

# Pauline Epistles: 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

## INTRODUCTION

Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians are personal and rich encouragements to a young, growing, and learning church. Though the books provide both heavy emphasis and insight about Christ's Second Coming and the details that surround it, these details should not overshadow Paul's tone of love, care, and hope that he has for the church at Thessalonica. These letters are richly personal, wildly uplifting, and gentle in the few corrections that Paul makes for the church. Read them to see a beautiful example of a people who received the gospel with eagerness and how Christ marks their lives as a result.

Historically, Paul's love for the Thessalonians comes from the rich experiences they shared together. It starts on Paul's second missionary journey around A.D. 49 or 50. Acts 17 tells the story of Paul's time in Thessalonica, where he visited a local Jewish synagogue and "reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead" (Acts 17:2-3). Praise God that *some* were persuaded, including devout Greeks and some leading women! However, the Jews in the city grew jealous, so they incited a mob, caused an uproar, and dragged some Christians before the authorities. Paul and Silas, the "men who have turned the world upside down" with the message of the gospel, had successfully preached Christ in Thessalonica. And when the Jews in Thessalonica heard that Paul preached in nearby Berea, they followed him and chased him out of there, too. Paul's time in Thessalonica was short; but Christ was proclaimed, and the Thessalonians believed.

The Thessalonians had learned much from Paul, but it seems like they hadn't learned everything. Their faith and example were commendable, and Paul was proud to consider them his "glory and joy" before our Lord Jesus at his coming (1 Thess 2:19-20). But, possibly due to either Paul's short stint of just a few weeks in the city or perhaps false teachers who came and distorted what Paul taught, the Thessalonians lacked a robust understanding of theology about the circumstances that correspond with Christ's return. After encouraging the church and praying for them in various ways (e.g., 3:11-13), Paul exhorts them to walk in a manner that pleases God (4:1) and wait expectantly for the *future* hope of Christ's return (4:13-5:11; 2 Thess 1:5-12). These letters are deeply personal and carry a rich current of theology in them. They are a blessing to weary souls and a hope for the sufferer and fainthearted, for Christ has come and will come again to make all things new.

## IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Two words that could sum up the books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians are "Active Patience." At first glance, these sound contradictory; how should they be active while they are waiting for something to occur? Does that mean we are to do things *and* not do things? Well, yes. It's common in the United States to see a high school, college, or other graduation ceremony off in the distance—typically around the month of May. But do students merely wait for their graduation when they know it's coming? No! In fact, there is often still work to be done to both complete one's schooling (homework, exams, etc.) and to prepare for the future after schooling (résumé building, job hunting, etc.). Active patience is to faithfully act with the end in mind, while waiting patiently and expectantly in faith for that day to come.

For the Thessalonians, Paul speaks of the future day of Christ's return in both letters. However, one would miss Paul's point if they fell into a complacency that presumed everything of this day and age was insignificant because of the ground shaking changes that accompany Christ's Second Coming. Christians are called to live flourishing lives, rejecting idleness (1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6-12) by *actively* walking with *patient* endurance in the world's present afflictions (1 Thess 2:13-16, 2 Thess 1:3-4). Christ's completed work enables Christians to live and wait for their future glorification, which is an assured and present hope that sustains those in Christ in every situation (1 Thess 5:9-11).

## **BOOK ORGANIZATION**

### **1 Thessalonians**

- Opening (1:1)
- Paul's Love and Longing for the Thessalonians (1:2-3:13)
  - Thanksgiving for the Example of the Thessalonians (1:1-1:10)
  - Paul's Effective Ministry to the Thessalonians (2:1-3:10)
  - Paul's Pastoral Prayer (3:11-3:13)
- Paul's Teaching: For Today and Tomorrow (4:1-5:28)
  - For Today: Walking to Please God More and More (4:1-4:12)
  - For Tomorrow: Waiting Expectantly for Christ's Return (4:13-5:11)
  - For Today: Walking and Waiting as a Church (5:12-28)

### **2 Thessalonians**

- Opening (1:1-2)
- Comfort for the Persecuted Thessalonians (1:3-12)
  - Thanksgiving for their Faith and Steadfastness (1:3-4)
  - Foreseen Justice at Christ's Return (1:5-10)
  - Prayer for Perseverance Amidst Affliction (1:11-12)
- Correction of Theology about the Day of the Lord (2:1-17)
  - Refuting False Claims (2:1-12)
  - Standing Firm in the Gospel's Truth (2:13-15)
  - Benediction of Comfort and Establishment (2:16-17)
- Command to Work Instead of Living Idly (3:1-15)
  - Transition from Encouragement to Exhortation (3:1-5)
  - Warning Against Idleness (3:6-12)
  - Call to do good (3:13-15)
- Benediction (3:16-18)

## **JESUS IN THE BOOK OF 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS**

The letters to the Thessalonians are uncompromisingly Christocentric; they hold Christ's person and work at the very center of their message. One could give a passing glance to each chapter and see the repeated theme of Christ's work applied to his people through the gospel in every part of each letter.

In 1 Thessalonians 1 we see Paul's gratitude to God that the Thessalonians trust in Christ for salvation, live accordingly, and wait for the resurrected Christ's return. Chapter 2 and 3 speak to the community created in Christ through the gospel, as Paul loves and desires to be mutually encouraged in Christ with the Thessalonians. Chapter 4 calls the Thessalonians to live in light of the instructions given through Christ for sanctification as they await his glorious and imminent return to raise believers from the dead in glorification. And, in 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul calls for righteous living as those who walk in the day rather than the night, putting off false practices and being kept blameless for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul continues his emphasis on living gospel-saturated lives as those waiting for Christ's return. Chapter 1 grounds the Thessalonians' faith in God's work while the church endures affliction from those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus. Christ's name will be glorified on the day in which Christians are freed from the afflictions of this world and God's righteous vengeance in judgment comes upon those who work evil in this life. Chapter 2 tells the Thessalonians of the things that will precede Christ's coming on the day of the Lord, warning them that the rebellion and opposition of a "lawless one" will oppose Christ's reign. But the end of chapter 2 and all of chapter 3 applies Christ to the present circumstances as the one in whom Christians can stand firm. Christ establishes and guards his people against his enemies and calls them to work toward the consummation of their great salvation. It is the peace of Jesus Christ that Christians can cling to in this time of need.

## BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

### OBSERVATION

- Who are the authors? How do the authors speak in the letter as first-person *singular* vs. first-person *plural*? What does that tell you about whether Paul is the primary author?
- Who are the recipients? How does their experience differ from ours?
- How does this book's historical context lend to understanding the written intent of authors?
- What about the organization of 1 & 2 Thessalonians clarifies its message?
  - What rhetorical devices do the authors use to communicate the book's message?
  - What information do the authors assume that the audience already knows (e.g., 1 Thess 5:1-2)?

### INTERPRETATION

- What is the overall message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians? How did you come to that conclusion?
- Literary context: How do you read your passage considering the given genre: New Testament epistle?
  - What is the significance of various literary devices used? What do they teach or emphasize?
  - Consider how the authors use prayers, benedictions, stories, encouragement, refutation, command, etc.
- Historical context: What was happening at this point in history?
- Cultural context: What customs, practices, actions, and attitudes were common then?
- Biblical context: What other passages could be helpful for interpretation of particular "end times" events?
  - Other texts on the Second Coming could include Matthew 24, Daniel 7, Revelation 19. Note: Paul seems to be drawing on scriptural teaching, particularly in Matthew 24 and Daniel 7, to reach these conclusions.
  - Consider interpreting the less clear passages in light of the clearer passages.
- Theological context: What theological themes are most prevalent in these letters?
  - What should mark people's lives if they are in Christ?
  - How does Paul consider both his suffering/afflictions and the Thessalonians' suffering/afflictions considering their gospel hope?
  - Note: 1 & 2 Thessalonians' heavy emphasis on Christ's return and the "Day of the Lord" touches on the doctrine of eschatology, also known as "Last Things" or the "End Times." At least four Christian viewpoints about the End Times can be drawn from Scripture, and all of them deal with topics in 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Please exercise charity and caution when making objective claims about these events, as Christians from all viewpoints will read and be edified by your writing.

### APPLICATION

- Read to be encouraged and spurred on by a faithful and growing church's response to the gospel.
- How should Christians imitate the Thessalonians' example?
- What does it look like to both share the gospel and your own life with another?
- How should we encourage and exhort one another to live lives worthy of our calling in Christ?
- Why does the Christian have hope in patiently waiting for a future event? What effect does that hope have on the Christian?
- What is the role of one's church community in living out the "one another" of these two letters?

### PRAYER

- Pray and give thanks for those in your life who are models of Christ, his faithfulness, and the gospel (1 Thess 1:2-10).
- Pray that God would provide you meaningful opportunities to minister to others with your life and words (1 Thess 2:1-12)

- Pray that the Lord would make you increase and abound in love and holiness before Christ's return (1 Thess 3:11-13)
- Pray that God would encourage you with the assured hope that Christ is returning to judge rightly, both the living and the dead (1 Thess 4:13-18; 2 Thess 1:5-12).
- Pray for your leaders who minister to you and exhort you toward further Christlikeness (2 Thess 3:1-12).

### **CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS**

"The prophets have proclaimed two advents of His: the one already passed . . . but the second when, according to prophecy, He shall come from heaven with glory, accompanied by His angelic host, when He also shall raise the bodies of all men who have lived, and shall clothe those of the worthy with immortality and send those of the wicked . . . into everlasting fire with the wicked devils." (First Apology 52)

—Justin Martyr

Question 15: "What comfort does the return of Christ 'to judge the living and the dead' give you?"

Answer 15: "That in all affliction and persecution I may await with head held high the very judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the judgment of God for me and has removed all the curse from me; that he will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but he shall take me, together with all his elect, to himself into heavenly joy and glory."

—Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

"As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin, and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity: so will He have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Amen." (33.3)

—Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

"We believe that Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly, in power and glory, to consummate his salvation and his judgment. This promise of his coming is a further spur to our evangelism, for we remember his words that the gospel must first be preached to all nations. We believe that the interim period between Christ's ascension and return is to be filled with the mission of the people of God, who have no liberty to stop before the end. We also remember his warning that false Christs and false prophets will arise as precursors of the final Antichrist. We therefore reject as a proud, self-confident dream the notion that people can ever build a utopia on earth. Our Christian confidence is that God will perfect his kingdom, and we look forward with eager anticipation to that day, and to the new heaven and earth in which righteousness will dwell and God will reign forever. Meanwhile, we re-dedicate ourselves to the service of Christ and of people in joyful submission to his authority over the whole of our lives."

—The Lausanne Covenant (1974)

