



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

### **New Testament Survey**

## **Lesson 23 – Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians – Guidance for the Last Days**

### **The Background of These Letters**

In Lesson 22 we saw what kind of city Thessalonica was and how a congregation of Christians was founded there on Paul’s second mission journey. Paul had been permitted to preach in the Jewish synagogue for three Saturdays before the majority of the Jews rejected him. Very likely he was able to preach to the Gentiles for some time after that, until the unbelieving Jews stirred up the rabble of the city against him and attacked Jason’s home. The Thessalonian Christians had to suffer persecution because of their open confession of Christ. Because of this severe persecution, they longed especially for the return of the Lord Jesus and the end of the world.

After Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica, he went to Berea and Athens. But he was still very much concerned about the Christians in Thessalonica. Therefore, when Timothy came from Berea to Athens to join Paul, Paul sent him to Thessalonica to find out how things were going in the congregation there. Paul was afraid that all their afflictions and troubles might lead them to desert the Christian faith. Timothy returned from Thessalonica and reported to Paul, who was by this time in Corinth during his 18-month stay there. Timothy had both good news and bad news.

The good news was that the Thessalonian Christians had remained faithful to the Gospel of Christ and to His missionary Paul, and that they showed great love to one another, so that they were good examples to all the other Christians.

But Timothy reported some problems as well:

1. Sexual immorality. This is not surprising because of the prevalence of sexual immorality in their culture.
2. The false idea that Jesus was coming right away.
3. A wrong idea about the deaths of Christians. Some of them believed that those who died before the coming of Christ would miss out on the benefits.
4. Continued persecution by the unbelieving Jews.
5. Giving up their former occupations and living a disorderly life, being busybodies in their neighbors’ affairs and expecting others to provide for their bodily needs.

**Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians** is his response to Timothy’s report. This letter contains a long thanksgiving that recalls the history of the Thessalonian congregation

(Chapters 1-3) as well as instruction and admonition with respect to the problems reported by Timothy (Chapters 4-5). Paul wrote this letter from Corinth in 50 AD.

**Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians** was written after Paul received news of further problems in Thessalonica. False ideas had been spread in the congregation concerning the Lord's second coming. Paul wrote his second letter to give further instruction on this matter and to encourage them to remain firm in their faith. Unique to this letter is Paul's extensive discussion of the coming of **"the man of sin,"** also known as **"the son perdition"** and commonly called the Antichrist – someone who opposes Christ and makes the attempt to replace or displace Him.

### **The Last Things: Eschatology**

Every chapter of Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians mentions the last things, that is, things related to Christ's second coming, the judgment on the last day, the resurrection of the dead, and death. All these subjects are lumped together under the term "eschatology". For example:

1 Thessalonians 1: **"to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come"** (v. 10).

1 Thessalonians 2: **"What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?"** (v. 19).

1 Thessalonians 3: **"so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints"** (v. 13).

1 Thessalonians 4: **"The Lord Himself will descend from heaven ... and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air"** (vv. 16-17). This is sometimes called "the rapture", but almost all who talk about the rapture have wrong ideas of what is going to happen then.

1 Thessalonians 5: **"The day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night"** (v. 2).

2 Thessalonians 1: **"when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels"** (v. 7).

2 Thessalonians 2: **"That day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed"** (v. 3).

2 Thessalonians 3: **"But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one"** (v. 3).

### **The Antichrist**

The Antichrist is given this name only in the first letter of John (1 John 2:18), but he was foretold already by God to the prophet Daniel (Daniel 7:8, 20-22, 24-27) as one who would oppose the Christ and trouble Christians. Paul gives this description of the Antichrist in 2

Thessalonians 2:4: He **“opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.”**

The history of the Christian Church indicates that there is only one that fulfills this prophecy, and that is the Roman pope or the institution of the papacy. The pope calls himself the vicar of Christ on earth, the ruler of Christ’s Church on earth, and even claims to be infallible when he is teaching the Church. Despite his fine-sounding words, the pope is actually opposed to the true Gospel of Christ. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent, which began to meet during Martin Luther’s lifetime, denounced the true Gospel that Luther was teaching from the Bible, and cursed all those who teach that we are saved by faith in Christ alone, apart from the deeds of the law, as Romans chapter 3 clearly teaches.

Read 1 and 2 Thessalonians with the notes below. If you have questions, do not hesitate to ask them.

### **I. Paul’s Thanksgiving Recalling the History of the Congregation (1 Thessalonians 1-3)**

#### **Greetings (1:1)**

Paul, Silas, Timothy – to the Thessalonians – grace and peace.

#### **The founding of the congregation (1:2 – 2:12)**

Your becoming Christians goes back to **“your election by God”** (v. 1:4). God chose you to be His.

**“You became followers ... of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction”** (v. 1:6).

**“You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”** (v. 1:9).

**“We speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts”** (v. 2:4).

**“You are witnesses ... how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves”** (v. 2:10).

**“We exhorted, ... as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God”**  
(vv. 2:11-12).

#### **The severe persecution (2:13-16)**

**“When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it”**  
(v. 13).

**“You also suffered ... from your own countrymen”** (v. 14).

**“The Judeans ... killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us”** (vv. 14-15).

Paul's separation from the congregation (2:17 – 3:5)

**"We wanted to come to you, ... but Satan hindered us" (v. 2:18).**

**"We ... sent Timothy ... to encourage you concerning your faith" (vv. 3:1-2).**

Timothy's report (3:6-10)

**"Timothy ... brought us good news of your faith and love" (v. 6).**

Concluding prayer (3:11-13)

## **II. Paul's Admonitions Regarding the Problems Reported by Timothy (1 Thessalonians 4-5)**

With regard to moral problems (4:1-12)

**"This is the will of God ... : that you should abstain from sexual immorality" (v. 3).**

**"God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness" (v. 7).**

**"You yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (v. 9).**

**"Aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands" (v. 11).**

With regard to the last things – eschatology (4:13 – 5:11)

**"God will bring with Him (Jesus) those who sleep in Jesus" (v. 4:14).**

**"We who are alive ... will by no means precede those who are asleep" (v. 4:15).**

**"Thus we shall always be with the Lord" (v. 4:17).**

**"Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober" (v. 5:6).**

**"God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ"  
(v. 5:9).**

With regard to congregational life (5:12-22)

**"Recognize those who ... are over you in the Lord ... and esteem them very highly in love"  
(v. 12-13).**

**"Always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all" (v. 15).**

**"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks" (vv. 16-18).**

Concluding prayer and benediction (5:23-28)

## **III. Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Thessalonians in View of Persecution (2 Thessalonians 1)**

**"We ourselves boast of you ... for your patience ... in all your persecutions" (vv. 4).**

The unbelievers “shall be punished with everlasting destruction ... when He comes” (vv. 9-10).

“He comes ... to be admired among all those who believe” (v. 10).

**IV. Paul’s Warning that the Coming of Christ Will Be Preceded by the Coming of Antichrist**  
(2 Thessalonians 2)

“Now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed” (v. 6). (the Roman Empire?)

“The Lord will consume (the Antichrist) with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming” (v. 8).

“They did not receive the love of the truth ... For this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie” (vv. 10-11).

**V. Paul’s Admonitions Regarding the Success of the Word and Their Disorder**  
(2 Thessalonians 3)

“Pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified” (v. 1).

“If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat” (v. 10).

“There are some who walk among you ... , not working at all, but are busybodies” (v. 11).

**Questions**

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1. What topic is mentioned in every chapter of Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians?
2. How were the Thessalonians tested soon after they turned to Christ?
3. Who were the main persecutors of the Christians in the early days of the Church?
4. Why did Paul write his first letter to the Thessalonians?
5. What word from God did Paul bring regarding sexual immorality?
6. What will happen on the day that Jesus returns?
7. What will happen to unbelievers on the last day and beyond?
8. How did Paul describe the coming Antichrist or man of sin?
9. How is the prophecy of Antichrist being fulfilled in our day?
10. How do we know that God disapproves of laziness?