

## The New Testament, Book 14

### II Thessalonians

The second letter to the church at Thessalonica was written soon after the first letter--perhaps within a month or two, while Paul was still in Corinth. He had received word that the Thessalonian Christians had been misled by false teachings about the return of Christ. These false teachings contradicted what Paul had taught them, particularly in matters concerning the nearness of the event, and the necessity that they continue to work and support themselves and their families. Verse 2 of Chapter 2, and Verse 17 of Chapter 3, suggest that they may even have received one or more counterfeit letters, supposedly written by Paul, contradicting the things he had taught them while he was there.

It seems also that the Thessalonian Christians had come under severe persecution, and some thought that this was the great tribulation, and that it would be followed immediately by the return of the Lord<sup>1</sup>. As a result, some of them had again ceased to work, expecting the Lord to return at any moment. Paul reminded them that certain events must take place before the Lord's return, including a great falling away by the Church, and the rise of an evil, anti-Christ deceiver ("that man of sin...the son of perdition").

And, in this second epistle, Paul came down harder than in the first one concerning those who had ceased to work. He told them that they must continue to work, to support themselves and their families; and he concluded with a command that, "...if any would not work, neither should he eat" (meaning that such a person should not be supported by the church, allowing him to be idle, waiting for the Lord's return).

**A. Author.** As in the first letter, the author is Paul; he identified himself in the opening salutation and the closing salutation; and he again included Silas and Timothy in the opening salutation. External evidence for his authorship is expansive, and even earlier than that for the first letter, including: Justin Martyr (ca 100-165 AD), who referred to 2:2-8<sup>2</sup>; and Irenaeus (early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, died ca 202 AD), who mentioned the letter by name, ascribed it to Paul, and quoted from 2:4<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 24:21-31.

<sup>2</sup> ANF, Vol 1, Dialogue with Trypho, CX, pp 253-254.

<sup>3</sup> ANF, Vol 1 Irenaeus Against Heresies, III, VI, 5, p 420.

**B. Place and Date.** As in the first letter, Paul wrote from Corinth, about 50-53 AD.

**C. Theme.** The theme of the second letter, as in the first letter, is the Second Advent. In this second letter, however, Paul introduced and emphasized two things not mentioned in the first one: the fearful, fiery, judgment on the rebellious sinners that will accompany the Lord's return; and, that Jesus will not return until after a great apostasy, a falling away of the Church, and the appearance of an evil leader, demanding worship and falsely proclaiming himself to be God.

**D. Highlights.** Highlights of II Thessalonians include the following:

1. Rewards for the Faithful and the Unfaithful. (1:3-12)

After a brief salutation (1:1-2), Paul expresses joy, for he has heard of the growing faith of the Thessalonians, and their Christian love for one another; and he is rejoicing because, although they are being persecuted, they are standing fast in faith. In this way, he says, they are to be counted worthy of their membership in the Kingdom of God. He then assures them that God, in his righteousness, will execute vengeance upon those who oppose the gospel, and will punish them. This punishment will be horrible, and will consist of three things: "flaming fire"; "everlasting [with no end] destruction"; and separation--forever--from the presence of God (and all of this suffering with the inability to die, because spirits don't die)<sup>4</sup>.

He prays that, in the end, the Thessalonian believers may be faithful, living in the power of the Holy Spirit, glorifying God, and being glorified by Him.

2. Two Things Must Precede the Return of Christ. (2:1-5)

Paul expresses the hope that the Thessalonians will stand fast in the faith, and that they will not be confused or shaken by false spirits, false teachings, or by false letters appearing to be from him. These false teachings will hold that the return of Christ is "at hand," imminent, and will probably occur any day.

He tells them, however, that two things must occur before Christ returns: there will be a great apostasy--a falling away by the Church; and there must appear an evil and powerful deceiver, a great enemy of righteousness, "that man of sin...the son of perdition." This evil leader will exalt himself above all that is worshipped, sitting in the Temple at

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<sup>4</sup> For a summary of end-time events and how they will relate to the redeemed and the unredeemed, see "Death, Resurrection, Judgment, and Eternal Destinations: Keeping Our Bearings in the Book of Revelation" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

Jerusalem, declaring that he is God. Paul had taught them these things when he was with them; but he was there for only a brief period of time, and they need to be reminded<sup>5</sup>.

**NOTE:** *You may remember that Jesus, when He sent his apostles out two-by-two to preach and heal, He told them to declare that “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Yet, here the false teachers are wrong in telling the Thessalonians that the return of Christ is “at hand.”*

*There is no contradiction here, for when Jesus told his apostles to declare that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, He spoke of his **first** coming, as the redeeming Messiah. Here, the false teachers, when they said that his return is “at hand,” are talking of the **second** coming of Christ, to judge and to make all things right, at the culmination of this present age.*

### 3. An Evil, Anti-Christ, Deceiver, and His Terrible Future. (2:6-12)

Paul speaks more about the evil person, the deceiving “son of perdition” who will claim to be God, demanding to be worshipped as God, who must come and deceive many before the return of the Lord.

This coming evil one, however, will not come until his time, which is appointed by God. The mystery of iniquity, a spirit of lawlessness and rebellion against God, is already at work in the world; but it is restrained, and does not yet have total freedom to deceive. Paul’s wording in verses 6 and 7 is a little--well--“Pauline” (characteristic of him and his brilliant mind, and not easily understood)<sup>6</sup>. This spirit of lawlessness and iniquity will not have full freedom to operate until “he that now letteth,” the One who restrains this wickedness and the evil, anti-Christ person, not allowing him full power to deceive, is “taken out of the way.”

Those who reject the gospel and the truth of God will be deceived, many will believe the lie, and God will allow this strong delusion because they will have rejected the truth and demonstrated that they love unrighteousness. After this evil, anti-Christ deceiver, the “son of perdition,” has been allowed freedom to deceive for a designated time, Christ will return to the Earth to fulfill all things, and make all things right. When He does, the anti-Christ deceiver will be consumed and destroyed with the very breath of Christ and “the brightness of his coming.”

**NOTES:**

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 24:1-31.

<sup>6</sup> II Peter 3:15-16.

*a. There is controversy concerning verse 7 and the identity of the one who will be “taken out of the way,” allowing the anti-Christ person full freedom to deceive. It seems to be the Holy Spirit, and the Church He empowers and inspires, who will be removed at Christ’s appearance in the sky (I Thessalonians 4:13-18). If this is so, what a terrible place the Earth will be during that period, with absolutely no restraints on iniquity, injustice, wickedness and sin.*

*b. The breath of God is a fascinating, fearsome, and wonderful thing. It has enormous power, both to impart life and to kill. When God created Adam, He breathed into his nostrils, imparted life, and Adam “became a living soul.” Yet here, in verse 8, we are told that when Christ returns He will destroy the anti-Christ deceiver with the spirit (breath) of his mouth and the brightness of his coming<sup>7</sup>.”*

*I won’t attempt to explain this definitively, but it has to do with the inexpressible holiness, purity, and power of the presence of God. Remember the experience of Moses on Mt. Sinai. God told him to keep the people at a safe distance; and they were forbidden even to touch the bottom of the mount lest they die. Even Moses was only allowed a glimpse of God, and that was from the rear. And, when Moses came down from the mount, he had to cover his face, for it was so infused with the holiness of God that the Israelites could not stand to look upon it. Daniel had a similar experience when confronted by the pre-incarnate Christ by the Tigris River, incapacitated, lying on his face; those with him didn’t see or hear the vision, but were terrified by an overwhelming presence, and they fled. Peter, James and John could not stand, or remain conscious, in the presence of Moses, Elijah and the transfigured Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. Paul was struck down on the Damascus road by the presence and voice of the resurrected, glorified Jesus. John had the same “slain in the Spirit” experience when confronted with the risen, glorified Christ in Revelation 1; and remember that when he saw this form of Christ, his breath was in the form of a two-edged sword, a killing instrument.*

*In summary, we might think of it this way:*

- 1. God is infinitely, inexpressibly, pure, holy and powerful.*
- 2. Sin and evil cannot survive in his presence; they are consumed and destroyed as would be tissue paper exposed to the intense heat radiating*

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<sup>7</sup> The Greek word here rendered “spirit” is *pneuma*. It can mean breath, spirit or wind; here it means both breath and spirit. We sometimes sing, “Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew;” and this is entirely scriptural.

*from a blast furnace. To look upon Him and his brightness would consume us, even as looking directly at the Sun will destroy our eyes (a small and inadequate but, I hope, helpful analogy).*

*2. We are basically sinful, and sin cannot survive in the presence of God.*

*3. Even after God transforms us and infuses us with his Holy Spirit, we cannot survive the fullness of his presence; even small, restrained experiences of his presence can temporarily incapacitate us.*

*4. Someday, when we are glorified and in his presence, freed completely from the sin nature inherited from Adam and Eve, we will enjoy every aspect of his presence, forever, and with no danger or ill effect.*

4. Correct the Idle Troublemakers. (3:1-15)

Paul seems to interrupt his teaching with a request for prayer for himself and his men, and a brief benediction for the Thessalonians (3:1-3). And then he gets very serious about those disorderly idlers in the church who refuse to work; he tells the Thessalonians not to keep company with them. Such idlers, with time on their hands, he says, become meddlesome busybodies and troublemakers<sup>8</sup>.

In fact, he reminds them of what he had commanded them when he was with them: that those who will not work shall not be fed by the rest of the church. Yet he doesn't say that they are hopeless and are to be shunned or removed from the church; he is only saying that they should be shown the error of their ways, admonished and corrected. The rest of the church should not relate to them as if they were behaving properly and correctly, for this implies approval of their wrong behavior. The rest of the church should withdraw from normal fellowship with them and correct them; but then, once corrected, they are to restore them to full fellowship.

And, in the midst of this guidance about dealing with idlers and shirkers, in verse 13 Paul utters words of encouragement that have become classic: "be not weary in well-doing<sup>9</sup>."

**NOTES:**

*a. Paul is not saying that food should be withheld from those who cannot work (because of age or infirmity); he is speaking of able-bodied Christians who choose not to work.*

*b. People who are idle are likely to become busybodies and troublemakers because they have nothing useful to occupy their minds and energies (or, they think that they don't).*

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<sup>8</sup> The Greek for the word, "disorderly" (*ataktos*) is primarily a military term, meaning out of order, moving with slackness, not keeping rank, and insubordinate.

<sup>9</sup> This principle is expressed more fully in Gal 6:9

*c. Freemasonry, in its Blue Lodge ritual, uses verse 6 verbatim, but omits “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” for “Jesus” and “Christ” may not be mentioned in a well-ordered lodge. They perform the same mutilation on I Peter 2:5, omitting the words “by Jesus Christ.” Albert Mackey, revered 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sovereign Grand Commander of Scottish Rite Freemasonry, Southern Jurisdiction and a greatly respected Masonic philosopher, called this blasphemous mutilation of Scripture “slight, but necessary, modifications.” God seems to call it the ultimate fatal error (Revelation 22:19)<sup>10</sup>.*

And then, with a final benediction, Paul signs the letter with this own hand which, he says, is his custom in all of his letters to the churches<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> For more on this subject, see the author’s book, “33 Degrees of Deception” published by the Bridge-Logos Foundation., pages 25, 29, 81, 82, 230, 277 and 278.

<sup>11</sup> Here, in v 17, Paul seems to be saying that the test for the validity of an epistle supposedly sent from him is that it be personally signed by him, and not by a scribe--or by anyone else other than Paul.