

2 Thessalonians

Authorship

The same arguments for the authorship of 1 Thessalonians apply here, though 2 Thessalonians is much more widely disputed. External evidence for Pauline authorship is, if anything, stronger than for the first letter. It may be concluded that Paul wrote this letter.¹

Date

Internal evidence coupled with the record of Acts argues that 2 Thessalonians was written soon after 1 Thessalonians, prior to Paul's revisiting the city and while he was still at Corinth with Silas and Timothy. It was written in A.D. 51.

Historical Setting

Paul is residing in Corinth in the course of his first missionary activity in Achaia. He has already written one letter to the Christians at Thessalonica, having established the church less than a year before.

Original Readers

The church was comprised largely of Gentiles who had been converted from idolatry. They had proven themselves to be obedient disciples and were progressing in the faith.

Occasion

Since this second letter covers much the same material as the first with respect to the coming of the Lord, it may be reasoned that Paul's first letter was not completely successful in dealing with the things that had been troubling the Thessalonian Christians. Or perhaps the false teachers had countered with a new teaching. In any case, Paul still has the same ultimate goal, the believers' growth in the faith and worthy conduct before the Lord.

Special Issues

Paul's eschatological sources. The question may be asked, Where did Paul get his information about the end times? The answer is not a simple one. He could have received much of it by means of direct revelation (cf. 2 Cor. 12:2-4). He probably learned about the Lord's own teaching from his interaction with the Jerusalem apostles (cf. Gal. 1:18). If

¹ For a discussion of the objections to Pauline authorship see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. revised (Downers Grove: IL, 1990), 592-603.

Matthew was written as early as is proposed in this series of arguments, he would have had Jesus' own eschatological teaching in hand. He certainly had Daniel's book, which contained the structural outline of end time events, along with a number of specific details. When 1 Thessalonians 2 is interpreted against and correlated with Revelation and Daniel it becomes obvious that Paul's teaching is consistent with the eschatological program revealed elsewhere in Scripture.

Message

Though final retribution against evil must await the day of the Lord, believers are to endure suffering and live uprightly with a view to obtaining glory.

Outline

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| I. | Introductory Greeting. | 1:1-2 |
| II. | Paul encourages the church in the face of persecution and hardship. | 1:3-3:15 |
| | A. Paul encourages the church to endure persecution for the sake of the kingdom of God. | 1:3-12 |
| | 1. Their faith has become strong enough to endure suffering. | 1:3-4 |
| | 2. Their endurance is evidence of worthiness of the kingdom. | 1:5 |
| | 3. Their rest will come when Jesus returns from heaven. | 1:6-10 |
| | a. He will return to punish those who trouble the church. | 1:6-9 |
| | b. He will return to the admiration of those who believe. | 1:10 |
| | 4. Paul prays for them to fulfill their calling. | 1:11-12 |
| | a. He prays that God would consider them worthy of their calling. | 1:11 |
| | b. He prays that Christ would be glorified. | 1:12 |
| | B. Paul assures the church that they have not missed the coming of the Lord. | 2:1-15 |
| | 1. Introductory admonition: The day of the Lord has not come. | 2:1-2 |
| | 2. The day of the Lord will come with destruction. | 2:3-12 |
| | a. The man of sin must be revealed. | 2:3-5 |
| | b. The one who restrains will be taken away. | 2:6-7 |
| | c. The lawless one will be destroyed. | 2:8-12 |
| | 1) The Lord will destroy him at His coming. | 2:8 |
| | 2) The Lord will send delusion for His judging. | 2:9-12 |
| | a) Satan will work wonders. | 2:9 |
| | b) The unrighteous will reject the truth. | 2:10 |
| | c) The unrighteous will believe the lie and be condemned. | 2:11-12 |
| | 3. The day of the Lord will mean salvation for believers. | 2:13-14 |
| | a. Believers have been chosen for salvation. | 2:13 |
| | b. Believers have been called to obtain glory. | 2:14 |
| | 4. Concluding admonition: Hold fast the received traditions. | 2:15 |
| | C. Paul exhorts the church to continue in every good word and work for the glory of the Lord. | 2:16-3:15 |

1. Introductory benediction: Paul wishes for them to be comforted and established in word and work. 2:16-17
2. Summary exhortation:
 - a. Paul directs them in the word of prayer. 3:1-2
 - b. Paul commends them to love and endurance. 3:3-5
 - c. Paul commands them to an orderly walk. 3:6-15
 - 1) Paul admonishes all to support themselves. 3:6-12
 - 2) Paul exhorts perseverance in doing good. 3:13
 - 3) Paul instructs the discipline of the disobedient. 3:14-15
- III. Concluding Salutation: Paul wishes them the Lord's peace and grace. 3:16-18

Argument

Paul writes a second letter to the church at Thessalonica in response to continued debate over teaching relating to the second coming of Christ. The same spiritual goals are reflected in this second letter but new information is given about the circumstances surrounding the return of the Lord.

I. Introductory Greeting (1:1-2).

Paul uses virtually the same introductory greeting as he did for the first letter, indicating perhaps that he has the same perspective and purpose.

II. Paul encourages the church in the face of persecution and hardship (1:3–3:15).

This is really the point of the whole letter, though it has a doctrinal side and a behavioral component. Their past faith and future performance need to be evaluated and undertaken from the perspective of the certainty of the Lord's return, thus the positioning of material about the Lord's return in the middle of the book.

A. Paul encourages the church to endure persecution for the sake of the kingdom of God (1:3-12).

Paul is able to give thanks for their faith (1:3-4) but is still concerned that they continue in it, even while experiencing persecutions and trials (1:5). Paul encourages them by a reminder that what they were experiencing was indication that their testimony is something that God approved of, otherwise they would not be receiving the reaction that they were (1:5). God would take care of judging their oppressors and would give them rest (1:6-9) when the Lord returned (1:10). Rather than requesting an end to suffering, Paul prays that God would be able to accomplish everything he desires through these faithful believers to the glory of Christ (1:11-12). Paul approves of their past conduct and encourages them with a lofty reason for carrying on, though it may transpire in the crucible of suffering.

B. Paul assures the church that they have not missed the coming of the Lord (2:1-15).

If the Lord had already come, as some had been teaching, then what was the nature of the persecution and tribulation that they were experiencing? Paul assures them that events of the Great Tribulation will be unmistakable, including a great apostasy and the self-exaltation of the man of sin (2:3-5). In the meantime the restrainer (probably referring to the Holy Spirit) is preventing such a bold assault on God's earthly representatives (2:6-7).² Though Paul does not specifically declare the exact relationship of the rapture to these events he does clearly refer to that event (2:1).³ Destruction awaits the lawless one (2:8) but not before he has deceived the whole unbelieving world with the aid of Satanic power (2:9-10). Even God Himself will contribute to that delusion so that he may accomplish the work of judgment (2:11-12). The teaching on the events preceding Christ's return are calculated to encourage the young church in their endurance of persecution, knowing that they have not been abandoned but are, rather, actually being used by God to accomplish his ultimate plan. This discussion of the coming of the Lord is rounded off with Paul's assurance that they have been chosen for salvation and glorification (2:13-14). Therefore, they must stand firm in these apostolic traditions (2:15).

C. Paul exhorts the church to continue in every good word and work for the glory of the Lord (2:16–3:15).

Paul's wish of comfort and establishment in word and work (2:16-17) serves as a hinge; it grows out of the believers' past experience and the certainty of the Lord's return and looks forward to a continuation in conduct that becomes their calling (cf. 1:11). Prayer (3:1-3) is crucial to their continuing in a walk characterized by love (3:5) and order (3:6-12). They must be careful to police themselves when it comes to living as Christians (3:13-15).

² For a discussion of the "restrainer" see Charles E. Powell, "The Identity of the 'Restrainer' in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):329.

³ See Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church* (Bellmawr, Pa.: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1995), 223-29, for a discussion of these verses as they apply to the Rapture. On the Rapture see also Thomas R. Edgar, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).

III. Concluding Salutation: Paul wishes them the Lord's peace and grace (3:16-18).

Perhaps the thing most needed by these believers is peace, which is Paul's primary desire for them. Since the Lord is present they may experience and manifest his calming assurance in the midst of their trials.

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