

God's Message to Us in Second Thessalonians

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Introduction

Last week in our sermon series in which I am preaching one or two sermons on each book of the Bible, we looked at Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

- Probably in January or February of AD 51, Paul, Silas (or Silvanus), and Timothy had first gone to Thessalonica and preached the gospel at the synagogue there.
 - Many Greeks, including some prominent persons, and a few Jews had welcomed the gospel despite much opposition from the synagogue.
 - The opposers raised up a serious persecution that forced Paul and his companions to leave.
 - It was very displeasing to them to leave this fledgling congregation that needed to be established and encouraged in their new-found faith.
 - They tried again and again to return to them, but were hindered by Satan in some way, and finally resorted to sending only Timothy to them.
- Paul wrote First Thessalonians after Timothy returned from the visit.
 - His purpose was to tell the Thessalonians how grateful he was to God when Timothy told him how they were continuing faithfully in the Lord.
 - Paul added his encouragement and apostolic support to young Timothy's ministry, encouraging them and exhorting them to keep on abounding in the Lord. He also answered a question they had about the return of Christ.

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, written (we believe) at the end of AD 51, dealt with some false teaching that they had been exposed to about the return of Christ.

- Apparently, there were those claiming that Paul himself had taught that Christ had already returned, so Paul writes to assure them that this is not true.
- In doing so, he (or rather the Holy Spirit of God) provided the church with some very helpful teaching that is of great use today.
 - In chapter 1, he speaks about God's justice in judgment.
 - This was helpful for them as a church being persecuted, and it is useful for us modern Christians to help us accept the severity of God's judgment.
 - In chapter 2, he prophesies of widespread apostasy in the church.
 - This was helpful for them because it assured them that Christ had not returned and helped them and us to expect widespread apostasy so as not be swept away with it.
 - At the end of chapter 2 and in chapter 3, he encourages us in the way forward.
 - And of course this is always helpful for believers in every age.

Let's take a look at this edifying material in 2 Thessalonians.

I. Let's begin by looking at the justice of God's judgment as it is set forth in chapter 1.

- A. Paul wastes no time in getting to the subject of God's justice.
 - 1. After a brief greeting in verse 1-2,

- he reiterates in verse 3-4 how he and his companions are bound to give thanks to God for the Thessalonian church's faithfulness under persecution.
 - **2 Thess 1:3-4: We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, ⁴ so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure...**
2. But before he even finishes his sentence he begins to speak of how God's justice therefore calls for the Thessalonian believers to be rewarded and for their persecutors to be judged.
- a. The believers' willingness to suffer for the Lord shows that they are definitely on His side—on God's side.
 - You don't suffer for the cause of a kingdom that you are opposed to when you are a weak minority who is being trampled upon.
 - If you have anything less than loyalty to your king, you renounce your allegiance and join the other side.
 - You see how Paul says of the believers at Thessalonica that their patience and faith in all their persecutions and tribulations...
 - (verse 5): **is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer.**
 - He does not mean that they are deserving of God's salvation from their sins, but he means that they show that they have been reconciled to God by God's saving grace...
 - They are now, by God's grace, on God's side and it is only right for God to deal with those who oppose them—because they are being opposed for being loyal subjects of God's kingdom.
 - He will surely stick up for His own subjects!
 - b. It is a righteous thing for Him not only to recognise them as belonging to His kingdom, but also to punish those who are attacking them for being loyal to Him.
 - Thus verse 6 & 7 say: **since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, ⁷ and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels,**
 - c. Even though God does not render judgment presently, let no one suppose for a minute that He will not deal with them when Jesus comes.
 - One of the greatest errors that people make is to suppose that because God does not judge all sin now, He will never judge it.
 - There are many who go on, oblivious to the danger, not realising that though God overlooks their sin now, He has appointed a day in which He will judge it all.
 - Anyone who goes on living without seeking to make peace with God is a fool.
 - How they will regret their folly when Jesus comes.

- B. Paul describes the extreme severity of God’s wrath that will fall upon them in that day in the terrifying words of verses 8-10.
- **2 Thess 1:8-10: in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰ when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.**
1. What a terrifying prospect!
 - a. Jesus Christ will come in flaming fire to take vengeance...
 - And it is on all who **do not know God and do not obey the gospel (v. 8)**.
 - They suppressed the truth of God and ignored His obvious displeasure with us for our sin of rejecting Him.
 - They did not seek reconciliation with Him—and in those many cases where it was offered to them by Him, they utterly refused...
 - They refused even when they were told that God had sent His only Son to be punished in the place of sinners—
 - Their hatred of God was so great that they rejected His gracious terms of reconciliation where He, the one who had been wronged, offered to pay the damages of those who had wronged Him.
 - b. The only fitting punishment is, as verse 9 says, punishment with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord.
 - To reject the living God, who is good and gracious and kind, and who created us and gave us all that we have, calls for punishment that never ceases...
 - That is what is described here in verse 9.
 - They will be cast away from His favourable presence and glory to suffer forever.
 2. We are so mistaken if we think that eternal punishment is unwarranted.
 - a. Many professing Christians deny or claim to be unsure about the eternal punishment of sinners.
 - If we are honest, we have all struggled with it—because we do not see the glory of God against whom we have sinned.
 - We don’t grasp the fact that the Son of God had to go to the cross and be cursed to pay for our sin—no lesser measure would do.
 - To question everlasting destruction is to insult our Lord Jesus Christ and the extreme sacrifice He had to make for our sins.
 - It is to miss what it was for the very Son of God to be cursed for us.
 - b. Let me admonish you all therefore to believe the plain teaching of scripture in our text about the everlasting punishment of the wicked.
 - Believe it and grapple with it so that you will come to realise that your sins are deserving of nothing less than this...

- And then you will marvel at the love of God who sent His Son to pay fully for such sin.
 - If you do this, it will change the way you look at the, by comparison, very light suffering we bear in this world...
 - And it will fill you with a greater love to God, a greater admiration of His justice and grace, a greater joy in your salvation, a greater sense of urgency for the lost and a greater willingness to lay down your life for Christ.
- C. In view of Christ's glorious coming and judgment, it behooves us to pray that we would be counted worthy of His kingdom.
1. He is coming to punish the wicked, but He is also coming, as verse 10 says, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe.
 - You do not want to be outside of the circle of those who believe in that day.
 - How we will admire Him when His beauty and justice and majesty are all revealed to us.
 2. You see how the apostle prays that they will all be counted worthy of Him in that day.
 - Again, you understand, *worthy* in the sense that we will be those who have been reconciled to God by Christ—who are shown to be on God's side instead of to be standing against Him.
 - If you have come to Christ to be reconciled, you will stand with God.
 - If you deny Him when the pressure comes, and do not repent, you show that you do not really believe, whatever you might profess, and you will not stand in the judgment.
 - Paul's prayer is in verse 11-12: **Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of *this* calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of *His* goodness and the work of faith with power, ¹² that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.**
 - Pray that you and your children and all your brothers in sisters in this church will be counted worthy in that day... to the glory of Jesus Christ who has saved them by His grace and by the grace of His Father.
 - That's right—those who are on God's side will bring glory to God in that day as trophies of His grace.

TRANS> Now let's move on to chapter 2.

II. In chapter 2, we have a prophecy of widespread apostasy that will occur in the church before Christ returns.

- A. This is a difficult passage to understand, but two things are clear.
1. First, it is clear in this passage that the falling away will occur before the Day of Christ and the church's gathering has occurred.
 - Paul is assuring the Thessalonians of this.
 - It appears that someone had been teaching that Christ had already come, and that this had troubled some of the Thessalonian believers.

- In verse 2, Paul says that even if someone forges a letter in his name saying that Christ has come, it should not be believed...
 - Apparently the one spreading this teaching had been saying it was something that Paul had said.
 - But Paul assures them that Jesus will not come until after the falling away.
2. A second thing that is clear is that the falling away that will occur will be a significant falling away of the church.
- The falling away is introduced in 2 Thess 2:3-4 which says: **Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come unless the falling away [apostasia] comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, ⁴ who 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.***
 - Here are a few facts to consider.
 - a. First, that the word translated *falling away* is *apostasia* from which we get our word apostasy.
 - It is used in the Bible (including the Greek translation of the OT—the Septuagint) to speak of falling away from God.
 - It speaks of a falling away of those who profess to know God, not of those who are outside the church.
 - We should not think it to be a rising up of some political power in the world, but of a rebellion of the church.
 - b. Second, see how this falling away is shown to be a significant event involving the whole church.
 - This is indicated because it (the falling away) is preceded by the definite article—it is not just *a* falling away, but *the* falling away.
 - This does not describe a local apostasy in this church or that church, but a falling away that would be throughout the church.
 - It is a significant rejection of the Lord by those who are in the church similar to what happened when Israel worshipped Baal under King Manasseh or the time when all Israel except for a remnant rejected Jesus as their Messiah.
 - c. Third, this falling away is said to occur when *the man of sin* is revealed.
 - Here again, this is not just *a* man of sin, but *the* man of sin whom Paul also calls *the son of perdition*... one who is to be destroyed.
 - He describes him as one who sets himself up in the temple of God... the temple of God suggesting that is a man in the church...
 - And he sets himself up, it says, as if he is God—giving himself divine titles, universal authority to write laws, and such things.
 - Verse 9 says that he will come with powers and signs and wonders so that he will deceive people.
 - d. And notice how the deceived ones are described in verse 10-12...
 - I will quote from verse 9 for context: 2 Thess 2:9-12: **The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and**

lying wonders, ¹⁰ and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. ¹¹ And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, ¹² that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

- Like Israel when Jesus came, these are covenant people who were given the truth, but who did not love the truth. Therefore, they were blinded with strong delusion so that they did not believe the truth even though it was obvious.
 - It is a judgment of nominal Christians who grew up within the church, but who did not love the gospel.
 - Though they talk of God, they do not have saving faith.
 - They will be duped by the man of sin and shift their allegiance from Christ to follow this man, being deceived by him.
- B. The difficulty with this passage is in trying to determine what time in history this refers to.
1. Some have thought it refers to a civil ruler outside the church—whether to Nero or Domitian or to some later figure,
 - but I have already shown you that it refers to someone who arises from within the church, not to an outsider.
 2. Some have suggested that it happened at the time when Arius arose and led many in the church away from the confession of Christ as being fully God.
 - But Arius did not set himself up as God—he promoted heresy, but he did not put himself up as a substitute for God.
 3. Others have suggested that it is the Pope of Rome—not a particular pope, but the papacy as a whole.
 - John Wyclif and many pre-reformers thought this, and almost all of the reformers thought this including Calvin and the original Westminster Assembly.
 - The pope certainly does fit the description in almost every way:
 - He gave himself divine titles, authority to forgive sin, authority to make new laws or change ones that were made, and he performed signs and wonders that deceived many people and led them into error.
 - But there is, perhaps, one way he does not fit—or does not yet fit, and that is that he did not take dominion over the whole eastern branch of the church.
 - They have their own errors that are almost as great, but the issue is that this apostasy under the Pope did not sweep through the whole church, only the western portion.
 - Understand, of course, that there will always be a remnant that follows Christ, but by sweep through the whole church I mean the church all over the world.
 4. For this reason I do not think we can be too dogmatic.
 - There are often precursors to the final event, and it may be that the great falling away is still ahead of us.
 - It is possible that it was the apostasy of the church under the pope—there is no great objection to seeing it as that...

- If it is not that, it is certainly something like that that is yet to come on an even broader scale and could even grow up out of that apostasy.
- We must be careful though... the church in both the old and the new testament has never done well when it comes to recognising the fulfillment of prophecy until after the fulfillment is complete.

C. Even though we struggle to identify the event, this prophecy is very useful to us.

1. It is useful because it teaches us to expect wide-scale apostasy in the church.
 - We need to realise that this is possible so that we won't be swept along with the great mass of the church when it falls away.
 - Many people have been deceived in this way—they say, “But this is the church... this is my church... how could they all be wrong?”
 - They say this even though the church is doing things like selling indulgences for the forgiveness of sin...or claiming that the pope can make new laws for the church...
 - or things like denying that the Bible is the word of God and that Jesus was truly the Son of God as so many liberal protestant churches have done.
2. It also helps us as we evaluate church history.
 - Again, some look at history and they say things like, “Could the church be wrong for all those years about traditions like praying to Mary and the saints?”
 - And they don't look in the scriptures to see that the apostles never did such things and that Jesus never endorsed anything like this—instead the Bible and the church's prophets condemn putting our trust in those who have died as was done in the OT with household idols.
3. We need to realise that as it was with Jesus and the prophets and the apostles, so it will often be with us...
 - That we will often be in the great minority when we follow the scriptures and adhere to the true gospel of Christ.
 - And that, my brothers and sisters, is the great key...
 - The ones who are deceived by apostasy are the ones who did not receive the love of the truth.
 - If we love the gospel of Jesus Christ and we delight in His word, we will not be led astray by the words of men or the pretences of men.
 - Do you love the gospel of our salvation?
 - Do you cherish the fact that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, or is that to you a very trivial and secondary matter?

TRANS> That brings us to the third thing I want to look at in 2 Thessalonians...

III. Paul shows us the way to go forward as those who are in Jesus Christ.

A. He tells us to press on in hope.

1. It is difficult to hear of wide-spread apostasy in the church.
 - It can crush your hope.
 - It causes you to lose heart when you see people holding to error.
 - It can make you feel insecure—how can I expect to stand when others fall away?

2. But Paul expresses his confidence (hope in a Biblical sense) that it is Christ who keeps us and who will bring us to glory.
 - The assurance that God will keep us flows through this whole passage.
 - a. In 2:13-14, he says: **But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, ¹⁴ to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.**
 - Those who come to Him in true faith are those whom He has chosen and called by the gospel for the purpose of obtaining glory.
 - He does not appoint anyone to believe that He has not also appointed to obtain glory.
 - That means that we can trust Him to keep us.
 - b. In 3:3, Paul expresses this hope like this: **But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one.**
 - If you believe, you will not be deceived by the deceptions of Satan, through the man of sin, or in any other way.
 - This is not to say that none who are in an apostate church are saved—it is to say that those who are saved will not be deceived by the false doctrine of that church.
 3. Let this confidence of the apostle be your confidence if you believe.
 - Those whom the Lord calls He also justifies, and those He justifies He also sanctifies and those He sanctifies He also brings to everlasting glory.
 - Let your hope rest in Him both for yourself and for your brothers and sisters in the church.
 - 2:16-17 says: **Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.**
- B. The second thing Paul tells us to do is to continue in the traditions that we have been taught, *whether by word or by epistle...*
- In 2:15, he says: **Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.**
1. Note the word *therefore*.
 - This word *therefore* links this call to stand fast in the apostolic traditions with the hope in verse 13-14 that Jesus will preserve us in His grace.
 - *Therefore*, because Christ has appointed us to obtain glory by believing the gospel... stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught.
 2. This holding to the traditions of the apostles is a key element in the preservation of ourselves and our children in the faith.
 - Departure from Christ begins in the church with departure from the traditions that we have been taught by the apostles—that is, ways of doing things.
 - If men had never been elevated as bishops but had followed the apostolic traditions where there are only two standing offices in the church—the bishop

or elder and the deacon, and where the office of elder or bishop is always exercised in plurality at every level,

- I say, if the church had stuck to that, it would have been impossible for any man to ever take the office of universal bishop or pope...
 - nor of archbishop or cardinal or any of the rest of it.
- And if there had never been the addition of ceremonies not appointed by the apostles, there would have been no worship of saints or angels or crosses,
 - and no holy days in the New Testament besides the Sabbath and no musical performances with all kinds of instruments... only the simple singing of the psalms.
 - There would have been no ceremonies besides the simple observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper—nothing to crowd out the giving of attention to the reading and preaching of the word which was appointed.
- Standing fast is the opposite of falling away.

C. Third, Paul tells us to pray for the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

1. For the Thessalonian believers, this meant praying for Paul, Timothy, and Silvanus.

- The request for prayer is given in 3:1-2 in these words: **Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run *swiftly* and be glorified, just as *it is with you*, ² and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith.**
- Just think how important these prayers were for the whole church!
 - Paul was writing a large portion of the New Testament for us, and the Thessalonians had a role in that as they prayed for his ministry.

2. But you have an ongoing role in praying that the word of the Lord that was delivered to us in scripture would run swiftly and be glorified today...

- And that those who minister the word would be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men *today*—for not all have faith.
- Think of how important such prayer is.
 - This generation is the only link to carry the scriptures into the next generation.
 - You have a role to play in the advance of the kingdom through your prayers, through your own walk, and through your own sharing of your hope in the gospel of Christ.
 - Pray as if God's kingdom depended upon your prayers because it does, and our Lord calls you to pray.
 - If you are not praying for His kingdom, it is likely that you are among those who have never received the love of the truth yourself.

D. The fourth thing Paul tells us if we are to move forward with Christ's kingdom, is to work for our bread.

- In verse 11-12, he says: **For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. ¹² Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.**

1. Some have speculated that some of the Thessalonians were not working because they were thinking that Christ was going return anyway,
 - But Paul does not say that in either First or Second Thessalonians.
 - Instead, he speaks of this *work problem* as something he had addressed when he first brought the gospel to them—
 - in other words, it was a problem with some of them before they were converted, not something that grew out of a theological misunderstanding.
 - The Greeks did not consider manual labour honourable—it was for slaves.
 - Therefore, those who were not slaves often became clients of wealthy patrons who wanted to have a group of people around them to make them more important in the community.
 - If you showed up to events with a group of clients around you, it boosted up your status and your influence.
 - But Paul is telling these clients they need to work and earn their keep.
 - Indeed, some of them were apparently so stubborn that they would not work even if they did not have a patron—
 - they wanted the wealthy members in the church to take care of them.
2. Indeed, here is a lesson for us too.
 - Work is an honourable thing that brings glory to God, and if we are able, we ought to be diligent about serving God in a daily calling.
 - Being diligent in our work is a way to advance in Christ’s kingdom and to keep us from being busybodies as Paul says.
 - We should not go on welfare or disability unless we really are unable to work, not should we support forced taxation of the rich to support us.

E. The fifth thing Paul tells us here is to keep each other accountable.

1. He says that about this matter of work—that we should not provide for those who are not working... and should even withdraw from them, while still counting them as a brother and admonishing them as such...
 - He also calls us to withdraw from those who have any kind of disorderly conduct.
 - In 3:6, he says: **“But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.”**
2. We need to keep each other accountable.
 - As we saw in Philippians, it is important for us to stand together in the faith and that means that if someone is starting to go astray, or if we think they might be, we need to have a talk with them.
 - You don’t need to make a big deal—sometimes you just need to ask questions—but we need to care enough about each other to keep each other accountable.
 - We live in a world that hates Christ and that has an active devil, and we all have our sinful flesh—this body of sin that we wrestle with.
 - And so, as Paul says in 3:14-15: **if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.** ¹⁵ **Yet do not count *him* as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother.**

TRANS> All of these are helpful ways to keep us on track for Christ so that we do not fall away as so many in the church do.

- If we really belong to Christ, we will do these things and He will keep us as those who are chosen for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth that we might obtain the glory promised to us and be found admiring Christ when He comes.

Conclusion: Paul concludes with a blessing for the Thessalonians, recognising that it is the Lord who keeps them in the truth.

- 2 Thess 3:16-18: **Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord *be* with you all. ¹⁷ The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every epistle; so I write. ¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you all. Amen.**