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2 Thessalonians: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

The salutation with which 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 begins is almost identical to that of 1 Thessalonians, with the slight alteration of God the Father to God our Father, and the addition of From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ at the end of verse 2. This epistle was likely written fairly shortly after the first epistle. Paul still seems to be ministering with Silas and Timothy, the missionary team that first worked among the Thessalonians. And the epistle is addressed from them.

However, as in 1 Thessalonians, Paul is the actual writer of the epistle throughout. In verse 17 of chapter 3, 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. Even though the letter is addressed from Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy then, Paul is the sole author. The main thing that changes from 1 Thessalonians in the introduction underline is the fact that the grace and peace aren't primarily from Paul and the other missionaries, but from God himself.

As before, Paul moves from this to express their continued thanksgiving for the Thessalonians, now presented not in terms of their actual practice, but as their fitting response to what God has done and is doing in the Thessalonians. Their increasing faith and love for each other is evidence of the work of God's grace among them. The missionaries boast about the Thessalonians and all the other churches that they go to on account of the Thessalonians' steadfastness and faith through trial.

While some of the Thessalonians might be discouraged, Paul and his fellow missionaries cannot hold in the delight and the joy and the pride that they have in seeing the way that the Thessalonians are growing and prospering in their faith. Unlike doting grandparents with pictures of their grandchildren, they can't help but go everywhere and show everyone and tell everyone about what God is doing among them. The steadfastness of the Thessalonians in affliction is evidence of the righteous judgment of God.

It is an anticipatory sign in the present of their future vindication. Their faithful suffering for righteousness' sake identifies them as those who are blessed, as those who will be vindicated in the day of judgment. Persecution is the path that leads to the inheritance of the kingdom, and those who find themselves on it have cause to rejoice, for their vindication will come.

They are suffering for the kingdom, which is itself a sign of God's grace. There's a paradoxical character to all of this. Suffering is not usually a positive sign, but for the Christian it can be.

This evidence of their future vindication is also a sign that they are considered worthy of the kingdom. This is not something they have earned, so much as a matter of grace, God has marked them out by suffering, graciously declaring them worthy of his inheritance. We might think about the reaction of the apostles to their persecution in Acts 5, verse 41.

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. God's justice will be seen in the way that he will repay their persecutors for their evil, while rewarding the Thessalonians, the missionaries and all suffering Christians with relief. This will occur when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in fiery judgment, enacting divine wrath on all who do not know God, those who reject the knowledge of God that has been given in the Son, and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The language of judgment for not obeying the gospel may seem arresting to us. What does it mean to obey the gospel? The gospel is at heart the message of Christ's lordship and kingdom. To obey the gospel is to submit to this, to Jesus as Lord.

Paul alludes to Isaiah chapter 66, verse 15 here. For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. When this time comes, those who disobey the summons to bow their knee to Jesus Christ, will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, and exile from the presence of the Lord and of his glory.

They are confined to outer darkness, cut off from all of the blessings and the goodness of God's special presence. Once again, Paul is borrowing language from the Old Testament prophets. Here it's the language of Isaiah chapter 2, verse 10.

It's worth noting that Paul is taking up an Old Testament statement where the Lord refers to Yahweh, and he is relating it here to Jesus. We should also consider the way that Paul frames eternal destinies here. The emphasis is not upon two places, heaven and hell, but upon two different relations in which people stand to the glory and presence of the person of Jesus Christ.

One party are brought into and vindicated in the presence and manifest and participate in the glory, and the other party is utterly cut off from them, experiencing absolute, utter and final loss. Heaven is, at its very root, not a place so much as the glorious presence of a person. Heaven is where we enjoy Christ, the new heavens and the new earth, where Christ is present with his people.

When Christ comes, he will be glorified in his holy ones. The church will display and reflect his glory, and he will be glorified in her, a people refined as gold through suffering. Paul's constant prayer is that God will make the Thessalonians worthy of his calling.

This way of describing things, of God making them worthy of his calling, makes clear that the worthiness is something that God produces in his people. We will be judged according to works on the last day, but the works are ways in which God has conformed us to the judgment that he has made concerning us. The declaration of justification is worked out, to borrow an illustration from the early Luther, in some ways like a sculptor who declares the sculpture that he is going to produce from the block of marble before he has begun to fashion it.

The judgment is proleptic. It anticipates the way that God will conform us to that judgment. God calls us and then he makes us worthy of his calling.

The calling happens first, and then we are made worthy of what we have been called for. This process is one in which we are active as God's transforming power works in us and

through us. We are never the final source of the action though.

The end of all of this is that the name of the Lord Jesus is glorified in us. We are his workmanship and when people see us, they see what he has created in us. And then we are also glorified in him.

The grace of God and the Lord Jesus Christ is that which governs this entire process of salvation, from beginning to end. At no point does it rest upon anything other than God's unmerited goodness towards us and his Son. A question to consider.

The letters to the Thessalonians should encourage us to think much more about Christ's final coming and the age to come. How might Paul's teaching here change the way that we think about the new heavens and the new earth? In 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 we discover that some people in Thessalonica are already claiming that the day of the Lord has come or that it has begun in some way. This event might be referring to the final coming of Christ but could also refer to a coming of Christ of epoch-changing character, such as AD 70 represented.

AD 70 involved a great tribulation, a coming of Christ and a gathering of the people of the Lord, described in Matthew chapter 24 verses 29 to 31. Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other.

They should not be deceived because Christ would not return without a widespread falling away or apostasy from the faith first. Prior to the advent of Christ there must also be the revelation of the man of lawlessness. This statement is developed from Daniel chapter 11 verses 31 and 36 by way of the Olivet Discourse.

Daniel chapter 11 verse 31 Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress and shall take away the regular burnt offering and they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate. And in verse 36 of that chapter And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god and shall speak astonishing things against the god of gods.

He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished for what is decreed shall be done. Paul also picks up the language of Theodosian's Greek translation of Daniel chapter 12 verses 10 to 11 with its reference to the end time tribulation as one during which the lawless ones will do lawlessness and none of the lawless ones will understand. In Daniel this lawlessness is connected to the establishment of the abomination of desolation and the end of regular temple sacrifice.

It's an event focused upon the temple in Jerusalem and Jesus takes this up in the Olivet Discourse. Mark chapter 13 verses 14 to 19 and 24 to 27 speak of the abomination of desolation and the tribulation followed by the coming of the son of man and the gathering of the elect to Christ. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now and never will be.

But in those days after that tribulation the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken and then they will see the son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory and then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. In Daniel there is a figure who persecutes, brings about the desecration of the temple and leads astray, who challenges the people of God, who exalts himself and will end up being overcome by God. Paul argues that this will take place before Christ is revealed.

Yet even before the specific man of lawlessness is revealed a principle of lawlessness is already at work in the world. Jesus speaks of this presumably alluding to Daniel in Matthew chapter 24 verse 12. And because lawlessness will be increased the love of many will grow cold.

Jesus refers here as John refers in Revelation to a tribulation that has already begun in the first century AD, a tribulation drawn from the prophecy of Daniel. These prophecies of great tribulation in Daniel have begun fulfillment in Christ and in Israel. Even before that they looked forward to the persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes.

The tribulation arrives in progressive stages, perhaps like ascending Russian dolls. At each stage we should know the pattern to expect. Alternatively we could see it as a telescoping effect, as a series of closely related events that stand at a great distance in time that can be collapsed into a single concentric structure of expectation.

It is a single reality that is awaited but a reality that arrives in progressive stages. Paul wants to assure the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord has not already begun or arrived, even if they may have received unsettling communications or messages purporting to be from Paul and his fellow missionaries that it had. The Thessalonians were rightly expecting an epoch-changing day of the Lord on the very near Jesus had taught that that generation would not pass away until the events prophesied in the Olivet Discourse occurred and that some people standing hearing him teach would not die before they saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

This event was not necessarily the end of the physical cosmos, but it was the end of a world, the end of an epoch. Paul wants them to understand that the day of the Lord, whether the day of the Lord on the near horizon or the day of the Lord on the final horizon, will not arrive until the man of lawlessness is revealed. Jesus, in his teaching in the Olivet Discourse, had described the way that false teachers and false messiahs and

confusing messages would come along, leading people to wonder whether he had already returned.

However, the day of the Lord would not arrive before a large-scale apostasy of Christians had occurred. A principle of lawlessness would be growing, tribulation would be gathering pace, and many would fall away. Before the day itself comes, the man of lawlessness must be revealed, someone described as the Son of Destruction.

It is perhaps interesting to note that there is one other figure in the New Testament who is called the Son of Destruction, that is Judas Iscariot in John 17. While I was with them I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the Son of Destruction, that the scripture might be fulfilled.

This might help us to recognise a further way in which the sufferings of Christ anticipated and played out in miniature the reality of the end times themselves. Tribulation, betrayal, Satan being given a free reign, revelation of the Son of Destruction, widespread falling away, deliverance to death, etc. All of these things occur in the events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ.

The man of lawlessness that Paul describes is closely connected to the temple, where he is elevated, setting himself up as if he were God. Paul and his fellow missionaries had already instructed the Thessalonians concerning this when they were with them. The principle of lawlessness is already operative at that time.

John speaks in a similar way in 1 John 2, verse 18. For the time being, however, there were forces holding the principle of lawlessness back. Perhaps this is the restraining work of the Holy Spirit exercised through the ministry of the Church.

When this was removed, however, all hell would break loose. My suspicion is that this, on the nearest horizon of the first century, referred to the church in Jerusalem in the run up to AD 70, where the leader of the church, James, the brother of Jesus, was martyred, and then the rest of the church later fled the city, leaving lawlessness to run rampant and unchecked, without any righteous remnant to arrest it. We might also compare this to the destruction of Sodom.

When Lot's family was delivered from the city, the city was no longer preserved. The man of lawlessness most likely refers to a high priest setting himself up in the temple as if it were his own palace, rather than the palace of the Lord. James Jordan suggests that it is Ananias.

Others have argued that it might be John of Giscala, a leader of the Jewish revolt, or Phaneus, the last high priest, who is described as follows by Josephus. The zealots undertook to dispose of the high priesthood by casting lots for it, whereas, as we have said already, it was to descend by succession in a family. The pretense they made for

this strange attempt was an ancient practice, while they said that of old it was determined by Lot, but in truth, it was no better than a dissolution of an undeniable law and a cunning contrivance to seize upon the government, derived from those that presumed to appoint governors as they themselves pleased.

Hereupon they sent for one of the pontifical tribes, which is called Aniochon, and cast lots which of it should be the high priest. By fortune the lots so fell as to demonstrate their iniquity after the plainest manner, for it fell upon one whose name was Phaneus, the son of Samuel, of the village Aptha. He was a man not only unworthy of the high priesthood, but that did not know well what the high priesthood was, such a mere rustic was he.

Yet did they hail this man, without his own consent, out of the country, as if they were acting a play upon the stage, and adorned him with a counterfeit face. They also put upon him the sacred garments, and upon every occasion instructed him what he was to do. This horrid piece of wickedness was sport and pastime with them, but occasioned the other priests, who at a distance saw their law made a jest of, to shed tears and sorely lament the dissolution of such a sacred dignity.

The Lord Jesus would then kill the man of lawlessness, with the fiery breath of his mouth in his coming. This I believe refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, its temple, and its leaders in A.D. 70. The behaviour of the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, is in accord with the activity of Satan.

This period would be one of satanic possession and activity, just as the period of Christ's sufferings and passion was the time of Satan, where Satan was released to do his greatest damage and to wreak havoc. So the expected day of the Lord will be preceded by another such unleashing of Satan. Just as Satan entered into Judas, so Satan's shadowy agency will be apparent surrounding the man of lawlessness.

There will be false signs and wonders, strong deception and delusion, and people will be brought to their own destruction. This could be compared to the story of the Exodus, where there are false signs and wonders done by the Egyptian magicians, and Pharaoh's heart is hardened to the point of near insanity. God himself will bring delusion to them, so that they are led to their own destruction.

The destruction is something that they bring upon themselves though. We might think of 1 Kings 22-23 here. The fascinating thing is that The Lord has declared disaster for you.

The Lord has declared disaster for you. The Lord has declared disaster for you. The Lord has declared disaster for you.

The interesting thing in the case of Micaiah is that he is directly telling Ahab that God has sent him delusion. Surely if God is trying to trap Ahab then this is precisely the

wrong way to go about it. Yet the fact is that Ahab loves the delusion.

The wicked do not believe the truth, not because the truth isn't presented to them, or even that the truth is not in any way apparent to them, but because they refuse to love the truth. When it comes down to it, they want to believe the lie, and God gives them what they want. Even when he gives it to them with flashing warning signs, they still swallow it whole, because they hate the truth.

When we see unbelief in our day, this is so often what it comes down to. Some Christians get drawn into futile debates about the truth of certain teachings, failing to recognise that some people simply hate the truth and will swallow even obvious lies that present themselves as alternatives to it. The problem often isn't that scripture isn't clear enough on certain matters, but that people refuse to love the truth.

Before we can receive the truth, we need to be lovers of the truth, people who seek the truth where it can be found, and who will go where it leads. The Thessalonian believers, however, contrast with all of this. Once again, Paul declares their sense of duty as the missionaries to give thanks for what God is doing and has done among the Thessalonians.

They have been chosen for salvation. This salvation will be accomplished if they are set apart by, and conform to God's righteous judgment by the work of the Spirit, and as they believe in the truth. We don't reflect enough upon the strangeness of belief in the truth in a fallen race that loves and wants to believe the lie.

The Thessalonians, having been chosen for salvation in such a manner, were called to it through the Gospel declaration and summons of the missionaries, to the end that they might participate in the glory of the reigning Lord Jesus the Messiah. They must not be swayed by rumours and false reports then, but must stand firm in the teachings that they had been given by Paul and the missionaries. Paul concludes the chapter by praying that the Lord Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who by grace gave the entire Gospel reality, will settle their troubled hearts and establish them firmly in the truth against the day when all who are not grounded in a love for every good word and every good work will be uprooted in that time of testing.

A question to consider, what are some ways in which we grow in our love of the truth so that our hearts are guarded against the appeal of the lie? The third and final chapter of 2 Thessalonians begins with a request for prayer. In 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 25, Paul had also requested prayer, and now he gives more detail of what he wants prayer for. He speaks of the word of the Lord as if it were a runner, and he asks them to pray for its swift movement.

He wants them to pray that it might be honoured and glorified everywhere, as it was and is among them. The word of the Lord is the message of the reign of Christ, and Paul

wishes to see it recognised and received for the glorious message that it is. He further asks for prayer for deliverance from the opponents they will face.

The Gospel has its fierce enemies, as Paul himself once was, and they need to be rescued from their schemes. Not everyone may have faith, but the Lord is faithful, and Paul expresses his assurance that the Lord will strengthen and guard the Thessalonians from the assaults of Satan. Paul is confident in the Lord and his faithfulness, and that confidence means that he is assured that the Lord will keep the Thessalonians in obedience to their instructions as his messengers.

He also expresses a wish in the form of a prayer, that their hearts would be directed to the love of God, and the steadfastness of Christ. God's love and Christ's steadfastness protect our hearts in times of uncertainty and struggle. They provide a firm and secure stronghold for us.

They give us peace and calm in our hearts and in our minds, when so much that is going on around us might unsettle or shake us. The unchanging character of Christ and the deep and unwavering love of God mean that even in the chaos of the world, our hearts can be at rest, as our fundamental standing is unchangeable. In 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 9-12, Paul had already given instructions concerning church members who were idle and lazily dependent upon others.

Now concerning brotherly love, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another. For that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you brothers to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

This sort of behaviour is clearly a problem in the Thessalonian community, as Paul returns to the matter again here, addressing both the church as a whole and the particular troublemaking members. Paul speaks of a tradition that the Thessalonians received from Paul and his fellow missionaries. The tradition in view here is not a teaching so much as a form of practice.

Paul and his companions did not only give words of instruction, but also set a pattern of behaviour for the Thessalonians to follow. Although the missionaries would have been within their rights to request financial support from the Thessalonians, to whom they were ministering at the time, they forwent that right in order to provide a necessary example. The able person who resisted working should not be supported in their indolence.

That person should not eat. The model of diligence provided by Paul and the missionaries shows up the failure of those who walk in idleness. Those not busy at work

find other people's business to get involved in, and make a nuisance of themselves.

They undermine rather than building up the church. This isn't just less than ideal behaviour. It is something to be dealt with in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is disorderly. It is also something that brings dishonour to the church. The ideal is that people do their work quietly, rather than being lazy busybodies, and that they earn their own living, rather than depending upon others.

The virtues that Paul celebrates here are not the flashy virtues. They're virtues like working diligently, avoiding lazy dependency, earning your own living and paying your way, living a quiet life and patiently doing good. We often imagine the Christian church progressing through more radical and attention-grabbing virtues, but this largely isn't the case.

The letter to Diognetus, a second century description of Christians, speaks of them as follows. Christians are indistinguishable from other men, either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life.

Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens.

Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

Christians' lives ought to be quietly remarkable. Paul charges the Thessalonians to recognise those among them who resist the instruction of the missionaries. While not treating them as enemies, they should distance themselves from them, so that they might be ashamed and reform their conduct, and so that their poor behaviour might be seen for the departure from the true pattern of Christian discipleship that it is.

The conclusion of the Epistle has similar elements to the conclusion of 1 Thessalonians. Most obviously the final statement, but verse 16 is also similar to 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 23. The peace that Paul declares in the benediction might also answer to the unsettling feelings that they had about the possible arrival of the day of the Lord.

Paul also stresses here the fact that the greeting is written with his own hand, rather

than using an amanuensis. Similar statements can be found in 1 Corinthians 16, verse 21, and Galatians 6, verse 11. However, in Romans 16, verse 22, we have the words of an amanuensis.

Having Paul's own concluding greeting in his own hand as authentication, the apostolic authority with which the original letter came would be more evident. It would also help to avoid the problem of letters falsely purporting to be from Paul and his companions, a problem that was illustrated in chapter 2, verse 2. A question to consider, what are some other quiet and unassuming virtues that should mark the Christian?