: Theist

As person who believes in one or more gods.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Note the personal applications for your walk with the Lord based on the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. 2 Thessalonians 1:1–12

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of 2 Thessalonians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things the Lord may be teaching you.

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