

## 2 Thessalonians Chapter 1

### The Big Picture

The letter that Paul sent to the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians) had been received with joy. It had helped to clear up a lot of the concerns the church had, but there still remained confusion about the Day of the Lord. From the first verse of chapter two we are led to believe that either someone came there under the banner of Paul, or wrote a letter as from Paul, telling them that they were in the Day of the Lord. This caused no end to their confusion as Paul had taught them clearly that they were not participants in the Day of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5), but rather were looking for the coming of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4). Additionally, since many thought they were in the Day of the Lord, or that the coming of the Lord was imminent, they had quit their jobs and had “retreated to the mountaintops” waiting for the return of Christ. Thus, this letter has a two-fold purpose. One, to clear up remaining confusion about the Day of the Lord, and secondly, to command those who had become idle and busybodies to get back to work so as not to be a burden on the church.

In this first chapter, Paul commends the church for their continued faithfulness in the area of obedience, faith, and love. He then deals with the issue of the coming of the Lord in its two-fold purpose, first, to rescue the righteous from all their troubles, and secondly, to recompense the ungodly for their sin, rejection of Christ, and persecution of the church.

**1** Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

**2** Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As with 1 Thessalonians, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy were together at the writing of this letter. Since we note that all three were here, as well as in 1 Thessalonians, we are led to believe that this letter was written shortly after the first while Paul was on the same missionary journey. According to all that we know of Paul’s missionary activity on his second journey, this letter would have been written from Corinth while Paul was ministering in that city.

**3** We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth;

**4** So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure:

What is it that makes a church great? Is it a great choir? How about a well-known and gifted pastor? What about programs? How about a large budget or great numbers? In these two verses we find an answer quite different than the answer given by many churches today. In God’s sight, numbers, budgets, and giftedness do not make a church great, but rather the character of the people in the church make a church great. God’s yardstick is a lot different than ours. A church may boast great numbers, have a large budget, and be on the leading edge of innovation and technology, yet be a dismal failure in God’s sight.

In verses three and four we find that which makes a church great and makes it one to be proud of, and that is the character qualities of growing faith, expressed love, and patient endurance. Paul had already commended the Thessalonian church of their labor of love, work of faith, and patience of hope in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. However, what made this church special is that they did not just stop there and rest on their laurels, rather they continued to grow in their faith so much so that the growth was evident to all. This gives the Apostle Paul great joy as it shows his labor among them had not been in vain.

Secondly, the Thessalonians are commended for their love towards one another. This love was not expressed in terms of emotional platitudes, but rather in the way in which they interacted with each other. Put another way, their love was borne out in their actions and not their words.

### **Do You Love Others?**

**How can you tell if you have love for the brethren? Ask these questions:**

- 1. Are you harboring bitterness or an unforgiving spirit towards any believer? Ephesians 4:32 tells us we are to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us.**
- 2. Are you envious of other believers? 1 Corinthians 13:4 tells us that “love envieth not.”**
- 3. Are you proud of yourself or your achievements or do you look down on other believers due to their social position or status? 1 Corinthians 13:4 tells us that “love is not puffed up.”**
- 4. Do you always see the worst in other believers and attribute to them the worst of motives? 1 Corinthians 13:5 says that “love thinks no evil.”**
- 5. Are you patient with other believers when they wrong you or do not exhibit patience towards you? 1 Corinthians 13:4 says “love suffers long.”**
- 6. Are you kind to other believers and do you refrain from speaking evil of them behind their backs? 1 Corinthians 13:4 tells us “love is kind.”**
- 7. Does your heart ache when other believers fall into sin? Do you seek to restore the sinning brother or are you quick to judge and condemn? 1 Corinthians 13:6 says “love rejoices not in iniquity” and Galatians 6:1-2 tells us to restore the falling brother with an attitude of meekness.**

Thirdly, the Thessalonian believers suffered patiently at the hands of an unbelieving world. Their life was not an easy one, as they were hated by the Jews for being supposed apostates and hated by the world for their lifestyle. Christ reminded his disciples in John 15:16 that suffering is a normal part of the Christian life. We should expect it. And when it comes we should rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer in Christ's name.

One of the easiest things to do when going through trials and suffering is to blame God or become bitter. We lash out at those who persecute us, or inwardly relish the thought of them being judged for their sin or getting what's coming to them. The true believer who has a heart for the lost does not see it that way, rather they are burdened for the salvation of their persecutors even as Christ called out to God to forgive those who crucified him.

Because of these three characteristics, Paul tells the Thessalonians that they have become an object of his boasting. They have become a model for other churches so that whenever Paul

wants to illustrate what a true church should be, the name of the Thessalonian church comes up. Note that it is not the Thessalonians who were boasting, but rather Paul was boasting in their behalf. It is interesting to see that while Paul was serving in a church (Corinth) that was perhaps the worst church he had to deal with, he wrote a letter to a beloved church who embodied the very character qualities missing at Corinth.

**5** *Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer:*

The suffering being faced by the Thessalonian believers was not some capricious act of God whereby he delights in the suffering of his children. Rather, it was allowed in the lives of these believers to make evident their true nature. Trials never douse the faith of the true believer, rather the faith of the true believer is made manifest not only to that believer, but to a watching world, through the trials that come his way. God is right in allowing trials as it is only trials that strengthen faith and endurance.

Thus, instead of the suffering face by the Thessalonians producing a grumbling, complaining church, it had produced a church rich in faith and worthy of the kingdom of God which here refers to their ultimate salvation. No one likes suffering, but suffering is an integral part of the maturing process for the believer. Without trials we become stagnant in our faith. Trials are needed to remind us of the source of our strength and to assure us that we indeed are part of the kingdom of God as we endure them. For the believer, trials are never an end to themselves, but rather a means to the end.

**6** *Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you;*

**7** *And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels,*

When Christ comes again and rescues the believer taking them from the midst of their trials, he will at the same time bring judgment on those through whom those trials came. The Thessalonian Christians were suffering injustices and inhumane treatment by the ungodly society in which they lived, and God was not going to let that injustice go unpunished. The unrighteous have their day, but there is coming a future day when God has his day.

Why is it that God will bring vengeance on those who persecute the believer? It is because it is the right thing to do. By definition, God does that which is right, all the time. God is not right because he does right things, rather something is right because it is that which God does. God is the standard. Those that persist in their rebellion against God place themselves under his righteous judgment, and those who persecute His followers persecute Him.

### **The Two-Fold Aspect of the Second Coming**

Throughout the New Testament we find that the Second Coming of Christ has a two-fold purpose. The first purpose is to rescue the believers from the midst of their trials and take them back to heaven to be with Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, John 14:1-6). This is seen by the believer to be a glorious and most-anticipated event. The second purpose is quite different and that is to bring judgment on a God-hating and Christ-rejecting world. Some say Christ does both as they see only a single coming of Christ. Others believe Christ's second coming to consist of two phases, one for his saints, and another for judgment. It is this author's contention that the New Testament most clearly teaches the latter, and not the former. Consider the following:

1. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Christ comes to receive the saints into glory, in Revelation 19 he comes with the saints in judgment.
2. Believers are called upon to look for the “blessed hope”, which is the personal return of Christ for his Bride (Titus 2:13). Unbelievers are warned about Christ’s coming at which time they will be cast into outer darkness (Matthew 13).
3. A single coming of Christ precludes the possibility of any rapture position other than the Post-Tribulational, which in turn poses many problems as listed in the Appendix on Rapture positions.
4. It is not uncommon for the Bible to speak of two separate events as though they were one. Consider the first and second advents of Christ as recorded by Isaiah in Isaiah 61:1-3. There we are led to believe in only a single advent of Christ whereas we know from Christ’s reading of this passage at Nazareth that there are two advents. The first as a savior, and the second as a judge. Consider also the resurrection as recorded by Daniel in Daniel 12:1-2 in which we appear to see only a single resurrection whereas in Revelation 20 we find there are in reality two.

When will this righteous judgment take place. It will take place when he comes with his angels to execute judgment on those that are objects of his wrath. It is here we are given a hint as to which aspect of Christ’s coming is in view when we compare this with Matthew 24-25. There we find that at the end of the age Christ comes back in glory with the holy angels who then separate the elect from the wicked. In Matthew 13 we see this as well in the Parable of the Dragnet and the Parable of the Tares. Throughout the Bible we see the angels as being involved as executors of God’s judgment, and at the end of this age they will be particularly busy. What should the attitude of the righteous be about this knowledge of future judgment? They should rest easy, knowing that God will not allow the unrighteous to go unpunished. The believer is not called to personal vengeance, but rather to wait for God to bring vengeance.

### **This Event According to Pre-Wrathers**

According to the Pre-Wrath Rapture position, we still have two phases to Christ’s second coming but their interpretation of this passage is that the first phase is simultaneous with the Rapture of the Church and the Day of the Lord during the last half of the last half of the Tribulation. Although it is true that when God raptures his bride his judgment begins to fall on an unsuspecting world, but the difference between the Pre-Tribulationist and the Pre-Wrathist is exactly what the Day of the Lord is. The Pre-Tribulationist takes the Day of the Lord to refer to the entire seven years of the Tribulation whereas the Pre-Wrathist takes it to refer to only the last part of the Tribulation after the sixth seal (see the Appendix for issues related to this).

If one reads this passage quickly, the Pre-Wrath position seems to be favored, as the Thessalonians are told to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord at which time he will give them rest from their enemies and visit judgment on the ungodly. However, note that the judgment that falls on the ungodly is everlasting fire and separation from God. When does this happen? During the Tribulation or after it? According to Matthew 24 and 25 it is after the Tribulation. Additionally, we are not told that the angels accompany Christ at the Rapture, but they very definitely accompany Christ at his revelation at the end of the Tribulation. Thus it appears best to see that Paul is not trying to give a precise chronology of the Second Coming of Christ, but rather a general description of what happens without any reference to Chronology or timing unless one wants to be a Post-Tribulationist.

**8** *In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:*

**9** *Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;*

How is this vengeance visited on the ungodly? It is in flaming fire. Who is involved in this judgment? It is those who obey not the gospel of Christ and do not know God. What is the nature of their judgment? It is everlasting destruction and banishment.

First, we see that the manner in which Christ comes to execute judgment is described as “flaming fire.” This is not only a reference as to the nature of the punishment, that is, the Lake of Fire, but it is also a reference to the manner in which the judgment takes place as the unveiled glory of Christ consumes his enemies. In Zechariah 14:12 we find a hint of this where we read “And this shall be the plague wherewith the LORD will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem; Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth.” The lot of the ungodly is not a pleasant one in the day of vengeance.

The recipients of this judgment have the two-fold description of “them that know not God” and “those that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This defines not only those who have no knowledge of God as they refused to live up to the light that God had revealed (Romans 1:18-20), but also those that know the truth and do not obey it. Both groups of people are equally damned, but those that knew the truth and rejected it are doubly-damned. God’s is a patient God giving time for the ungodly to repent, but this is coming a day when the patience is over and it is too late for repentance. In that day God’s judgment will fall swiftly, surely, and accurately on those that either do not, or will not, believe.

Finally, the nature of this punishment is two-fold. First, those that receive the vengeance of God are punished with everlasting destruction. This is not the destruction of non-existence, but rather the destruction of ruin. The lost will find themselves occupants of the Lake of Fire, a place originally created for Satan and his angels. It is God’s “garbage dump” where all those that refuse to submit themselves to the Lordship of Christ will find themselves forever. Secondly, this punishment is described in terms of abandonment by God. Whereas the believer will enjoy the presence of God and the unveiled glory of the Father in heaven, the unbeliever will suffer eternal blackness and isolation from the presence of God.

### **Is Hell Eternal?**

**There is a movement in Christianity today that says Hell (the Lake of Fire) is not eternal. They say that it is inconsistent for a God of love to have an “eternal chamber of horrors” where he watches with glee the sufferings of the lost. Instead of the unbeliever suffering forever, they teach that the unbeliever may suffer for a short time depending on their evil and then they are annihilated out of existence. What exactly happens to a man after death? Six different views quickly sort themselves out.**

- 1. Immediate annihilation - man is a purely physical being who ceases to exist at death.**
- 2. Immediate salvation - all men go to heaven at the moment of death.**
- 3. Postponed salvation - all men are given eternal life after a future resurrection.**

4. Postponed annihilationism - unbelievers will be annihilated after a future judgment.
  5. Second change - unbelievers will be given a second chance to believe the gospel. Those that don't are then annihilated.
  6. Classic view - unbelievers will suffer eternal torment, believers eternal bliss.
- In response to the teaching of all forms of annihilationism, consider the following:
1. In Revelation 14:11 we are told that the torment of those who take the mark of the beast ascend up forever and ever before the throne of God. How can there be torment with no conscious existence. In other words, if an unbeliever is annihilated, then the possibility of them being in torment is removed since they have no conscious existence to feel that torment.
  2. The same term is used to refer to eternal life and eternal death (Daniel 12:1-2; Matthew 25:46). The annihilationist says that for the believer "eternal" refers to endlessness but for the unbeliever "eternal" refers to finality. This is a mixed hermeneutic. One cannot change the intended meaning of a word to fit one's theology. If so, one is no more honest than a Twiddle-Dee or Twiddle-Dum who said, "a word means just what I want it to mean, nothing more, and nothing less."
  3. In the eternal state described in Revelation 21-22 we find the location of the Lake of Fire to be outside the city (Revelation 21:8; Revelation 22:15). There is no hint there that the occupants of the Lake of Fire have ceased to exist as they are spoken of in the present tense.
  4. Both the Antichrist and False Prophet are still alive in the Lake of Fire after 1,000 years (Revelation 20:10). There is no indication there of annihilation.
  5. If the torment of the occupants of the Lake of Fire is not eternal, then why is the Lake of Fire spoken of using terms like "eternal" and "everlasting." If the ungodly are annihilated after a period of suffering, then the idea of the "worm dying not" and the "fire not being quenched" lose their meaning.

**10** *When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.*

The coming of Christ that brings judgment on the lost is the very same coming that brings joy to the believer. It is a bittersweet event. In Revelation 10 John is given a book to eat that in his mouth was sweet like honey and in his belly bitterness. For those that look for the Lord to return His coming is a much-anticipated and glorious event as the believer finally comes into possession of all that was promised in their salvation. To the unbeliever, however, that time is a time of finality. The day of grace is over and the time of God's vengeance is at hand.

**11** *Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power:*

**12** *That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Although the future event of Christ's second coming is certain and sure, Paul does not throw up his hands and surrender to fate. Rather, he prays constantly that the Thessalonian believers would be counted worthy of their calling and not be ashamed at the coming of Christ.

Paul understood that the knowledge of Christ's coming should fill the heart of the believer with anticipation and urgency. Anticipation for finally being in the presence of Christ, urgency to live a life that will be pleasing to Christ when he comes back. Many times we get so wrapped up in trying to figure out the exact moment of Christ returns or the exact sequence of end-time events that we miss the reason we are told of Christ's return, and that is to spur us to holy living. How can a believer bring maximum glory to Christ in that day? They can be prepared and ready. Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian believers is that they be ready, so when Christ appears they can face his appearing with joy and expectation, not fear and sorrow.