

## SECOND THESSALONIANS

### Introduction:

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: “2 Thessalonians should be studied in connection with 1 Thessalonians because it is only from an understanding of the First Epistle and the situation that it revealed that one can fully grasp the significance of the Second. And more than that, the solution of the problem as to whether Paul wrote the Second Letter is likewise largely dependent on our knowledge of the First. It would, for instance, be much harder to believe that Paul had written 2 Thessalonians if we did not know that before writing it he had used the tender and tactful methods of treatment which we find in the First Letter. It is as though one should enter a sick room where the physician is resorting to some rather strong measures with a patient. One is better prepared to judge the wisdom of the treatment if he knows the history of the case, and discovers that gentler methods have already been tried by the physician without success.”

*The Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* writes: “Two letters written by the apostle Paul, which are among the earliest of Paul and of the New Testament. The major theological theme of 1 and 2 Thessalonians is the return of Christ to earth. Important as this theme is, however, the Thessalonian letters leave the reader wide awake to the responsibilities of the present, not gazing into the future. Both epistles aim to establish and strengthen a young church in a stormy setting (1 Thess 3:2,13; 2 Thess 2:17; 3:3). In neither epistle does Paul fight any grave errors in the church. In both epistles the reader feels the heartbeat of Paul the pastor as he identifies with a young congregation taking its first steps in faith.”

On the occasion for the writing of this epistle, *The Pulpit Commentary* writes: “In order to understand this Second Epistle, we must endeavor to ascertain the condition of the Thessalonian Church when the apostle wrote to them. Paul had been compelled to leave the Thessalonians only partially instructed in Christianity; they were defective both in the knowledge of its doctrine and in the practice of its precepts. He had written them an Epistle to correct abuses and to supply what was lacking in their faith (1 Thess. iii.10). The intelligence brought back to the apostle by the bearer of the First Epistle, or through some other channel, was the occasion of this Epistle. The apostle received a good report of the Thessalonians, and is enabled to express his joy and thankfulness to God that their faith grew exceedingly, and the love of every one toward each other abounded (ch. i.3). But still the erroneous views concerning the advent, and the consequent disorders to which he had adverted in the First Epistle, had rather increased than diminished. The Lord Jesus Christ had left the world only twenty years before. He had promised to return at an uncertain date, and therefore nothing was more natural than that the Church in general should have expected his immediate return. Various circumstances, both in the Church and in the world, heightened this expectation. Such a view of an immediate advent had taken possession of the minds of the Thessalonian converts. Their anxiety for the loss of their deceased relatives, who, they thought, would lose all the benefits occurring at the advent, had indeed been assuaged by the former Epistle, but the expectation of the immediate advent itself had grown in strength. The Thessalonians, it would seem, from misapprehending some passages of the First Epistle, considered that the day of Christ was at hand (ch. ii.2). Mistaken and enthusiastic men had also nourished this deception by appealing to visions and to the traditionary sayings of the apostle; and it would even appear that an Epistle had been forged in the name of the apostle. The Church was thrown into a state of wild excitement; an impatient and fanatical longing for the instant when Christ would come seized upon one portion, whilst fear and consternation at the awfulness of the event overwhelmed another. The consequence was that many of the Thessalonians were neglecting their secular business and living idle and useless lives, conceiving that there was no use of working in a world which was so soon to be destroyed, or performing the duties belonging to a state of things which was so soon to terminate. Their only duty they felt was to be in readiness of the immediate coming of their Lord.”

People who hold to a strict dispensational view of the return of our Lord would strongly object against the suggestion that Paul is speaking in both Epistles about the same event. But the appropriate place to discuss this is in chapter 2, rather in the introduction to this Epistle.

Finally, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* states: “The second epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians was written to correct the erroneous notion among the Christians at Thessalonica that the persecutions from which they were suffering were those of ‘the great and awesome day of the Lord’ (Joel 2:31) from which they had been taught to expect deliverance by ‘the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him’ (2 Thess 2:1). The theme of this epistle, obscured by the mistranslation of the KJV in 2:2, ‘the day of Christ is at hand,’ is correctly rendered in NASB ‘The day of the Lord has come.’ ”

*The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* gives the following outline of this book:

I.	Paul's Encouragement in Persecution	ch. 1	
	A. Thanksgiving for Their Growth		1:1-4
	B. Encouragement in Their Persecution		1:5-10
	C. Prayer for God's Blessing		1:11-12
II.	Paul's Explanation of the Day of the Lord	ch. 2	
	A. The Events Preceding the Day of the Lord		2:1-12
	1. First a Falling Away		2:1-3
	2. The Man of Sin Is Revealed		2:4-5
	3. The Restrainer Is Taken Out of the Way		2:6-7
	4. The Second Coming of Christ		2:8-12
	B. The Comfort of the Believer on the Day of the Lord		2:13-17
III.	Paul's Exhortation to the Church	ch. 3	
	A. Wait Patiently for Christ		3:1-5
	B. Withdraw from the Disorderly		3:6-15
	C. Conclusion		3:16-18

The Text:

<b>I.</b>	<b>Paul's Encouragement in Persecution</b>	<b>ch. 1</b>	
	<b>A. Thanksgiving for Their Growth</b>		<b>1:1-4</b>

*1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,*

*To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:*

*2 Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*3 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing.*

*4 Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.*

Paul's greeting in this Epistle is identical to the one in the first Epistle, with the exception that the words "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" are added here.

The prayer of thanksgiving is also very similar to the one in I Thessalonians, the only difference being that there other churches testified to the solidity of the faith of the Thessalonians, while here it is Paul who boasts about their faith to other churches.

Paul loved to use the example of believers in one place for the encouragement of believers in another. Writing to the Corinthians, for instance, he stated: "And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving."<sup>1</sup> Paul's motives in writing to the Corinthians, however, were more complicated than in this Epistles to the Thessalonians. In the latter case, it was not a matter of finances but of spiritual growth. Paul had not "ulterior motives" in setting his newborn children as an example to other young churches. Since the First Epistle is generally believed to have been written from Corinth, and it is the consensus the both Epistles

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<sup>1</sup> II Cor. 8:1-7

were written in rapid succession of each other, the church that received Paul's boast was probably the one in Corinth.

## **B. Encouragement in Their Persecution**

1:5-10

*5 All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.*

*6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you*

*7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.*

*8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.*

*9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power*

*10 on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

The persecution and suffering that are mentioned in the First Epistle had evidently not abated when this Second Epistle was written. The knowledge that these young believers were unrelentingly subjected to such severe pressure must have been very hard on the apostle. Yet, his reaction is not negative. When believers are persecuted, it means that they are a definite threat to the enemy's authority. The devil does not waste his energy on those who have no significance in the Kingdom of Heaven. From the very beginning of its history, the members of the early church had a clear understanding of this. We read that when the apostle were flogged by order of the Sanhedrin: "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."<sup>2</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary* states beautifully: "Religion, if it is worth any thing, is worth every thing; and those either have no religion at all, or none that is worth having, or know not how to value it, that cannot find in their hearts to suffer for it."

The use of the words "God's judgment" in this context has a double cutting edge. It is used positively as a means for the purification of the saints and negatively as a punishment for those who instigate the persecution. This double edge is found elsewhere in Scripture also. When Jesus was led to the cross, He exclaimed: "If men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"<sup>3</sup> And Peter states: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?"<sup>4</sup>

Paul links the present suffering, in which he includes himself, with the Second Coming of Christ, which will be marked by the vengeance of God. John speaks of this day in Revelation: "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."<sup>5</sup> This day also seems to be described in the opening of the sixth seal in Revelation, where we read: "I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"<sup>6</sup>

The saints' knowledge about the fate of their oppressors should fill them with compassion instead of fear. If we know what will happen to those who torture us and compare their eternal fate with our eternal

<sup>2</sup> Acts 5:41

<sup>3</sup> Luke 23:31

<sup>4</sup> I Peter 4:17

<sup>5</sup> Rev. 1:7

<sup>6</sup> Rev. 6:12-17

bliss, we have reason to be moved instead of to tremble for man. The writer of Hebrews states correctly: "So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"<sup>7</sup> And Jesus counseled His disciples: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."<sup>8</sup> This was the reason for Jesus' compassion in the above quoted verses. He turned to the women who wept when He was led away and said: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then 'they will say to the mountains, ' 'Fall on us!' ' and to the hills, ' 'Cover us!' ' "<sup>9</sup>

Richard Adams, the author of the allegory *Watership Down*, shows remarkable insight. There is an episode in which a rabbit, Fiver, who has the gift of prophecy, pities the animal that comes to kill him, because he knows the fate that is awaiting his executioner.

One of the problems in this epistle is the description of the Day of the Lord, compared to the depiction in First Thessalonians. If we adhere to a strict dispensationalist view of the Lord's return on two separate occurrences, one before the coming of the Antichrist, prior to the "Great Tribulation" for the benefit of the church, and the second at the end of the tribulation to judge the world, we are faced with two epistles that deal with totally different subjects. That is, of course, quite possible. But then there is little or no unity between the two epistles. If, on the other hand, we take the second epistle to be a continuation of the first, the description of the two phases of the "Day of the Lord" makes the matter rather complicated. I believe that caution is needed in our search for clarity about the Second Coming. I hold the dispensational pre-tribulation rapture view to be quite plausible but I am afraid that a radical dogmatic approach to a matter that is left rather gray in Scripture has done a lot of harm to the unity of the church.

In the introduction to the two epistles, *The Tyndale Commentary* writes: "The situation, then, would seem to be that Paul wrote I Thessalonians, but that it did not achieve all that he desired. Further reports reaching him showed that his defense of his own conduct had proved adequate (this we may gather from the fact that he did not repeat it), but apparently other parts of his letter were not so effective. Idleness on the part of some continued, and there were misunderstandings about the Parousia which caused others to be troubled in mind. Accordingly, without losing time (by common consent there cannot have been more than a matter of weeks between the two Epistles), Paul set himself to the task of putting things in order, and 2 Thessalonians is the result. It must have been written soon after I Thessalonians, because it must have been sent prior to Paul's second visit to Thessalonica (see Acts xx. If.), and Corinth is the only place known to us where Paul, Silas and Timothy were together during the intervening period. In this second letter he carries on the work of the first, encouraging the faint hearted, rebuking the slackers, clearing up points associated with the return of the Lord. 'It is simply a second prescription for the same case, made after discovering that certain stubborn symptoms had not yielded to the first treatment.' "<sup>10</sup>

The question then remains whether Paul's picture of the coming of the Lord in his first epistle is the same as the one in the second. The two pictures are not incompatible. In I Thessalonians we read: "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."<sup>11</sup> In this epistle Paul writes: "This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels... on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed."<sup>12</sup> It makes more sense to see two separate events but undeniable proof seems hard to obtain.

The description of the Lord's return in this epistle is quite awesome and we do well to take a closer look. The picture is a glorious one, "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels." The Greek word rendered "revealed" is *apokalupsis* which means "disclosure." It is the

<sup>7</sup> Heb. 13:6

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 10:28

<sup>9</sup> Luke 23:28-30

<sup>10</sup> Last sentence is quoted from R. H. Walker, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*

<sup>11</sup> I Thess. 4:16

<sup>12</sup> ch. 1:7,10

name given to the Book Revelation and it is certainly appropriate to connect Paul's description to the images John paints for us in the last book of the Bible. The "powerful angels" are probably the seraph that surround the throne of God which Isaiah saw in his vision of God's glory and which was revealed to Ezekiel.<sup>13</sup> It is the Shekinah glory that accompanied the people of Israel on their journey to the Promised Land and that settled above the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle and the temple.

The first result of Jesus' return here is punishment for the agnostics and the unbelievers. We may presume that "those who do not know God" are people who willfully ignore or deny God. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* mentions as an example Pharaoh who said: "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."<sup>14</sup> TLB brings this out in its rendering "Bringing judgment on those who do not wish to know God and who refuse to accept his plan to save them through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The question how much accountability can be expected of those who have never heard the Word of God has plagued Christians throughout the centuries. We may assume that there is a balance of righteousness between God's wrath and His mercy for those who will be judged. We should never pretend that our sense of righteousness could be greater than God. As Abraham exclaimed: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"<sup>15</sup> Paul does not speak here of those who never had a chance to hear but of those who heard and rejected. The context that speaks about the persecution of the saints is proof of this. Also, it is impossible to reproach disobedience of the Gospel to people who have never heard the Gospel.

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments profoundly on this: "There is nothing that more infallibly marks a man for eternal ruin than a spirit of persecution, and enmity to the name and people of God: as the faith, patience, and constancy of the saints are to them an earnest of everlasting rest and joy, so the pride, malice, and wickedness of their persecutors are to them an earnest of everlasting misery; for every man carries about with him, and carries out of the world with him, either his heaven or his hell. God will render a recompense, and will trouble those that trouble his people. This he has done sometimes in this world, witness the dreadful end of many persecutors; but especially this he will do in the other world, where the portion of the wicked must be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth."

We should not draw the conclusion from Paul's words that unbelievers are annihilated. The words "eternal destruction" are linked to "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." Reverting to non-existence is incompatible with being shut out from the presence of the Lord and could not be considered an effective punishment. It is rather the loss of all human dignity and of all traces of the image of the creator in man that forms the essence of the sufferings of hell.

Vs. 10 speaks of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in the believer. The rendering of the NIV, as well as of some other more modern versions, may lead to confusion. "On the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed." The Greek uses the word "in" in connection with "holy people" as well as with "all those who have believed." The KJV stay closer to the original with: "When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe." The day of Christ's return is the day of our glorification. This is consistent with Jesus' words in His prayer for the believers on the eve of His crucifixion: "And glory has come to me through them... I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me."<sup>16</sup>

Paul's statement here is one of the most wonderful revelations about the transformation that will take place in those who have put their trust in Him. The apostle John speaks about this: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Isa. 6:1-4; Ezek. 1:4-28

<sup>14</sup> Ex. 5:2

<sup>15</sup> Gen. 18:25

<sup>16</sup> John 17:10,22,23

<sup>17</sup> 1 John 3:1,2

The coming of Christ will have a transforming effect upon us that surpasses our wildest imagination. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* states beautifully: "Christ will be glorified and admired in them. His grace and power will then be manifested and magnified, when it shall appear what he has purchased for, and wrought in, and bestowed upon, all those who believe in him. As his wrath and power will be made known in and by the destruction of his enemies, so his grace and power will be magnified in the salvation of his saints. Note, Christ's dealings with those who believe will be what the world one day shall wonder at. Now, they are a wonder to many; but how will they be wondered at in this great and glorious day; or, rather, how will Christ, whose name is Wonderful, be admired, when the mystery of God shall be finished! Christ will not be so much admired in the glorious esteem of angels that he will bring from heaven with him as in the many saints, the many sons, that he will bring to glory."

From *Barnes' Notes* we copy the following observation: "[And to be admired in all them that believe] This may either mean that he will be admired among or by them that believe; or that the ground of the admiration which he will receive in that day will be what will be seen in them; that is, their graces, their numbers, their joys, their triumphs will be the occasion of producing admiration of him-for he will be regarded as the source of it all. Tyndale renders it: 'and to be made marvelous in all them that believe.' The latter interpretation seems to me to be the correct one. The general idea is, that Christ in that day will be manifested in a glorious manner, and that the source of his highest triumphs will be what is seen in the saints. His main honor when he returns to the world will not be the outward splendors which will attend his coming, nor the angels that will accompany him, nor the manifestation of his power over the elements, but the church which he has redeemed. It will then be seen that he is worthy of universal admiration, for having redeemed that church. He shall then be admired or glorified in his people:

- (1) for having conceived the plan of redeeming them;
- (2) for being willing to become incarnate and to die to save them;
- (3) for the defense of his church in all its persecutions and trials;
- (4) for raising his people from the dead;
- (5) for the virtues and graces which they will exhibit in that day.

This appropriate honor of Christ in the church has never yet been fully seen. His people on earth have, in general, most imperfectly reflected his image. They have in general been comparatively few in number, and scattered upon the earth. They have been poor and despised. Often they have been persecuted and regarded as the 'filth of the world and the offscouring of all things.' The honors of this world have been withheld from them. The great have regarded it as no honor to be identified with the church, and the proud have been ashamed to be enrolled among the followers of the Lamb. In the last day all this will be changed, and the assembled church will show to admiring worlds how great and glorious is it, Redeemer, and how glorious was the work of redemption."

Daniel prophesied about this glory: "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."<sup>18</sup> John says of the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb: "It shone with the glory of God."<sup>19</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* adds to this: "The work of faith is past; the result of faith, the state of sight and glory, has commenced. The glorification of believers will thus become the glorification of Christ. The glory of Christ does not arise from the punishment of the wicked, but from the glorification of believers. Christ will indeed be glorified in the punishment of the wicked. His justice will be manifested and vindicated; but his glory will be especially seen in the manifestation of his mercy toward believers."

### C. Prayer for God's Blessing

1:11-12

***11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith.***

***12 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.***

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<sup>18</sup> Dan. 12:3

<sup>19</sup> Rev. 21:11

Paul links this vision of the glory to come directly to the message he had preached to those people and he makes the application to the present. The hope of glory is meant to keep us going through life on earth. Yet if God in His mercy would not cover the glory to come for us to see in the present, we would be in danger of thinking that it is anything other but the glory of Christ in us. It is better for us to be, in the words of Oswald Chambers, “conscious sinners and unconscious saints.” C. S. Lewis, in his sermon *The Weight of Glory*, says: “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.”

The immediate purpose of the hope of glory is to keep ourselves clean while we are on our pilgrimage. As the apostle John writes: “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”<sup>20</sup> This hope is our motivation to live in such a way that God will approve of us and to act by faith. This includes both the faith that moves mountains as well as the confidence that God will keep us from stumbling.<sup>21</sup> The glory that will be revealed in us in a perfect way at the return of Christ ought to be sensed in our lives in the present by those who try to find out what motivates us. In the words of Peter: “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”<sup>22</sup>

A closer look at Paul’s prayer makes us see how complex Christian life actually is. Paul prays for three things in the life of the believer:

- that our God may count you worthy of his calling,
- and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours
- and [that by his power he may fulfill] every act prompted by your faith.

Paul does not say that we have to be worthy to be called by God. It is after God calls us that we have to live up to our reputation. In some of his other epistles, the apostle elaborates on this. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, he writes: “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”<sup>23</sup> In Philippians we read: “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> And in First Thessalonians, we read: “urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.”<sup>25</sup> When God counts us worthy of His calling, the work of sanctification by the Holy Spirit in us is nearing its completion. But the way Paul words it suggests that we do all the work. This is the strange and contradictory condition of the Christian life that, on the one hand we have to act as if everything depends on us knowing that, on the other hand, without Christ we can do nothing.

The same is true of the second statement. “Every good purpose of yours” means the goals we set for ourselves in life. I am very wary of the modern trend of goal setting. I don’t think we should float aimlessly on life’s ocean but there is in the setting of “measurable goals” in our spiritual life a tendency to imitate the ways of the world, especially of the world’s business practices, that is not glorifying the Lord. We ought rather to search for God’s goals with our lives and follow His instructions. Yet Paul does not rule out personal initiative. The Greek text reads literally: “and fulfill all the good pleasure of his goodness.” The Greek word rendered “good purpose” is *eudokia* which can be translated “satisfaction,” “delight,” or “purpose.” *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Paul is praying, then, that God would bring about within the Thessalonians the goodness of will (*eudokia* means ‘good resolve’ and not merely ‘good desire’) which leads to goodness of action. It is like the collect for Easter Day, ‘We humbly beseech thee, that as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect’, as more than one commentator has pointed out.” The rendering of this verse in

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<sup>20</sup> I John 3:3

<sup>21</sup> See Jude vs. 24

<sup>22</sup> I Peter 3:15

<sup>23</sup> Eph. 4:1

<sup>24</sup> Phil. 1:27

<sup>25</sup> I Thess. 2:12

TLB is enlightening: “And so we keep on praying for you, that our God will make you the kind of children he wants to have-will make you as good as you wish you could be!-rewarding your faith with his power.” Christian life is a strange and inseparable mixture of divine guidance and human initiative.

It seems redundant to state that God has to fulfill our every act of faith. After all, what is faith other than the assurance that God will bring about what we ask Him? Paul may be referring here to God as the source of our faith, rather than as the object of it. The Spirit of God works faith in us. Without His influence, no one would trust the Lord enough to perform acts of faith. We have to look to God to increase our faith. An example is the father of the demon possessed boy, who cried to Jesus: “I believe; help my unbelief!”<sup>26</sup> All this indicates that, for Paul as for James, faith is never a passive state of mind but it declares itself in acts.

The last verse of this chapter reiterates that the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed in His children on earth. Paul intertwines the two thoughts that Christ is our glory and we are His. This concept will remain beyond the reach of our imagination as long as we live on earth.

Finally, we see that Paul emphasizes the role of prayer in the coming about of the things that God has ordained for His children. If the second coming happens whether we long for it or not, and if the saints will be glorified with or without their own cooperation, prayer plays no significant role. After stating that the glory of Christ at His coming will be demonstrated in the believers, Paul prays that it will come about. This gives the final touch to the mystery. Jesus taught His disciples to pray: “your kingdom come,”<sup>27</sup> suggesting that it would not come without prayer. If the second coming is unavoidable, why is the Bible’s last prayer: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus?” We may speculate about what would have happened with the return of Israel if Daniel had not prayed at the end of the 70 year captivity.<sup>28</sup> It may be true that the Holy Spirit prompts the saints to pray but the truth remains that the Lord wants to fulfill His purpose by means of the prayers of men.

What a wonderful thing to pray for one another: “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.”

## **II. Paul’s Explanation of the Day of the Lord** ch. 2

### **A. The Events Preceding the Day of the Lord** 2:1-12

#### **1. First a Falling Away** 2:1-3

*1 Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers,*

*2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying 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.*

With chapter 2 we enter into the core of this Epistle. Most commentators agree that Paul refers to his first Epistle which had caused misunderstanding among the believers, as well as to oral teaching given while the apostle was present with them. This was followed by rumors that had reached the ears of the Thessalonians about things that Paul had presumably said or written which had greatly upset the congregation. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “Three upsetting means are suggested: (1) spirit-report of a special revelation given to Paul; (2) word-a report of a sermon preached by Paul; (3) letter-a false epistle. As from us, purporting to be from us (RSV), probably applies to all three.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* introduces this chapter with: “This chapter is involved in difficulties; it is the obscurest passage in the writings of Paul; it is pre-eminently one of those things in his Epistles which are hard to be understood (2 Pet. iii. 16). But it is to be observed that the description of the man of sin, though

<sup>26</sup> Mark 9:24 (RSV)

<sup>27</sup> Matt. 6:10

<sup>28</sup> See Dan. 9:1-3

obscure to us, was not necessarily obscure to the Thessalonians. They had information on this point which we do not possess. The apostle, when at Thessalonica, had instructed them in this subject, and to these instructions he refers in the description which he here gives (vers. 5, 6). Nor was the information which he imparted to them indefinite and general, but definite and precise. He had described the nature of the apostasy, the characteristics of the man of sin, and the influences which retarded his manifestation (vers. 3, 4); and if these point were known to us, as they were to the Thessalonians, most of the obscurity which rests on this prediction would disappear.”

## 2. The Man of Sin Is Revealed

2:4-5

**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.**

**5 Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?**

There circulated in the latter part of the first century, after the death of Nero, a rumor that the evil emperor had come back to life. This is called the “Nero redivivus myth.” *The Tyndale Commentary* explains: “Nero died in 68, but in the following year an impostor appeared giving out that he was Nero. He was speedily destroyed, but others appeared in subsequent years. Eventually Nero's death became accepted, but the expectation continued that he would come back to life again, and lead a force opposed to all that is good. The picture came to have a supernatural tinge, so that Nero was thought of as in a sense human, and in another sense demon.” Since this Epistle was written before Nero's death, the myth cannot have been the basis for Paul's reference to “the man of sin.” It is quite possible, however, that Nero was thought to be the Antichrist while he was still alive. He probably was the model of the Antichrist in John's Revelation but that was after his death.

The NIV speaks about “the man of lawlessness” (KJV—“that man of sin”). The Greek uses the words *ho anthroopos tees hamartias*. This is, according to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, “The same as the Hebrew expresses ‘iysh ‘awen, and ‘iysh b/liya`al; the perverse, obstinate, and iniquitous man. It is worthy of remark that, among the rabbis, Samael, or the Devil, is called ‘iysh b/liya`al w/‘iysh ‘awen, the man of Belial, and the man of iniquity; and that these titles are given to Adam after his fall.”

A second title the NIV uses is: “The man doomed to destruction (“The son of perdition”—KJV). The Greek uses the words *Ho huios tees apooleias*. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments on this: “The son of destruction; the same epithet that is given to Judas Iscariot, John 17:12... The son of perdition, and the man of sin, or, as some excellent MSS. and versions, with several of the fathers, read, *anthroopos tees anomias*, the lawless man, see 2 Thess 2:8, must mean the same person or thing. It is also remarkable that the wicked Jews are styled by Isaiah, Isa 1:4, *beniym mashchityim*, ‘children of perdition;’ persons who destroy themselves and destroy others.”

The main problem in our interpretation is the question whether “the Day of the Lord” here is the same event as described in the First Epistle. If it is, the whole system of eschatology that divides the Second Coming into a pre-tribulation rapture, followed by the Great Tribulation, and ending with the appearance in glory of our Lord Jesus Christ is up in the air. If, on the other hand, Paul speaks here about an event different from the rapture that is mentioned in the first Epistle, Second Thessalonians is only loosely linked to the first Epistle and it can hardly be considered a sequence of it.

In order to get a better understanding of the problem the words “saying that the day of the Lord has already come” need to be looked at more closely. The Greek text reads literally: “as that is at hand. the day of Christ.” The NKJV renders this: “as though the day of Christ had come.” TLB reads: “that this day of the Lord has already begun.” The RSV: “that the day of the Lord has come.” *The Pulpit Commentary* states about the words “Is at hand”: “Literally, *is present*, so R.V. The verb is so translated in the other passages where it occurs (Rom. viii. 38; 1 Cor. iii. 22; Gal. i.4; Heb. ix.9), except in 2 Tim. iii.1, where it ought also to have been so rendered. It is, however difficult to conceive how the Thessalonians could think that the day of the Lord was actually present. We cannot imagine that they thought that Christ had already come for judgment. To escape the difficulty, some conceive that ‘the day of the Lord’ is not identical with ‘the coming of the Lord,’ but that, besides the actual advent, it includes the events which are its antecedents and concomitants... It appears, however, best to suppose that the word is a strong expression for the imminence of that day; that the hour of the advent was about to strike. The Thessalonians ought always to be living in a state of preparation for the day of the Lord, as that day would come suddenly and unexpectedly; but they were not to be so impressed with a sense of its immediateness as to be deprived of their sober reason.”

I have to think in connection with this problem of my friend Naiditaka in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, who asked me if it was true that Jesus had already returned in the United States of America! This Stone Age tribesman had, obviously, as little understanding about eschatology as about world geography. But who says that the Thessalonians had a more sophisticated view? They may have been familiar with Zechariah's prophecy about the coming of the Lord: "On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south."<sup>29</sup> They had no access to world news coverage as we have today. They may have thought it possible that certain eschatological events had occurred elsewhere and that the news had not yet reached them.

It seems safest to assume that Paul's treatise of the Day of the Lord in this Epistle is not to assuage misunderstandings about what he wrote in his first Epistle concerning the rapture but that it speaks about another phase in the chain of eschatological events. The problem remains then that, if we hold to the doctrine of a pre-tribulation rapture, why does the apostle enter into so many details about the appearance of the Antichrist when the true believers will no longer be there to observe it? Our problem will, most likely, not be solved on this side of the great divide.

The Bible gives us ample information about the coming of the Antichrist his intentions and his performance. The Antichrist will stage a fake return of Christ, accompanied by the proclamation that he is actually Jesus Christ himself. Jesus even warned His disciples that there would be many counterfeits. We read in Matthews Gospel: "Jesus answered: 'Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.' "<sup>30</sup> Satan will place decoys on our planet and confuse many. John describes the scene for us in Revelation: "I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest."<sup>31</sup> This white horse and its rider are not the same as the one that appear toward the end of the same book. There John writes: "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."<sup>32</sup> Toward the end of world history, Satan will arrange a mock appearance of the Messiah in order to lead astray those who have no firm personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

Jesus prophesied about this event, quoting a prophecy of Daniel. We read: "So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."<sup>33</sup> Some commentators believe that Daniel's prophecy was mostly fulfilled during the reign of Antiochus, Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.), who desecrated the temple in Jerusalem by sacrificing swine on the altar and by sprinkling the sanctuary with their broth. *The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* states about this man: "Antiochus IV surnamed Epiphanes (God manifest) but called by his enemies Epimanes (madman). Antiochus IV was one of the cruelest rulers of all time." Others suggest that Jesus' prophecy, in which Daniel is quoted, was fulfilled in 70 AD when the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem. "The abomination that causes desolation" is then seen as an description of the Roman army. But Paul clearly applies the preceding prophecies to Satan's man who will come and declare himself to be the Christ and God. The KJV calls him "the son of perdition." From the statement "he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" some Bible scholar

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<sup>29</sup> Zech. 14:4

<sup>30</sup> Matt. 24:4,5

<sup>31</sup> Rev. 6:1,2

<sup>32</sup> Rev. 19:11-16

<sup>33</sup> Matt. 24:15,16

have concluded that the temple in Jerusalem will have to be rebuilt before the Antichrist will be revealed. It seems quite possible to me, however, that the Antichrist can claim to be divine without having to seat himself in a physical manner in a building of stone. Paul's words can be interpreted in a poetical sense without diminishing their spiritual truth.

Eschatology is a very complicated discipline of theology. Almost invariably prophecies that can be classified as pertaining to the end time have already found some kind of fulfillment at moments in past history. The image that best illustrates prophecy is the ripple effect the throwing of a stone in a fishpond produces. The ripples continue from the epicenter to the edge of the pool. Most prophecy has had more than one fulfillment. The Antichrist has been identified over the centuries in Nero, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mao Dze Dung, and others who have drunk of Satan's brew. The apostle John concurs with this. In his First Epistle, he writes: "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come."<sup>34</sup> This does not mean that there will not be a final climactic appearance of the antichrist. The same demonic spirit that inspired certain individuals in world history to do evil will ultimately demonstrate himself in one person who will combine the evil of a Nero and Hitler and bring it to the highest peak of horror this creation has seen. *The Pulpit Commentary* quotes Olshausen who said: "Antichrist does not step on the scene suddenly without any preparations; on the contrary, a stream of antichristian sentiment and conduct pervades the whole history of the world."

### 3. The Restrainer Is Taken Out of the Way

2:6-7

**6 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.**

With the verses "And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. 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" we come to the part of the Epistle that is hardest to explain.

Paul's words have given ground to endless speculations and various interpretations. Paul had orally conveyed the meaning of this statement to the church in Thessalonica but tradition has not passed the words on to us. The text suggests that the Thessalonians had forgotten the instructions themselves.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* observes: "The exposition of 2 Thess 2:3-9, in which Paul exhibits his teaching on the 'Man of Sin,' is very difficult, as may be seen from the number of conflicting attempts at its interpretation... Here we would only indicate what seems to us the most plausible view of the Pauline doctrine. It had been revealed to the apostle by the Spirit that the church was to be exposed to a more tremendous assault than any it had yet witnessed. Some twelve years before the epistle was penned, the Roman world had seen in Caligula the portent of a mad emperor. Caligula had claimed to be worshipped as a god, and had a temple erected to him in Rome. He went farther, and demanded that his own statue should be set up in the temple at Jerusalem to be worshipped. As similar causes might be expected to produce similar effects, Paul, interpreting 'what the Spirit that was in him did signify,' may have thought of a youth, one reared in the purple, who, raised to the awful, isolating dignity of emperor, might, like Caligula, be struck with madness, might, like him, demand Divine honors, and might be possessed with a thirst for blood as insatiable as his. The fury of such an enthroned maniac would, with too great probability, be directed against those who, like the Christians, would refuse as obstinately as the Jews to give him Divine honor, but were not numerous enough to make Roman officials pause before proceeding to extremities. So long as Claudius lived, the Antichrist manifestation of this 'lawless one' was restrained; when, however, the aged emperor should pass away, or God's time should appoint, that 'lawless one' would be revealed, whom the Lord would 'slay with the breath of his mouth' (2 Thess 2:8)."

*The Fausset's Bible Dictionary* comments: "Paul's *antikeimenos*..., 'who opposeth all that is called God,' is the 'Antichrist' of John. He is not to come until 'he who now letteth (hinders) and that which withholdeth' (hinders; the same Greek verb as before, only neuter instead of masculine) be taken out of the way; i.e., the curbing power of human law (neuter) and the curber (masculine), namely, the Roman emperor and whoever may be representative of the fourth world kingdom's power just before Antichrist. The unanimous consent of the early Christians that the Roman empire is 'what withholdeth' was so unlikely to

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<sup>34</sup> I John 2:18

suggest itself to them, inasmuch as regarding it as idolatrous and often persecuting, that this explanation seems to have been preserved from Paul's oral teaching. Another less probable view is that the Holy Spirit is 'He who now letteth,' and the elect church the thing 'that withholdeth,' and that is to be taken out of the way on the eve of Antichrist's coming." The prevailing view among Evangelicals is that it is the Holy Spirit, present in the church of Christ on earth is "what is holding him back" and that after the rapture has taken place, the way would be open for the coming of the Antichrist. It is good to realize, though, that this was probably not the view of the first century Christians.

We find a good Old Testament illustration is Abraham's prayer of intercession before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>35</sup> It seems that the presence of 10 righteous people could have saved the cities. God said to Abraham: "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it." A closer look at the story, however, reveals that the angels who had to destroy the cities could do nothing as long as one single righteous person was still present. Lot pleaded with the angel, saying: "I can't flee to the mountains; this disaster will overtake me, and I'll die. Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small. Let me flee to it--it is very small, isn't it? Then my life will be spared.' He said to him, 'Very well, I will grant this request too; I will not overthrow the town you speak of. But flee there quickly, *because I cannot do anything until you reach it.*' (That is why the town was called Zoar.)"<sup>36</sup> (*Zoar* means "little"). That episode suggests that Satan would not be able to deploy his evil scheme through the revelation of the Antichrist to the full as long as there is on earth a church with righteous people.

#### 4. The Second Coming of Christ

2:8-12

***8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.***

***9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders,***

***10 and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.***

***11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie***

***12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.***

The Roman empire was founded on laws that have become the basis of all the constitutions of western civilizations. It is good to realize that Paul spoke about lawlessness and about a lawless one in a world that prided itself of its laws. The importance of Paul's statement is a warning to those who have not fully committed themselves to Jesus Christ. What he is saying to the believers in Thessalonica is that accepting the truth as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ is the only protection a human being can have against being swept away by a cataract of lawlessness. We can draw charts explaining the eschatological events and preach the details of the rapture and the second coming but the only thing that really matters is our readiness on the basis of our relationship with Christ. The coming of the Antichrist will mean the end of the gray areas in life. Nobody will be able to sit on the fence anymore. Those who are not fully committed to the truth of God will follow a "powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie." That will corrupt their lives to the point judgment will be unavoidable. Those who are not sanctified by the Holy Spirit will compromise with evil and ultimately become totally evil themselves.

The victory over the Antichrist will be won effortlessly without any struggle. The mere appearance of Jesus' glory will be his undoing. The Lord will overthrow him by simply blowing on him. The Antichrist will be a human being. When God created Adam, He blew His breath in Adam's nostrils and thus he became a living being, made in the image and likeness of God.<sup>37</sup> In the man, the Antichrist, God's image has become a complete caricature. When God blows His breath on this creature, it will blow him away completely. In this man sin will have come to its full measure. Paul defines sin as "falling short of the glory of God."<sup>38</sup> It is

<sup>35</sup> See Gen. 18:16-33

<sup>36</sup> Gen. 19:19-22

<sup>37</sup> Gen. 2:7

<sup>38</sup> Rom. 3:23

this glory of God that will be man's ultimate condemnation. Every man will be measured by the standard of God's glory. Only those who are covered with the glory of Christ will be able to stand. On the day of judgment, the Antichrist will be found naked and the coming of the glory of the Lord will be his destruction.

**B. The Comfort of the Believer on the Day of the Lord** 2:13-17

*13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.*

*14 He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*

*16 May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,*

*17 encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*

We can image that when Paul wrote these words, he shook himself as someone who wakes up from a bad nightmare. The people to whom he wrote were not corrupt and heading for condemnation but dear brothers and sisters in Christ whose lives had been turned around by the Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul looked at them with the eyes of his spirit and he remembered what they were like when he first met them before they had opened their hearts to the Gospel. They had responded to the love of God and had immediately begun to show evidence of their conversion in a complete change of behavior.

Reading Paul's words, we could easily build upon them a doctrine of predestination. God chose them to be saved. The Bible teaches clearly that God chooses us and that His choice goes back to before the beginning of creation. In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul wrote: "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."<sup>39</sup> The problem in the doctrine of predestination is not about those who are saved but about those who, presumably, are chosen to be lost. To Timothy, Paul wrote: "God our Savior, ... wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."<sup>40</sup> And the apostle Peter says about the will of God: "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."<sup>41</sup>

The fact that God's predestination of man is placed before the creation of the world means that sin had not entered the picture. Predestination then refers to God's original plan with man to share His glory with Him. God had of course foreknowledge of the fall but that doesn't mean that He wanted some human beings to be eternally lost.

Paul's words also imply that salvation does not simply mean a ticket to heaven. Salvation means being sanctified through the work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. That pertains to life on earth. Paul's emphasis on justification by faith alone, as expounded in his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians, has led some people to believe that the quality of our life on earth, after conversion, is of no importance. Salvation implies sanctification. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul defines the as "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" and "in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed."<sup>42</sup> The Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ not only saves us from damnation but it empowers us to live lives of obedience. Elsewhere in Romans, Paul writes: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."<sup>43</sup> The Good News about the

<sup>39</sup> Eph. 1:4-7

<sup>40</sup> I Tim. 2:3,4

<sup>41</sup> II Peter 3:9

<sup>42</sup> Rom. 1:16,17

<sup>43</sup> Rom. 8:3,4

death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the key to righteous living. The theme of Paul's Epistle to the Romans is not justification by faith alone but obtaining righteousness by faith. That is why Paul states: "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works."<sup>44</sup>

God has called us and chosen us to share in the glory of Jesus Christ but it is our responsibility to stand firm. This means not only doing the right thing but also believing the right thing.

The chapter ends with Paul's wonderful prayer for the believers that God may encourage and strengthen them. Eternal encouragement and good hope are already provided in the love and grace of God. The prayer is for the application of those to the personal lives of the believers. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* ties this in with the main theme of the first epistle: "The hope of the Gospel was the resurrection of the body, and the final glorification of it and the soul throughout eternity. This was the good hope which the Thessalonians had; not a hope that they should be pardoned or sanctified, etc. Pardon and holiness they enjoyed, therefore they were no objects of hope; but the resurrection of the body and eternal glory were necessarily future; these they had in expectation; these they hoped for; and, through the grace which they had already received they had a good hope-a well-grounded expectation, of this glorious state."

### III. Paul's Exhortation to the Church ch. 3

#### A. Wait Patiently for Christ 3:1-5

**1 Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you.**

**2 And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith.**

**3 But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.**

**4 We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command.**

**5 May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.**

A better heading for this section might be "Paul's request for prayer for himself." After praying for his converts, he asks for prayer for himself and those who are with him, as well as for their ministry. The purpose is that there will be no hindrance to their preaching of the Gospel. The words "may spread rapidly" are the translation of one Greek word *trecho*, which means, "to run or walk hastily." The Interlinear Transliterated Bible renders it "may have free course." About the words "and be honored," *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "And be glorified; namely, in the conversion of souls (comp. Acts xiii. 48). The allusion may be to the applause given to the victors in the foot-races which constituted so considerable a part of the Grecian games. This personification of the Word of the Lord is a favorite figure with the apostle. 'In St. Paul's language there is but a thin film between the Holy Ghost, the Divine personal Spirit, and the spirit in the believer's inmost being. And so in St. Paul's conception there is but a thin film between the Word preached and the living Word of God who is God' (Bishop Alexander)."

With the words "just as it was with you" Paul thinks back to the exhilarating experience in Thessalonica when the Word that he preached made his hearers turn around 180°. But this evokes, at the same time, the image of the hostility Paul and his team experienced themselves.<sup>45</sup> The "evil men" who had no faith were, obviously, the jealous Jews who were the cause of Paul having to flee the city by night. His opponents were not pagans who did not know the living God but people who professed to believe in YHWH and who prided themselves on their keeping the commandments. Paul qualifies those people as not having the faith. It is amazing to realize that the greatest sin is often found under the cloak of religion. Jesus launched His most bitter accusations not to the people who were "living in sin" but to the religious leaders of His time. The greatest hindrance to the preaching of the Gospel for Paul was not the pagans of the great cities but the Jewish immigrants.

The phrase: "May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance" merits a closer look.

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<sup>44</sup> Rom. 9:30-32

<sup>45</sup> See Acts 17:5-9

Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words writes the following about this sentence: "In 2 Thess 3:5, the phrase 'the patience of Christ,' RV, is possible of three interpretations, (a) the patient waiting for Christ, so KJV paraphrases the words, (b) that they might be patient in their sufferings as Christ was in His, see Heb 12:2, (c) that since Christ is 'expecting till His enemies be made the footstool of His feet,' Heb 10:13, so they might be patient also in their hopes of His triumph and their deliverance. While a too rigid exegesis is to be avoided it may, perhaps, be permissible to paraphrase: 'the Lord teach and enable you to love as God loves, and to be patient as Christ is patient.' "

The love the Thessalonians are to demonstrate is the love of God and the perseverance is not their own but Christ's. The word "perseverance" is the translation of the Greek word *hupomone*, which is derived from the word *hupomeneo*, meaning "cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy." Paul, not only, wants the believers to imitate the joy of Christ and to follow His example but also to make Jesus Christ the source of their joyful endurance. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews voiced it thus: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."<sup>46</sup> But Paul goes beyond this by stating that God wants to let His love pour through us to others and Christ makes His endurance available to us.

*Barnes' Notes* observes on this verse: "[And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God] So direct your hearts that you may love God. 'And into the patient waiting for Christ.' Margin, 'patience of Christ.' The marginal reading is in accordance with the Greek, and seems best to express the apostle's meaning. The prayer of the apostle was, that they might have the love of God in their hearts, and 'the patience of Christ;' that is, the same patience which Christ evinced in his trials. They were then suffering affliction and persecution. They needed patience, that they might endure their trials in a proper manner. It was natural for the apostle to refer them to the Savior, the great example of patience, and to pray that they might have the same which he had. That it does not mean that they were to wait patiently for the appearing of Christ, as our translation seems to imply, is quite clear, because the apostle had just been showing them that he would not appear until after a long series of events had occurred."

## **B. Withdraw from the Disorderly**

3:6-15

***6 In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.***

***7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you,***

***8 nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.***

***9 We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.***

***10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."***

***11 We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies.***

***12 Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat.***

***13 And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.***

***14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed.***

***15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.***

Paul instructs the believers in these verses what to do with church members who are "idle." The Greek word used is *ataktos*, which means "morally irregular." The KJV renders it "disorderly." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* observes that it refers to "slackness (like soldiers not keeping rank)." The moral connotation of the word indicates that it was not a matter of people who were non-conformists but that they were slack in the maintaining of their testimony of purity. We tend to think of immorality specifically in terms of sexual misbehavior. Paul connects it here to work ethics. He had set an example in the way he provided for his own support while preaching the Gospel in Thessalonica. Paul was

<sup>46</sup>

Heb. 12:2,3

the original “tentmaker.” The expectation of the Lord’s soon return had become an excuse for some people to stop working and to begin sponging off their fellowmen.

From *Barnes’ Notes* we copy the following interesting observation: “The apostle now... turns to an important subject—the proper method of treating those who were idle and disorderly in the church. In the previous Epistle he had adverted to this subject, but in the mild language of exhortation. When he wrote that Epistle he was aware that there were some among them who were disposed to be idle, and he had tenderly exhorted them ‘to be quiet, and to mind their own business, and to work with their own hands;’ 1 Thess 4:11. But it seems the exhortation, and the example of Paul himself when there (1 Thess 2:9), had not been effectual in inducing them to be industrious. It became, therefore, necessary to use the strong language of command, as he does here, and to require that if they would not work, the church should withdraw from them. What was the original cause of their idleness, is not known. There seems no reason, however, to doubt that it was much increased by their expectation that the Savior would soon appear, and that the world would soon come to an end. If this was to be so, of what use would it be to labor? Why strive to accumulate property with reference to the wants of a family, or to a day of sickness, or old age? Why should a man build a house that was soon to be burnt up, or why buy a farm which he was soon to leave? The effect of the expectation of the speedy appearing of the Lord Jesus has always been to induce men to neglect their worldly affairs, and to lead idle lives. Man, naturally disposed to be idle, wants the stimulus of hope that he is laboring for the future welfare of himself, for his family, or for society, nor will he labor if he believes that the Savior is about to appear.”

In setting his own example before the people, Paul did not imply that it was improper for ministers of the Gospel to expect support from the ones to whom they ministered. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests that the people in Thessalonica must have been rather poor and that this was the reason for Paul to support himself by his own labor. Our text does not give any grounds for this supposition.

It was obviously Paul’s general policy to refuse love offerings and donations from churches. Toward the end of his life, the apostle wrote to the church in Philippi: “You Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.”<sup>47</sup>

The reason for Paul’s behavior, apparently, changed according to the circumstances in which he found himself. In Thessalonica, it was to set an example to those who appeared to have a natural tendency toward laxity. But from his writing to the Corinthians we understand that the reason went much deeper. Paul had a deep feeling of being unworthy of his calling because of his history of violence against Christians before his conversion. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, he writes: “Don’t we have the right to food and drink? Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’ Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. Don’t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s

<sup>47</sup> Phil. 4:15,16

law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”<sup>48</sup>

The words “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” are a warning to those who were “idle” as well as to the church. The person who is unwilling to work expects to be fed by others. To those others Paul says: “Do not feed him!” If a man’s moral sense of duty does not tell him that he ought to fulfill his responsibilities, his empty stomach may.

The problem of people who are not busy is that they become busybodies. The Greek gives us a play-of-words that can be perfectly transferred in English. Paul uses two words with the same root *ergazomémous*, which means, “to toil” and *periergazomenous* “busbodies.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments on this word: “Doing everything they should not do—impertinent meddlers with other people’s business; prying into other people’s circumstances and domestic affairs; magnifying or minifying, mistaking or underrating, everything; newsmongers and telltales; an abominable race, the curse of every neighborhood where they live, and a pest to religious society. There is a fine paronomasia in the above words, and evidently intended by the apostle.”

Paul addresses the busybodies in a roundabout way. It could be that the information he had received was not specific and that he did not want to offend people about whom he had received no direct accusations. “Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat” addresses nobody in particular and the apostle may mean to say that this is the way he tackles the problem whenever he faces it. The words “And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right” are clearly directed to the church as a whole; they express the confidence that the people to whom he writes do not belong to the category mentioned above.

The general tendency of this paragraph is to encourage the church to exert discipline. Paul does not take on a paternalistic tone in this epistle. He wants the church to deal with the problems that occur. Only in situations that had clearly gotten out of hand, as in the church in Corinth, would Paul step in and use his authority.<sup>49</sup>

Paul’s blessing is not as all-inclusive as in some of his other epistles. The best example of what came to be known as the apostolic benediction is in Second Corinthians: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”<sup>50</sup> Here, everything is concentrated on the concept of peace: “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way.” This benediction is obviously based on the Old Testament benediction the priest had to pronounce before the people of Israel: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”<sup>51</sup> *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Ellicott, who described this peace as “The deep tranquility of a soul resting on God.”

The peace of God offsets the battle in which we find ourselves in this world. Jesus said to His disciples: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” and “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> I Cor. 9:4-27

<sup>49</sup> See I Cor. 5:1-5

<sup>50</sup> II Cor. 13:14

<sup>51</sup> Num. 6:24-26

<sup>52</sup> John 14:27;16:33

When the Lord called Gideon to wage war against the Midianites who had invaded the land of Israel, we read: “So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace.”<sup>53</sup> The Hebrew word is *shalom*, which is variously rendered: “safe,” “happy,” “friendly,” or “welfare,” “health,” “prosperity,” “peace.” The Hebrew text reads literally *Jehovah-Shalom* as one single name. This peace is one of God’s principle character traits; it is one of His attributes.

*The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* comments on the words “The Lord be with all of you”: “We need nothing more to make us safe and happy, nor can we desire any thing better for ourselves and our friends, than to have God’s gracious presence with us and them. This will be a guide and guard in every way that we may go, and our comfort in every condition we may be in. It is the presence of God that makes heaven to be heaven, and this will make this earth to be like heaven. No matter where we are if God be with us, nor who is absent if God be with us, nor who is absent if God be present with us.” And *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* concludes: “This blessing includes even the troublemakers.”

On the phrase “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “It is very likely that Paul employed an amanuensis generally, either to write what he dictated, or to make a fair copy of what he wrote. In either case the apostle always subscribed it, and wrote the salutation and benediction with his own hand; and this was what authenticated all his letters. A measure of this kind would be very necessary if forged letters were carried about in those times.” Such a clause would, or course, only have meaning in letters that were addressed to churches that Paul had visited personally. That may be the reason we read at the end of the Epistle to the Romans: “I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.”<sup>54</sup> At the end of First Corinthians we read: “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, we find the mention of Paul’s signature also in the Epistle to the Colossians, which was a place Paul had never visited personally.<sup>56</sup>

The keyword in the last sentence of the epistle is “grace” which is the translation of the Greek word *charis*. It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *shalom*. It is the essence of God’s dealing with man. If His grace is with us, He is with us. Scripture links the presence of the Lord to our obedience. The “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” is followed by the promise: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Judg. 6:24

<sup>54</sup> Rom. 16:22

<sup>55</sup> I Cor. 16:21

<sup>56</sup> See Col. 2:1; 4:18

<sup>57</sup> Matt. 28:19-20