

CONCERNING THE COMING OF OUR LORD: THE BOOK OF 2 THESSALONIANS

Week One: Worthy Of The Kingdom Of God (2 Thessalonians 1:1-5)

The apostle Paul had been in Thessalonica for only a short while when he was driven out of town by the religious authorities (Acts 17:1-10). Afterwards, he wrote a letter to the believers in Thessalonica, seeking to strengthen their understanding of a number of basic spiritual principles, including the idea that Jesus would someday return to bring his faithful children home. Now, in this second epistle, the idea of Jesus' return takes a more prominent role.

As we read Paul's spiritual greeting (1:1-2), we should note that there had probably been some other communication (not necessarily written) between the apostle and the Thessalonians, besides the two inspired epistles that we know of. One way or another, Paul has learned of some misunderstandings in Thessalonica, and he has also become aware of some serious hardships that some of the believers are undergoing. In 2 Thessalonians, he will tie these together.

Echoing his many praises of the Thessalonians in the first epistle, Paul gives thanks and praise for their perseverance in the midst of trouble (1:3-4). Regardless of their misconceptions, regardless of any mistakes they have made, Paul always emphasizes things he appreciates about them. Our agendas and our insecurities sometimes lead us to look first at the negative features of another group or another congregation - Paul's example teaches us to look at others differently.

Before going into his discussion of the topics that have confused the Thessalonians, the apostle takes time to comfort them in their sufferings (1:5). In fact, while we soon learn about the misconceptions these believers had, we do not learn exactly what they were enduring at the hands of unbelievers. And it is unimportant - the fact that they were suffering and enduring mistreatment ought in itself to arouse our sympathy, as it did Paul's.

Believers everywhere have troubles and worries that we never know about. We do not need to know exactly what these problems are in order to treat others properly - we can always treat everyone kindly and gently; and we can remember never to boss others around or to assume that we know better than they do how to run their lives. When we see others who seem to struggle to serve Jesus, we have a choice. Do we assume that we have a right to "straighten them out", or do we assume that they might need some genuine compassion and support?

After this, Paul will go on to remind them of what is at stake when it comes to spiritual matters (1:6-12). Then he tackles their erroneous ideas about the second coming of Jesus, and in doing so he urges them to keep calm and clear-minded about the topic (2:1-8). He will help them to learn how to be strengthened by truth and grace (2:9-17); and in closing he will urge them to keep busy, but not to be busybodies who disturb others (3:1-18).

To be "worthy of the kingdom of God" does not mean measuring up to some standard. It means that we accept for ourselves the burden of living in a fallen world, and we accept the calling to help one another to get through this life so that we may all enjoy the eternal blessings of the next.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2012

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Week Two: What's At Stake (2 Thessalonians 1:6-12)

The Scriptures provide many images of the final coming of Jesus, the end of the world, and the final judgment. If we take them all literally, then we quickly run into unsolvable contradictions. So instead of trying to interpret the details literally, it is best to focus on the spiritual certainties. In this passage, Paul clearly outlines for the Thessalonians - young in faith but eager to understand - the most important implications of the eventual end of this world.

He begins by reminding them, as they are enduring painful mistreatment by unbelievers, that the ultimate fate of the godless is far more horrifying than anything that unbelievers can inflict on us in this life (1:6-8). However painful our present lives may be, however keenly we feel our present disappointments, these are only temporary. But the lost will suffer forever.

The apostle's purpose is not to arouse vengeful feelings, but to move us to patience and even pity. No matter how much anger or hatred we may feel for those who do horrible things, if we were actually to see them in hell, we would not enjoy watching their punishment. And so we should not seek revenge upon those who do evil on this earth. Even if we cannot possibly move evildoers to repentance, we can always remember that their sinfulness is a spiritual tragedy to be regretted, not a moral outrage that we must punish.

Paul also points out that, whatever else may be involved in being "lost", or in being "sent to hell", the worst thing about it is being cut off from God's presence (1:9-10). Although our human minds always want to construct a literal description of hell, we cannot truly know what exact form it will take. The Scriptures on the subject are often more figurative than we wish to admit. But we can know with certainty that eternal punishment will include eternal separation from God.

If we appreciated our relationship with God as highly as we should, we would also appreciate how sad it is for a soul to lose that blessing forever. If we value God himself above our religious activities and self-promotion, then we can realize what the real stakes are for ourselves and for others. We might even save ourselves from the unpleasant surprise that Jesus warned about:

"Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:22-23). Salvation both consists of and depends on our awareness of the importance of knowing God, not on any accomplishments or knowledge or doctrinal correctness.

In praying for the Thessalonians, Paul again uses the idea of being "counted worthy" by God (1:11-12). The things we do in service to God do not make us worthy of him. The short-term results of our ministries and activities do not matter as much as our humility and the awareness of our perpetual need for God's grace. There are many methods by which we can influence others to join our church or to accept our beliefs, but these in themselves are meaningless. Only when we truly live by mercy and grace can we hope to help others to know the God of all grace.

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Week Three: Keeping Calm About The Coming (2 Thessalonians 2:1-8)

Like most believers, the Thessalonian Christians were excited about the thought that Jesus might actually return during their own lifetimes. But, again like most Christians, the Thessalonians were easily distracted by speculative or irrelevant theories about the second coming. Paul does not satisfy their curiosity, but instead seeks to calm their feverish speculations so that they can channel their energies into more important things.

The apostle cautions them not to allow the second coming to gain undue importance in their minds, or to become a distraction or a source of controversy (2:1-2). Indeed, since "God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33), his truths will never create restless uncertainty or competitive debates. It is our own fleshly reasoning that leads to such things.

The second coming will not come until "the man of lawlessness" (NIV) appears first (2:3-4). While this reference provokes speculations today, it was not meant to do so. Paul's main topic in this passage is not "the man of lawlessness" *per se* - his point is to show that the second coming has not yet occurred. (That may seem self-evident, but even in recent times there have been eccentric teachers who taught theories similar to those that were troubling the Thessalonians.)

The exact phrase that Paul uses here is not found elsewhere in the Bible; so we cannot know with certainty whether it refers to a specific individual, or instead is a personification of a period of rampant human sin - when God's restraint is removed, to reveal human sinfulness to the full.

But if it is a specific individual, then it cannot possibly be anyone currently identifiable, for "he" will not come until shortly before the end of the world. So all speculation (or the desire to label someone we dislike as an enemy of God) is without basis. But in any case it is unlikely that the phrase refers to a specific individual, for no one human being is ever a true super-villain. So far, the worst persons in history have all merely reflected the ills and problems of their own societies.

Although it may disappoint the flesh, it seems at least as likely that Paul is figuratively referring to a general period of unrestrained sin (no, not the present time), and special suffering for the faithful. In this case, there could be some rough parallels in passages such as Revelation 20:7-8.

So Paul presents a simplified view of the last coming, implying that this extreme display of lawlessness is being curbed indefinitely, to be allowed free rein only near the end (2:5-6). He assumes that the means of restraint is evident to his readers, perhaps suggesting that God will not allow Satan to exercise the full power of deception until just before the end - implying that there is no individual "man of lawlessness", unless perhaps it refers to Satan's own direct activities.

And there is no doubt about the final triumph of Jesus over "the man of lawlessness", whoever or whatever that might mean (2:7-8). When we too are confronted by those who push their bizarre theories about the "end times", we should take Paul's advice: do not let them trouble us, and let us not be caught up in debating or discussing their pretentious speculations. If we properly understand the second coming of Jesus, then it will produce nothing but peace and contentment.

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Week Four: Strengthened By Truth & Grace (2 Thessalonians 2:9-17)

Some self-interested teachers have exploited the enthusiasm and inexperience of the new believers in Thessalonica, by filling them with speculative theories about topics such as the second coming of Jesus. Paul has tried to put their minds at rest by pointing out that we do not and cannot know the details about such things; and he has encouraged them to focus instead on clear spiritual truths. Spiritual strength comes from grace and truth, not speculative theology.

"The lawless one" - whoever or whatever that might mean - will be quite successful in deceiving humanity (2:9-10). When we read such things, we have a sad fleshly tendency to think that they refer to some world leader or political figure whom we dislike. The Scriptures, on the contrary, are talking about something much more profound. It is a universal human tendency to believe what we wish to believe, and to come up with rationalizations after the fact to "prove" our beliefs.

Believers are not immune: we become star-struck when some self-interested politician manipulates his audience by talking about God; we allow our flesh to become excited by some method or motivational tool that promises outward results; we convince ourselves that our material blessings are rewards for our faith, not undeserved outpourings of grace. We'll always hear what we want to hear - but we can be aware of this weakness. Whenever we are utterly and totally convinced of something, this is a sign that we are almost surely in error! The humble Christian realizes that uncertainty is inherent in living by genuine faith.

Likewise, the apostle's warning about a "powerful delusion" should be a caution to us, not a rallying cry to oppose those whose ideas or policies displease us (2:11-12). In truth, whenever we allow anger or hatred for "sin" - whether real or imagined - to convince us that God wants us to oppose or destroy some human, then we ourselves are the ones who are being deluded. God never calls us to hatred or bitterness, regardless of the reason.

The "powerful delusion" is again both simpler and more profound than what our flesh thinks it is. It is a simple but powerful warning for us not to allow our fleshly passions and desires to dictate our spiritual convictions. Emotional devotion to a certain method, stubborn assertions of particular points of doctrine, and self-righteous assessments of someone else's spiritual deficiencies are all signs of having succumbed to a "powerful delusion".

And so Paul's call to the Thessalonians is not for them to get riled up and go around trying to stamp out sin, nor is it for them to start debates about the second coming - it is for them calmly to continue in the greater truths about God (2:13-17). It is always appropriate for us to give others hope, to do good things for others, and to tell others about God's grace and glory. We are both allowed and encouraged to do these things even for those who live in error or sin. For we are all living in error and sin of some kind - and God does not cease to love, encourage, and serve us.

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Week Five: Be Busy, Not A Busybody (2 Thessalonians 3:1-18)

Paul devotes most of 2 Thessalonians to discussing what we can know and what we cannot know about the second coming of Jesus. He makes no attempt to make an exhaustive exposition - for, as he implies, the real problem with most false teachings (on whatever subject) is not the factual errors involved, but the use of time and effort to debate something unimportant. Indeed, idleness is the real problem behind so many of our own "doctrinal" disputes and other problems.

The apostle reminds his readers of how much we all need God in our lives and ministries (3:1-5). We all need prayers and encouragement from each other. We all face the world's inherent disappointments, worries, and confusion; and we should do whatever we can to instill trust in our relationships with each other. This can only happen if we stop evaluating and judging each other, and start showing compassion and understanding.

And so the apostle's firm warning against idleness can be better understood when we keep it in the context of the rest of the epistle (3:6-10). He is not talking about believers who simply don't "do enough" to measure up to our expectations - rather, the warning against idleness is directed against those who are a burden to others, either by selfish behavior or by stirring up controversy and division, instead of making an honest living and then doing what they can to help others.

We should not label someone as "idle" simply because they are "not doing enough" in terms of ministry. How can we possibly know what God expects of someone else, or what burdens they must carry to support themselves and their families? What matters is not the amount of time or even effort directed into ministry - what matters is whether a believer builds others up and edifies them, or whether a believer makes demands on others or judges and criticizes them.

We too would do well to learn the difference between keeping constructively busy and becoming a useless busybody (3:11-15). A Christian who works hard and then "only" comes to church for a couple of hours a week, but who is giving and kind to others, is far more pleasing to God than a so-called Christian who has plenty of time, but who uses it to tell others what they should be doing, or to push his personal theories about ministry, methods, or theology.

Every one of us "could" be spending more time in ministry than we do, and "could" find more opportunities to help others to seek God. To analyze one another's lives in this regard is self-righteous and fleshly. The question is instead, when we do have time for ministry, do we just use ministry as an excuse to make ourselves feel superior or important, or do we inconvenience ourselves for the sake of easing others' burdens (spiritual or otherwise)?

The apostle's brief closing remarks emphasize his personal feelings for the believers in Thessalonica (3:16-18). Like all believers in Jesus, they have some wonderful qualities and have some wonderful insights into God. Like all believers, they make mistakes and have some strange misconceptions. Neither the good nor the bad should prevent them - or us - from drawing ever closer to one another and to God.

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