

2nd THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Lesson #1

Introduction

Last week we concluded our study of first Thessalonians, so this week will be moving into second Thessalonians. It's considered by many that these two letters were written very close together, perhaps only a few weeks or a few months apart. The two letters deal with the same subjects, which were; first the escalating persecution of the Christian believers, second a false teaching that had arisen suggesting that the day of the Lord (the tribulation period) had already begun, third, an unruly lifestyle by some of the church members who had ceased to work themselves and were living off the efforts of the other saints, and fourth, the indication that there may have been some immoral behaviors of a sexual nature taking place by some in the church. Paul addresses these issues again, and with more detail in this second epistle. So, let's start with chapter one:

God's Righteousness, Judgement, and Glory

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy:

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 We must always thank God for you, brothers, which is fitting, since your faith is flourishing, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. 4 Therefore we ourselves boast about you among God's churches—about your endurance and faith in all the persecutions and afflictions you endure. 5 It is a clear evidence of God's righteous judgment that you will be counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also are suffering, 6 since it is righteous for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, 7 and [to reward] with rest you who are afflicted, along with us. [This will take place] at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with His powerful angels, 8 taking vengeance with flaming fire on those who don't know God and on those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 These will pay the penalty of everlasting destruction, away from the Lord's presence and from His glorious strength, 10 in that day when He comes to be glorified by His saints and to be admired by all those who have believed, because our testimony among you was believed. 11 And in view of this, we always pray for you that our God will consider you worthy of His calling, and will, by His power, fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith, 12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified by you, and you by Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thess 1:1-12 (HCSB)

Just as he did in his first epistle, Paul greets the Thessalonians, thanks God for them, and acknowledges that their faith is flourishing and their love for one another is increasing, even though the persecutions from the unbelievers are escalating. He even goes so far as to say that he boasts about them among the other churches. Such a comment certainly encourages their continued endurance and, to some degree, puts them under pressure to continue to perform to live up to the complement. But, being human beings, they needed to have some kind of reason, some kind of hope for the future to continue to endure such a situation. And this is a major part of what Paul's doing in this epistle. He's reminding them that this situation is temporary, and the final outcome will be both righteous and worthwhile.

In verses five through seven Paul says "it is a clear evidence of God's righteous judgment that you will be counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you are also suffering, since it is righteous for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to reward with rest, you are afflicted, along with us."

Here, in just one short sentence, is Paul's summary to the Thessalonians as to why they persevere through the hardships and persecutions. It's really very simple isn't it? It's exactly the same reason that the farmer labors in the soil and plants his seeds and tends his crop in the hot summer sun. It's the same reason that every worker toils hard all day long, day after day, and that is - that he expects to reap a harvest, or to earn a wage when the work is done. Every worker works in hope of an eventual worthwhile benefit.

And likewise, every person who has heard proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, and has been granted the gift of belief and saving faith in that gospel, perseveres and endures the difficulties and hardships of life, because, they have a blessed hope of a future benefit and reward that exceeds their comprehension. The believer anticipates a harvest, and the workers anticipate a future benefit for their labors.

Now we know that what we're speaking about here is not a salvation by works, but a reward for faithfulness. While salvation is entirely by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, nevertheless the Scriptures speak of a time of evaluation, a time of reward for faithful endurance through the trials of life for those who believe. Therefore, every believer gladly, and joyfully participates in the work, labors side-by-side with his brothers and sisters, and endures the persecutions and hardships, in the sure and certain hope of God's promises for the future. But, as these epistles make very clear, it isn't by any means a free and easy ride into the kingdom of God.

It is recorded in Luke, Chapter 13, that as Jesus was passing through a certain town someone said to him "Lord are there only a few who are being saved." His answer was very interesting. He said "strive to enter through the narrow door, for many I tell you will seek to enter but not be able." It's interesting to note that the word "strive" in our English translation is actually the Greek word for agonize. Again in Acts 14:22 Paul is quoted as saying "it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of heaven."

In our first example, from Luke 13, we might ask - how come some are denied entry when they are said to seek entry? Why would God deny entry into His kingdom to anyone who wishes it? Would a loving God do such a thing? Does this mean there are some kind of restrictions on entry into God's kingdom that are stringently enforced? Why is it that many of those who are said to genuinely seek entry would be denied access? From the tone of this verse it almost sounds like more people who are seeking entry into heaven are denied than are allowed. So what is it that makes the difference? Why are only a very few allowed and so very many refused? And perhaps, even more importantly, how can we tell the difference beforehand, so that we won't be one of those who are denied? (Explain the difference between following Jesus in submission to his Lordship and simply wanting, or even expecting, to go to heaven)

Many of the one's who are denied are regular church goers, according to Matthew 7:21-23. They hear the word preached every week, and participate in the church's activities. They have all the little magnetic stickers on their refrigerators, and the fish symbol on their cars. They have warm fuzzy feelings about the love and forgiveness of Jesus, so, what else could they do, what is it that's missing? Why will they be denied entry into the kingdom of God?

The good news is that there's no need to be ignorant or misinformed. The scriptures tell us in plain language exactly what it is that makes the difference. It is those who have undergone a supernatural transformation, a regeneration of their heart attitudes and mental perspectives by an act of the Holy Spirit. This act always produces visible results (called fruits) that are clearly discernable. The foremost of which is a new innate desire to thoroughly **know** and **obey** the word of God, not just **evade** it through ignorance or clever manipulations.

It is those who, after hearing and believing the gospel message, resultantly **begin to do the will of God** that are allowed entry into His kingdom of heaven. (Mat 7:21) Many, says the scriptures, are those who hear the message, and then start going to church, and even participating in the activities, and certainly do want and even expect to go to heaven, but there's no discernable change of their hearts and minds, no hungering and thirsting for true righteousness and holiness, just at best a mild behavioral modification, and even then, usually only when there's an audience.

Verse five says "it is a clear evidence of God's righteous judgment that you will be counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which you also are suffering." What we see here is the willingness to persevere under hardships of whatever kind. Whether they be physical, or mental, or whatever they might be. They might be from an external source, or they might even be from an internal source, like the temptations of our flesh. Again quoting Paul's statement in Acts 14:22 "*it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of heaven.*" Just for the record let me make it clear that we are not teaching that anyone earns entry into the kingdom of heaven by enduring persecutions, but rather, that the willingness to endure persecutions, of any and all kinds, is an intrinsic characteristic of those who are being saved. And it is an evidence of their being counted worthy of God's kingdom.

Therefore, as we said earlier, there is no need to be ignorant as to whether one is, or is not heaven bound. One need only examine themselves as to their heart's desires, and their motives, and their willingness, and even desire, to thoroughly **know and obey** the word of God. In the same way that a landowner gives a pick and a shovel to his workers free of charge, he still expects that they will put them to use themselves in the hot summer sun. The good worker will take the tools, thank the landowner, and promptly put them to work. The useless worker may thank the landowner for them also, but he won't be willing to put them to use, rather he'll simply stare at them with contempt. In the same manner, thanking God for his free gift is one thing, but putting it to use in one's daily life is the true test of authentic regeneration.

And this is the whole point Paul's making in verses four and five. The clear evidence of God's righteous judgment is that he rewards the faithful for acting accordingly, and brings judgment on those who do them harm. Verses seven and eight go on to say *"this will take place at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with his powerful angels, taking vengeance with flaming fire on those who don't know God and on those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."*

As this verse declares, there are those who don't know God, and there are those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. But these two groups are in actuality one and the same. There are many who say they know God, as the verses in Matthew 7:21-23 tell us, but those who truly know God, and are known by Him, are only those ones who have resultantly obeyed His commandments. The scriptures acknowledge that man sins, and occasionally disobeys God, but it does not make any place for, nor acknowledge the existence of, anyone who knows God in truth and then continues to live a life of persistent disobedience to His commandments. Of these, God says that He never knew them. (Mat 7:23)

Despite all the mockers, and the unbelievers, and the naysayers, there is a day, fixed by God from before creation, when He will tell his Son Jesus to return to the earth and take His rightful place as King and Lord forever. He will immediately exercise His vengeance, with flaming fire, on those who don't know God, **and** on those who say they do, but then choose not to **obey** the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just like the verses in Matthew chapter 7, this verse says exactly the same thing; that just knowing about Jesus, and professing a relationship with him isn't conclusive. It doesn't prove anything. It is the willingness and desire to **obey him** that characterizes the true believers, and distinguishes them from the many false professors who use His name but deny His power to free His chosen from their love of sin.

In our lesson last week we quoted from Titus chapter 1, and I'd like to use that again in this lesson where Paul told Titus:

15 To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. 16 They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed. Titus 1:15-16 (NASB)

As the Bible makes clear over and over again, it isn't what someone says with their mouth, but rather what they do by their actions, that characterizes their status. Every good tree bears good fruit said Jesus, but, if the tree bears no good fruit, it's cut down and thrown into the fire. (Jn 15) If this is so, then what is good fruit? Essentially, it is the transformed heart attitudes of self-sacrificing love for one another, and righteous desires and behaviors as they were taught by Jesus, and the innate desire to obey His commands, that are the distinguishing marks of His true disciples. It is those who are diligently seeking to **know and obey** the gospel of Jesus who have reason to be hopeful for His prompt return. But many are those who profess to know Jesus, but deny Him by their deeds. These will, to their shock and amazement, also be among those who know the vengeance of flaming fire at His glorious return.

Using this verse from Titus, I'd like to add that there are many who continue in their former ways of life after making a profession of faith. Sometimes it's because they aren't immediately aware of their sin in God's eyes, and when they are they immediately cease these behaviors. But many more are those who continue in their ways fully knowing that the word of God forbids their behaviors, but they say that they feel okay about it, because they have an understanding with God, and their conscience is okay with it. This my friend is a defiled conscience. God doesn't judge anyone on their own conscience, He judges them on their obedience to His word. If you ever, for one second, think that you have a license to disobey God because your conscience has learned to accept it, then you have defiled your conscience, and you are in big trouble. God does not sanction, or overlook disobedience to His word just because you or I feel okay about it.

Now, while we're on this theme, I like to share some of my thoughts if I may. I've often considered the question of just exactly what is the point of this warning of the Scriptures? On the one hand it's a warning to the deceived that they may not really be what they think they are. For instance, in my day-to-day life I meet and speak with multitudes of people, the vast majority of whom are not believers, but nevertheless, if I ask them if they're going to heaven when they die the vast majority will say that they think they probably are. Or at least they hope they will. Very few are those who will openly say "no, I think I'm probably going to hell when I die." The vast majority seem to hold out some kind of hope of salvation apart from repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Because of their ignorance of the character of God, and the heinousness of their sin, they can, and do, live their whole lives in the comfort of self-deception.

So, my question is – what exactly is the point of the Scriptural warnings to these people? If I tell them that they are living in self-deception will this do them any good? The answer is, that to the vast majority, it will not. In fact it will only serve to further condemn them, since they'll no longer be able to claim ignorance. (Examples: Noah, Jeremiah, etc.) Therefore, the warnings in the Scriptures about self-deception will only be effectual to the chosen. To the vast multitudes of unbelieving, and professing believing but self-deceived, they will simply fall on deaf ears. So why preach this?

Because, to the chosen, every one of them without fail, the warnings **will** be effectual. The chosen will respond, the chosen will repent, the chosen will hear the word of God and they will understand it, and they will obey it, because they have been regenerated and transformed by the indwelling Spirit of God. The warnings of sin, and the gospel message of repentance and faith will be effectual to every one to whom it was predestined by God. Not one less, and not one more.

To my dear Baptist brothers, I adjure you to preach the word, the whole word, and nothing but the word. Please stop trying to manipulate mankind's emotions to elicit a spurious response to the gospel. It is the truth alone that's the good news, and it will be received by every single one for whom it has been predestined from the beginning. It's not he who wills or he who runs, but it's God who has mercy on whom He pleases. He calls His chosen to saving faith by way of the gospel, so, our job is to present that gospel with absolute clarity, omitting nothing, and free from any and all embellishments. Salvation is entirely of the Lord, it is the gift of God, bestowed only upon whomever He pleases, it is not the manipulations or persuasions of man. Yes, when the gospel is preached accurately and thoroughly, the genuine respondents will be few, but that's entirely up to God's predetermination. All salvation was predetermined by God before creation, we're not deciding that issue now day by day, we're just working it out on God's predestined timetable. (Phi 2:12-13)

In John 6:37 Jesus said that all those that the Father had given him will indeed come to Him. He said He wouldn't lose a single one of them. And then, conversely, in verses 44 and 65, He made it clear that no one could come to Him unless they had been specifically called by His Father. Been granted access it says in verse 65. In Romans 8 we're told that the Father predestined His elect, and in the course of time He calls them through the gospel, justifies them by faith in Jesus Christ, and then eventually glorifies them by His work of perfect sanctification.

In his second epistle to the Corinthians Paul said:

15 For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; 16 to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. 2 Cor 2:15-16 (NASB)

On the one hand, the gospel message is a sweet savor of life to those who believe it, but, at the very same time, it is the savor of death to all who reject it. The only thing the gospel isn't, is neutral. It's either a fragrance of life, or it's a fragrance of death, and, like the two-edged sword, it always cuts in one direction or the other. It either cuts the believer free from his bondage to sin and death, (Rom 6:17-18) or, it cuts the unrepentant sinner to pieces (metaphorically speaking). Now, moving on to verses 11 and 12:

Verses 11-12:

11 And in view of this, we always pray for you that our God will consider you worthy of His calling, and will, by His power, fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith, 12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified by you, and you by Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

By what criteria will God consider us worthy of His calling? Now this question isn't asking by what criteria God will save us, or consider us righteous; rather it's asking by what criteria God will consider us worthy of the gift of forgiveness and imputed righteousness that He has graciously bestowed upon us. In other words, have we proven to be worthy of having received that indescribable gift? Have we responded in the manner that He intends?

And how is it that we are intended to respond to His calling? According to Romans chapter 8, verse 29, we are to be transformed into the image of His Son, so that He will be the first of many such brethren. And again in Ephesians 4, verse 13: *"until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."*

And then in Romans 12 we have these verses:

1 Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. Romans 12:1-2 (HCSB)

Our worthiness of the gift of forgiveness and faith is measured in how much we have been transformed into the likeness of Christ. In both our thinking, which is attitudes and affections, and our outward behaviors. We will never, in ourselves, ever be worthy of redemption or forgiveness, but we are reproved, rebuked and exhorted daily, by the word of God and the indwelling Spirit, to live in a manner that brings glory and honor to the name of our Lord and Savior; and our worthiness of His calling is based on how well we did that very thing. If we have brought honor to Him in this life, through this transforming process, then we will be counted worthy of our calling, and He will bring honor to us at His glorious return.

Our denomination truly seems to believe that the whole point of a believer's life is to see how many others he or she can lead to a profession of faith. They see this as the fruit of the Spirit and point of life, rather than the sanctifying and transforming process that is everywhere detailed throughout the scriptures. This is to so minimize the gospel message, and the entirety of scriptures, to the point where they lose their whole meaning and purpose for which God gave them.

Bearing fruit, according to scriptures, is the transforming of genuine converts into Christlikeness, not how many converts you produce. Yes, there must be converts, and for that we must preach the gospel, but the whole point of those converts is to transform and sanctify them to a level of Christlikeness that they are deemed worthy in the eyes of God of that calling that produced them in the first place. And this is what our denomination is completely, and I believe intentionally missing. We are obsessed with numbers of professions, to the point that we are willingly ignorant of the obvious lack of any resultant holiness and sanctification. This is not even close to what the scriptures teach.

Conclusion:

Paul opens this second epistle to the Thessalonians with his standard greeting, and thanks God for the brothers and sisters there who are enduring persecutions and still demonstrating their love for God and one another in the midst of the turmoil.

He then goes on to encourage them, by way of reminder, as to the reasons they are suffering and enduring hardships. He says it's only righteous that God would eventually repay with affliction all those who were currently afflicting the church, and that He would reward, with eternal rest, all those who patiently endured those afflictions in the name of Jesus Christ.

He tells them that both of these will happen openly and visibly at the revelation of Jesus Christ from heaven, at which time He will take vengeance with flaming fire on those who don't know God; and not just on those who don't know God, but even more surprisingly, on those who think they do, but don't feel the necessity to thoroughly know and obey His teachings. Those who have a god created from their own carnal minds, and fashioned to their own liking. These will know the flaming fire of judgement just like the ones who deny God outright.

Now there's many who ask why we have to speak of such things as God's judgement, and of flaming fire, and eternal hell. They want a one dimensional god of love and forgiveness, not an angry God of retribution and vengeance. But the problem with this is that the holy scriptures speak very much of both aspects of the true and living God. He is perfect love and at the same time perfect holiness and righteousness. He will not ignore His holiness and righteousness by overlooking or condoning unrepentant sin just because He is a God of Love. He is a sinless, righteous, and holy God of love. And he will always act in keeping with all of His attributes, not just some of them. His righteousness demands retribution, and His love affords a means of forgiveness, but all in accordance with His divine predetermined plan and holy character.

Those who are truly regenerated, and filled with the Spirit, are eagerly awaiting the glorious revelation of their Lord and Savior. They live every day in eager expectation of His return to catch them up into the clouds to be with Him in His presence forevermore. They know and acknowledge His sovereignty, and find comfort in it, not intimidation by it. Their first love is for Him, not this world and its fleeting pleasures or perceived obligations.

I've often asked people, in the churches that I've attended over the years, if they really wish the Lord would come for His church today, this very day and hour. It's surprising how very few answer "Oh yes, come quickly Lord Jesus!" I can almost count those who responded this way on the fingers of my hands. The overwhelming response is; "well, of course I want Him to return someday, but just not today." Think about that answer. What does it say about the true priorities of our lives? Will someone who honestly loves the Lord with all their heart, all their soul, all their mind, and all their strength answer that they don't want Him to come for them just yet? Is this person really living in the blessed hope of His glorious return, or is their love of this present world, and the things of this world being made manifest by their answer?

More to the point, what would our answer be? Would we answer "yes, come Lord Jesus," or, are we also among those who say we do eventually want Him to come, but just not yet? Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. If Christ is truly our treasure, as we say He is, then our hearts will be set on His immediate return, and our uniting with Him eternally.

Now there's many who say they don't want Him to return yet because some of their loved one's haven't repented and been saved yet, and they feel that it's their obligation to stay here and see to that task. Now perhaps this sounds noble, but it reflects an ignorance of God's sovereignty over His creatures, and His part in their salvation. And no doubt reflects our true priorities.

Romans 11:25 and 2 Peter 3:9 tell us that there is a final number of gentiles predestined to come to faith during this church period, and that God will certainly bring that to pass before the return. Therefore, our place is to yield ourselves to His authority and put Him, not other men, or even family, as our first priority. When a church, or a person, begins to put perceived worldly obligations, even seemingly noble ones, ahead of our desire to be with Christ himself, then it earns His rebuke, as did the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:1-5) Even the attending to the death and burial of our loved ones is subservient to the call of Christ on our lives and our priorities. (Mat 8:22; Luk 9:60) When He calls, absolutely everything else whatsoever must immediately cease, desist, and bow in subjection.

If we are fortunate enough to be among those who are alive at the calling together, then we will all have, what seems to us to be, unfinished business. But our business isn't necessarily His business. When He's ready to return everything else the world is doing, and everything the world thinks is of earth shattering importance, will simply become obsolete and meaningless. At that point, Christ's priorities will become the world's priorities, and our previously petty concerns will seem silly by comparison, probably even the most noble of them.

One is probably counted worthy of the calling of God when he or she has become sufficiently transformed in their likeness to Christ that they will all answer "yes, come immediately Lord Jesus" that we, and the whole world, may see your vindication, and your glory made manifest to all creation. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen.