

1 AND 2 THESSALONIANS - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this story/book say to you about God?

This question can be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. Is there any important truth found in Thessalonians that is not found elsewhere in the Bible? Would we be any worse off if these two letters were left out of the Canon? Why do you think the church fathers included these two short letters? When were these letters written? Was there anything unusual or unique about the church at Thessalonica? From where were these letters written? Had Paul written other letters which became parts of the New Testament before he wrote Thessalonians? (See Acts 17:1-15; 18:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-6)

Tentative Chronology of the Early Christian Church

(Modified from 6SDABC p. 101,102)

A.D.

- 31 Crucifixion, Ascension, Pentecost (Luke 23; John 19; Acts 1,2; 5BC, pp. 251-254)
- 34 Stephen stoned; church persecuted; gospel carried to Samaria (Acts 7:1-8:25)
- 35 Paul converted (Acts 9:1-19)
- 35-38 Paul at Damascus, Arabia, and back to Damascus (Galatians 1:17)
- 38 Paul escaped from Damascus during reign of Aretas; visited Jerusalem "after three years" (Galatians 1:18); went to Tarsus (Galatians 1:21)
- 44 James the apostle and brother of John martyred; Peter imprisoned at Passover time; Agrippa died (Acts 12)
- 44-45 Barnabas took Paul to Antioch; Paul remained there "a whole year" (Acts 11:26)
- 45 Barnabas and Paul took famine relief to Jerusalem (Acts 11:25-30)
- 45-47 Paul's first missionary journey; on return, Paul remained at Antioch "no little time" (Acts 14:28, RSV) (**James written**)
- 49 Jerusalem Council, "fourteen years after" (Galatians 2:1)
- 49 Paul started second missionary journey; preached in Phrygia, Galatia, and entered Europe (Acts 15:36-16:40)
- 50-51 Paul arrived at Corinth; stayed one and one-half years (**1 & 2 Thessalonians written**)
- 52 End of second missionary journey; Paul "some time" at Antioch (Acts 18:23)
- 53-58 Paul's third missionary journey: traveled through Asia Minor, stayed three years at Ephesus (**1 & 2 Corinthians written**), traveled through Macedonia, stayed three months at Corinth (**Galatians and Romans written**); left for Jerusalem (Acts 19&20)
- 58-60 Paul arrested in Jerusalem; imprisoned at Caesarea "two years" (Acts 24:27); left in autumn
- 60-61 Paul's journey to Rome; arrived in spring (Acts 28:11-15)
- 61-63 Paul a prisoner in Rome "two whole years" (Acts 28:30); (**Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians written; Hebrews may have been written at this time also**)
- 63-66 Paul released from Roman prison; traveled in Crete, Asia Minor, Macedonia (**1 Timothy, Titus written; 1 Peter probably also written; Jude likely written**)

- 66 First siege of Jerusalem; Paul re-arrested; (**2 Timothy written; 2 Peter written**)
- 67 Death of Paul and Peter; (**Acts written-or at least finished**)
- 70 Destruction of Jerusalem
- 90-96 John arrested and sent to Patmos by Domitian (ruled A.D. 89-96) (**Revelation written**);
John released from Patmos (**the Gospel of John and the three letters written**)

1 & 2 Thessalonians were some of the first books of the New Testament to be written. (It is likely that James and possibly even Galatians were written earlier.) It is certain that Paul did not sit down and say to himself, "Let me start writing the New Testament!" Because of persecution which arose in Thessalonica only a short time after he arrived there, he was only able to spend a few weeks with the new church that he had started. As a result, they still had many questions which they wanted to ask him. (See Acts 17:1-9)

It is quite likely that Paul had written other letters before he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians, but we do not have those other letters preserved. In 2 Thessalonians 2:2, he warned against believing things that some church members thought had been written in a letter. Since all of Paul's letters were apparently written down by assistants, Paul signed his letters so people would know they were from him. In 2 Thessalonians 3:17, he clearly identified his own letter by signing it with "his own hand." These warnings imply that there were other letters, perhaps even some from Paul, which had been written earlier.

Paul wrote these letters from Corinth, and they were carried by Timothy back to Thessalonica. As noted above, this took place in the middle of Paul's second missionary journey. The letters were from Paul, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy; but Paul was obviously the principal author. Timothy and Silas had remained behind when Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica and later Berea because of the opposition stirred up by the Jewish community. Timothy soon joined Paul at Athens but was sent back to Thessalonica to see how the church was doing. When Timothy returned with their questions, Paul, then in Corinth, wrote 1 Thessalonians and sent it back with Timothy.

When Timothy returned with news of the church's feverish preparations for the second coming, Paul thought it was necessary to clarify some issues and he wrote 2 Thessalonians. Both of these letters were probably written in A.D. 51. Paul later visited Macedonia in A.D. 57-58, on his third missionary journey, and again visited after his release from Roman prison in about A.D. 63-66.

Thessalonica (now Salonika) is located at the northern-most tip of the Thermaic Gulf (now known as the Gulf of Salonika). The Egnatia Road which connected Rome with the East ran through Thessalonica. Because of that and its good harbor, the city became a great commercial center. It had a large Jewish population and its own synagogue. Paul made it his plan to enter the large, important cities first and establish the work in those places from which he planned for the gospel to spread to the smaller cities. There were some Jewish converts in Thessalonica, but many more Gentiles became Christians.

1 & 2 Thessalonians from *The Message*:

The way we conceive the future sculpts the present, gives contour and tone to nearly every action and thought through the day. If our sense of future is weak, we live listlessly. Much emotional and mental illness and most suicides occur among men and women who feel that they "have no future."

The Christian faith has always been characterized by a strong and focused sense of future, with belief in the Second Coming of Jesus as the most distinctive detail. From the day Jesus ascended into heaven, his followers lived in expectancy of his return. He told them he was coming back. They believed he was coming back. They continue to believe it. For Christians, it is the most important thing to know and believe about the future.

The practical effect of this belief is to charge each moment of the present with hope. For if the future is dominated by the coming again of Jesus, there is little room left on the screen for projecting our anxieties and fantasies. It takes the clutter out of our lives. We're far more free to respond spontaneously to the freedom of God.

All the same, the belief can be misconceived so that it results in paralyzing fear for some, shiftless indolence in others. Paul's two letters to the Christians in Thessalonica, among much else, correct such debilitating misconceptions, prodding us to continue to live forward in taut and joyful expectancy for what God will do next in Jesus. (Introduction to 1 & 2 Thessalonians from *The Message*)

2. Paul was only able to spend a short time with the Thessalonians before the Jews from Philippi arrived and stirred up trouble and tried to kill Paul and his companions. He spent three weeks speaking in the synagogue and may have continued for a few more weeks in the home of Jason. In that short time, he conducted an "evangelistic campaign" that appealed to Jews, Romans, and Greeks. By the time trouble started, they were apparently ready to die for "the truth" that Paul had given them! What made his words so convincing? What Christian or personal beliefs are you ready to die for?

This is primarily a thought question, but people have died for many very important, basic beliefs within the church. Other people have died for foolish reasons! Our understanding of the Scriptures makes us convinced that the most important truth of all is the truth about God and His government. That is the truth that brings joy and comfort to true Christians everywhere. God is not the kind of Person His enemies have made Him out to be—harsh, exacting, arbitrary, unforgiving, vengeful, and severe. If God were like that, it might even be foolish to love and trust Him. But, so many "Christians" seem to imply that that is how He is by the things that they believe. Why do you think that is? What do your beliefs imply about God?

3. Should one come to the place where one could say, ". . . holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed"? (1 Thessalonians 2:10, *NIV*) Did Paul think that he was already perfect? What do you think Paul was referring to in that verse? Is it that he was referring to the way he had persuaded them to be Christians? What about the methods he had used before the Damascus road?

Paul always threw his entire effort into doing the work of God. The Thessalonians had seen how diligently Paul and his companions had worked. Paul later claimed to be the worst of all sinners, (1 Timothy 1:15,16; compare 1 Corinthians 15:9; Ephesians 3:8) but his methods were praiseworthy, and the Thessalonians knew it. Paul was not claiming to be perfect, (See 1 Corinthians 7) but he worked very hard at spreading the gospel.

Prior to the "Damascus road experience," Paul had worked for an entirely different reason.

At that time, he was determined to be the most prominent of the young Pharisees.

4. What would you understand to be the fulfillment of 1 Thessalonians 2:16, “God’s wrath has come upon them at last”? What would it mean to the Thessalonians? What is implied by 1 Thessalonians 1:10? How does Jesus deliver us from “the wrath to come”? (Compare Romans 1:18,24,26,28) Is Jesus to deliver us from the “wrathful Father-God”? Do we have one “kind God” and one “wrathful God”? What about the Holy Spirit? What does the Holy Spirit do to one who persistently rejects the truth? Doesn’t the Holy Spirit leave that person alone? What is the wrath of the Son? (What is the wrath of the Lamb?) What did Jesus do? What did He say we should do when people will not listen? Take the sandals from off your feet and say, “I’m sorry”? (Matthew 10:14) Is it possible to run a universe that way?

Paul seemed to have been clearly aware of “the wrath to come.” (See 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Daniel 9:24; Matthew 23:37-39; 24:15-20; Luke 19:43,44; 21:24) He knew that prophecies pointed to the destruction of Jerusalem again. The gospels of Matthew and Luke had not yet been written, but Jesus had spoken, and the disciples had heard His message. Paul realized that when Jerusalem was destroyed (as later occurred in A.D. 70), many Jews would truly believe that the end had come.

Careful study in the whole of Scripture makes it clear that **God’s “wrath” is simply His turning away in loving disappointment from those who do not want Him anyway, thus leaving them to the inevitable and awful consequences of their own rebellious choices.** (A. Graham Maxwell) That was true for the Jews, and it will be true for all who follow in their footsteps. God never rejects anyone unless or until that person has placed himself beyond His reach. God will never use force to “bring anyone back.”

5. What do you think happened that might have led Paul to write, “We wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us”? (1 Thessalonians 2:18, RSV) How might Satan actually do that? If Satan was working through the Jews, why didn’t Paul mention that? (Compare Matthew 16:23) Why is Satan mentioned so few times in Scripture?

It was clear that Paul had been guided by the Holy Spirit to take up the work in Macedonia. It was to be expected that Satan would seek to oppose anything that was so clearly directed by God. So, Satan stirred up opposition by any and every means available to him. No doubt, the opposition that Paul encountered in each city was the direct result of the forces of Satan. But, Satan cannot ultimately triumph, he can only hinder.

Satan does his best to keep his activities secret. He has succeeded in our day by convincing most biblical scholars that he does not even exist! This serves his purposes best because in the future when events occur that cannot be explained on merely human terms, then those scholars will be ready to attribute those events to God. Probably the main reason why many do not believe in the existence of Satan is that they cannot explain how a good God could create, or even allow, evil.

As we already know from reading all of Paul’s writings, he lived a very difficult life. Almost everywhere he went, he was opposed and persecuted. (2 Corinthians 11:23-33) That made the spread of the gospel slower than Paul wanted and prevented him from doing many things that he would have liked to have done. Much of Paul’s opposition was spearheaded by the Jews, but certainly not all of it. Paul recognized the power behind those events as being from Satan himself.

6. From Paul’s answers in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, what do you think was the main question in the minds of the Thessalonians? What important details of truth do we learn from 1

Thessalonians 4:13-18? What else did Paul want them to know about the second coming? (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 5:23)

Clearly, the main emphasis in 1 Thessalonians is the nearness of the second coming of Christ. There are several very important points that Paul made in this passage:

- 1) Those who have died in Christ are not lost; they will rise again.
- 2) Those still alive at the time of Christ's coming will ascend with the formerly dead to meet Christ in the air. (v. 17)
- 3) We will live together forever with them and the Lord. (v. 18)

How you understand this passage is clearly influenced by your concept of the nature of man. The Bible speaks a great deal about the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead at the end of the world. If a person's "spirit" or "soul" goes to heaven at the time of his death, what would be the purpose of the resurrection? If the spirit or soul has any consciousness, what would change when it is united once again with its body? Is it possible to enjoy the wonders of heaven if you are just a spirit? In the Bible, the word *spirit* is the same as the word *breath*. It refers not only to the literal breath of a person but also to the power behind that breath, the Power of Life. God gives that power—no one else could—and when a person dies, in one sense, that power returns to God who gave it. It is just like the electricity in our homes. When we switch off a light, does the electricity return to the power plant?

7. Does 1 Thessalonians 4:14 prove that the dead saints are with Jesus in heaven now? Why does the *New English Bible* say, "God will bring them to life with Jesus"? (Compare the *Good News Bible*) Is this verse primarily referring to the death and resurrection of Jesus? Or to events at the second coming? What would be the purpose of a resurrection of the body if the saints had been enjoying heavenly bliss for many years already?

There is nothing in all of Scripture that supports the idea that humans are inherently immortal or that they have an immortal soul or spirit. (See note above.) Paul emphasized the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead and that is one of the proofs that the righteous dead will be raised in the same way. Thus, even though they are described as sleeping—the biblical description of the first death, or "sleep death" (John 11:11-14; Luke 8:52,53; Matthew 9:39,40)—they will awake and rise at the sound of the mighty trumpet blown by Michael (the name means the "One who is like God" or "who is like God") which is one of the titles for Christ in Scripture. (John 5:25)

In the Bible, Michael, the Archangel, is always pictured as being in direct conflict with Satan (compare Jude 9). The Bible says (1 Thessalonians 4:16) that the dead will arise at the voice of Michael the Archangel; the Gospels say that they will arise at the voice of Christ. (John 5:25-29) But, there is even a better reason for accepting that view. The name Michael means, "Who is like God?" or "The One who is like God." And that name is only used for Christ in places like Daniel (10:13,21; 12:1), Revelation, and Jude when the great controversy is involved. So, when the Leader of the loyal side is referred to, He is called, "the One who is like God"—Michael. And we know who Satan is—the adversary who would like to be like God, but is not.

8. Having read 1 and 2 Thessalonians, do you believe that those who are alive and remain to see Jesus come will have any special advantage or privilege over those who have "fallen asleep"? (See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

This is a very important passage for helping us to understand how God deals with those who have fallen asleep before Jesus comes the second time. Since the first death, or sleep

death, (see Mark 5:39; John 11:11-15; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6,18,51; 2 Peter 3:4) is always only temporary and every person who dies that death will be raised by God again, (see John 5:28,29) in God's eyes the "dead" are only "sleeping." Thus, when the judgment is complete and the final events before the second coming have taken place, Jesus will come with a shout which will "awaken" the dead. Then, all the righteous, both those who had formerly been dead or asleep and those who have survived until the end, will be taken together to heaven for the millennium. So, in God's eyes those who are dead are simply taking a long "rest" before they will be resurrected again. The wicked dead, of course, will arise in their own resurrection after the millennium, at the third coming of Christ. (Revelation 20:4-6)

9. What does it mean to "rejoice evermore"? (1 Thessalonians 5:16) Do you "pray without ceasing"? (1 Thessalonians 5:17) Can you do any work while you are praying?

Paul was simply suggesting that the true Christian is always thinking about God. In all that he does, the true Christian seeks to represent God correctly. When troubles come, he is silently praying that God will guide and protect him. When good things happen, he praises God for them. That has led many Christian theologians to describe the attitude of a Christian as constantly "thinking toward God." One can do this while driving, working, eating, or playing. It is not necessary to bow onto one's knees to pray. It is also possible to be thankful at all times for all that God has done for us. That is what Paul was implying by those two verses.

10. Why did Paul find it necessary to write, "test everything"? (1 Thessalonians 5:21) Do you have to prove everything? Can you test spiritual things with the intellect? If not, how do you test them? Surely, we do not need to test things coming from God! (Matthew 24:24; 1 John 4:1) Or do we?

God knows about Satan's very successful methods of deception. He knows that our only safety is to test everything! This is a life-or-death matter in the spiritual realm. Some people question whether it is possible to use our minds to critically examine spiritual things. They quote passages from Scripture, such as 1 Corinthians 2:14, suggesting that "spiritual things are spiritually discerned."

But, we must recognize that all spiritual matters must be perceived and comprehended by the intellect which is a function of the brain. Thoughts, emotions, even feelings are a function of the brain and the mind. The Devil does not want us to critically or carefully examine spiritual matters because if we do, he will always lose. The evidence is never on the Devil's side. When carefully investigated and understood correctly, all the evidence supports God's side in the great controversy. So, the Devil does everything he can to make light of evidence, careful investigation, and the faith and trust in God that is based on them. Jesus warned us that there would be times in the future and especially at the end when all types of false prophets, false messiahs, and deception in every form would abound. (See Matthew 24:4,5,11,23-27)

God has nothing to lose if we carefully investigate Him. The Holy Spirit loves it when we study about Him and investigate His methods. Our only safety, in times when so many false leaders are appealing with miracles and every device they can think of, is to carefully investigate before we believe!

11. Should we "greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss"? (1 Thessalonians 5:26, *NRSV*; compare *The Living Bible* or *Phillips*) Is this command significantly different from the one in 1 Peter 5:14?

ἀσπάσασθε τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς πάντας ἐν φιλήματι ἁγίῳ. (Nestle-Aland Greek NT, 27th Ed.)

salutate fratres omnes in osculo sancto (*Vulgate*)

Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss. (*King James Version*)

Give the Lord's followers a warm greeting. (*Contemporary English Version*)

Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. (*God's Word*)

Shake hands for me with all the brothers there. (*The Living Bible*)

Greet all the Christians there with a holy embrace. (*The Message*)

Greet all the brothers and sisters in Christian love. (*New Living Translation*)

Paul was just suggesting that the Christians of Thessalonica should be friendly. That was the usual way of greeting in those days. It is still the usual way of greeting in many parts of the world. Others greet by shaking hands or giving a hug. God is not recommending something new. Christians should be happy to see each other and should treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. This is another example of the fact that God deals with people all over the world and understands them in their cultural context.

12. Did Paul suggest that there were forged letters going around? Who do you think would stoop to use such methods? (See 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 3:17; Galatians 6:11; compare 2 Timothy 2:16,18; 1 Corinthians 16:21; Colossians 4:18)

Paul had already suggested that the Devil was opposing him! But there were also human opponents who believed that Paul was discrediting the honored Jewish traditions of their fathers. People were even claiming to write in Paul's name! (See 1 Thessalonians 2:2 and 3:17) Considering all the other things that were done to Paul to try to stop his ministry, it should be no wonder that people, even today, would try to discount or discredit his letters. (See 2 Corinthians 11:23-33)

13. How could the Thessalonians have been apparently upset by the "delay" in the return of Jesus in A.D. 51? (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; compare 2 Peter 3:3-17) What would have led them to think that He was coming back so soon? Why didn't God, through Paul, clearly explain to them that thousands of years would have to pass first? Was God dishonest in suggesting through the apostles 2000 years ago that time was almost over? (See 1 John 2:18; compare Joel 1:15; 2:1,2; 3:14)

God has always suggested that time is short. He said so in Joel—about 800 years before Christ. That is not to suggest that God did not know when the end would come, but rather, that each of us should live every day as if the end were upon us. In fact, any day could be the last for any one of us, and the very next thing we would see would be the face of God. But more than that, if God were to tell us that the time is far off, many of us would immediately turn to other interests and essentially forget God. God is not crying, "Wolf! Wolf!" In comparison to God's scale of eternity, even our entire lives are very short. We need to use all the time that is available to prepare ourselves. In this sense the end is always very near.

14. Who was Paul referring to when he wrote, "The man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God"? (2 Thessalonians 2:3,4, RSV; compare Isaiah 14:12-14) Could this refer to more than one individual?

The antichrist referred to in these passages is spoken of elsewhere in the Bible. (See 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7) From these passages it is clear that John believed that there were many antichrists just as we should expect many false prophets and false messiahs in

the time of the end. (See Matthew 24:4,5,11,23-27) While there is only one ultimate adversary, there are many who take his side in the great controversy. (1 Peter 5:8; Revelation 12:7-12) In almost every generation, there have been those who thought they could identify the antichrist! There have been individuals who have held powerful and sacred positions and who have behaved as though they were God's adversary. But ultimately, God's adversary is the Devil.

In Revelation 13:18, the "beast" is identified as having the number 666. In ancient times it was quite popular to have a person identified in one way or another with a code number. Some Protestants have pointed out that one of the titles for the pope is *vicarius filii dei*—"substitute for the Son of God." If the letters of that Latin name are added up, their Roman numeral values do indeed equal 666. But, it should be noted that in the very ancient pagan polytheon, there were 36 gods, each of whom ruled over a portion of the heavens, and each had a number from 1 to 36. If the numbers from 1 to 36 are added together, the sum is 666! There are also other ancient uses of the number 666.

In light of all this, it seems fair to say that the ultimate substitute for the Son of God is the Devil himself. All who have aspired to very powerful positions in religious organizations—ones who want those positions so they can wield great, even God-like, power over others—are only lesser substitutes for the Devil himself.

15. When will the events of 2 Thessalonians 2:8 take place? Was Paul writing about the second or the third coming? Did he differentiate between the two?

There is no evidence in the writings of Paul or any other Bible writer—other than John in Revelation—that clearly differentiates between the second and the third comings of the Messiah or Christ. Not until Revelation 20 is the millennium mentioned. In light of this, it appears that God did not see fit to spell those details out to anyone before John. Thus, Paul, recognizing that there would be two different resurrections, (see Acts 24:15; John 5:29) must have assumed that they would occur at about the same time. God did not see fit to correct that misunderstanding until about forty years later when the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation from the Isle of Patmos.

16. When do the events pictured in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 take place? Is that at the second coming, before the second coming, or at the third coming? Does God sometimes "mix up" events that happen at different times? (See Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) Does this passage refer primarily to the papacy, or to Satan himself? (See GC 593,624,625; 5T 698; 8T 27,28)

Most Christians would immediately recognize that the wording in 2 Thessalonians 2:1 suggests that Paul was writing of the second coming which the Thessalonians thought was imminent. Later, in verse 8 it suggests that the Lord will kill or destroy that "wicked one" with the brightness of His coming. We believe that the Devil, who is the ultimate wicked one, will not be destroyed until after the millennium and the third coming. So, how could these two passages apparently be talking about the same events. An understanding of the Greek word translated *kill* or *destroy* will help. The word means to "make idle, ineffective, or powerless," or "render useless," or "to nullify." At Christ's second coming, Satan will be "chained" to this earth (Revelation 20) and will no longer be able to tempt or bother any of God's faithful children. That is the first stage of his destruction. Later, at the third coming, Satan will be ultimately destroyed, and finally and forever, his kingdom will be nullified or cease to exist. Never again after that will we be troubled by Satan's temptations.

17. If you knew with certainty that Jesus was coming back in one year, would it change what you

are doing now? If Jesus was coming in five years? In ten years? In twenty years? Soon after you die?

Even though God speaks often in Scripture of the time being short, He is not trying to frighten us into behaving. He is trying to tell us the truth! God could come very soon if we were to do our part in getting ready.

God gives no man a message that it will be five years or ten years or twenty years before this earth's history shall close. He would not give any living being an excuse for delaying the preparation for His appearing. He would have no one say, as did the unfaithful servant, "My lord delayeth his coming," for this leads to reckless neglect of the opportunities and privileges given to prepare us for that great day.—*Review and Herald*, Nov. 27, 1900, par.3; *LDE* 34.2; *Maranatha* 108.2

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