



09. 2 Thessalonians 1:1 – 2:12

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Author

- Many judge that this letter was written by a disciple who set out to present an authentic statement of Paul's thought for a later generation.
- There can be no objection in principle to this God's word was a living word, to be renewed when circumstances changed.

The Torah was attributed to Moses

The Psalms were attributed to David

Wisdom writings were attributed to Solomon

The prophetic scrolls were updated and re-applied

Testaments of the Patriarchs and Moses

Apocalypses attributed to Enoch

Commentaries on the Torah attributed to Ezra

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 'Though absent in body, I am present in spirit ... When you are assembled, my spirit is present with the power of our Lord, Jesus'(1Corinthians 5:3-4)

People would have continued thinking in these terms after Paul's death.

The fact that there are present personal reminiscences and expressions of personal emotion is not proof of Paul's authorship. These could be to help pick up Paul's spirit and reinforce in the readers their memories of Paul.

However, from a study of the language, the style, and the content, I find no persuasive reason against accepting this as a genuine letter composed by Paul himself and sent from Corinth to Thessalonica as a follow up to the letter we have just studied.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-2

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy
to the church of the Thessalonians
in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace
from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The opening address is almost identical with that in the previous letter. Paul will return to the subject of **peace** towards the end of the letter (see 3:16). The reasons for this will emerge as the letter unfolds.

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters,
as is right, because your **faith** is growing abundantly,
and the **love** of every one of you for one another is increasing.
Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God
for your **steadfastness and faith** [1 Thessalonians 3:6-10]
during all your persecutions [1 Thessalonians 1:6; 3:3]
and the afflictions that you are enduring.

It was normal practice to follow the greeting with an expression of thanks. Paul does so in what in Greek is one long and very convoluted sentence, from verse three through to verse twelve. He begins his expression of thanks by focusing on two areas of growth: their **faith**, and the **love** which they have for each other within the community.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-8

⁵This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God [1 Thessalonians 2:12], for which you are suffering [1 Thessalonians 1:6]. ⁶For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to **give rest** to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels [Mark 8:38] ⁸in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not acknowledge God and on those who **do not obey** [ὕπακούω] **the gospel of our Lord Jesus.**

‘The Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire’ (Isaiah 66:15).

Paul introduces the rich scriptural theme of ‘**rest**’ with its connotations of a long and difficult journey ending in the Promised Land.

He speaks of the goal of the just as a sharing in the ‘**glory**’ of the exalted Jesus. We recall Jesus’ own words about the Son of Man coming ‘in the glory of his Father with the holy angels’ (Mark 8:38). Paul thanks God for their perseverance amid persecution. They will share in the radiant beauty of the Exalted Jesus when they experience the splendour of the life promised to those who have put their faith in him.

Those who ‘do not acknowledge God’ (see Jeremiah 9:6; 10:25) will have to suffer the consequences when God ‘deals out retribution to his enemies’ (Isaiah 66:6).

Paul ‘updates’ the language of scripture by speaking of ‘those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus’. God’s saving love has been revealed in Jesus. Those who stubbornly reject him are rejecting salvation.

2 Thessalonians 1:9-10

⁹These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰when he comes to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at on that day among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

The consequences of obstinate rejection of God's will and God's love are described in the starkest terms: 'eternal destruction' and 'separation from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might'. Paul seems to be drawing upon the refrain of Isaiah about those who 'hide in the dust from the terror of the Lord, and from the glory of his majesty' (Isaiah 2:10,19,21).

These consequences are the exact opposite of the salvation and communion with Jesus which was the main theme of Paul's first letter (1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:11).

We are reminded of the last words of the Book of Isaiah: ‘They shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh’(Isaiah 66:24).

When speaking of the ‘unquenchable fires of hell’ (Mark 9:43), where ‘soul and body are destroyed’ (Matthew 10:18), Jesus referred to ‘gehenna’. This is the valley to the south of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 7:30-33; 19:1-15; 32:35), where the fires of the enemy camps during the siege of Jerusalem, and the fires of fever suffered by those left to perish there on the field of battle, made a lasting impression on the psyche of the people of Jerusalem. Gehenna became a symbol of the fire of divine judgment on those who ‘have rebelled against me’.

Jesus speaks of hell for there is no love in failing to alert us to the consequences of rejecting God's love. It is important, however, that we note that in the same breath Jesus tells us not to be afraid of God. Hell is not a punishment inflicted upon us from the outside by God. It is what we do to ourselves when we obstinately reject God's saving love. Let us listen to Jesus:

‘I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell [γέεννα]. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows’ (Luke 12:4-7).

Punishment for sin is always self-inflicted. God's judgment cannot but declare things to be the way they really are, but we are to imagine God making his judgment as Jesus did when he wept over the city that he loved so much (Luke 19:41-44).

We are exhorted to look carefully at the direction our life is taking, at the decisions we make and decline to make, and at our priorities. God's unconditional love does not take away from us the possibility of our refusing his love, nor does it remove the consequences that follow from such a refusal. We can create a hell here for others and for ourselves. There is no reason to suppose that death will automatically reverse this. It matters what we do. It matters now and it matters eternally: 'What will it profit you to gain the whole world but forfeit your life? Or what will you give in return for your life?' (Matthew 16:26).

2 Thessalonians 1:11

To this end we always pray for you, that our God will make you worthy of his call

Three times in his first letter, Paul referred to God's call. He spoke of his time among them when, like a father he was: 'urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory' (1 Thessalonians 2:12). He reminded the Thessalonians that God called them 'in holiness' (1 Thessalonians 4:7), and he reminded them: 'the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this' (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

¹¹and will fulfil 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 the Messiah.

Jesus told us that he is the vine; we are the branches (John 15:1). We need ‘good resolve’ and we need ‘work of faith’ (see 1 Thessalonians 1:3): a faith that issues in the fruit of love. The fruit, however, though it appears on the branches, always comes from the vine. Our resolve must be to cling to the vine. Jesus promises to remain in us, and it is his Spirit that will produce the fruit. Seeing the fruit of love in the lives of Jesus’ disciples, others will be drawn to desire the same intimacy with Jesus, and they will be drawn to join the community which manifests by its life the reality and the active presence in the world of the living and true God, the God of love. In this way is the glory of the risen Jesus revealed.

‘Paul writes to the Corinthians: ‘All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

We read in Isaiah: ‘Let the Lord be glorified, so that we may see your joy’ (Isaiah 66:5). We are reminded of the promise of Jesus: ‘The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father’ (Matthew 13:43). As Paul writes: ‘When the Messiah who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory’ (Colossians 3:4).

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3

¹As to the coming of our Lord Jesus the Messiah
and our being gathered together to him,
we beg you, brothers and sisters,
²not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed,
either by spirit or by word or by letter purporting to be from us {3:17},
to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.
³Let no one deceive you in any way

We come now to the main point of the letter. It concerns the ‘coming of our Lord Jesus the Messiah’ and ‘our being gathered together to him’ (see 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; Mark 13:27). The Thessalonians are in a state of panic because they are being told that the day of judgment is upon them. This is the first example of a phenomenon that has recurred throughout the history of the church. In our own day we have witnessed terrible examples of the extremes to which people will go when convinced by some ‘charismatic’ leader that the end is upon us.

Jesus himself warned us: ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them’ (Luke 21:8).

Paul is not sure of the source of the idea, but whatever its origin, it is a deception.

In his earlier letter he had told them not to ‘despise the words of the prophets’ (1 Thessalonians 5:20). The Spirit of Jesus can choose to speak to us through the medium of such words, uttered in prayer and in openness to the Spirit. However, he also warned them to be discerning: to ‘test everything’ (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Are there some in the community who are claiming prophetic inspiration in announcing that ‘the day of the Lord is already here’? If so, they are mistaken and the community is not to be deceived. In his earlier letter Paul had advised them to esteem those graced with organisational responsibility in the community (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). If it is they who are the source of this pronouncement, they are in error.

Perhaps those responsible for the pronouncement that is causing alarm are claiming the authority of Paul. If they are using a written document to support their claim, Paul asserts that it is not from him. We will see that he goes to some lengths later (3:17) to draw their attention to the handwriting with which he concludes the letter. It is his 'signature'. If a letter claims to be from him and lacks it, they should ignore it. On the other hand, since the letter which we know as First Thessalonians does not contain the teaching that is causing disturbance, it may be that some are saying that that letter was not from Paul, and Paul wants them to know that it was, indeed, from him, and so draws attention to his handwriting so that they can check the signature of the earlier letter and reassure themselves that it is genuine.

It is also possible that they were taking some of Paul's statements from his earlier letter out of context and using them to support their claim. He did say that 'God's wrath has overtaken them at last' (1 Thessalonians 2:16), and he kept stressing the need to be alert (1 Thessalonians 5:1-10), and spoke as though they might still be alive when the Lord comes (4:15,17). If they are basing their claim on these statements, they are distorting Paul's intended meaning. Whatever the source of this idea, they are not to be deceived!

2 Thessalonians 2:3

That day will not come unless the **rebellion** [ἀποστασία] comes first, and the **lawless one** [ἀνομία] is revealed, the one destined for destruction.

In Jewish apocalyptic literature there was an expectation that prior to the final realisation of God's design in history there would be a state of wholesale disorder or **rebellion**. The following is typical:

‘Behold, the days are coming when those who dwell on earth shall be seized with great terror. The way of truth shall be hidden, and there will be no faith upon the earth. Injustice will multiply beyond anything which you have thus far experienced, beyond anything you have heard of previously’ (4 Ezra 5:1-2; see Didache, 16).

That day will not come unless the rebellion [ἀποστασία] comes first, and the lawless one [ἀνομία] is revealed, the one destined for destruction.

The one leading the rebellion, called here the ‘lawless one’ would be ‘revealed’ (ἀποκαλυπτω). Paul wastes no time in stating that this leader of the rebellion is ‘destined for destruction’. He will make this point again powerfully at the conclusion of his argument. He describes the arrogance and the religious posturing of the leader of the anti-God rebellion. We have already noted that Thessalonica was the residence of the Roman proconsul of Macedonia. Undoubtedly the Christians would have been under considerable pressure to involve themselves in the cult of the emperor and the public state festivities honouring the Roman gods.

2 Thessalonians 2:4

⁴He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God.

Paul draws his description of the action of the lawless one from the Book of Daniel. The Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, tried to force the Jerusalem inhabitants to worship the statue of Zeus which he had introduced into the sacred precincts of the Temple. 'He shall exalt himself and consider himself greater than any god' (Daniel 11:36). Pompey dared to enter the inner sanctuary of the temple in 63BC, and the emperor Caligula threatened to have a statue of himself erected there in 40AD (see Josephus, Jewish Wars 2,184-185). Jesus also warns about the 'desolating sacrilege' (Matthew 24:15) in the setting of persecution and of attempts to deceive the community.

2 Thessalonians 2:5

⁵Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?

Paul appeals to their memory. He has already spoken to them about this while he was still with them. His argument is simple: whatever troubles they are experiencing, this wholesale assault against order has not yet happened, so the final judgment, the day of the Lord, cannot be already here.

2 Thessalonians 2:6

⁶And now you know what is now restraining him,
so that he may be revealed when his time comes.

Some scholars identify whatever it is that is restraining the rebel and his rebellion as some present **negative** force. Perhaps Paul is alluding to the persecutions being suffered by the Thessalonians, or, more probably, to the disturbance within the community that is holding some of them in its sway. The point behind this line of argument is that the presence and activity of these or other evils is a sign that the cataclysmic evil of the final days cannot be happening yet. When the final darkness descends, lesser shadows will vanish. Others seek to identify whatever it is that is restraining the rebel and his cosmic rebellion as some **positive** force. The apostolic mission of Paul himself, perhaps. One thinks of Jesus' words: 'the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations' (Mark 13:10). In this sense every act of faith and love can be seen as delaying the general apostasy.

2Thessalonians 2:6-8

⁶And now you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. ⁷For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. but only until the one who now restrains it withdraws. ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.

In the final analysis what is restraining the lawless one is God's will. Paul is drawing their attention to the truth of faith that everything comes within the providence of God. They and the whole of history are in God's hands. Rather than allowing themselves to be distracted by thoughts of the end, they should focus on the ways in which the 'mystery of lawlessness' is now working in Thessalonica. It is evident within the community itself. However, the final judgment cannot happen till God withdraws his restraining will. They should not let themselves be alarmed.

Paul's conclusion is simple and powerful. They have nothing to fear from the final revelation of evil on the earth. There is no cosmic battle between evil and good. All power is on the side of good. Paul may be looking to the future to the **manifestation** (ἐπιφανεία) of Jesus' **coming** (παρουσία, see 2:1). He may also be referring back to Jesus' life on earth and especially to his love-giving on the cross in which Jesus has already shown evil up as having no power against love. If evil was conquered by love in Jesus' earthly ministry, imagine, says Paul, what will happen at the coming of the Lord Jesus. All opposition to grace will be destroyed simply '**with the breath of his mouth**' (see Isaiah 11:4). God created the world with a word. In the final analysis, his 'breath', his Spirit, will conquer all. We are reminded of Jesus' words: 'Take courage; I have conquered the world!' (John 16:33). If they are with Jesus, there is nothing to cause them alarm.

2 Thessalonians 2:9-10

⁹The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, ¹⁰and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

The community in Thessalonica has become a battle ground between forces of good and forces of evil. Paul sees this struggle against a larger cosmic background. On one side are the powers of good: God, the Lord Jesus in whom God's divine power is focused, the apostolic ministry which is the instrument of God's saving power now at work in the world, and the believing Christians who are heeding the gospel and will be saved.

On the other side are the powers of evil: Satan, the lawless one who is the instrument of Satan and who stands against Jesus as the epitome of the incarnation of evil, the mystery of lawlessness which is at work in the world, and those who refuse to believe in the gospel and are caught up in behaviour that is contrary to God's will. Satan's power to deceive is great, but those only will be deceived who 'refuse to love the truth'.

The ultimate reality is God. Truth (ἀληθεία) exists when who God is has not been swept away in a river of forgetfulness (ληθη), but is apparent for all to see. Jesus is the revelation of God as love, and the gospel is the proclamation of this revelation. Those who are committed to this truth and who are committed to allowing this truth to bear in their lives the fruit of love will be able to resist the deceptions of the evil one and experience the salvation offered by God through Jesus. Only those who reject the gospel will fall prey to the lying attractions of Satan.

The Thessalonians are to concentrate on this in their daily lives, and not allow themselves to be distracted or alarmed by empty speculations about the timing of the end.

2Thessalonians 2:11-12

¹¹For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion,
leading them to believe what is false,

¹²so that all who have not believed the truth
but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.

Care must be taken to understand properly Paul's words about the judgment of God on those who reject God's love and so refuse salvation.

There are two fundamental truths that are basic in both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures. One is that God's initiative is always merciful. The other is that in a limited but real way we are free and responsible. Paul's statement cannot be understood in a way that contradicts either of these truths.

Paul has already stated that those ‘who are perishing’ are doing so, ‘because they refused to love the truth and so be saved’(2:10). It is the refusal of God’s love that leads automatically and necessarily to delusion; indulging in injustice leads necessarily to condemnation.

Since God is the author of reality, we may say that God is ultimately responsible for this being the way things are. However, the bad effects of our bad actions are precisely that: we cause them, not God, whose mercy is always at work drawing us to repentance and so to forgiveness. If we obstinately refuse this offer, the effects of our refusal will come upon us with divine necessity.