

LESSON 8

Overview of 2 Thessalonians

Getting Acquainted

Still in Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–18), the apostle Paul sits down to write a follow-up letter to the Thessalonian church some 360 miles (by land) to the north. We know this is not his first correspondence with the congregation he helped to plant (see Acts 17:1–11), for he references a previous letter (almost certainly 1 Thessalonians) in 2:15. In that epistle—the earliest in the New Testament after Galatians and James—he had covered a number of pressing topics in light of Timothy’s report (1 Thess. 3:6). Although roughly half the length of 1 Thessalonians—three chapters compared to five, and 47 verses compared to 89—2 Thessalonians is packed with theological insight and practical significance.

The apparent occasion for 2 Thessalonians is an update Paul has received concerning the church (2 Thess. 3:11). Three issues in particular demand further instruction and application: (1) the ongoing experience of persecution (see 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 3:1–5); (2) an unsettling rumor concerning the day of the Lord (see 1 Thess. 5:1–11); and (3) the ongoing presence of idlers among the church (see 1 Thess. 4:11–12; 5:14). Paul broadly addresses these themes in 2 Thessalonians 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

It is fascinating to note that the title “Lord Jesus” appears 12 times in this three-chapter letter—more than in any other New Testament epistle. (The title appears 11 times in 1 Thessalonians.) Paul remains intent on spotlighting Jesus’ lordship over human history as well as over our individual lives.

Placing 2 Thessalonians in the Larger Story

Only two decades have passed since Jesus of Nazareth—Messiah of Israel, Savior of the world, eternal Son of God—completed his earthly mission by means of his atoning death, victorious resurrection, and royal ascension. In the meantime, a man named Paul has been dramatically converted on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19) and commissioned as an apostle to proclaim Christ and plant churches. In Acts 17:1–11 we read of his ministry in—and banishment from—the city of Thessalonica. It is this congregation in Macedonia (northern Greece) that he now addresses for the second time from Corinth (southern Greece), having received a new report about them (2 Thess. 3:11).

Definition: Atonement

The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as a substitute for sinners. In joyful obedience to the will of his Father (Heb. 12:2), Jesus was punished in the place of his people, all who repent of sin and rely on him.

Key Passage

“We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Thess. 2:13–14)

Date and Historical Background

In Acts 17:1–11, Luke recounts Paul’s visit to Thessalonica and ministry among its synagogues. Nearing the end of his second missionary journey, Paul is in Corinth for 18 months (Acts 18:1–18) when he writes to the Thessalonian church. (See Week 1 for more details to the backstory.) Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, in northern Greece. Boasting a population of more than 100,000, the city was a powerful commercial center situated on the Aegean seacoast along the Via Egnatia (a major Roman east-west highway). Given its geographical and cultural position, Thessalonica was a hotbed of lucrative trade and religious pluralism. While primarily devoted to the pantheon of Greco-Roman gods, the city also included a substantial contingent of Diaspora Jews—as evidenced by Paul’s focus on the local synagogue (Acts 17:1–4, 10).

Definition: Diaspora

Also known as the Dispersion, the term refers to the historical scattering of Jews from Jerusalem into the rest of the Mediterranean world. Although applicable to Jewish persons in general (John 7:35), the NT chiefly applies such language to the scattering of Jewish Christians in particular. Luke highlights the Diaspora’s origins in persecution (Acts 8:1–4; 11:19), and both James and Peter address letters to believers “in the Dispersion” (James 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1).

Outline

1. Opening (2 Thess. 1:1–2)
2. Thanksgiving and Comfort for the Persecuted Thessalonians (2 Thess. 1:3–12)
 - i. Thanksgiving proper (2 Thess. 1:3–4)
 - ii. Justice guaranteed when Jesus returns (2 Thess. 1:5–10)
 - iii. Prayer report (2 Thess. 1:11–12)
3. Refuting the False Claim about the Day of the Lord (2 Thess. 2:1–17)
 - i. The false claim (2 Thess. 2:1–2)
 - ii. The false claim refuted (2 Thess. 2:3–12)
 - iii. Reassurance (2 Thess. 2:13–14)
 - iv. Exhortation (2 Thess. 2:15)
 - v. Prayer (2 Thess. 2:16–17)
4. Transition (2 Thess. 3:1–5)
 - i. Request for prayer (2 Thess. 3:1–2)
 - ii. Reassurance (2 Thess. 3:3–4)
 - iii. Prayer (2 Thess. 3:5)
5. The Problem of the Idlers (2 Thess. 3:6–15)

- i. The command to the community (2 Thess. 3:6)
 - ii. The tradition (2 Thess. 3:7–10)
 - iii. The problem (2 Thess. 3:11)
 - iv. The command to the idlers (2 Thess. 3:12)
 - v. Instructions to the community (2 Thess. 3:13–15)
6. Conclusion (2 Thess. 3:16–18)

As You Get Started

As we begin this study, do you have a sense of any specific emphases of 2 Thessalonians? Without using your Bible, do any passages from 2 Thessalonians come to mind? Has this letter already been meaningful to your walk with the Lord in any specific ways?

Do a quick read-through of 2 Thessalonians. What themes or topics stand out? What about particular words or phrases? Write them down. What would you say is Paul's primary aim in this letter?

How would you describe the contributions of 2 Thessalonians to Christian theology? What do you think the letter teaches us about Jesus, sin, salvation, the end times, or any other doctrine? What aspects of 2 Thessalonians have confused you? Are there any specific questions you hope to resolve through studying this letter?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a few minutes to ask God to bless you with increased understanding and a transformed heart and life as you begin this study of 2 Thessalonians.

NOTES
