



2 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians is a letter written to a community who were struggling with both persecution from those outside and misunderstanding from those inside the community. In the face of this Paul talked about the importance of remaining faithful to Jesus while they waited for his return.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 7 minutes
Short of time? Just read 1.1-2.4; 3.6-18



Genre

Epistle



Anything tricky?

2 Thessalonians is very different to 1 Thessalonians; it is written into a different context and has much less warmth than 1 Thessalonians. It doesn't quite 'fit' with 1 Thessalonians in terms either of style or of content. It is also much harsher than other letters. See what you think as you read it.



Inspiring quotes

¹¹To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, ¹²so 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 Thessalonians 1.11-12)

¹³But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

(2 Thessalonians 2.13)

⁵May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

(2 Thessalonians 3.5)



About the Author

Like 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians gives its authors as Paul, Silvanus and Timothy.

The problem with 2 Thessalonians is, as mentioned above, that it is completely different in style, tone and content from 1 Thessalonians (as well as from most other Pauline letters). As a result, some scholars think that it was written by a follower of Paul at a later date, using the themes of 1 Thessalonians as a guide. There is very little agreement about this. Some people argue strongly that Paul definitely wrote it; other say that he definitely didn't. You will need to decide what you think about this.

What do we know about him?

Paul is probably the best known of all the early Christians. Before encountering Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a zealous Pharisee who sought to maintain the purity of Judaism. After his experience on the Damascus road, he turned his zeal to proclaiming Jesus Christ among the Gentiles. This brought him into conflict with some other early Christians, not least Peter, who thought that followers of Jesus Christ should convert to Judaism. He travelled around the Roman Empire (though primarily in Asia Minor – modern-day Turkey – and Greece) proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and founding communities

of Christians as he went. He also wrote a large number of letters, 13 of which are preserved in the New Testament. 2 Thessalonians is one of these.

Silvanus is assumed to be the Silas, referred to in Acts, who accompanied Paul on his first and second missionary journeys. He is first mentioned in Acts 15.22 where he was selected by the Jerusalem church to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. From there he travelled onwards with Paul. He was with Paul in Philippi where they were both imprisoned but freed from their imprisonment by an earthquake. He is mentioned as co-author of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and also mentioned in 2 Corinthians (1.19) and 1 Peter (5.12).

Timothy was born in Lystra in Asia Minor of a Jewish mother and Greek father. Acts 16.1-3 recounts his meeting of Paul in Lystra and of Paul's desire to take him with him on his journeys. Paul often sent Timothy to communities that he had founded to take letters to them and so that he could report to Paul about what was going on, as indeed he did with the Thessalonians (see 1 Thessalonians 3.2 and 6). Two letters in the New Testament (1 and 2 Timothy) are reputed to be letters of encouragement from Paul to Timothy in Ephesus. Christian tradition identifies Timothy as the first Bishop of Ephesus.



About the times

There are two entirely different dates proposed for 2 Thessalonians.

If you think that Paul wrote it then it would be dated to the mid-50s (ad 54-56).

If you think that Paul didn't write it but that someone later wrote it then it would be dated somewhere between ad 80 and 100.

It is entirely up to you to decide what you think about this, you could even decide that you can't decide!

What were people feeling?

Whenever you date this book it is clear that there are two key issues at play. The recipients are struggling with some kind of persecution and with anxiety about being deceived.



How is it structured?

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| 1.1-12 | Opening and thanksgiving for faithful endurance (along with destruction for those who don't obey the gospel) |
| 2.1-12 | Further thoughts on the day of the Lord |
| 2.13-3.5 | Prayer for the Thessalonians and requests for prayer |
| 3.6-15 | Warnings about idleness and disobedience |
| 3.16-18 | Farewells |



What kind of Book is it?

An epistle. However, this epistle reads quite differently from most other Pauline letters. It has a harder, sharper edge (even than epistles like Galatians) and promises destruction on those not obeying the gospel.



Look out for...

We have noted already 2 Thessalonians is an altogether harsher book than other New Testament epistles. It talks of punishments, of the lawless one, of the dangers of disobedience and idleness. Keep an eye out for these themes as you read and ask yourself why the tone of this letter might feel so much more fearful than other letters.

This letter also spends longer on the 'coming of our Lord Jesus Christ' than most other books. Reflect on these teachings – how do they make you feel?



What could this mean for me?

In some ways the tone of 2 Thessalonians – with its warnings of punishments and destruction of non-believers – feels quite like the Old Testament. Is there a place for this, do you think, in our faith today?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Do you agree that this letter is different from other New Testament letters? If yes, why? If not, why not?
- What did you make of the strong theme of punishment in the book? We rarely talk about this kind of thing today – should we?
- The condemnation of idleness in chapter 3 was hugely influential on Victorian values – what are your views about it? Are we idle today?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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