

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians

(SB_2Thess_Chapters 2 & 3)

In chapter 1, Paul opened his second letter to the believers of Thessalonica comments of thankfulness for their continued faithfulness in spite of the continued opposition, persecution and attempts to distort the Truth that Paul had previously communicated to them.

- These wonderful believers were commended for their observable love for each other, their growth in their faith, and their patient endurance of persecution (1:3-4).
- Paul reminds these believers that unbelievers who persecute believers will face future judgment and destruction. The Lord will come again and destroy unbelieving evildoers (1:5-10).
- In Paul’s narrative, the judgment associated with His 2nd coming will be preparatory to (and is closely associated with) the judgment of the Great White Judgment Throne.
- Paul addresses the relationship between the two distinct events – not the chronological separation between them.
- Paul closes chapter 1 with a brief prayer that these believers would fulfill God’s “work of faith with power” (1:11) so that the name of Jesus Christ might be glorified.

Among other things, in 1st Thessalonians, Paul addressed questions regarding the resurrection of these Gentile believers (both dead and living) at the Rapture, whereas in 2nd Thessalonians, Paul’s focus was to address questions relating to “the day of the Lord.”¹ Evidently, shortly after Paul wrote 1st Thessalonians, other questions surfaced. Someone had either taught or in some way stirred up doubt and anxiety amongst these Thessalonian believers. The point of confusion centered around whether they might have missed the Rapture and were already experiencing the “day of the Lord” since they were experiencing persecution and tribulation – a characteristic of believers during the “day of the Lord.”

These verses contain truth about the end times that can only be understood when properly reconciled with other Scripture. These future events are central to the message of this epistle.

CLARIFICATION OF “THE DAY OF THE LORD” (2 THESS 2:1-17)

The Beginning of “the Day of the Lord” (2 Thess 2:1-5)

1 Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, 2 that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if

¹ There are very pronounced and observable distinctions between the Rapture, the Tribulation period and the 2nd Advent in 1st Thessalonians as Paul deals with the *parousia* or “coming” of the Lord – a term and phrase that embraces all of the events surrounding the 2nd Advent including the Rapture. In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Paul encourages these believers to “wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath [*i.e. the Tribulation period*] to come.” So, this verse contains allusions to the Rapture and the Tribulation period. In 1 Thessalonians 3:13, Paul is probably referencing the 2nd Advent when he expresses the desire that “He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.” In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, Paul explains the order of resurrection associated with the Rapture event. (Verse 14 is probably a reference to the 2nd Advent and in verses 15-17 Paul provides elaboration regarding how these believers are resurrected so that they are “with Him” at the 2nd Advent). In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Paul contrasts the attitudes of unbelievers with the attitudes of believers regarding “the day of the Lord” (*i.e. the Tribulation and 2nd Advent*).

from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 3 Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 4 who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. 5 Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

In verse 1, Paul clearly indicates that he is speaking of the Rapture – “and our gathering together to Him.” As will be developed, Paul’s point was that they had not missed the Rapture in spite of what others might be saying.

Apparently the source of confusion had arisen from several sources – false prophets, messages delivered by teachers of falsehood, and letters, some of which had been ascribed to Paul or one of his companions (cf. 2 Thess 3:17 – “the salutation of Paul with my own hand which is a sign in every epistle; so I write”). It is no small wonder that there was confusion amongst these new believers; however, Paul reminds them that he had taught them all of these things while he was with them (v. 5). We may ask how they could have been so easily confused by all of this false teaching after Paul had evidently so clearly communicated the Truth to them based upon his own testimony in verse 5? The answer probably rests in the fact that all of that communication had been verbal, there was no accepted canon of Scripture at that point and the responsibility of the administration of God’s revelation to mankind was going through a rapid change.

The false message that they were in the “day of the Lord” because of the pressures they were experiencing made them question how Paul could speak of the Lord’s return as preceding the “day of the Lord” (1 Thess 1:10) and that they would not see God’s wrath – a reference to the Tribulation era (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9).² Paul clearly taught a pre-Tribulation Rapture, but they were having difficulties distinguishing between the current persecution they were experiencing and the persecution that Paul had taught that would be associated with the “day of the Lord” (i.e. the Tribulation). The result in their lives was a loss of composure and disturbance of soul.

Principle: When we cannot reconcile what we see and hear in life with what is revealed in God’s Word, there is a great potential for us to be “shaken” (from Gr. *saleuo* – σαλευω) in our “composure” (or “mind” – Gr. *nous* – νους). (The same Greek word – *saleuo* – was used by Luke in Acts 17:13 to describe the unbelievers, the Judaizers, the agitators who followed Paul from Thessalonica and stirred up the people of Berea).

Principle: When the believer loses “composure,” the believer has accepted what he/she has empirically observed to be reality instead of God’s revealed Truth.

Question: Is it not clear in Scripture that God desires us to be people of “composure,” i.e. people who know and live with confidence, assurance and a peace that passes the understanding of the rest of the world?

Principle: Not all that is empirically observable or rationally deduced in this life and in this world is of the Lord.

In verse 3, Paul indicates that there are two things which will attend the coming of the “day of the Lord.” First, the “apostasy” must accompany the “day of the Lord.” It is important to note that Paul does not explicitly state that this “apostasy” precedes the “day of the Lord.” Second, the “man of lawlessness” must be revealed. I will not present every interpretation that

² As we have previously observed, the “day of the Lord” is a phrase in Scripture that, depending upon context, embraces any part of the Tribulation, the 2nd Advent, the Messianic Kingdom, and the great white throne judgment (cf. Psa 2:9; Isa 11:1-12, 13; Joel 2; Amos 5:18; Zeph 3:14-20 and many other passages).

exists regarding this verse. Instead, I will just present the interpretation that I believe to be correct or at least consistent with what I understand.

The Greek word translated "apostasy" is *apostasia* (Gr. ἀποστασία). This Greek word means a "rebellion" or a "falling away." After the Rapture of believers from this earth, conditions will be ripe for a world leader to emerge who will be embraced by those who remain. Conditions will be ripe because there will be only unbelievers initially and unbelievers will constitute the majority of the world's population. The "apostasy" is simply a reference to the mass abandonment or revolt against the Truth of the gospel of the kingdom and the promised Messiah of Scripture in favor of the claims and promises of the false-Christ.

The "man of lawlessness" is a reference to the anti-Christ. At a certain point in the Tribulation, the anti-Christ will require his statue to be erected in the Temple in Jerusalem and be worshipped by all (cf. Dan 7:25; 8:11-14; 11:37, 45; Rev 13:2-18). That event had not yet occurred at the time of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. This will be a very distinguishable event as emphasized by Paul's use of a tense of the verb translated "is revealed" that highlights this event to be a very decisive act that will take place at a definite point or moment in history.³

That "distinguishable" event will be when the anti-Christ is very clearly distinguished or set apart from those co-regents with whom he has co-governed during the first 3 ½ years of the Tribulation era. He is the "little horn" that emerges and becomes the most prominent amongst the kings known as "the beast" in Revelation 13, 17 & 18 (cf. Dan 7:8, 20-25). This "little horn" will be indwelt by Satan after experiencing a mortal wound and a pseudo-resurrection orchestrated by Satan. He will then be empowered and indwelt by Satan, thus making him a super-mortal of sorts. This will occur in very close chronological proximity to his breaking of his peace-treaty with Israel and the erection of his statue in the temple in Jerusalem which he will require to be worshipped.

Paul's point was that the absence of these phenomena was evidence that the "day of the Lord" (i.e. the Tribulation) had not yet arrived. The *Expositor's Bible Commentary* supports this interpretation very well.

His proof of the day's nonpresence consists of citing two phenomena that had not yet occurred. The text does not explicitly say whether these will come before the day of the Lord or immediately after it begins, because the Greek sentence is not complete, but it presupposes something to be added from the previous verse; i.e., "that day will not come" (NIV) or "that day is not present" (cf. note). Grammatically similar constructions elsewhere ([Matt 12:29](#); [Mark 3:27](#); [John 7:51](#); [Rom 15:24](#)) show these two happenings are conceived of as within the day of the Lord, not prior to it. The day of the Lord had not yet arrived because these two conspicuous phenomena that will dominate the day's opening phase had not yet happened.⁴

Obviously, had "the rebellion" and the revealing of "the man of lawlessness" already taken place when Paul was writing this letter, then the teaching of the priority of the rapture to "the day of the Lord" would have been called into question. But here in [2 Thessalonians 2](#) Paul is not discussing the timing of the rapture. He is simply reassuring his readers that "the day of the Lord" had not come. Nor does he at any place in this context ([2Thess 2:1-12](#)) tell his readers that they will at some future time "see" the two initial phenomena of "the day of

³ Paul uses the aorist, passive, subjunctive of *apokalupthē* (Gr. ἀποκαλυφθῆ).

⁴ Frank E. Gaebelin, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1989-1998), electronic version.

the Lord." Had he said that, there would indeed be a problem. But he did not speak of the Thessalonians' actually seeing the phenomena. He simply stressed the present nonarrival of the phenomena.⁵

The troubled at Thessalonica could take heart in knowing they had not missed the gathering of those in Christ at the *parousia* (v. 1). Their present persecutions were not identifiable with those to be inflicted by the man of lawlessness on a later group of saints after the eschatological day begins.⁶

After the catching away of those in Christ (1Thess 4:17), all who are truly in him will be gone. Conditions will be ripe for people, especially those who call themselves Christian but are not really such, to turn their backs on God in what they do as well as in what they already have in thought. Then their insincerity will demonstrate itself outwardly. This worldwide anti-God movement will be so universal as to earn for itself a special designation: "*the apostasy*"--i.e., the climax of the increasing apostate tendencies evident before the rapture of the church.⁷

Following and in conjunction with the apostasy will come the unveiling of a mighty figure embodying everything opposed to God. His whereabouts before his unveiling are not given. He will be alive for years before his unveiling, but his dramatic public presentation will occur after the rebellion begins.⁸

The Restrainer (2 Thess 2:6-17)

6 And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. 8 Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; 9 that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, 10 and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. 11 For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, 12 in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. 13 But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. 14 It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. 16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, 17 comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.

We have dealt with verses 6-8 in previous studies, so I will not spend much time developing and supporting my understanding and interpretation of these verses in this lesson. The best explanation to date that I have found for this passage is expressed and summarized in

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

the following rendering with interpretative inserts. The net of it all – the “restraining” is simply Satan holding onto his place in heaven – a place from which he will be excluded at a point in the future (see Rev 12:7-12).

And you know what [*neuter pronoun – a reference to the abyss, the abode of Satan and the demons once they are cast from heaven; Satan wants to delay his confinement there*] restrains him [*“is holding him” – the verb is transitive requires an object, thus the implied “him” as supplied in the NASV*] now, so that in his time he [*the Anti-Christ empowered by Satan*] may be revealed. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he [*a reference to Satan*] who now restrains [*“holds fast” – a reference to Satan holding onto his place in heaven until he is cast out of heaven at the middle of the Tribulation – see Rev 12:7-12*] will do so until he is taken out of the way [*a reference to Satan being cast out of heaven – probably at the mid-point of the seven-year Tribulation period*]. 8 And then that lawless one [*the Anti-Christ*] will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming [*2nd Advent*]; 9 that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders. (2 Thess 2:6-9)⁹

And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, 8 and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night. 11 “And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death. 12 “For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time.” (Rev 12:7-12)

Note the consistency between Paul’s teaching regarding these future events and what the rest of Scripture teaches regarding these same events. As one example, Paul’s description of the destruction and end of the “man of lawlessness” is consistent with the interpretation provided in Daniel 2:42-45 of the ultimate end and destruction of the “feet of iron and clay” of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (described in Daniel 2:34-35). John describes his end in Revelation 17:14 & 19:11-21.

EXHORTATION AND CORRECTION (2 THESS 3:1-18)

1 Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord will spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; 2 and that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. 4 We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. 5 May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. 6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not

⁹ See E.W. Bullinger, *Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1984), 407 for an analysis of this passage that supports this interpretation.

according to the tradition which you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; 9 not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. 13 But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. 14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. 15 Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother. 16 Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance The Lord be with you all! 17 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Since this study is a part of a "survey of the Bible" series, I will not present a detailed exegesis of this chapter. Rather, the following highlights are noteworthy.

- Note Paul's humility to request prayer from the very believers that he is instructing as a spiritual father (v. 1 & 3).
- The opposition from unbelievers is associated with "the evil one" (v. 3).
- As an apostle, Paul had the right (and exercised it) to "command" with authority (v. 4 & 6).
- As a servant-leader, Paul did not exercise his authority in the same way the authorities of this world do. He set the example (v. 9) by supporting himself and not asking for or demanding financial support to which he was entitled.
- Paul could not stomach "users" – those believers who wanted to take advantage of the generosity of others or those who were freeloaders (v. 10).
- The believer should lead a disciplined life; otherwise, the testimony of that believer is compromised (v. 11). There is great truth to the old axiom that "idle minds and idle hands are the devil's workshop."
- Believers are to not grow weary of producing divine good (vs. human good).
- Believers who are committed to orthodoxy and ortho-praxy should separate from believers who oppose the Truth and who try to spread distortions of Truth based on speculation, rumors and conjectures derived from teachings contrary to Truth and contrary to spiritual leaders who have proven themselves to be trustworthy (v. 14). (This is behavior that is distinct from legitimate questions – a point that should be intuitive since Paul has devoted two letters to such questions).
- The separation is not to be handled in an adversarial fashion, rather it should be handled in a fashion similar to the way one would deal with a family member (v. 15). We explain our actions, we speak with them, but we do not let them control or dominate and we do not enable them to continue to sow seeds of discord and disrupt the spiritual progress of the rest of the body.