

TUTORIAL

3.25

God will bring Rest

In this tutorial, Bible presenter Scot Keen tackles Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. In the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians, we find encouragement to persevere because God has promised us rest.

Introduction

In this tutorial, we look at Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. Most people understand this to be written soon after Paul wrote first Thessalonians, for several reasons. First of all, we have the mention of Paul, Silas, and Timothy being together in both letters. When we follow their ministry in the book of Acts, it looks like there is approximately an eighteen-month window when these three men were all together. If that is the case, both letters had to be written within an eighteen-month time period. That is significant because Paul was thinking about these believers, and he did not wait years or move to write them the letters after the initial church plant. Paul almost immediately checked on them and reached out to them. And so, it seems that 2 Thessalonians was written soon after 1 Thessalonians.

Purpose of Second Thessalonians

The purpose of the letter is to encourage the church as they persevere through suffering. We find in 2 Thessalonians that their persecution is still taking place. In chapter one verse four, Paul thanks God for their perseverance in the midst of their persecutions which they endure. So, it was ongoing. Paul also wrote this letter to clear up confusion regarding the day of the Lord. We will look at that more closely in chapter two. But evidently somebody had previously written a letter to the church in Thessalonica. They had put Paul's name on that letter, and that letter said that they were currently in the day of the Lord. This letter caused great confusion for the believers. Also in this letter, Paul corrects a problem regarding work ethic which he had seen while present during the initial church plant, addressed in 1 Thessalonians chapter four, and by this point, it is a full-blown problem that Paul has to deal with pretty strongly.

Paul's basic message in chapter one is to keep going because someday God will bring rest. And I think of it this way. Years ago I was in the car with my

family travelling to Kentucky. And we were going to see family and had about an eight-hour trip ahead of us. At this time, my daughter was roughly between six and nine months old. She cried for the last several hours of the trip. What I wanted to communicate with her was that we didn't have much farther to go. But it's hard to communicate to a young child, and obviously she wouldn't have understood me as she experienced time differently. My point to this illustration is that we know we are not going to be on earth forever, regardless of how intense the persecution gets, and this will encourage us to hang on and to be faithful because, after all, this is not the final chapter. And that is what Paul does here.

Paul begins the letter with an introduction and greeting, "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1:1). And then Paul praises God for the good things that he saw taking place in Thessalonica. Look at verse three. He says, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater." Now, this is amazing, because in 1 Thessalonians, Paul was concerned about their faith. He does not seem to show that same concern in 2 Thessalonians. So far, Paul is encouraged. It seems like the Thessalonians are maturing and are stable which gives Paul a sense of relief. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul had exhorted them to grow in the faith, and he also prayed that they would abound in love.

Look again at verse three. Paul says their love towards one another grows increasingly greater. That means firstly that God answered Paul's prayer as he was causing the Thessalonians to bound in love. And it also shows that they took Paul's exhortation to excel in love in first Thessalonians seriously. No wonder Paul is giving thanks to God. They are responding to the Message that he gave them. He is so encouraged that God answered his prayer and that they responded in obedience to the Word of God. In verse four, Paul says, "Therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure." Not only were their afflictions ongoing, but so was their faith. They were still trusting God. They were living by faith.

And so you could say that 1 Thessalonians was successful. They responded to Paul's Message. For those of you who may be involved in a church plant someday, imagine how encouraging this would be to a church planter; to know that you have instructed a church, seen a need and spoken into that from God's Word, and they respond! No wonder Paul praised God. Paul talks about the afflictions that they endure in verse four, and then he says in verse five that their perseverance and persecution is a plain indication of God's righteous judgement. This is worded in a slightly obscure way, so let me explain it. Paul says, "You guys are trusting God in the midst of persecution, and that proves

that God does the right thing.” What does Paul mean by that? He says it proves God's righteous judgement. Here is his explanation: so that they will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which indeed they are suffering.

Looking at persecution biblically

Paul says when they find themselves in the kingdom of God, they will be worthy to be there because they have suffered faithfully for Christ, and therefore they deserve the honors that will be bestowed upon them in the kingdom. But God's righteous judgement is not just seen in rewarding the believers for their faithfulness. God's righteous judgement is also seen in the way in which He treats the unbelieving world. Look at verse six, “After all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you.” Now, this is interesting terminology here. Our translations do a great job, “Repay with afflictions those who afflict you.”

Paul uses a play on words in Greek. Here is the concept: God pays back in kind. The law of the harvest rings true. People reap what they sow. Think about, for example, Mordecai and Solomon and Haman in the Old Testament. Haman wanted to have Mordecai hung on the gallows, but Haman ended up being hung on the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Take for example the men who framed Daniel when they caught him praying to God in Jerusalem. They wanted Daniel thrown into the lion's den, which he was. And in the end, God spared Daniel in the lion's den, and his attackers were thrown into the lion's den. The idea here is that God pays back with trouble those who trouble us. And so we see that God is going to bring judgement on the unbelieving world.

Obviously Paul is talking about those who trouble the believers in the first century. But I believe he is looking more broadly than that. He seems to be looking at humanity as a whole who will face God's judgement in the tribulation or the day of the Lord. And so God will pay back with trouble those who trouble us. He will give relief to those who are afflicted. And He will do this when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

We now come to a resolution that we have been waiting for since Genesis chapter four. Think about how righteous Abel was murdered by wicked Cain. And the cry of God's people down through the ages has been, “How long, oh Lord? When is God going to turn the tables and finally make things right again?” And Paul says he will give wrath to the wicked and rest to us ultimately when Jesus comes back in flaming fire. Now, this is not a reference to what I've been calling the rapture. This is a reference to the second advent of Christ. And I think you could argue that when a believer dies, they finally have rest. You could also argue that, if I'm correct on my order of events here, when the rapture happens, all Christians will have rest.

But when are things going to ultimately change, never to be messed up again? It will be when Jesus comes back at the second advent. I believe it was as if Paul was looking through a telescope and could see ahead to the final event. He did this to encourage believers that it will not be like this forever. God will give relief to those of us who are afflicted when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know Him.

When I consider this passage, a comical image comes to my mind which takes me back to first grade in the little town that I grew up in, Hyden, Kentucky. And I remember there was a young man in our class, which is strange, because it was first grade and so he should have been a small boy. I don't know how many times he'd had to repeat first grade. When the teacher would leave the room, this young man would look around to be sure no teachers were there, and literally would grab the tables and start flipping them over, terrorising all the children in the classroom. We were scared to death of this guy. And he would continue doing that until the door opened and Ms. Roahr came back into the room. And then he would become as docile as a lamb.

In the same way, the world is under the sway of the Prince of the Power of the Air. Satan is the god of this world, and he wreaks havoc across the globe. But when Jesus comes back, he will be brought to a sudden and screeching halt. And so there will be relief when Jesus comes back. We can anticipate this with confidence and also with a sense of joy as we wait for it to take place. For the sake of time, I will not discuss this further expect to say that when this takes place, our world will be dramatically different. Evolution will not be taught in schools anymore. Abortion clinics will not be open anymore. Christians won't be persecuted. It will be radically different; things will finally be right on planet earth.

And so, Christ is coming back, and notice that He deals out retribution to those who do not know God and do not obey His Gospel. And if you look in Romans at the phrase *obey the Gospel*, it is referring to obedience of faith. Paul is saying that those who do not know the Lord will face eternal destruction. It is not that the wicked are consumed with fire and annihilated, they will face eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.

Remembering back to 1 Thessalonians chapter five, I argued that Paul contrasted believers with unbelievers. Unbelievers face sudden destruction and will not escape. But we who believe are not in darkness. God has destined us for salvation. Well, Paul does a similar thing here. He talks about what will face the unbelieving world. But then look at what He says about believers in verse ten, "When he comes to be glorified in his saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed." On that day, the believers will

glorify Him. It is not that we can somehow add something to the majesty of God's glory, but the fact that we will be there glorifying, knowing what we were and what He has made us, will ultimately bring Him glory. He will be marvelled at by all who have believed. In the presence of the glorified Christ, we are going to be gripped and stunned in our hearts, marvelling in His presence.

Here is the difference between eternal destruction and marvelling in the presence of Christ. Look at verse ten, "Because our testimony to you was believed." The reason the Thessalonians will be marvelling in the presence of Christ is because Paul, Silas and Timothy went into Thessalonica with the Gospel of God's grace. They proclaimed that Message, and these people believed. And I want to encourage you with a thought: maybe one day there will be an indigenous church marvelling in the presence of Christ, instead of eternally separated from Him and enduring his wrath, all because you took the Gospel to them and they believed it.

Prayer for growth

Paul then prays for continued growth in 2 Thessalonians 1: 11-12, "To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling." If God is going to count us worthy of our calling, then would have to be living consistently with our calling. So, in essence, Paul is praying that they would walk worthy of their calling, just like he did back in first Thessalonians chapter two. Not only that, but he also prays that they would fulfil every desire for goodness, and the work of faith with power. Imagine being this believer in Thessalonica. As a believer you have desires for goodness and desires to live for the Lord. And as we saw in Romans chapter seven, sometimes the willing is present, but the doing is not. Paul prayed that not only would they have the desire, but that God would also fulfil that work of faith with power.

Notice the purpose or the goal of that prayer request in verse twelve, "So that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in him." Paul is praying that God would answer both their prayers and his for them to live worthy of Christ and to fulfil their desires for goodness with the power of God's Spirit as they walk by faith. And as a result, Christ will be glorified. And how will this request be granted? Paul says, "According to the grace of our God, and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul is praying for their continued growth so that they will ultimately live in a way that is pleasing to Christ. He is praying that they will keep going.





DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. According to 2nd Thessalonians 1:10, why will the Thessalonians be rejoicing in the presence of God?
2. How does the previous question impact your view of missions?