

# Notes on

## Paulus' Second Letter to the Thessalonikans

### Authorship and Date:

The ascribed author of the letter is Paulus of Tarsus, the envoy, and in the case of this letter his authorship is undisputed. The letter is attested early by outside sources.

Internal criteria date the letter to c. 51-52 CE, shortly after the author's first letter to the group. It is likely that this was the second (extant) letter written by Paulus. Within the framework established by the Actions of the Envoys, the letter must have been written after 17:1, when Paulus first visited Thessalonike. If indeed 1 Thessalonikans was written after this letter, then there is no doubt that the letter could not have been written while Paulus was in Beroia (Ac 17:10-14), for the first letter mentions Athens (Ac 17:16ff.). The earliest time of composition must have been during Paulus' stay at Korinth (Ac 18:1ff.), after Paulus was rejoined by Silvanus and Timotheos (Ac 18:5). Since Paulus spent so much time there (18 months, Ac 18:11), it is likely that both Thessalonikan letters were written while he was staying at Korinth. Gallio's proconsulship (52 CE) began during this stay, so the letter was written in 51 or 52 CE.

### Purpose of the Letter:

The letter is short, appearing to contain two reasons for writing. First, there were people in Thessalonike who claimed that the Second Coming of the Messiah in judgment on Israel was already happening. The persecution that the Christians there were already facing probably gave rise to such speculations.

Paulus was also concerned with the notion that people might claim to be doing "God's work" and might sponge off of the people for their living.

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### Commentary:

*Paulus and Silvanus and Timotheos  
to the assembly of Thessalonikans in God our Father and Lord Anointed Jesus.*

A traditional greeting, identifying the co-authors of the letter and the recipient.

*1:2 Hello to you, and peace from God our Father and from Lord Anointed Jesus.  
We are bound to thank God always about you, brothers, just as it is worthy, because your trust is growing up, and love for one another is abundant in each one of all of you. And so, we ourselves boast in you among God's assemblies on behalf of your endurance and trust during all of your persecutions and afflictions that you are enduring: a token of God's just judgment, for your being made worthy of God's kingdom. On its behalf you are also suffering--since it is just with God to repay with affliction those who are afflicting you, and to repay you who are being afflicted with rest with us (in the revelation of the Lord Jesus from the sky with messengers of his power: in a flame of fire, giving retribution to those who do not*

*know God and to those who do not listen to the good message of Jesus our Lord). They will pay a just thing, eternal destruction away from the Lord's presence and from the glory of his strength--when he comes to be glorified in his holy ones and to be wondered about in all those who have trusted, because our testimony about you was trusted--during that day.*

In the introduction to the letter, Paulus expresses several thoughts. First, he is pleased that the two defining elements of Christianity, trust and love, are becoming "abundant" in his readers. His praise on that account will serve as a touching point for any comments he chooses to make about opposition from certain Jewish people.

The Thessalonikans are suffering social persecution, and this opposition only serves to deepen their trust -- for which Paulus and the others are grateful. Their unwillingness to shrink back from what they believe has only demonstrated that they are "worthy of God's kingdom."

The readers need not worry about their opposition. God is aware of what they are doing and will repay those who oppose the spiritual message with judgment. This judgment would come at the so-called Second Coming of the Messiah, when God would come to judge those Israelites who rejected Jesus. The "good message of Jesus" is the spiritualization of the principles of the Torah into lives of trust and love. Although the readers live by these things, their opponents do not, and so those opponents were soon to be judged. On the other hand, the readers who persevere would be rewarded, and the revelation that they had indeed been following the true Messiah would both glorify the Anointed One and vindicate his followers.

*11 For this reason also, we are always praying about you, so that you would be worthy of the calling of our God and would fulfill every delight of goodness and every deed of trust with power, so that the name of our Lord, Jesus, would be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the generosity of the God of us and of Lord Anointed Jesus.*

The introductory portion of the letter concludes with the authors pointing out their constant remembrance of the readers in God's presence. It was their prayer that the Thessalonikans continue to live such loving and trusting lives, being worthy of their calling to God. In living such admirable and blameless lives, their lifestyle would give glory to the Anointed One who had given them the teaching, through God's own generosity.

*2:1 But we beg you, brothers, about the presence of our Lord, Anointed Jesus, and of our being gathered together to him:*

The authors now disclose the reasons for writing the letter. First of all, they explain, something must be explained regarding "the presence" -- the Second Coming. How and when is it that God's people would be "gathered" to Jesus?

*that you not be quickly shaken from your mindset nor be alarmed – neither through a spirit, nor through a message, nor through a letter (as through us) – as though the Lord's day were present.*

Some people had circulated the rumor that the events that ushered in the Messianic Age were already happening. In retrospect we know that such things happened less than twenty years later. It is quite possible that, given the authors' careful wording, people were using the first letter to the Thessalonikans (which urged diligence in watching for the time) as support for the view that these things were already going on. After all, they could point to the persecutions that they were facing as evidence that the end of the old age was near.

We observe immediately that neither Paul nor the Thessalonians regarded the return of the Lord or the events that followed as being the end of the world, or the end of time. The things that were looking for only signaled the end of that age – an age governed by ritual religion.

The authors together are adamant that some time still remained. Even if a spirit, or spoken message, or written letter should say that the end of the age had happened, the Thessalonians should not change their (right) attitudes – to be watchful, because the events were near, but not to overreact to the supposed "signs".

*3 No one should trick you by any means, because unless the Revolt should come first and the person of lawlessness be revealed -- the son of destruction, the one who opposes and who lifts himself up above all things that are called a god or august, so as to seat himself in God's temple, displaying himself (that he is a god).*

If rumors of the impending end of the age were not to be trusted, nor what they noticed around them, then how could the readers distinguish between the actual coming of the Messiah in judgment and various false reports?

The Revolt would be the primary sign. The term "revolt" implies not only physical rebellion but spiritual resistance to God as well. The word (αποστασία) appears only here and in Acts 21:21. In the other instance Paulus has been accused of persuading Israelites to revolt from Moses, and from the customs of the rabbis.

We discern the same meaning, revolt, in other Greek texts. For example:

After Titus Geganius Makerinus and Publius Minucius had entered their authority, Rome suffered from a great scarcity of corn, which took its beginning from the revolt (εκ της αποστασεως). (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquities of the Romans*, 7:1.1)

But about Gischala, its state were this way: - When Johannes, the son of Levi, saw some of the citizens with a great attitude on account of their revolt (δια την αποστασιαν) from the Romans, he worked to restrain them, and begged them that they would guard their trust to them. (*The Life of Flavius Josephus*, 10)

The word appears in the Septuagint in Joshua, as an indicator of revolution against God. The tribes that built an altar of sacrifice to God urge God to destroy them if the altar had actually been to another deity; that is, if their construction of the altar had been an open act of revolution against God.

"If we were in revolt (εν αποστασια) against or wandered from Yahweh, may he not rescue us this day!" (Josh 22:22)

The First Revolt (66 CE - 73/4 CE) was both of those things from a Christian standpoint. In taking a stand for a physical nation of Israel and for the importance of the Temple and priestly system in worship, the Israelite rebels who sought political independence from Rome were advocating a religion and lifestyle that was rooted in physical things. These actions opposed the teachings of Jesus and his insistence that his kingdom was not characterized by physical things.

Next, the "person of lawlessness" would "be revealed." The "person of lawlessness" is a **personification** of the system of Priestly Judaism as it stood in direct opposition to God's spiritual teachings through

Jesus. Any opposition to God was "lawlessness," and so the Jewish system was about to be publically revealed as lawlessness personified. Do not construe these writings as saying that God opposed all Jewish *people* or Jewishness. Those people who supported ritual religion (against the notion of free lives in love and trust) were his opponents -- the matter was never "racial."

The Jewish system would place itself above anything divine or "august" -- a term that was used to describe the Caesars and which may have been a reminder to the readers that the religious system was about to oppose the Roman Empire. In determining to form a rebellion in order to impose certain religious beliefs, those advocates of earthly theocracy were making their own system (and not God) out to be the source of forgiveness. In the metaphor, they placed themselves in God's temple, standing in God's place. The authors could have found support in the writings about Samuel (1 Sam 8-10), where God told Samuel that in desiring a human king they were rejecting the rule of God (8:7). Paulus and his friends may have had the account of Samuel in mind at the time of writing this letter.

*5 Don't you remember that I told you these things when I was being directed toward you? And now you know what is holding back: for his revelation in his season. For the secret of lawlessness is already working (until only the one who is holding back in the present should happen out of our midst). And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will consume with the breath of his mouth and deactivate with the appearance of his presence. The lawless one's presence is according to the working of the Enemy: with all kinds of false power and signs and wonders and with all kinds of unjust deception for those who are being destroyed. Against this, they did not receive the love of the truth for their salvation. And on account of this, God will send them a working of deceit, to the point of their trusting the lie, so that all those who do not trust the truth but who delighted in wrong would be judged.*

Paulus, writing alone, explains that he had said as much when he had addressed them before. Therefore, he had already told them that God was waiting for just the right time. Still, the readers could clearly recognize that "the secret of lawlessness is already working," because the strongest advocates of the priestly system had become the readers' greatest opponents. Very suddenly -- Paulus de-emphasizes how soon -- God was going to come forth from his people and reveal the lawless system for what it was. This happened when the First Revolt began to go against the Jewish people, after the ascendance of Vespasian to the imperial throne.

Then the Second Coming -- the judgment on Israel -- would come. Jesus and his students had been warning Israel that their political state and religious system were about to be judged. When Vespasian's son, Titus, seized the temple, and when finally Masada was taken (and the nation of Israel dissolved), Jesus' own words were vindicated. Therefore, from Paulus' perspective (writing ahead of time), it was to be as though Jesus' own words were consuming Priestly Judaism, removing all of its power.

Until that time, the system ("the lawless one") would attempt to lure Christians back into ritual religion and to persuade Jewish people not to accept the teachings of Jesus, even through false signs and outright deception. Philo may be mentioning those signs when he alludes to certain prophetic ecstasy among his people, although the signs and wonders may not necessarily be supernatural (but an appeal to omens). The readers' opponents would believe the lies, refusing to accept Jesus' spiritualization of the Torah -- the truth, which would have saved them. Instead, God would cause them to trick themselves with their own deceit. That way, they would believe their own lies and be caught in them when the judgment on Israel came. These events were completed by 74 CE, and since that time there has been no temple and no Priestly Judaism. At this point in time it is impossible to trace someone's lineage back to Abraham, which had been the mark that established Jewishness. Note though that both Jesus and

Paulus pointed out destruction for Priestly Judaism, but neither advocated violence against Jewish people.

*13 Now we are bound to thank God always about you, brothers, beloved from Yahweh, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation, in the making holy of the spirit and the trust of truth. For this also, he called you, through our good message, to the point of obtaining the glory of our Lord, Anointed Jesus.*

But God did not call the Thessalonikan Christians to participate in the Revolt and to have their religion destroyed. Instead, he had called them via the "good message" of trust and love (brought by Jesus and told by the inspired envoys) to trust the truth (rather than the lies of the Judaizers). Therefore, they would be spared.

*15 Then after all, brothers, stand and hold on to the traditions that you were taught, whether through a spoken message or through our letter.*

That is, the readers would be spared *provided* that they continued to live the sort of spiritual lives that Jesus had explained. The Thessalonikans had not heard about this life from Jesus, but the envoys had passed his teachings on as "traditions," both in person and in writing.

*Now may our Lord, Anointed Jesus himself, and God our Father--the one who loved us and gave eternal advice and a good hope (with generosity)--advise your hearts and establish you in every good deed and word.*

In concluding the thought, the three prophets call on God to strengthen the readers, so that they would look ahead to their vindication and guide their actions -- that everything they say and do would be good.

*3:1 What remains is this: pray, brothers, about us, so that the message of the Lord would run and be glorified, just as it also did toward you, and so that we would be rescued from the out of place and evil people. For the trust does not belong to all people.*

The transition to the next section is somewhat short. Having expressed their own prayer for the readers, the authors now call on the Thessalonikans to pray for them. Their desire for themselves is only what they wish on the readers: they want to be able to do what God wants them to do. They want the message of trust and love to grow and spread, and for them to be vindicated. These are the same classes of things that they want for the Thessalonikans, and so the expression is one of sympathy. They recognize that not everyone accepts or will accept Jesus' spiritual Torah...

*But the Lord is trustworthy, who will establish and guard you from the evil one. Now we are persuaded in the Lord about you, because the things that we charge, you both are doing and will do. Now may Yahweh guide your hearts into the love of God and into the endurance of the Anointed One.*

"...but the Lord is trustworthy." Turning away from themselves and back to the welfare of the readers, the authors together know certainly that the Thessalonikans' trust is real. Their actions prove it. Therefore, they bless their readers, so that God would continue to guide them into deeper and greater love and would strengthen them to hold on to Jesus' teachings in the face of increasing opposition.

*6 Now, brothers, we charge you in the name of our Lord, Anointed Jesus, to withdraw yourselves from every brother who is walking without order and not according to the tradition that was handed down by us. For you yourselves know how it is necessary to imitate us--that we were not disorderly among you, nor did we eat bread as a gift from anyone. On the contrary, we were working with toil and weariness, night and day, so as not to burden any of you. It is not because we do not have authority, but so that we would give ourselves a type for your imitation of us.*

Some commentators put forth the idea that certain Thessalonikans were sitting around waiting for the judgment to arrive. The letter says nothing of the sort, and by the tone of the letter, the "disorderly" brothers were not resting on their honest belief that the judgment was imminent. Indeed, the authors nowhere describe the "disorderly" as being honest in their beliefs. There is a subject break in the letter, including a conclusion of the preceding topic, and so there is no need to suppose that the two subjects are related.

What does the letter say? It accuses certain people of not following Jesus' teachings ("the tradition that was handed down by us"). This teaching had included living lives of love in a manner that did not burden others. Paulus and company remind their readers to "imitate" them in the respect that Christians are not to live off of one another. Being "disorderly" refers to lacking a legitimate means of earning a living. If Paulus and his companions had "burdened" the Thessalonikans by living off of them rather than supporting themselves, then they too would have been "disorderly." But Paulus reminds them that they were not like that; instead, they refused even to take bread as a gift, so that no one would be burdened. The traveling envoys and their entourage had explicitly been given the authority to live with other Christians while they traveled (Mt 10:11), but Paulus recognized that this "Apostles' Privilege" was not a necessary thing but merely a privilege. Writing in the plural, the authors indicate that every one of them realized that it was best to never exercise that privilege but instead to earn their own keep. Paulus did this through tent-making. In their final mention of their own example, they mention together that their example was intentional -- everyone needs to imitate it.

*For also, when we were directed toward you, we charged you this: that if someone doesn't want to work, he should not dine either. For we hear of some people walking among you without order: neither working but being beyond work. Now we charge and advise such people in the Lord Anointed Jesus, so that they would dine on their bread after working with quietness. Now you, brothers, should not do a bad job of doing well.*

After pointing out their own example, the authors turn to their teaching. When they had addressed the Thessalonikans personally, they expressly pointed out that whoever fails to support himself should be allowed to starve. Sponging off of others was mere laziness at work. The people who wanted the Thessalonikans to support them had claimed that they were "beyond work." Quite possibly they were teachers themselves. Instead of admitting them any other possibility, the authors hold strong: such people should get jobs that do not cause them to mooch off of local Christians. Then they would honestly earn the food on their tables.

The authors begin to conclude the thought by directing the readers to keep working hard at their own jobs.

*14 But if someone does not listen to our message through the letter, point him out. Don't intermingle with him, so that he would be disgraced. And don't regard him as an enemy; on the contrary, admonish him as a brother.*

What should they do about these "moochers"? Their desire to be supported by their fellow Christians should be pointed out to everyone, and everyone should shun such people. That way, they would be shamed into doing the right thing and seeking honest employment.

Should the readers treat such people as anathema? No. These people need to learn a lesson, but that lesson should be taught with love.

*Now may the Lord of Peace himself give you peace through everything in every way. May the Lord be with you all.*

The letter's own conclusion begins with a universal blessing for peace, in the hopes that peace would come within the group and within the larger social scope.

*The greeting by my hand, that of Paulus, which is a sign in every letter. I write this way.*

After this, Paulus signs the letter himself, indicating that this portion is in his own handwriting.

*The favor of our Lord, Anointed Jesus, be with you all.*

With a final blessing the letter concludes. The First Revolt was still almost fifteen years away, and the Thessalonians would have to wait for it patiently. As for the other problem, it has plagued every generation of Christians since the first.

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