

Introduction to 2 Thessalonians

Peter Evensen | August 2017

Author

Paul names himself the author at the beginning of the letter:

2 Thessalonians 1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

At the end of the letter, he writes:

2 Thessalonians 3:17 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.

As with the first letter to the Thessalonians, this one is also sent from Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy, who were Paul's companions on his second missionary journey when he had first visited Thessalonica.

Recipients and Background

Paul tells us to whom he is writing in v. 1: "To the church of the Thessalonians." For the history and background of this congregation, see **Recipients and Background** for 1 Thessalonians.

Occasion and Purpose

It seems that after the first letter Paul had received word about the congregation in Thessalonica. They still had some questions about the Lord's return and continued to face persecution.

Paul wrote this second letter to:

- Encourage the congregation as they face persecution.
- Either correct a misunderstanding of what Paul had written about the Lord's return in the first letter or to combat false teaching that was being spread as if it was what Paul was teaching.
- Address a continuing problem of idleness.

Date of Writing

The fact that Paul is still with Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy shows that this letter was probably written shortly after the first letter to the Thessalonians, when Paul was still in Corinth. Paul was not with both Silas and Timothy after he left Corinth on his second missionary journey.

The contents of the letter are also very similar to the contents of the first letter.

Because of these things, this letter was probably also written during Paul's 18-month stay in Corinth, shortly after the first, perhaps toward the end of his stay in the year 53 AD. This would make 2 Thessalonians the third letter written by the Apostle Paul.

Content

This letter can be divided up into three main sections:

1. Greeting and Encouragement (1:1-12)

The greeting (1:1-2) is very similar to the greeting in the first letter (compare with 1 Thessalonians 1:1), and, like the first letter, Paul begins this letter by giving thanks to God for the faith and love of the Thessalonians:

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. (compare with 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3).

Paul then assures the Thessalonians that those who are persecuting them will be judged and punished by God and that God will give them relief:

2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

Paul ends this section by telling the Thessalonians that he and his companions always pray for them:

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, 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.

2. The Lord's Second Coming (2:1-17)

In the second section Paul talks about Christ's second coming. This was a topic Paul had addressed in the first letter (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11). It appears that some were teaching that Christ had already returned and that the believers in Thessalonica had been left behind:

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

It seems that whoever was spreading this false teaching had sent a letter that pretended to be from Paul.

Paul then tells the Thessalonians that the Lord would not return until some unmistakable things had happened:

2 Thessalonians 2:3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.

The Lord would not return until there was a falling away (a rebellion against God) and the "man of lawlessness...the son of destruction" was revealed.

Here Paul gives us important information about the one John calls the Antichrist in his letters:

1. He “opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.” (2:4)

The Antichrist will be a religious leader, sitting in the temple of God. He will claim to be doing the work of Christ, but he is actually the strongest opponent of Christ.

2. “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders” (2:9)

The Antichrist will be successful in bringing about the “falling away” because Satan will support him with many miracles and signs.

3. “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.” (2:7-8)

The Antichrist was at work in Paul’s day and will continue up until the return of the Lord Jesus.

These statements make it clear that the Antichrist is not a political leader, as many today believe. It also shows that the Antichrist isn’t one specific individual. Instead it is a religious leader who has a continuing office or position in the church. We understand the man of sin described here to be fulfilled in the office of the papacy.

Paul ends this section with an encouragement. Many will reject the truth (2:10-12), but God called the Thessalonians to faith and the truth:

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

Paul then exhorts the Thessalonians:

2 Thessalonians 2:15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

And Paul that prays that God would comfort and establish them (2:16-17).

3. *General Exhortations and Conclusion (3:1-18)*

In this section Paul asks for prayers that he, Silvanus, and Timothy may spread God’s word unhindered, and that they may be delivered from wicked and evil men. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to trust in the Lord to guard them from the evil one.

Finally Paul warns those in the congregation who refuse to work. He had mentioned this problem briefly in his previous letter (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12),. In his first letter he encouraged everyone to work and not be dependent on anyone. In this letter, Paul is more forceful in his admonition:

2 Thessalonians 3:6-8 Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

2 Thessalonians 3:10 For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

Paul holds himself up as an example, along with Silvanus and Timothy. They worked for their food. Note, however, that Paul is not saying that those who preach the word should not be supported by their congregation:

2 Thessalonians 3:9 It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.

Paul and his companions did have the right to be supported by the Thessalonians, but they chose not to use that right to set an example for the Thessalonians. Paul clearly teaches in other places that those who preach the gospel should earn their living by the gospel (see Matthew 10:10, 1 Corinthians 9:4-14, 1 Timothy 5:17-18). Paul voluntarily gave up this right on his mission trips so that he would not be like the other traveling preachers who seem to be only seeking financial gain.

Paul closes with a prayer:

2 Thessalonians 3:16 Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.

Paul writes the closing greeting with his own hand as a sign of the letter's authenticity:

2 Thessalonians 3:17 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.

The false letter claiming to be from Paul (see 2:2), made this "sign of genuineness" necessary (see also Galatians 6:11).

Outline

1. Greeting (1:1-2)
2. Encouragement (1:3-12)
3. The Lord's Second Coming (2:1-17)
4. General Exhortations (3:1-15)
 - a. Exhortation to Prayer (3:1-5)
 - b. Exhortation to Work (3:6-15)
5. Conclusion (3:16-18)

(this overview is based on a study prepared by Pastor Nathanael Mayhew, <http://atlanta.clclutheran.org/booksofthebibleoverview.html>)