

SECOND EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONICANS

Approximate date: 51-52 C.E. (maximum of six months after 1 Thessalonians)

Time period: season of severe misunderstanding about the end-times

Author: the Apostle Paul

Location of author: Corinth

Target audience and their location: Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in
Thessalonica

People:

Paul, Silas, Timothy

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah

Places:

Thessalonica

Key Themes:

judgment upon the wicked who reject the gospel / events that must precede the Second Coming / spread of lawlessness and lying signs and wonders / warnings against idleness

Key Scriptures: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4; 3:5-7 / **Greeting** (1:1-2); **Thanksgiving** (1:3-4); **The Judgment of God** (1:5-10); **Prayer** (1:11-12); **The Parousia** (2:1-12); **Further Thanksgiving and Prayer** (2:13-17); **Exhortations** (3:1-15); **Conclusion** (3:6-18)¹

Theological Summary: The Apostle Paul claims to be the author of 2 Thessalonians, along with Silvanus and Timothy as co-senders (1:1). Genuine Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians tends to not be questioned by conservative examiners, but is often questioned by many liberals. The text of this letter was well-known to some of the main leaders and documents of the emerging Christianity of the Second Century, including: the *Didache* (ch. 2; 2 Thessalonians 3:11), Polycarp (*Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* 11; 2 Thessalonians

¹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 605-606.

3:15), Ignatius, Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 110; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12), Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.7.2; 2 Thessalonians 2:8).² “No responsible early church authority ever questioned Paul’s authorship of 2 Thessalonians” (Carson and Moo).³ Guthrie actually concludes, “The external evidence is, if anything, rather stronger [for 2 Thessalonians] than for 1 Thessalonians.”⁴

Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians is often challenged on the basis of its structure, and the fact that the letter is more formal and rigid in its language than 1 Thessalonians.⁵ Doubts about the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians can stem from the difficulty of thinking that a second letter would be posted to the Thessalonians, so soon after a first letter.⁶ “[T]hose who reject the letter’s authenticity do so mainly because it seems so pointless as a sequel to 1 Thessalonians” (*IDBSup*).⁷ It is thought that 1 Thessalonians depicts an imminent return of the Messiah, and that 2 Thessalonians depicts a return that must be preceded by some definite events.⁸ Some liberals think that 2 Thessalonians “may have been written by someone among [Paul’s] co-workers or disciples who employed the authority of Paul to address a situation in which Christians were undergoing intense persecution” (*EDB*),⁹ and that this was likely a second generation piece after the death of the Apostle.

A majority of conservative interpreters hold to genuine Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, and feel that 2 Thessalonians clarifies many of the statements made in 1 Thessalonians.¹⁰ Tenney notes that none of the arguments against Pauline authorship are valid, “for the two letters deal with two different aspects of the same general subject, and bear so many resemblances to each other that they are clearly related” (*NIDB*).¹¹

In academic evaluation of 1&2 Thessalonians together, there is some discussion which proposes that 2 Thessalonians was actually written before 1 Thessalonians. This conclusion is often drawn from a comparison of theological themes that seem to be relatively new in 2 Thessalonians, and may be understood more firmly in 1 Thessalonians.¹² Such a view naturally would have to hold that 1&2 Thessalonians together were genuinely Pauline.

Most conservatives still tend to hold that 2 Thessalonians was written after 1 Thessalonians, and that this letter was composed not long after the first letter. It could have been written a number of months after 1 Thessalonians, although it could have been written a

² Merrill C. Tenney, “Thessalonians, Second Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 4:835.

³ Carson and Moo, 536.

⁴ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 593.

⁵ Edgar M. Krentz, “Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the,” in *ABD*, 6:520-521; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Thessalonians, Second,” in *EDB*, 1299.

⁶ F.W. Beare, “Thessalonians, First Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 4:625.

⁷ J.C. Hurd, “Thessalonians, Second Letter to the,” in *IDBSup*, 901.

⁸ Beare, “Thessalonians, First Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 4:626.

⁹ Gaventa, “Thessalonians, Second,” in *EDB*, 1300; cf. Krentz, “Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the,” in *ABD*, 6:522.

¹⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 592-599.

¹¹ Merrill C. Tenney, “Thessalonians, Letters to the,” in *NIDB*, 1009.

¹² Hurd, “Thessalonians, Second Letter to the,” in *IDBSup*, 901; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 599-602; J.W. Simpson, Jr., “Thessalonians, Letters to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 937; Carson and Moo, pp 543-544.

number of weeks after it, as agitators had entered in among the Thessalonican Believers and were promoting an imminently forthcoming return of Yeshua.¹³ 2 Thessalonians was probably written from Corinth, and was written to clarify misunderstandings from the first letter that had arisen after Paul heard a report about what had been taking place.¹⁴ 2 Thessalonians could have been written to answer the claims of an unauthorized letter, which said the return of Yeshua was at hand (2:2), or at least was anticipatory of unauthorized letters being forged in the name of Paul.

Like 1 Thessalonians, no one in the scholastic community has ever proposed a Hebrew or Aramaic origin for the text of 2 Thessalonians. A Greek composition of 2 Thessalonians is definite given its audience.

The theology of 2 Thessalonians is largely focused around eschatology.¹⁵ The letter adds additional dimensions to the eschatology of 1 Thessalonians, specifying that certain events must precede the return of Yeshua (2:1-3), and it introduces the figure of “the man of sin” (2:3-9),¹⁶ the antimessiah or antichrist. The text takes on a distinctly more Jewish character than 1 Thessalonians, including references to “the day of the Lord” (2:2), which the largely non-Jewish readership would not have been as familiar with as the Jewish readership.

Paul specifies many of the general end-time claims of 1 Thessalonians. He encourages the Believers in Thessalonica (1:4-10), corrects misunderstandings relating to the Second Coming (2:1-12), and is forced to exhort many of the Thessalonians to work (2:13-3:15). There was a strong belief that the return of Yeshua and the end of the world were at hand, and people were not working (3:10-12), providing sustenance for their families and/or giving the community of Believers a slothful reputation. As Gundry observes, “The fanaticism arose out of a belief in the immediacy of Jesus’ return...Paul therefore writes this second epistle to the Thessalonians to quiet the fanaticism by correcting the eschatology that gave rise to it.”¹⁷ Much discussion abounds from 2 Thessalonians on the figure of the antimessiah/antichrist, the issue of the restrainer (2:6-7), and the prophesied apostasy (2:3).¹⁸ Even though there are debates among Christian pre-millennialists, there is also a wide amount of agreement. 1&2 Thessalonians together, though, do not tend to garner as much attention as does Yeshua’s Olivet Discourse, the Book of Revelation, or the Book of Daniel.

2 Thessalonians offers no huge theological challenges for the Messianic community today. It is interesting, though, that Paul does communicate how in his day, “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (2:7),¹⁹ indicating that in the mid-First Century the

¹³ Tenney, “Thessalonians, Second Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 5:835-836.

¹⁴ Beare, “Thessalonians, First Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 4:626-627.

¹⁵ Carson and Moo, pp 549-550.

¹⁶ Tenney, “Thessalonians, Second Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 4:834-835.

¹⁷ Gundry, in *A Survey of the New Testament*, 356.

¹⁸ There is debate among interpreters how exactly to approach the term *apostasía* (ἀποστασία). The NASU renders it literally as “apostasy,” other versions like RSV/NRSV/ESV and NIV/TNIV render it as “rebellion.” Pre-tribulationists have been known to approach *apostasía* as not a massive departure of people away from faith in the Lord, but instead as a departure of Believers into Heaven.

Consult the author’s article “The Great Apostasy” for a further discussion.

¹⁹ Grk. *to gar mustērion ēdē energeitai tēs anomias* (τὸ γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας); “For already this separating from *Torah* is at work secretly” (CJB).

community of faith was already distancing itself from God's Instruction in the Torah. However, the bulk of Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians relates to the return of Yeshua, and responds to the arguments of so-called end-time immanency. If anything, there is more in 2 Thessalonians to add to what is seen in 1 Thessalonians regarding the infamous pre- versus post-tribulation rapture debate. 2 Thessalonians also further addresses the need for Believers not to be too overanxious about the end-times, a problem much of the contemporary Messianic movement does suffer from. There is certainly room for improvement in our collective Messianic engagement level with the Epistle of 2 Thessalonians.²⁰

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 2 THESSALONIANS:

- 1. Why do you think Paul warns the Thessalonians about being idle in their conduct?**
- 2. What aspects of 2 Thessalonians do you think need some further investigation and reflection on your part?**
- 3. Having just examined both 1&2 Thessalonians, have you ever encountered a Messianic fellowship or congregation like the one Paul wrote to in Thessalonica? If so, what were its strengths and weaknesses?**

²⁰ Consult the author's commentary *1&2 Thessalonians for the Practical Messianic* for a more detailed examination of 1&2 Thessalonians (forthcoming 2012).

REFLECTION ON 2 THESSALONIANS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading
Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians:*