

# 2 Thessalonians - Introduction & Background

## Authorship

Paul identifies himself as the author two times in the book (1:1; 3:17). Although Paul uses the expression "we" in connection with the first reference (1:1, 3), the second reference (3:17) leaves little doubt that Paul is the sole author of this epistle. The view that Paul was the author enjoys strong external support.<sup>1</sup> Not only did the church fathers not contradict Pauline authorship but many of them also mentioned Paul as the author. In fact, that external support for the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians may be stronger than the external support favoring the Pauline authorship of 1 Thessalonians. Pauline authorship was so readily accepted that rationalistic critics did not challenge it until the 19th century. Despite this evidence favoring Pauline authorship, the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians remains one of the most doubted books in the Pauline corpus next to Ephesians and the pastoral letters.<sup>2</sup> However, most of the argument used to deny Pauline authorship can be readily answered. For example, some say that imminence exists in the first letter while it is lacking in the second letter. According to this argument, although "we" is used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, it is absent in the second letter. Yet such imminence is noticeable in the second letter (2:1). It is also argued that the linguistic features of 2 Thessalonians differ markedly from Paul's ordinary style. However, such a deviation could have to do with the differing tone of the letter or the employment of a different amanuensis. Others contend that the tone of 2 Thessalonians is more formal and distant than that of 1 Thessalonians. Yet such a change in tone could pertain to the change in circumstances that gave rise to the second letter. Moreover, some have suggested that the letter reveals more Old Testament data than what Gentiles would have been aware of. However, Gentiles that frequented the synagogue would have a firm understanding of the Old Testament (Acts 17:1-10). Finally, some have questioned the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians on the grounds that it is unlikely that Paul would have addressed the same audience twice within such a short period of time on the same subject matter. However, such similarity of subject matter actually lends more credence to authenticity rather than inauthenticity. Also, it is not out of character for Paul to do so given the similar content and short period of time in between the "severe letter" and 2 Corinthians.<sup>3</sup>

## Place of Writing and Date

The place of writing was Corinth. 2 Thessalonians 1:1 records Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy as being together. The New Testament indicates that these three were together only in Corinth (Acts 18:5). Moreover, the concerns of the second letter arose out of problems that were discussed in the first letter (1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6-15). Thus, the second letter was probably written as an urgent response to many of the issues surfaced in the first letter. Therefore, the second letter was probably written within 6 to 12 months of the first letter. In sum, it seems likely that 2 Thessalonians was written from Corinth sometime in between late A.D. 51 and early A.D. 52.

### **Purpose and Occasion for Writing**

Since Paul had written to the Thessalonians, more problems had developed within the church. Paul became aware of these problems either from the messenger who delivered 1 Thessalonians, from someone Paul sent to check on the status of the church, or from someone who informed Paul of what was going on in Thessalonica. There was some good news. The Thessalonians had continued to grow and remain faithful in spite of persecution. There was also some bad news. A false understanding of the Day of the Lord had arisen. Because people believed that the Day of the Lord had already begun they were quitting their jobs in light of the soon return of Christ. Paul's credibility had no doubt come under fire because the inauguration of the Day of the Lord contradicted his previous teaching that the believers would be kept out of this terrible time period (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9). This false teaching had spread because of a forged letter alleged to have come from Paul indicating that the Day of the Lord had begun (2 Thess 2:1-2). It is likely that the very unbelieving Jews that had Paul removed from the city disseminated this forged letter in an attempt to undermine Paul's credibility. These urgent circumstances prompted Paul to write. In chapter 1, Paul commends the Thessalonians for enduring persecution. In chapter two, he corrects the Thessalonians' false understanding concerning the inauguration of the Day of the Lord. In chapter three, he deals with the practical consequences of their wrong view of eschatology.

### **Message**

The message of 2 Thessalonians is that correct living emanates from a correct view of the future. In chapter one, Paul encourages the Thessalonians in the midst of persecution by informing them that God will execute future judgment upon their enemies. Thus, encouragement in the present comes from a proper eschatological understanding. In chapter two, Paul corrects the false eschatology that the Day of the Lord has begun. In chapter three, he deals with the mentality that seeks to use the soon return of Christ as an excuse for escaping life's responsibilities. In sum, while a correct eschatological understanding leads to encouragement and a proper balance between waiting for the Lord and work, a wrong eschatology negates these things.

### **Outline**

I. Commendation for enduring persecution (2 Thess 1:1-12)

- (1) Salutation to the Thessalonians (1:1-2)
  - (A) Senders (1:1a)
  - (B) Recipients (1:1b)
  - (C) Greeting (1:2)
- (2) Encouragement in the midst of persecution (1:3-12)
  - (A) Thanksgiving for the persecuted (1:3-4)
  - (B) Reason for the persecution (1:5)
  - (C) Destiny of the persecutors (1:6-10)
  - (D) Prayer for continued progress (1:11-12)

II. Doctrinal correction (2 Thess 2:1-17)

- (1) Problem stated (2:1-2)
- (2) Prerequisites of the Day of the Lord (2:3-10)
  - (A) Apostasy (2:3a)
  - (B) Revealing of the man of lawlessness (2:3b-12)
    - (a) Description of the man of lawlessness (2:3b-4)
    - (b) Removal of the restrainer (2:5-7)
    - (c) Destruction of the lawless one (2:8-9)
    - (d) The destruction of the lawless one's followers (2:10-12)
- (3) The contrasting destiny of the righteous (2:13-17)
  - (A) Thanksgiving for their calling (2:13-14)
  - (B) Exhortation to stand firm (2:15)
  - (C) Prayer for strength (2:16-17)

III. Consequences of poor doctrine (2 Thess 3:1-18)

- (1) Reciprocal prayer (3:1-5)
  - (A) Prayer for the missionaries (3:1-2)
    - (a) Spread of the message (3:1)
    - (b) Paul's deliverance (3:2)
  - (B) Prayer for the Thessalonians (3:3-5)
    - (a) Protection from Satan (3:3)
    - (b) Continued obedience (3:4)
    - (c) Greater intimacy with God (3:5)
- (2) Exhortation to discipline the idle (3:6-15)
  - (A) The exhortation (3:6)
  - (B) A better example (3:7-9)
  - (C) The reasons for the exhortation (3:10-11)
  - (D) The exhortation for the lazy to work (3:12)
  - (E) The need for patience (3:13)

- (F) The procedure of discipline (3:14-15)
  - (a) Negative aspect: disassociation and shame (3:14)
  - (b) Positive aspect: treat disciplinee as a brother (3:15)
- (3) Conclusion (3:16-18)
  - (A) Benediction of peace (3:16)
  - (B) Claim of authorship (3:17)
  - (C) Benediction of grace (3:18)

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### **Authorship**

- 2 Thess 1:1; 3:17 - both mention Paul definitively
  - Paul was attributed as the author of 2 Thess for 1900 years, until the "Higher Criticism" movement began in Europe about 100 years ago that liberal theologians decided to question Paul's authorship
- Strong external support

### **Audience**

- The church in Thessalonica (not to the city/residents of Thessalonica in general) (Cf. 1:1)
- Paul planted this church during his second missionary journey (Acts 17-18)
- He spent 6-12 months with them, after spending 3 weeks in the Jewish synagogue before they evicted him. After his 6-12 month stint among the Gentiles in Thessalonica, the unbelieving Jews began to persecute him and his team and ran them out of town.
- They ran him out of town due to jealousy at his fruitfulness among the Gentiles
- He and his team left Thessalonica and headed to Athens, then went on to Corinth, which is the location from which he wrote both 1 & 2 Thessalonians

### **Place of Writing**

- Corinth (Cf. 1:1; Acts 18:5)
  - When you compare the people who were with Paul when he wrote 2 Thess with Acts 18:5, which describes his team when he was in Corinth, they are the same people

### **Date of Writing**

- 2 Thess arose out of concerns raised in the 1 Thess
  - This is how we know the order of the letters (which came first)

- The issues raised in 1 Thess seemed to have gotten worse, thus the need for Paul to write 2 Thess
  - Issues in 1 Thess that had gotten worse in 2 Thess:
    - 1 Thess 4:11-12: there was a problem in 1 Thess about people becoming lazy and working a regular job. This problem seems to be much worse when Paul wrote 2 Thess.
    - 1 Thess 5:14: there was a problem with some of the congregation being "unruly" and Paul instructed in his letter for the church to "admonish" them.
  - These two issues had become so bad by the time Paul wrote 2 Thess, he was forced to address them more harshly and directly:
    - 2 Thess 3:6-15 (addressing 1 Thess 5:14):
- 2 Thess was written 6-12 months after he wrote 1 Thess; 2 Thess was the third letter Paul wrote
- Late 51 AD to early 52 AD

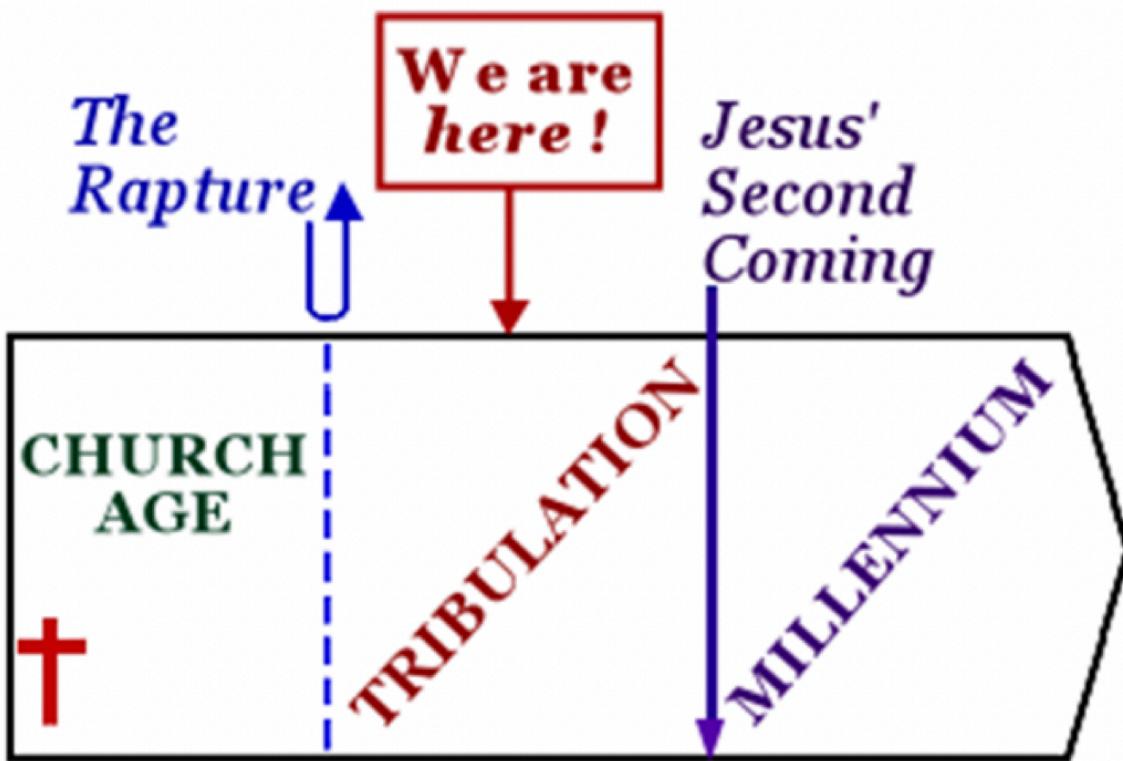
| Paul's Ministry Chronology |                              |             |          |  |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------|----------|--|
| # of books                 | Journey                      | Acts        | Date     | Books  |
| 1                          | 1                            | 13-14       | 48-49 AD | Galatians                                    |
| 2                          | 2                            | 15:36-18:22 | 50-52 AD | 1-2 Thessalonians                            |
| 3                          | 3                            | 18:23-21:17 | 53-57 AD | 1-2 Corinthians; Romans                      |
| 4                          | Trip to Rome                 | 28:16-31    | 60-62 AD | Ephesians; Colossians; Philemon; Philippians |
| 2                          | Between Imprisonments        | Post Acts   | 62-66 AD | 1 Timothy; Titus                             |
| 1                          | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Imprisonment | Post Acts   | 67 AD    | 2 Timothy                                    |

### Occasion

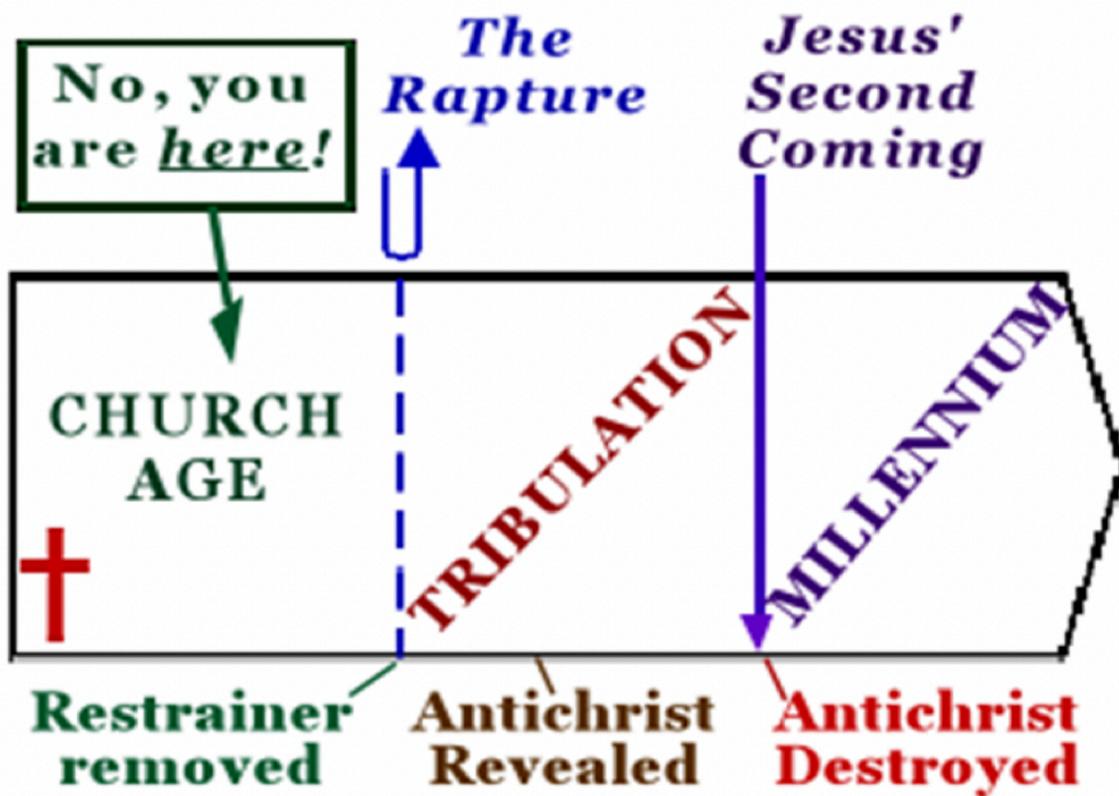
- Good news: continued growth despite persecution
  - The same unbelieving Jews who drove Paul and his team out of Thessalonica had turned on the Thessalonian church and began to persecute them and say all kinds of denigrating things to them about Paul and his ministry
  - Paul is pleased that they are growing in their faith despite persecution, even though they don't even have a NT at this point (maybe Galatians and possibly James, but that was it).
- Bad news:
  - Forgery (2:2)

- Either a letter, a spirit, or a message had come into the Thessalonica church, purportedly from Paul, which said that the Day of the Lord (Tribulation) had already begun
- Quit their jobs
  - After receiving this forged letter stated that the Day of the Lord had already begun, the Thessalonians figured that if Jesus was returning in less than 7 years, why do I need to hold down a job?
  - They began to drop out of responsibility because they "knew" that Jesus would return very soon. They didn't think it was necessary to do anything toward their future since Jesus was guaranteed to come back in less than 7 years (assuming they were in the Tribulation period at that point).
  - Since there was no NT at this point, these people had no formalized eschatology in the form of Scripture that they could refer to, which made them very open to deception. This left them to their own sanctified imaginations to determine what was really going on. ***This is what happens when people are left to their own devices to try to figure out the world around them, when they don't have proper teaching of Scripture to guide them.***
  - Same issue today, except the Thessalonians had an excuse...they had no NT at that point (only Galatians and James, if those had even reached Thessalonica at that point), and neither of those books deal with eschatological issues. Today, we have a completed canon of Scripture, yet because pastors don't teach eschatology and seminaries have de-emphasized it, there's a real lack of knowledge on what the Bible says will happen in the last days.
  - Instead of understanding the crazy world events that are going on today as stage-setting for the Tribulation, people open their Bible and try to correlate every newspaper headline with some passage of Scripture, often way off base.
- Attack on Paul's credibility (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9)
  - This forged letter gutted Paul's credibility because he taught then in 1 Thess that believers would be protected from the Tribulation period. So this forged letter, supposedly from Paul, contradicted Paul's earlier teaching to them and what he reiterated to them in 1 Thess (1:10; 5:9).
  - The Bible is "crisis literature" and once you understand the crisis that the Thessalonians were in, you can better understand what Paul wrote in this letter.

## The Thessalonians' False Idea



# Paul's Correction of their Error



Paul had also said some things in his first epistle from which his readers drew a false conclusion. He had said that Christ would return, and that His return could be very soon (1 Thess 4:15-18). He also said that the day of the Lord would come as a thief in the night: unexpectedly (1 Thess 5:2).

In view of what Paul had taught the Thessalonians about "the Day of the Lord" when he was with them (2 Thess 2:5), they wondered if that "day" had already begun. They wondered if they were in the Tribulation, and if the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. Teaching from several other sources had confirmed their suspicions (2 Thess 2:2), and intensified their questions about Paul's statements regarding future events that he had written in 1 Thess.

The apostle wrote 2 Thessalonians to correct these erroneous ideas. The "return of Christ," about which Paul had written, was not His Second Coming, but the Rapture. While "the day of the Lord" would arrive unexpectedly, it would be unexpected only by unbelievers.

Several predicted events would precede its commencement.

Paul made an important distinction in this epistle about future events. In 1 Thess, he had taught that the Lord's return *could* take place "very soon," and that the Day of the Lord *would* come as a "thief in the night." Consequently, he urged his readers to wait expectantly for the Lord (1 Thess 4:16-17; 5:2). In 2 Thess, he wrote that the Day of the Lord cannot begin immediately. Therefore his readers should continue their work (2 Thess 2). These statements may seem contradictory, but they are not. Paul distinguished these two truths in 2 Thess 2:1-2. The distinction is between "our gathering together to Him" (the Rapture, v1) and "the day of the Lord" (the Tribulation, v2). He wrote v1-12 to show the difference between the first event and the second period.

## New Revelation

Paul also gave definite new revelation about the Day of the Lord:

- (1) He said that presently "the mystery of lawlessness is at work" (2:7a). "Lawlessness" (rebellion against divine law) is the root trouble with human life individually, socially, nationally, and in every other sphere of life. The "mystery" of lawlessness is the new revelation he expounded here, concerning the course of lawlessness in the world and history, in space and time.
- (2) He revealed that in the future God will remove what is presently restraining lawlessness (2:7b). "The Restrainer" probably refers to the Church, which is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Lawlessness produces *corruption*, but the Church is the "salt of the earth," and "salt" prevents the spread of corruption. Lawlessness also produces *darkness*, but the Church is the "light of the world," and "light" dispels darkness.
- (3) Paul announced that in the future there will also be a crisis: the "man of lawlessness" will be revealed (2:8a). When will God withdraw the Spirit's present restraining ministry from the world? He will do so when He withdraws the Church from the world. When will He withdraw the Church from the world? He will do so at "our gathering together to Him" (v1, the Rapture). After that, the human leader of lawlessness will appear.
- (4) Finally, Paul taught that after this crisis, Jesus Christ will return to the earth to set up His kingdom (2:8b). Jesus will return at the end of the Tribulation, when the "man of lawlessness" is the prominent character on the stage of history. However, when Christ comes, He will destroy this Antichrist and curtail lawlessness (Cf. Ps 2).

## Structure

- 2 Thess 1: Commendation for growing in spite of persecution
- 2 Thess 2: Correction because they are NOT in the Day of the Lord, despite the forged letter
- 2 Thess 3: Consequences for their poor eschatology

## **Message ("working & waiting")**

A correct understanding of eschatology (2 Thess 2) leads to encouragement (2 Thess 1) and a proper balance between waiting and working (2 Thess 3)

### **Purpose**

To exhort the Thessalonians to adhere to a correct eschatology and thus live rightly. 2nd Thessalonians followed 1st Thessalonians by only a few months. Persecutions had begun. Paul had recently heard news about current conditions in the Thessalonian church. Some of the news was good. The majority of the Thessalonians were continuing to grow and to remain faithful to Christ, in spite of persecution. Unfortunately some of the news was bad. False teaching concerning the Day of the Lord had entered the church, causing confusion, and was leading some of the Christians to quit their jobs in expectation of the Lord's imminent return.

*It was in Thessalonica that the first Gentiles were killed in the Roman Empire. The local Roman governor in that part of the country said that every Christian had to bow before a statue of Augustus Caesar. He had been deified and statues of Caesar were erected everywhere. Christians who didn't obey the edict were persecuted...It was in Thessalonica that they dreamed up the procedure of offering a cask of wine on the altar to Venus or Caesar, and then publicly taking it out to the marketplace, sprinkling all the vegetables, meat, and other goods, announcing that it had all been dedicated to the god...Anyone who bought or ate any of it thereby worshipped a false god...Christians who stopped buying in the marketplace as a witness immediately became marked. The first crucifixions, the first burnings, and the first great persecutions of Christians began then. — Pliny, the Elder*

In view of these reports, Paul felt it necessary to write this epistle. He commended his children in the faith for their growth and faithfulness, corrected the doctrinal error about the day of the Lord, and warned the idle to get back to work. It is primarily a letter of correction—correction concerning persecution (2 Thess 1), concerning prophecy (2 Thess 2), and concerning practice (2 Thess 3).