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**Comments on  
the 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistle to the  
Thessalonians**

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# Comments on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistle to the Thessalonians

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	2
Chapter 2.....	8
Chapter 3.....	22

## Chapter 1

THE SECOND LETTER to the Thessalonians was evidently written not long after the first, while still they were young in the faith and the more likely to be misled by false teachers, especially in matters pertaining to the coming of the Lord. The opening words are almost exactly the same as in the first letter; Paul again associating with himself the same two fellow-labourers.

The condition of this assembly still gave great joy and thankfulness to the Apostle. Their spiritual health was good, in spite of the persecutions and tribulations that were pressing upon them; we had almost said because of their persecutions and troubles. The world being actively antagonistic to them, they were not for the moment, being tested by its seductions. The very pressure that it was exerting against them had the effect of welding them together.

In verses 3 and 4, growing faith and abounding love are brought into intimate connection with persecution and tribulation, and not without good reason. Not only was their faith growing, but growing exceedingly not only was love there, but

love was abounding. In this the Apostle greatly rejoiced as being the sign of spiritual vitality and progress, though he had nothing to say in this epistle as to their knowledge or gifts. In contrast to this, he acknowledged the knowledge and gifts of the Corinthians in his first letter to them, whilst he had nothing favourable to say as to their faith and love; and in them he could not boast, for they were carnal. Have we all grasped the significance of this? To what do we look if we desire to see spiritual advancement in one another?

The scripture shows us that real faith is a living thing. It is like a living tree, with its roots striking down into the soil of the knowledge of God. Faith is spiritual eyesight, and as we proceed our sight should grow clearer and its range be increased. As we know God better we trust Him more.

We must notice that in this second epistle Paul makes no allusion to their hope, though he does mention their patience, which is one of its fruits. The reason for this is, apparently, that adversaries had made further attempts to confuse their minds as to things to come in a way calculated to impair their hope, and that for the moment they had succeeded. How they did it, and how the Apostle countered their efforts by this epistle, we shall

see more clearly as we proceed. That which follows — verses 5 to 10 of this first chapter — was evidently penned with a view to setting matters rightly before their minds. The attempt had been made to delude them into thinking that their present troubles were a sign that the day of the Lord was already come. This will be seen, if 2 Thess. 2:1-2 be read. The word translated "at hand" at the end of verse 2 is really "present."

In verses 5 to 10 the public appearing of the Lord Jesus is presented as being the reversal of previously existing conditions, a complete turning of the tables, we may say. The Thessalonians were suffering tribulation, the men of the world being their troublers. When the Lord Jesus appears, He will recompense the world with tribulation and His saints with rest. In so doing, He will be acting in righteousness.

It is not difficult to see that it will be an entirely righteous thing for God to presently recompense the persecutors of His saints with tribulation. It is not quite so easy to see how the entrance of the saints into the coming kingdom can be connected with righteousness, for we should surely disclaim any thought of merit and protest that grace alone could bring us into the kingdom of God. The thought in verse 5 however, appears to be that

though all is of grace yet God desires to put His saints in possession of His kingdom, as those who are counted worthy of it. Hence He permits the persecutions and tribulations, which produce in them the fortitude and patience which He loves and can righteously reward. In this patience and faith under trial was seen a manifest token that God's judgment was righteous in assigning them to the coming kingdom and its rest.

The description of the public appearing of the Lord Jesus, given in verses 7 to 9, is indeed terrible. When He is unveiled from the heavens, nothing will be lacking which is calculated to strike fear into the hearts of rebellious men. Vengeance will fall upon those who do not know God and who do not obey the Gospel. Everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, will be the penalty inflicted. Many attempts have been made to avoid the plain and evident force of the two words, "everlasting destruction," but when all is said and done the fact remains that destruction does not mean annihilation, and everlasting does mean lasting for ever, and this whether we consider the Greek original or the English translation.

Let us notice that the Gospel is a message from God which we are to OBEY. We are so apt to think of it as a kindly invitation

which we are to accept; and to present it only in that light to others. Consequently, they think of it only as an invitation which they may decline, or at least defer indefinitely, without any very serious consequences; and that is to them a very fatal mistake. All who hear the Gospel, are responsible to render to it in response the obedience of faith.

Notice also that there can be no worse fate than to be consigned to eternal ruin away from the presence of the Lord. We saw in considering the first Epistle that to live together with the Lord is the very height of bliss. The converse holds true. There can be nothing worse than to be banished for ever from the presence of the One who is the Fountain-head of life and light and love.

The appearing of Christ will however have two sides. He will be glorified in taking vengeance on the ungodly. He will be also glorified and admired in all those who have believed in that day. The preposition here, you will notice, is not by but in. He will certainly be glorified and adored by us, but the point here is that He will be glorified in us. In that day, the saints will shine forth in His likeness as His handiwork. Men and angels

will look at them and glorify Him, inasmuch as all that they are will be the fruit of His work.

Nowadays, all too often we are to His discredit. Of old, the accusation had to be laid against Israel that, "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you." (Rom. 2:24). and the same indictment has to be brought against those who profess to be the people of today. But in that day, what will be displayed, will not be our crookedness or our peculiarities but the grace and power of Christ reproduced in us. In us men will see the glorious effect of the mighty work of God.

What a wonderful calling this is! No wonder the Apostle earnestly desired that God would count them worthy of it, by fulfilling His good pleasure in them now, promoting the work of faith with power in their hearts and lives. In this way the name of the Lord Jesus would be glorified in them now, and not only in the coming age. If He is to be glorified in us then, it is surely right that we should be concerned about it that He is glorified in us now.

The last verse of this first chapter emphasizes this, and adds the fact that not only is He to be glorified in us in the coming age

but we are to be glorified in Him, for we shall then be shining in a glory not our own but His. This will be "according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ." Nothing but the grace of God could produce so wonderful a result as that.

## **Chapter 2**

WITH THE OPENING verses of the second chapter we reach the matter which was the occasion of the writing of this epistle. Mischief-makers had been at work, endeavouring to persuade the Thessalonians that they had already passed into the day of the Lord, though they knew well that the day of the Lord brought heavy judgments with it, and that it would come as a thief in the night. (See 1 Thess. 5:1-3). Those who were attempting to lead them astray evidently reasoned that the persecutions and trials into which they had been plunged were judgments, which proved that the day of the Lord was upon them.

Now all this was simple deception, as verse 3 states, and the methods to which these adversaries stooped, hoping thereby the more effectually to deceive, were in keeping with their false teaching. They pressed their ideas upon the Thessalonians, "by spirit" "by word" and even "by letter as from us." Not only did

they assert it by word of mouth, but they gave out their teachings as having been received by inspiration of the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God did give inspired utterances in the early Christian assemblies, as the Acts of the Apostles bears witness, but there were also to be found false utterances proceeding from a spirit or spirits, which were not the Spirit of God, as indicated in 1 John 4:1-6. These deceivers might claim that they had received their teaching from a spirit. If so, it was from a spirit who was not the Spirit of God. They went however, one step further than this. They even sent a letter to the Thessalonians which purported to be from the Apostle Paul. By a species of forgery, they tried to make it appear that their erroneous ideas had his sanction. Satan is not at all careful as to the means he uses to attain his ends. Crooked teaching can be quite appropriately supported by crooked behaviour.

Some however, may wish to ask what was the importance of the point at issue? The persecution and trial were there. Did it after all matter so much whether it signified the arrival of the day of the Lord, or whether it did not? How often we find large issues of a practical sort hinging upon points of doctrine that look small enough! It did matter very much indeed. If the day

of the Lord were really present then the truth that Paul had been led to reveal to them, in the latter part of 1 Thess. 4 and the opening of 1 Thess. 5 was very evidently overturned. That day had stolen a march upon them, and overtaken them as a thief. Is it nothing to have the Word of God discredited?

Further, it would mean that here were believers left on earth to suffer tribulation, which came as retribution from the hand of God. Their heavenly hope would be dimmed, and they left to face the fearful things about to come on the earth. Was this a small matter? No, indeed.

How did the Apostle meet this deceptive teaching? He met it in two ways. First, by reminding them of the truth he had already established in his first Epistle. Second, by giving further clear instruction as to the day of the Lord, and the order of its events.

He besought them not to heed the error, by the coming of the Lord Jesus and by "our gathering together to Him." To what does he refer in these words? Clearly to that, as to which he instructed them in 1 Thess. 4:15 to 17. If we are to gather together to Christ in the air, before the coming of the day of the Lord, how can we find ourselves on earth suffering its throes?

In the light of the truth that had already reached them the Thessalonians ought never to have listened to these deceivers. But then of course, they were only recent converts — but babes in Christ — and consequently not yet much skilled in discerning the drift of the teachings they heard. Many of us may be like them, and if so it will help us to see that the truth is one consistent whole, so that we must never be shaken by new teachings, if they are at variance with the foundations laid by God in our hearts at an earlier period.

With verse 3 his further instruction begins. Not only is the Church to gather together to Christ in the air, before the day of the Lord arrives, but there are also two great events to first of all materialize upon the earth itself. They are both mentioned in verse 3. There is to be a "falling away" or, "an apostasy" first. Also "the man of sin" must be manifested. The former is a movement, the latter is a man.

All history teaches us how movements and men, are linked together, and in that order. First comes a movement, created all too frequently by the god of this world; then presently, a man appears who brings the movement to a head and in whom it reaches its highest expression and finality. Ancient imperialism

reached its head in Nebuchadnezzar: the French republican movement in Napoleon; whilst the modern Fascist movement has been headed up in Mussolini. Thus history will repeat itself on a much grander scale before the day of the Lord arrives.

Let us be clear as to what apostasy means. It is not just a course of backsliding, a growing cold on the part of Christians, as a result of which the world invades the church, dragging into its bosom a whole train of attendant evils. It is rather a complete forsaking of the truth of God, a total abandonment of the ancient foundations of the faith. There have been all too often in the history of the church distortions and perversions of truth, which might be compared to the transplanting of shrubs and the lopping of trees which largely spoil the effect of an otherwise beautiful and symmetrical garden. Apostasy is not like that. It is rather like a landslide of such dimensions that the whole garden is obliterated.

The idea is still quite widely held that the Lord will not return until the world has been prepared for His advent by the preaching of the Gospel and the conversion of most, if not all, its inhabitants. There is no support for this idea in the passage we are considering, but quite the contrary. The fact is, that what

will precede His advent in glory is a total abandonment of the faith by those who formerly professed to hold it. This apostasy will pave the way for the revelation of a great personage, who will be the direct representative of Satan, called here "the man of sin," for in him sin will find its highest expression. This man will be marked by the most arrogant self-exaltation. He will oppose God by claiming himself to be God. A claim such as this would be impossible amongst people calling themselves Christian — it would merely excite ridicule — were the way not prepared for it by the apostasy.

The apostasy then will be of such a nature that the minds of men will be prepared to accept such gigantic claims on the part of a mere man as quite possible and reasonable. The deification of man will be the logical and reasonable outcome of the movement. This throws a flood of light as to what the main drift of the apostasy will be. God will be dethroned and man will be enthroned!

Let us survey great Christendom today in the light of these facts. Without a doubt we see very ominous signs of the approach of the apostasy. The coming events cast their shadows before. The whole drift of "advanced" religious thinking and

teaching is in the direction which this scripture indicates. If God be admitted at all into the scheme of their thinking, He is relegated to the far distance and evolution is made to entirely fill the foreground. Evolution is only the flimsy creation of their own minds, yet they have endowed it with wonderful powers and mankind is supposed to be the very crown and fruition of all its workings. Man therefore is to them of supreme importance and not God. Moreover, they expect that evolutionary processes will not stop with man as he is today, but continue until a super-man will be produced. How simple and natural then it will be to acclaim the man of sin when he appears as the super-man long expected!

The Apostle had warned the Thessalonians of these things when he had been with them on that brief first visit, preaching the Gospel amongst them. We may wonder that he found time to speak of such a matter to them in so short a visit, and that he thought it appropriate to do so within not many days of their being converted; but so it was. Paul knew right well that "the mystery of iniquity" was already at work, as he tells us in verse 7. The meaning of this is that "iniquity" or "lawlessness" in its "mystery" or "secret" form was even then moving in men's

hearts. The lawless self-assertion which is to blaze forth in the light of day at the end of the dispensation was there at the beginning, though hidden in the dark. Hence the warning was necessary.

It is much more necessary then for us upon whom the end of the age is come. Let us take heed to it.

Have we all got clearly fixed in our minds thus far that the apostasy and the revelation of the man of sin must precede the day of the Lord? Human evil must reach its flood-tide height before the Lord deals with it in judgment.

If we have this clear, we shall not have difficulty in seeing that the coming of the Lord for His saints and our gathering together to Him in the air must precede full-blown apostasy. The true saints of God never apostatize. As long as the true church of God is here a witness is maintained on earth in the energy of the Holy Spirit, and the apostasy in its fulness is hindered — its chariot wheels drive heavily, for the brake presses hard against them.

When the brake is suddenly taken off by the rapture of the saints to heaven, the chariot will bound forward to the final crash that awaits it.

In verse 8 the man of sin is referred to as "that Wicked," or more literally, "the lawless [one]." The phrase in verse 7, "the mystery of iniquity," is more literally, "the mystery of lawlessness." Reading it thus, it is more easy to catch the connection. Lawlessness is the very essence of sin. It is the refusal of all controlling authority and restraint, and therefore in deadly opposition to God. The lawlessness, which has long been at work in Christendom in a mysterious or hidden way like a suppressed fire, is going to blaze forth in the lawless one.

But this will only be when the saints of God are removed from the scene of conflict by the coming of the Lord for them. At present the forces of evil are under restraint — restraint is the meaning of the two words withholds and lets in verses 6 and 7. There is "He who restrains" and also "what restrains." The former doubtless refers to the Holy Spirit of God, who is at this time personally upon earth as He never was before and will not be again. The latter, we believe, refers to the presence of the

church on earth; the church being the house of God wherein the Holy Ghost is dwelling.

We have probably but little conception of how great is the restraint placed upon the working of lawlessness by the presence of the saints of God. They may be poor and feeble but the Spirit of God who indwells them is almighty. Occasionally this restraint is manifested in quite unmistakable style, as when, for instance, a spiritist seance has been a failure because of the presence in the building of some definite and earnest Christian. This we believe has happened more than once. Have not many of us noticed how the flow of ungodly conversation in a room or office is stopped by the sudden entrance of an out-and-out servant of Christ?

When the Church is raptured to heaven, and therefore the Holy Spirit no longer has a house on earth, the consequences will be very serious and very immediate. The repressed lawlessness will burst forth in the lawless one and for a brief moment the working of Satan will have full scope. This coming lawless man will be inspired by Satan and exhibit his energy in every particular. Notice how sweeping are the expressions used. Satan will support him with ALL power, even to signs and

wonders of falsehood, so that EVERY possible deceit of unrighteousness will be brought to bear upon men who have been left behind to perish.

This tremendous energy of Satan will continue but for a short time. The lawless one being revealed on earth, he will be speedily dealt with. The Lord Jesus being revealed from heaven, He will utterly destroy him, casting him alive into the lake of fire, as Revelation 19:20 shows. How appropriate it is that this utterly lawless and disobedient man, the very personification of Satanic energy, shall be dealt with personally by the Lord Jesus, the wholly subject and obedient Man, the personification of the power and majesty of God. No intermediary shall be allowed to intervene in that conflict!

We must also notice how just are all the dealings of God with men. Those who will fall a prey to all this deceit of unrighteousness, are just those who when they heard the truth did not love it. Loving not the truth, they did not believe it, rather they had pleasure in unrighteousness. And now the deceit of unrighteousness captures them; they believe the lie, and they all fall under the judgment of God. Formerly God sent them the truth, the Gospel was sounded into their ears by men who

preached it "with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven" (1 Peter 1:12). Now God sends them a strong delusion. He does for them what of old He had to do for rebellious Israel, when He "blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart" (John 12:40; and see Acts 28:26-27). Is God unrighteous in acting thus? On the contrary; He is acting in righteousness of the strictest and most exact kind.

These verses should act as a check upon those Christians who seem to be so very desirous of possessing miraculous powers, particularly in the directions of "healings" and "tongues." Let them note that though there were such miraculous displays in the energy of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the dispensation, it is predicted that at its close there shall be a great display of similar powers, but of a spurious and Satanic kind. We are now near its end and it is significant how there has been a revival of strange happenings which purport to be miraculous and divine. We do not assert that all these happenings have been spurious and Satanic, but we do say that many have been and that if we do not test them all in very exact fashion by all the Scriptures we may easily be woefully deceived.

If we review for a moment the first twelve verses of our chapter we shall see then that directly after the coming of the Lord for His saints there will be,

1. A great movement in the realm of HUMAN thought, resulting in the falling away or apostasy, and culminating in the man of sin.
2. A great movement in SATANIC realms, resulting in an intense concentration of the powers of darkness, and culminating in great displays of lying wonders, so artfully staged as to utterly deceive apostate men.
3. A great movement of GOD'S government and power, resulting in His shutting such men up in their delusion and unbelief, and culminating in His public intervention in judgment through the glorious appearing of the Lord Jesus.

There will be first the catching away of the true saints of God. Then the falling away of corrupt and forsaken Christendom. Lastly the sweeping away of the whole nauseous thing in the judgment of God.

No hope is held out here for Gospel-rejectors. No second chance after the coming of the Lord for His people is hinted at.

The solemn statement is, "that they ALL might be damned who believed not the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

How delightful is the contrast of verse 13 with verse 12. The Thessalonian believers — and ourselves also — have been chosen of God to salvation, a salvation which will be consummated when the Lord comes for us, and we obtain His glory. To this we were called by the Gospel. In believing that Gospel we believed the truth and so from the outset we have that which fortifies us against the lie which those who perish believe, deceived by Satan.

The "sanctification of the Spirit" does not refer to the progressive work of the Spirit in the hearts of believers, conforming them more and more to the will of God. It refers rather to that setting apart for God which is achieved by the initial operations of the Spirit of God in the souls of men, operations which have in view His indwelling us when once the Gospel is believed. By this sovereign work of the Spirit we have been sanctified.

In view of this the word to us is "stand fast." We are to hold the apostolic "traditions" or "instructions." The Thessalonian believers had these instructions in two ways — by word of mouth

and by the written epistle. We have them in one way only. Let us take therefore the more earnest heed to the apostolic writings. We have indeed a good hope through grace, so we may well be comforted and established.

### **Chapter 3**

FINALLY, THE THESSALONIANS were to pray for Paul himself, and that not only in regard to his personal safety but in regard to the work with which he was entrusted. The history recorded in Acts 17 shows us how greatly prayer for his safety was needed at this juncture, yet he gave the first place to the work. The word had had full course amongst the Thessalonians and consequently it had been glorified in the wonderful results it produced in them. Paul asked prayer that thus it might be wherever he went. He prayed unceasingly for his converts but he was also not ashamed to ask for their prayers for himself. The most advanced saint or servant may well be thankful for the prayers of the youngest convert or the humblest believer.

As to the Thessalonians themselves the Apostle had confidence in the Lord concerning them that they would be governed by his directions, only he desired that the Lord Himself might dir-

ect their hearts into the enjoyment of God's love and into the patience of Christ. This is what we all want, and especially so seeing that the end of the age is upon us. If our hearts enter into Christ's patience, as He waits at God's right hand, and are tuned into sympathy with Him, we shall not chafe at what to us may seem a long delay. God's love will meanwhile be our enjoyed portion and we shall be able to display it to others while passing through the world.

From verse 6 of this third chapter and the succeeding verses it is evident that the erroneous ideas concerning the coming of the Lord, which had been pressed upon the Thessalonians, had already borne evil fruit. It is ever the way that evil communications corrupt good manners. Some amongst them had become fanatical in their minds, under the impression that the day of Christ was upon them, and had thrown up their ordinary employment. Having done this they began to expect support from others.

They became disorderly busybodies, doing nothing themselves and preying upon others who quietly went on with their work.

As to this the Apostle was able to hold himself up as an example. He had laboured night and day for his own support, though he might justly have been chargeable to them. God had ordained that "they which preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14). Yet he had not claimed this right. As to all others the divine rule is, "that if any would not work, neither should he eat."

In verse 12 we have Paul's word to these busybodies. He commands them to work for their own living. Then in verse 13 he turns to the rest of the assembly at Thessalonica and tells them not to be weary in well-doing, We can well imagine how tired they must have got of these disorderly brethren who were continually trespassing on their kindness. If now they were to be relieved of this burden let them not cease their benevolence but still be hearty and cheerful givers in the interests of the Lord.

Verses 14 and 15 give instructions in case any of the disorderly brethren were contumacious and refused obedience to God's word through the Apostle's letter. Such were to be disciplined. The displeasure of God was to be manifested in His people withdrawing their companionship. The offender would thereby be made to feel the unenviable notoriety of his isolation. His

links with the world without were broken and now there would be no happy companionship within the Christian circle. This would be a well-nigh impossible position and calculated to bring him to his senses. He was not however to be put right outside the Christian circle as though he were an enemy, which was the dealing that had to be taken with the offender of whom we read in 1 Corinthians 5.

All this should be done that peace might reign in their midst. Only the Lord Himself however could really give this. Paul desired that it might be theirs at all times and in every way.

As the Thessalonians had been troubled with an epistle falsely represented as coming from Paul, he was very careful that there should be no doubt about the authenticity of this epistle which really did come from him. This explains verse 17.

