

# **1 and 2 Thessalonians**

## **Promise to the Persecuted (2 Thess. 1:1-12)**

Lesson #11 for September 15, 2012

Scriptures: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12; John 1:18; Romans 2:5; 12:19; Revelation 16:4-7; 20:1-6; John 14:1-3.

1. So far this quarter, we have been studying 1 Thessalonians. Now, we turn to 2 Thessalonians. There is good evidence that the timing between the two letters was no more than a few months. Why was 2 Thessalonians written so soon after 1 Thessalonians? Many scholars have suggested that the Thessalonians had misunderstood portions of Paul's first letter, and Paul was writing back to them to correct those misunderstandings. In His foreknowledge, shouldn't God have instructed Paul well enough to get it right the first time?
2. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:1,2. Do these words sound familiar? Compare 1 Thessalonians 1:1. Ellen White had some interesting words to say about the Thessalonians' misunderstanding about Paul's first book/letter to them.

The instruction that Paul sent the Thessalonians in his first epistle regarding the second coming of Christ, was in perfect harmony with his former teaching. Yet his words were misapprehended by some of the Thessalonian brethren. They understood him to express the hope that he himself would live to witness the Saviour's advent. This belief served to increase their enthusiasm and excitement. Those who had previously neglected their responsibilities and duties, now became more persistent in urging their erroneous views.

In his second letter Paul sought to correct their misunderstanding of his teaching and to set before them his true position. He again expressed his confidence in their integrity, and his gratitude that their faith was strong, and that their love abounded for one another and for the cause of their Master. He told them that he presented them to other churches as an example of the patient, persevering faith that bravely withstands persecution and tribulation, and he carried their minds forward to the time of the second coming of Christ, when the people of God shall rest from all their cares and perplexities. (*Acts of the Apostles* 264.1,2)

3. Does the addition of the word *our* in the introduction to 2 Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 1:1,2) significantly change its meaning? Was Paul trying to help us to understand how important it is that we see Jesus as an exact likeness of the Father? We know that Jesus said repeatedly that He was just like the Father. (John 1:18; 14:7-11)
4. How often did the people in Bible times directly misunderstand the words of Christ Himself? The Sanhedrin was supposed to be composed of the wisest and most intelligent people in the nation. Look at John 8:24,28,58. Why did Jesus have to tell those very intelligent people three times that He was the divine Son of God before they finally realized what He was saying? Was that just a misunderstanding? Or, was it that what Jesus was saying was so contrary to their paradigm that they just could not comprehend it? They regarded the personal Name of God as too holy even to be pronounced! But, Jesus claimed that Name as His Name.
5. How often do we intentionally misunderstand and misinterpret Scripture? Are there any parts of our salvation paradigm that are not correct? What percentage of Seventh-day Adventists understand Ellen White's picture of the great controversy over God's character and government? How many Seventh-day Adventists can correctly interpret the third angel's message? (Revelation 14:9-12) We tend to focus on Revelation 14:12 because we like what it says. How do we understand the "fire," the "wrath," and the "forever" of Revelation 14:9-11? Don't we claim that the third angels' message is our final severe message of warning to a sinful world? Shouldn't we at least have that message down pat?

6. Jesus spent years focusing on teaching His disciples. Perhaps, it was the most important work that He had to do. They were the ones who would spread His message across the world. How many times did Jesus speak to His disciples about His upcoming suffering, trial, and death? Yet, they still did not get it. Apparently, they did not get it when Jesus spoke to them about it way up north near Caesarea Philippi. (Matthew 16:21; Mark 8:31-9:1; Luke 9:22-27) So, He spoke about it again after descending from the mount of transfiguration a short time later. (Matthew 17:22-23; Mark 9:30-32; Luke 9:43-45) Finally, on their way up from Jericho to Jerusalem on Jesus' last journey just before His crucifixion, Jesus spoke again very plainly about His death in Matthew 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34; and Luke 18:31-34. But, notice the words in Luke 18:34: "But the disciples did not understand any of these things; the meaning of the words was hidden from them, and they did not know what Jesus was talking about." (GNB)
7. Was God intentionally hiding this understanding from them? Surely, we do not believe that. Was it that because of their hopes that Jesus was going to become the future king of Israel, they just could not take in the idea that He might die at the hands of the Romans? He was supposed to conquer the Romans! Do we have any misunderstandings about the second coming?
8. There is another interesting difference between 1 Thessalonians 1:1 and 2 Thessalonians 1,2. In 2 Thessalonians 1:1,2, mention of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ occurs twice. In 1 Thessalonians 1:1, it occurs only once. Ancient copyists looked at that difference and some of them believed that 1 Thessalonians 1:1 should read the same as 2 Thessalonians 1:1. So, they added the second: "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." How do you feel about such variations in the ancient documents? Should we go back and look at the most ancient documents and follow them? Or, should we do what the *King James Version* has done and go with what some copyists thought was an appropriate correction?
9. Another important textual variation regards the Lord's prayer. Read Matthew 6:9-13 in one of the more traditional translations such as the *King James Version*. Then, compare Luke 11:2-4. If you look at the oldest manuscripts, neither of these copies of the Lord's prayer has the doxology attached to it. But, doxologies were—and are—the traditional way to conclude a prayer. (1 Chronicles 29:11; 2 Chronicles 20:6) So, later copyists added the doxology as it is in the *King James Version*. This doxology is very biblical, but it just was not included in Christ's original version of the Lord's prayer. Does that mean that we should stop praying it? Of course not! It is appropriate. But, we need to recognize that it may not have been a part of Christ's original prayer that He gave to us. Does that bother you? Who wrote John 5:4? Why do many versions leave it out? Compare various versions and look at the explanation given by Ellen White.
10. There is a very precise science for dealing with such variations. It is called textual criticism. We need to carefully distinguish between it and higher criticism which deals with completely different issues. In early Christian times, almost the entire Christian population could read the Greek of the New Testament. As the speaking of Greek gradually died out and Latin became the primary language, many people felt comfortable making their own translations from Greek into Latin. Even when copying the original Greek, some people felt comfortable in making what they thought were corrections. There are more than one hundred thousand manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. It is fairly easy to compare them and recognize that differences fall into large family groupings. How do you think we should deal with those differences?
11. It is interesting to notice that Paul had a tendency to produce very long sentences. 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 is a single sentence! Virtually all modern translations break this sentence into smaller pieces because we have trouble with such long sentences. We often read these verses as primarily speaking about issues concerning the second coming. But, if you realize that they are all one sentence, the initial and important subject and verb are "we are obligated" or "we ought" at all times to give thanks to God concerning you. So, Paul was speaking about the second coming in the context of his pride in the growth and progress of the Thessalonian church.

12. In general, we know that living things must grow, or they will die. Is that also true of churches? Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3,4.
13. Paul was writing this second letter to the Thessalonians apparently primarily because they had partially misunderstood his first letter. But, even so, he started out with fairly lengthy words of encouragement and affirmation for them. Notice that in these verses instead of speaking about his favorite combo of faith, hope, and love, (See 1 Corinthians 13:13) Paul talked about their faith, love, and patience. Does that have something to do with the fact that they were suffering persecution and afflictions?
14. Do we suffer any persecution or afflictions? The word *persecution* is almost universally assumed to refer to physical abuse or torture. However, in this place, the word *afflictions* means trials of various kinds. Do any of us experience trials? Don't we all? If we were representing Christ as we should, would we suffer more persecution and afflictions?
15. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:5,6. The next five verses in this chapter have a distinctly Old Testament feel to them. The book of 1 Thessalonians more nearly reflects New Testament language and thinking. But, this section of 2 Thessalonians speaks in very strong language that more closely reflects some parts of the Old Testament.
16. What did Paul say to us about violence? Almost everyone would agree that, in general, violence begets more violence. Paul was saying that those who use violence will come under God's judgment in the future. And God will judge everyone completely fairly. Does it make you feel more comfortable when you are having trials to know that those who might be making your life more difficult will "get what's coming to them"? Some Christians rejoice in Hebrews 12:29, "Because our God is indeed a destroying fire." They wish they could execute vengeance upon their enemies, but they rejoice in the fact that God will do it in the future and He will do it with much greater power and force than they ever could! Does that sound like a Christian attitude?
17. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9. Are you comfortable with what it says about God in these verses? Remember that we become like the God that we worship and admire. The ancient Assyrians worshiped the god of war. They were known for taking their enemies who had fought valiantly against them, beating them until they were black and blue, and then skinning them alive! Do you think their worship of the "god of war" influenced how they behaved? What is our picture of God? Is it correct? Are we following Ellen White's advice and constantly studying to improve the accuracy of our picture of God?
18. Are you comfortable with the God pictured in 2 Thessalonians 1 who pays back with vengeance, punishment, and the infliction of suffering? (See Romans 2:5; 12:19)
19. Even the very best governments must deal with unrestrained evil. In its early history, America had very few prisons. Justice was often meted out with a sword or a gun! Today, we have 4 million people incarcerated. Does the fact that the US Government has so many people in prison worry you? Can we be sure that when God executes His justice and judgment, it will be fair? Will it be fair because the onlooking universe has looked over God's shoulder and decided exactly how much punishment He should mete out? (Daniel 7:9,10) Or, will it be fair because each person ultimately decides his own degree of punishment?
20. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:10-12. Now that we have come to the end of 2 Thessalonians 1, notice some of the things which this passage clearly states about God's actions.

The full sentence in this week's text (*2 Thess. 1:3-10*) provides a number of important details about the second coming of Jesus. When Jesus returns, He will afflict the afflicters and provide rest for the afflicted (*see 2 Thess. 1:6, 7*). He will come down from heaven in the company of powerful angels (*2 Thess. 1:7*). He will come with flaming fire and execute justice on those who have rejected God and the gospel of Jesus Christ (*2 Thess. 1:8*). The wicked are destroyed (*2 Thess. 1:8, 9*) while the righteous bring glory to Christ (*2 Thess. 1:10*). (*Adult*

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21. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17, we learned that the righteous will be taken to heaven at the second coming. Thus, this earth will be left desolate for 1000 years. (Revelation 20:1-6). Having praised his Thessalonian friends in the first verses of 2 Thessalonians, Paul set the stage for some corrections that were needed. Proof that the second coming has not yet taken place is the fact that there has not been “flaming fire, destruction of the wicked, and the full glorification of Jesus in the eyes of all.” (*Ibid*)
22. If you had received this chapter of 2 Thessalonians directed to you from an inspired prophet, how would you respond?
23. There are some who believe that some of the harsher language in this passage does not sound like God. Ellen G. White responded in *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 21, as follows:

The Bible is not given to us in grand superhuman language. Jesus, in order to reach man where he is, took humanity. The Bible must be given in the language of men. Everything that is human is imperfect. Different meanings are expressed by the same word; there is not one word for each distinct idea. The Bible was given for practical purposes.

The stamps of minds are different. All do not understand expressions and statements alike. Some understand the statements of the Scriptures to suit their own particular minds and cases. Prepossessions, prejudices, and passions have a strong influence to darken the understanding and confuse the mind even in reading the words of Holy Writ. . . .

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.

It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.—*Manuscript 24*, 1886 (written in Europe in 1886). {1SM 20.2-21.2}

24. Does it give you great comfort to know that “They [the wicked] will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord” while in Hebrews 13:5 God promises the righteous: “I will never leave you; I will never abandon you”?
25. 2 Thessalonians 1 has raised a number of questions for our consideration. Are you comfortable with what you have learned? Do the variations in manuscripts bother you? Does the harsh language bother you? It is the challenge for true Christians to put together every part of Scripture—no matter how appealing or unappealing it may be—to establish a correct understanding of God’s character and His actions down through history. Our daily prayer should be that our picture of God be constantly improving.

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