

Lesson 10

Thanksgiving and Prayer

2 Thessalonians 1

Introduction

Ongoing problems and questions in the Thessalonian church necessitated Paul's writing of a second letter soon after the first. While these problems may have persisted, Paul was still very pleased with the growth and progress of the church and encouraged them to do even more. 2 Thessalonians addresses three essential matters:

- Ongoing persecution.
- The return of Jesus.
- The problem of idleness.

For almost 19 centuries, the authorship of 2 Thessalonians was virtually undisputed. The early church attested to Paul's authorship without question. Polycarp, Justin Martyr, and Ignatius all affirm that Paul wrote the book.

2 Thessalonians was written from Corinth a few months after 1 Thessalonians on Paul's second missionary journey. This letter is more authoritative (3:14 is a great example) yet tempered with gentleness (see 3:15). While the issues the church faced were of great importance, it appears these things had not yet grown to a level where the church's future was threatened. Overall, Paul was very thankful for this congregation and its love for the Lord.

1:1-2 – Introduction

Something unique about both letters to the Thessalonians is that Paul does not include his title as an apostle in his name. This tells us there were, at least at this time, no internal challenges to the authority he had been given by our Lord. Silvanus (a.k.a Silas) and Timothy are mentioned as Paul's companions.

1:3-5 – A Growing Faith

Many interpret 2 Thessalonians 1:3–12 within the broader context of the letter differently. Some see it as both the opening thanksgiving and the beginning of the main body, focusing on the Thessalonians' suffering. Others consider it part of a larger segment that extends to 2 Thessalonians 2:17, aimed at reassuring the Thessalonians about their salvation. Finally some believe it is the introduction to the letter, setting the tone and introducing the main theme, the Day of the Lord. It is the first of two thanksgiving sections³⁰ that lead into passages of exhortation.

Paul's intense desire to praise the Thessalonians was due to their faithfulness and spiritual growth, which compelled him to express continual gratitude—a theme reflected across his letters³¹. He viewed this as a divine obligation and also as an appropriate response to their outstanding spiritual behavior.

Paul emphasizes three main reasons for his praise:

Growing Faith

The Thessalonians' faith was intensively growing, not only in their trust in Christ but also in their ethical living. The term used for "growing" highlights the extraordinary increase in their faith since his first letter. *Flourishing* (CSB) is written intensively and denotes something that has grown beyond what is expected. This is amazing, considering how their faith had grown under intense persecution. It is in this way that persecution has a revealing effect. When it comes, it will make known the authenticity of one's faith. For the one genuinely committed to Christ, persecution strengthens faith by driving the Christian to God, forcing them to depend on Him. False faith falters under persecution.

Increasing Love

Their love for each other increased, evidenced by their active ministry and interpersonal relationships, as previously noted in 1 Thessalonians. This is the love of eager, sacrificial service – a true mark of a Christian (John 13:34-35).

Perseverance and Hope

Paul's joy for the Thessalonians is emphasized through his vocal and public praise of their spiritual resilience amid severe hardships. He openly boasted about their faithfulness in all the churches he visited, expressing gratitude to the Lord for their progress and celebrating the impressive spiritual victories they had achieved. The ongoing use of the present tense and the word "all" in his writings highlights that their opposition has continued relentlessly even after Paul's departure to Berea. He describes their struggles as "persecutions and trials," indicating the severe and unyielding nature of the challenges they endure. The local pagans were intensely opposed to the young church, exerting all efforts, except martyrdom, to suppress it.

1:5-10 – Will the Sacrifice and Suffering Be Worth It?

The justice of God would serve as a source of immense encouragement for the Thessalonians, assuring them that God would compensate them for their sufferings for Christ. Here, Paul uses a courtroom metaphor where the "evidence" demonstrates that God's judgments are both correct and inherently just (similar to the themes found in the book of Revelation), defending the righteousness of God's decisions.

The "evidence" may not be just their endurance but the persecutions themselves. The suffering they endured was not just to be seen as hardship but something that would change and mold them for the better. Shaping through suffering is seen as preparing them to be worthy of God's kingdom, indicative of their present and future glory. Thus, Paul wanted them to see that their current trials were part of a divine process where God's just nature was already making itself known

1:6-7a – What Divine Justice Looks Like

There are two sides to God's justice: punishment for those who do evil and relief for those experiencing persecution. What the pagan detractors were doing to God's people would be done to them. The word

“repay” in verse 6 is a term of business describing to pay back what has been earned.³² Here, the pay back is justice for the affliction that has been dealt out to God’s people. Reciprocity is God’s prerogative and He will deal justly with those who work evil:

So I will choose their punishment, and I will bring on them what they dread because I called and no one answered; I spoke and they did not listen; they did what was evil in my sight and chose what I did not delight in (Isaiah 66:4).

A sound of uproar from the city! A voice from the temple— the voice of the LORD, paying back his enemies what they deserve! (Isaiah 66:6)

Look, the Lord will come with fire— his chariots are like the whirlwind— to execute his anger with fury and his rebuke with flames of fire (Isaiah 66:15).

Those who are faithful will experience the opposite. Instead of fire and wrath, they will receive rest and relief. The Thessalonian brethren were in the middle of dealing with hostility and opposition that had grown into to persecution and hardship. Although there was no immediate promise of relief, there was a firm assurance of eventual and ultimate relief, which will bring not only an end to the suffering but also eternal honor and glory.

1:7b-10 – The Day of Judgment

The day of judgment will occur when the Lord returns from heaven with his powerful angels (1:7b).

For those outside of Christ

Verse eight contains the reasons for judgment:

1. The world “does not know God.”
2. Those who have heard the gospel and intentionally reject it and choose to live a life of sin.

Verse nine explains the punishment that will be meted out. *They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction from the Lord's presence and from his glorious strength.* This seems to align with Jesus’ teachings³³ where He taught that the punishment is *eternal* – punishment that will never end and will be ongoing throughout eternity. It would also parallel Peter’s writing in 2 Peter 3:7, 10.

The second half of verse nine also gives us another picture of what is meant by *eternal* punishment: something far worse than any suffering, as it involves eternal separation from God's presence and all the goodness He provides. The wicked will be completely engulfed in evil, forced to exist solely within its bounds. This extreme severity of punishment is starkly contrasted in scriptures such as Isaiah 2:10, 19, 21, where God's enemies flee from His majestic presence. Here, they are irrevocably cut off from it. This separation from God's divine dwelling presence—represents the ultimate contrast to the blessed assurance given to God’s followers, who are promised eternal companionship with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17; Revelation 21:3–4). The horror of this eternal isolation, submerged in the depths of all evil, is unimaginably awful and impossible to describe.

For Those in Christ

On the day of judgment, Christ will first be "glorified among the saints." We will share in Christ's glory, having received glorified bodies as mentioned in Philippians 3:21. This event will see Christ revealed in

His glory to the world, with His people participating in this glory, while their persecutors witness and acknowledge this splendor on the day of Christ's return. Paul also says Christ will be "marveled at" by all believers. , the wonder and awe we experience in initially encountering Jesus will be even more profound at His return. His coming will be an event beyond human description.

1:11-12 – A Prayer For Them to Follow Through

All the future promises of being at home with God experiencing rest from this life carries present responsibilities for Christians. We must live lives worthy of God's calling, acknowledging that He is the active force in making us worthy. Through prayer, Paul requests that God will fully develop their desires for goodness and actions driven by faith, reflecting the idea in Philippians 1:6 that God who began a good work in believers will complete it.

Next, Paul prays for divine strength for believers to fulfill their inner desires for goodness and the resulting external deeds of faith. He believes that a good life stimulates a deeper faith, which in turn inspires actions aligned with God's will. This process is seen as God completing His work in believers, enabling them to live victorious lives.

Finally, in verse 12, Paul outlines two purposes for his prayers:

1. That the name of Jesus may be glorified in believers, which not only has a future application but also a present one as Christ is glorified in their current lives of faith.
2. That believers may share in Christ's glory, a process initiated now through God's grace and to be fully realized in eternity.

What's In This For Us?

Perseverance in Trials: The Thessalonians' ability to grow in faith and love despite ongoing persecution is a powerful example for modern Christians. Trials can strengthen our faith and deepen our dependence on God, encouraging us to lean into our spiritual family and God's strength in times of adversity.

Living in Expectation of Christ's Return: The recurring theme of the imminent return of Jesus serves as a reminder to live in a way that reflects our readiness for His coming. We need to conduct our lives with eternity in mind, prioritizing spiritual growth and readiness over worldly concerns.

Active Engagement in Your Spiritual Family: Addressing the problem of idleness, Paul emphasizes the importance of each member contributing to the life of the church. This serves as a call to engage actively in our local congregation, using our gifts to serve others and foster a vibrant church life.

Upholding Justice and Integrity: As Christians, we are called to trust in God's ultimate justice and respond to evil with goodness, reflecting God's character in all dealings.

Conclusion

Through Paul's letters, we are reminded of the power of enduring faith, the importance of being engaged with the local church, the anticipation of Christ's return, and the reliance on divine justice. These themes

not only offer comfort and encouragement but also call us to live out our faith actively and purposefully. As we reflect on Paul's words to the Thessalonian church, we see the need to cultivate a resilient and growing faith, to contribute positively to our family and church, to live with an eternal perspective, and to maintain integrity in all our actions. When we embrace these things, we not only reflect His glory but also advance His mission here on earth.

For Discussion

1. How does the Thessalonians' response to persecution serve as a model for contemporary Christians facing trials and hardships today?
2. In what ways can we prepare ourselves spiritually for the return of Jesus, as emphasized in 2 Thessalonians?
3. How does the issue of idleness addressed by Paul relate to modern challenges within the church?
4. What lessons can we learn from Paul's emphasis on the justice of God in terms of how we handle personal grievances or injustices?
5. How does the promise of God's final judgment influence our daily actions and decisions?
6. Discuss the impact of enduring hardships for the sake of Christ as depicted in 2 Thessalonians. How does this shape our understanding of suffering?
7. What does it mean to live a life "worthy of God's calling"? How can you apply this in practical terms within your life?
8. Paul talks about the glory that believers will share with Christ. What does this glory look like in everyday life, and how does it affect our interactions with others?
9. How can we cultivate an atmosphere in the church that actively contributes to each other's spiritual growth and practical needs, avoiding the pitfalls of idleness?
10. How does the assurance that believers will be glorified with Christ influence our perspective on current struggles and the future hope laid out in scripture?

³⁰ 1 Thessalonians 1:3-12 and 2:13-14 are the book's two thanksgiving passages.

³¹ See Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Philippians 1:4.

³² Osborne, p. 159.

³³ See Matthew 12:32; 18:8; 25:41, 46.