

2 Thessalonians 1

M. W. Bassford, 12-12-10

Now that we've completed our Sunday night study of 1 Thessalonians, it only makes sense for us to turn our attention to its companion book, 2 Thessalonians. As far as we can tell, 2 Thessalonians was written shortly after 1 Thessalonians, perhaps just as soon as Timothy returned from delivering the first letter to Thessalonica. Unlike other epistle pairs, such as 1 and 2 Corinthians, there don't appear to be any significant changes that have taken place in the Thessalonian church. Just as we saw from 1 Thessalonians, they're still very concerned with the return of Christ and the end of the world, and the same problems with idle brethren that the first letter had hinted at appear to be continuing. 2 Thessalonians was likely written, in fact, to answer the questions with which Timothy had returned.

When we put all of this together, it places the authorship of 2 Thessalonians in the same place as 1 Thessalonians. Paul most likely wrote both letters during the eighteen-month stay in Corinth that we find recorded in Acts 18, in the middle of his second missionary journey. Through the use of other sources, we can date this to 51 A.D.

Even though this letter was penned nearly 2000 years ago now, there are still many important and relevant things that we can learn from it. First, confusion about the second coming of Jesus is no less common today than it was 2000 years ago. In the denominational world, the false doctrine of premillennialism is commonly taught, and even in our own brotherhood, there are many who believe in something called hyper-preterism. The basic idea here is that every single prophecy about the return of Christ, the resurrection from the dead, and so forth was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. These Christians expect that Jesus will never return again, and that the earth is eternal.

Naturally, the only way for us to deal with these different doctrines is by turning to the word and learning what it says. Let's put this into practice this evening as we consider the eschatological teaching of 2 Thessalonians 1.

The Thessalonian Church.

Paul opens the letter, as he commonly does, by greeting the Thessalonian church with **SALUTATION AND THANKSGIVING**. We read this in 2 Thessalonians 1:1-3. As is often true of Paul's letters at this stage of his work, he lists Silas and Timothy as co-authors, although the one responsible for the main content of the letter is clearly Paul. However, this opening still reflects the work of Timothy. Paul, of course, hadn't been back to Thessalonica since the writing of the first epistle, nor would he return to the city until the last leg of the third missionary journey, as recorded in Acts 20. However, Paul still speaks of his thankfulness for the way that the Thessalonians had grown in faith and love. This was the kind of information he could only have gotten from Timothy, and it shows his reliance on his companion.

In this simple idea, though, there's something very important for us to learn. The time frame here is not particularly long. It can't have been more than two years since the last time Paul set foot in Thessalonica. And yet, he is able to speak of the exceeding growth of their faith, of the abundant increase of their love. In that short time, they had spiritually progressed so much that it was strikingly obvious to Timothy, and to Paul as Timothy described it.

How do we fare in that regard? Let's say that someone who moved away from this congregation a couple years back, someone like Marisa Sanchez, came back and visited with us. What would she say about our faith and love? Would she exclaim about the growth of our confidence in the promises of God? Would she say that we obviously do a much better job of caring for one another than we did two years ago? Or would she find us in basically the same spiritual condition we were in when she left? Brethren, the Thessalonians didn't just hold steady spiritually. They didn't grow just a little bit. They grew abundantly, by leaps and bounds. We need to learn from their example and be like them.

From there, Paul turns to another reality of the Thessalonians' existence, the reality of **PERSECUTION**. He examines both the event and its meaning in 2 Thessalonians 1:4-5. First of all, notice that Paul talks about all their persecutions and all their tribulations. This is Paul speaking, friends. Paul had a Ph.D. in persecution. If he sees the Thessalonians being persecuted so much that he describes it this way, that poor church was really getting hammered.

However, despite all of that misery, the Thessalonians remained steadfast in their faith in God. They didn't budge, not even an inch, even though they were being clobbered for it. This level of endurance in such difficult circumstances had two important consequences. First, the Thessalonians provided a good example for churches throughout the Mediterranean world. When Christians in those other places were persecuted, they could look to the brethren in Thessalonica, take heart from their faith, and find the courage to endure persecution themselves.

Second, the entire process of persecution and perseverance foreshadowed the righteous judgment of God. It's tough for us to get our minds around this today, but our brethren 2000 years ago considered persecution a good thing. They reasoned that if Christ was persecuted, then anyone who did a good job of following Him could also expect to be persecuted. Paul here confirms that their persecution and their reaction to persecution proved that they were people whom God would count worthy of His kingdom. Those things wouldn't happen if they weren't on the right track.

However, what does this passage say about us? I don't hear a whole lot about Christians in the modern-day U.S. being persecuted for their faith. Why is that? Is the world nicer to Christians than it was in the time of Christ, or are we nicer to the world? Do we refuse to compromise on our principles, no matter what it costs us, or do we make accommodations with the world? Do we stand for the truth as we have opportunity, or do we go along to get along? I suspect that if we were more stubborn about those things, we would find that people in our time would be plenty happy to persecute too. However, only that uncompromising existence puts us in line for the kingdom of heaven.

The Coming of the Lord.

Paul continues from there to explain that the Thessalonians' problems would be relieved by **THE COMING OF THE LORD**. Look with me at 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8. This is certainly an ominous passage, but it offers a great deal of hope for the Christian as well. First of all, Paul emphasizes the way that the return of Jesus would relieve the afflictions of His people on earth, but would afflict those who were tormenting them. Once again, this points to some disconcerting differences between the first-century worldview and our own. If the Lord returned tomorrow, would it be a relief for us? Are our lives filled with enemies that we've made for the sake of the gospel, so that we need to be rescued from them? Do we have enemies at all, whom God could rightfully punish for their hostility to our righteousness? Or, instead, are we bopping along just fine in the here and now, with nothing that we really need to be relieved from?

Paul doesn't say, though, that the vengeance of Jesus is going to stop with the persecutors of the church. Instead, it's going to extend to two groups: first, those who do not know God; and second, those who know God but refuse to obey His gospel. When it comes to the law of God, ignorance is no excuse. On the day of judgment, nobody is going to be able to defend their sin by saying, "God, I just didn't know what you wanted me to do." That won't matter. Sin is sin, whether ignorant or not, and sin demands punishment. Likewise, belief without obedience is not enough. We can't just pray the sinner's prayer and expect to be all right. We must obey the gospel's command to be baptized, and thereafter, we must live according to the code that the gospel sets out. That's the only way we can be confident on the day of judgment.

Next, we see Paul elaborating on **THE RESULTS OF THE RETURN**. This appears in 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10. There are few more dramatic differences in all of Scripture than we see in these two verses. On the one hand, people who did not know God or obey the gospel of Jesus will be punished with the penalty of eternal destruction. That's an awful thing to contemplate. In this life, if we destroy something, that's a process with a beginning and an end. Once we've destroyed it, it doesn't keep on getting destroyed. However, that's not true in eternity. If we reject God in this life, the life to come will be filled with a destruction that continues forever. What's more, we will spend that eternal destruction separated from God forever. For age after age after age, nothing good will ever enter our lives again. Thankfully, that's not what the saints can expect when the Lord returns. Instead, they will have the opportunity to glorify Him forever and to marvel forever at His glory. Instead of torment, they will experience eternal bliss.

This might seem unfair to some. After all, forever is a very long time to be punished, and hell is a very bad place to be. How can a perfectly loving God condemn millions of lost souls to that? What we must understand, though, is that God doesn't reject the sinner. The sinner rejects God. Year after year, God in His mercy reaches out to them, and year after year, they ignore Him. When they could rejoice in righteousness and their relationship with Him, instead, they rejoice in falsehood and wickedness. They make it perfectly clear that they have no interest in God or in being with Him. Then, once their lives are over, God reluctantly gives them exactly what they spent those lives seeking. They didn't want to be with God? Fine. They don't have to be. Sadly, they then discover that the absence of God is quite literally hell.

Paul's Prayer.

An eternity separated from our Creator is a truly terrifying thing to think about, and it's something we should think about when we are tempted to sin. Thankfully, we see how we can make it to heaven despite those sins in **PAUL'S PRAYER**. Consider with me 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12. To me, this passage is every bit as reassuring as the previous one was ominous. We don't have to be worthy of this calling on our own merits. Instead, it is God who counts us worthy of our calling. We have to desire goodness, yes. We have to show our faith by our works, yes. However, those things are not what saves us in and of themselves, and that's a good thing because none of us have perfect resolve or perfect works. Instead, we are justified when God fulfills the resolve that we do have and the works that we do have with His power. We are not and cannot be complete in our own righteousness, but we are made complete by the grace of God.

On the day of judgment, this will lead to two complimentary glories. First, we ourselves will glorify the name of Jesus. Once again, we're not capable of this by ourselves. On their own, our imperfect, sin-stained lives don't glorify anything or anybody. However, when we are perfected and cleansed by the blood of Jesus, we become as spiritually glorious as if we had never committed a single sin. On the day of judgment, when the work of the grace of Jesus is complete, we will finally be the people He has always wanted us to be. In return, He will glorify us. He will give us forms of incomprehensible beauty, just like His own, and we will dwell in the glory of His presence forever.