

NT SURVEY: PAULINE EPISTLES

WEEK 2: 1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS

INTRODUCTION

- The goal of these individual overviews of Paul's letter is to give you information about the book which can give you more insight into what Paul meant when he wrote it. Another hope is that you will now have a resource to use when you are studying an individual book.
- As we look at these individual books, we are going to get the technical information out there first.
- Secondly, we are going to dive into the book and look at some of the specific passages that make the book unique, some passages that may be harder to understand or have been misunderstood, and finally, how this relates to the church today.

1 THESSALONIANS

Author and Date¹

- The Apostle Paul identified himself twice as the author of this letter (1:1; 2:18).
- Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy (3:2,6), Paul's traveling companions on the second missionary journey when the church was founded (Acts 17:1–9), were also mentioned in Paul's greeting (1:1).
- Though Paul was the single inspired author, most of the first person plural pronouns (we, us, our) refer to all 3. However, during Timothy's visit back to Thessalonica, they refer only to Paul and Silvanus (3:1,2,6).
- The first of Paul's two letters written from Corinth to the church at Thessalonica is dated ca. A.D. 51.
- This date has been archeologically verified by an inscription in the temple of Apollo at Delphi (near Corinth) which dates Gallio's service as proconsul in Achaia to A.D. 51–52 (Acts 18:12–17).
- Since Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia was probably written ca. A.D. 49–50, this was his second piece of canonical correspondence.

¹ <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB52/first-thessalonians>

Background and Setting²

- Thessalonica was established around 315 BC by Cassander, who named it after his wife Thessalonica, the half-sister of Alexander the Great.
- Thessalonica (modern Salonica, Greece) became the capital of Macedonia (ca. 168 B.C.) and enjoyed the status of a “free city” which was ruled by its own citizenry (Acts 17:6) under the Roman Empire.
- Because it was located on the main east-west highway, Via Egnatia, Thessalonica served as the hub of political and commercial activity in Macedonia and became known as “the mother of all Macedonia.”
- Religious pluralism filled Thessalonica with all types of pagan cults, temples, and deities. Archaeological evidence indicates at least 25 gods were represented in heathen worship, including Zeus, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Dionysus, and the Roman emperor, to name a few. However, some Gentiles had become proselytes to Judaism and were known as God-fearers.³
- The population in Paul’s day reached 200,000 people.
- Paul had originally traveled 100 mi. from Philippi to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey (A.D. 50; Acts 16:1–18:22).
- As his custom was upon arrival, he sought out the synagogue in which to teach the local Jews the gospel (Acts 17:1,2). On that occasion, he dialogued with them from the OT concerning Christ’s death and resurrection in order to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was truly the promised Messiah (Acts 17:2,3).
- Some Jews believed and soon after, Hellenistic proselytes and some wealthy women of the community also were converted (Acts 17:4).
- Mentioned among these new believers were Jason (Acts 17:5), Gaius (Acts 19:29), Aristarchus (Acts 20:4), and Secundus (Acts 20:4).
- Because of their effective ministry, the Jews had Paul’s team evicted from the city (Acts 17:5–9), so they went south to evangelize Berea (Acts 17:10).
 - The mob’s accusation was twofold: “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. Jason has harbored [welcomed] them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus” (vv. 6–7).
 - Jason and the others were charged with treason. **They were charged with causing a revolution, breaking the Pax Romana** (Roman Peace), **and trying to overthrow the Roman government to set up a king in place of Caesar**. There was an element of truth to the accusations. Jesus is a King, and He

² Ibid.

³ <https://israelmyglory.org/article/the-thessalonian-church/>

will one day judge and rule the earth. But the accusers misinterpreted the circumstances and timing of Christ's rule. In no way were the Christians inciting disloyalty to Caesar or attempting to establish Christ's Kingdom rule in place of Roman rule⁴.

- In Berea Paul had a similar experience to Thessalonica with conversions followed by hostility, so the believers sent Paul away for Athens, while Silvanus and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:11–14).
- They rejoined Paul in Athens (cf. Acts 17:15,16 with 3:1), from which Timothy was later dispatched back to Thessalonica (3:2). Apparently, Silas afterwards traveled from Athens to Philippi while Paul journeyed on alone to Corinth (Acts 18:1).
- It was after Timothy and Silvanus rejoined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5), that he wrote 1 Thessalonians in response to Timothy's good report of the church.
- Paul undoubtedly had multiple reasons for writing, all coming out of his supreme concern for the flock from which he had been separated.
- **Some of Paul's purposes clearly included:**
 - encouraging the church (1:2–10);
 - answering false allegations (2:1–12);
 - comforting the persecuted flock (2:13–16);
 - expressing his joy in their faith (2:17–3:13);
 - reminding them of the importance of moral purity (4:1–8);
 - condemning the sluggard lifestyle (4:9–12);
 - correcting a wrong understanding of prophetic events (4:13–5:11);
 - defusing tensions within the flock (5:12–15); and
 - exhorting the flock in the basics of Christian living (5:16–22)..

Historical and Theological Themes

- Both letters to Thessalonica have been referred to as “the eschatological epistles.” However, in light of their more extensive focus upon the church, they would better be categorized as the church epistles.
- Five major themes are woven together in 1 Thessalonians:
 - an apologetic theme with the historical correlation between Acts and 1 Thessalonians
 - an ecclesiastical theme with the portrayal of a healthy, growing church
 - a pastoral theme with the example of shepherding activities and attitudes

⁴ <https://israelmyglory.org/article/the-thessalonian-church/>

- an eschatological theme with the focus on future events as the church's hope
- a missionary theme with the emphasis on gospel proclamation and church planting

CHALLENGING VERSES

- 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.”
- This is often used for proof of the rapture of the church. As with all writings, it is important to firstly understand that Paul is not writing to defend a theological position.
- There were not covenantal guys running around talking about a post-mil or a-mil view of the end times. We cannot think of this as Paul writing a theological treatise on the rapture of the church.
 - While it is true that we see this verse as explaining what is going to happen in the next phase of church history, that is not why Paul wrote it?
 - Why did he write it?
 - The Thessalonians had a wrong view of the end times.
 - It was to bring comfort to those who thought others had missed out on heaven.
 - Keep this in mind as we read this. Paul was not trying to win an argument but bring comfort to the church who had poor theology.
- As Jesus died and rose again, so too will those who have died in Christ (1 Cor. 15:51–58; 1 Thess. 4:14). There is no judgment connected to this event; it is for believers. This imminent, divine collection of believers into heaven is a signless event and is the next one on the redemptive schedule.
- Those who are alive and those who have died will experience the Lord's gathering into heaven in glorified bodies. Apparently, the Thessalonians were informed fully about the judgment on the day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:1–2) but not about the preceding event—the rapture of the church.
- Until Paul received it as God's revelation to him, the only prior allusion appeared in Jesus's teaching in John 14:1–3. Because Paul didn't know God's timing for this event, he lived and spoke as if it could happen in his lifetime. As with all early Christians, he believed that it was imminent (Rom. 13:11; 1 Cor. 6:14; 10:11; 16:22; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Tim. 6:14; Titus 2:13).
- The phrase “the Lord himself will descend” (1 Thess. 4:16) fulfills the pledge by Jesus in John 14:1–3. Until then, he remains in heaven (1 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 1:1–3). Believers who have died will rise first (1 Thess.

4:16; 1 Cor. 15:52). Those alive at the rapture will accompany those dead, who rise first, and all will “meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:17).⁵

- 1 Thessalonians 5:2 “For you yourselves know full well that *the day of the Lord* will come just like a thief in the night.”
- **What is the day of the Lord? (2 Thess 2:2)**
- The Scriptures picture that after the church age, our present age, the Day of the Lord will begin. This terminology is spread all throughout the Bible. When Paul wrote this, he certainly had some OT texts in mind. This is not a 24-hour day but more like an epoch, age or period.
 - Isaiah 13:6 “Wail, for the day of the LORD is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty.”
 - Zephaniah 1:14–16 “Near is the great day of the LORD, Near and coming very quickly; Listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and the high corner towers.”
 - Eze 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Oba 1:15; Mal 4:5, etc.
- The Day of the Lord is a period of time in which God will deal with wicked men directly and dramatically in fearful judgment. Today a man may be a blasphemer of God, an atheist, can denounce God and teach bad doctrine. Seemingly God does nothing about it. But the day designated in Scripture as “the day of the Lord” is coming when God will punish human sin, and He will deal in wrath and in judgment with a Christ-rejecting world. One thing we are sure of, that God in His own way will bring every soul into judgment.⁶
- How does the coming of Christ for His church relate itself to the Day of the Lord which precedes the second coming of Christ by a number of years? This Day of the Lord will come suddenly and unexpectedly. What is the point? The point is that just as the translation of the church is the end of the day of grace it also marks the beginning of the Day of the Lord.
- In other words, the one event seems to do two things: it serves as the closing of one day and the beginning of the other. **If that is true, it gives us some very positive and definite teaching along the line that the church will be taken out of the world before the day of trial and trouble overtakes the world.**
- Paul is telling the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord is going to come, and this follows immediately the passage which dealt with the coming of Christ for His church.

⁵ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (IL: Crossway, 2017), 323.

⁶ <https://bible.org/seriespage/5-day-lord>

- In 1 Thessalonians 5 it is revealed that the Day of the Lord comes suddenly and unexpectedly. It is described: “the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.” A thief in the night comes unheralded. There are no signs that pertain to a thief.⁷
- 1 Thessalonians 5:19–20 “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances.”
- This is in a passage of Scripture dealing with Christian conduct.
- Quenching the Spirit has taking on some interesting interpretations over the years.
 - Not allowing the speaking of tongues or prophecies to take place is most common. But what does Paul have in mind here?
 - He uses similar phraseology in **Ephesians 4:30 “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God...”**
 - Both quenching and grieving the Spirit are similar in their effects. Both hinder a godly lifestyle. Both happen when a believer sins against God and follows his or her own worldly desires.
- What about despising prophetic utterances?
 - Once again, look at the context and meaning of *prophetic*.
 - First of all, in this context, prophetic is not the speaking forth some future event. While it certainly can mean that, most of the time in the Bible it is speaking of the written word of Scripture.
 - **2 Peter 1:19 “So we have the prophetic word made more sure...”**
 - The point Paul is making is that these prophetic utterances which they were hearing needed to be tested (vv. 21–22) against what they already knew from Paul. The good was to be kept and the evil was to be abstained from.
 - They needed to take the reading of God’s Word (the OT and Paul’s letter) with great seriousness.

2 THESSALONIANS⁸

Author and Date

- Paul, as in 1 Thessalonians, identified himself twice as the author of this letter (1:1; 3:17).
- Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, Paul’s co-laborers in founding the church, were present with him when he wrote. Evidence, both within this letter and with regard to vocabulary, style, and doctrinal content, strongly supports Paul as the only possible author.
- The time of this writing was surely a few months after the first epistle, while Paul was still in Corinth with Silas and Timothy (1:1; Acts 18:5) in late A.D. 51 or early A.D. 52

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB53>

Background and Setting

- Paul’s 18 month stay in Corinth provided time for the Thessalonian epistles to be authored (Acts 18:11).
- Apparently, Paul had stayed apprised of the happenings in Thessalonica.
- Perhaps the bearer of the first letter brought Paul back an update on the condition of the church, which had matured and expanded (1:3); but pressure and persecution had also increased.
- The seeds of false doctrine concerning the Lord had been sown, and the people were behaving disorderly.

Paul wrote to his beloved flock who were:

- discouraged by persecution and needed incentive to persevere
- deceived by false teachers who confused them about the Lord’s return
- disobedient to divine commands, particularly by refusing to work.
- Paul wrote to address those 3 issues by offering:
 - comfort for the persecuted believers (1:3–12)
 - correction for the falsely taught and frightened believers (2:1–15)
 - confrontation for the disobedient and undisciplined believers (3:6–15).

Historical and Theological Themes

- Although chaps. 1 and 2 contain much prophetic material because the main issue was a serious misunderstanding generated by false teachers about the coming Day of the Lord (Paul reveals that the Day had not come and would not until certain other events occur), it is still best to call this “a pastoral letter.”
- The emphasis is on how to maintain a healthy church with an effective testimony in proper response to sound eschatology and obedience to the truth.
- Eschatology dominates the theological issues.
- One of the clearest statements on personal eschatology for unbelievers is found in 1:9.
- Church discipline is the major focus of 3:6–15, which needs to be considered along with Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–13; Gal. 6:1–5, and 1 Tim. 5:19,20 for understanding the complete Biblical teaching on this theme.

Challenging Verses

- **2 Thessalonians 2:6–8** “And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming.”
- Who or what is the restrainer? Who is the lawless one? When will he be revealed?

- Whatever now restrains the Antichrist of vv. 3, 4, 8–10 from being revealed in the fullness of his apostasy and evil, must be more than human or even angelic power.
- The power that holds back Satan from bringing the final apostasy and unveiling of his Satan-possessed false Christ must be divinely supernatural.
- It must be God’s power in operation that holds back Satan, so that the man of sin, the son of destruction, won’t be able to come until God permits it by removing the restraining power. The reason for the restraint was so that Antichrist would be revealed at God’s appointed time and no sooner, just as was Christ (cf. Gal 4:4), because God controls Satan.⁹
- With all that being said, we do not know exactly what the restraining force is. Perhaps a combination of both the church (believers) and the Spirit. As the Spirit empowers the believers to work in the world, Satan is held back from doing what he desires to do.
- The lawless one is the anti-Christ. This is something that all agree on.
- The lawless one is going to point people to worship him. He is going to lie and the people are going to follow him because they would rather believe a lie than the truth.
- **When will he be revealed?**
- Some think that at the rapture of the church, the lawless one is revealed.
- Others think that the church is raptured, 3 ½ years later the lawless one is revealed.
- It depends on what you think the *restrainer* is...the church or God simply holding back Satan?

HOW DO THESE BOOKS RELATE TO AND HELP THE CHURCH TODAY?

- These books were written by a pastor/missionary to churches. (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 2:1)
- These books are instrumental in understanding Biblical counseling. (1 Thess 4:13; 5:14–18; 2 Thess 1:6–10; 2:3, 14–17)
- They show how a missionary should go into an area and present the gospel and plant a church. (1 Thess 2:1–12; 2 Thess 3:7–10)
- They are filled with how we are to encourage one another. (1 Thess 1:2–3; 3:11–13; 5:11)
- They show how we are to live a life of sanctification. (1 Thess 1:7, 9; 2:14; 4:1–7)
- They give instructions on how the church is to support their leaders. (1 Thess 5:12–13)
- They give instructions on how to handle church members walking in sin. (2 Thess 3:11–12, 14–15)

⁹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 2 Th 2:6.

KEY VERSES

- 1 Thessalonians 2:13 “For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.”
- 1 Thessalonians 2:18 “For we wanted to come to you--I, Paul, more than once--and yet Satan hindered us.”
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3 “For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality...”
- 1 Thessalonians 4:7 “For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:9 “For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ...”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:24 “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”
- 2 Thessalonians 1:4–5 “...therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure. This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.”
- 2 Thessalonians 3:6 “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.”
- 2 Thessalonians 3:13 “But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.”
- 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”