



## 2 Thessalonians - Introduction

### Author and Title

Although some scholars today have questioned Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, the unanimous testimony of the early church fathers supports Pauline authorship. The main reasons given by those who question Pauline authorship include:

1. The eschatology of 2 Thessalonians is regarded as different from that of 1 Thessalonians. Specifically, the sudden and/or imminent expectation of Christ's return in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 is said to be inconsistent with the requirement in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 that specific signs must first take place.
2. The many commonalities between 1 and 2 Thessalonians are alleged to reflect literary dependence, which is regarded as inconsistent with Paul's authorship of both.
3. Second Thessalonians supposedly has a colder tone than 1 Thessalonians.
4. Second Thessalonians 2:2 and 3:17 are thought to make best sense if written by a pseudonymous author.

A careful evaluation of these objections, however, supports the conclusion that Paul was in fact the writer of 2 Thessalonians. The duplicity entailed in the forgery hypothesis, see 3:17, is hardly credible. In addition, the above objections can be readily refuted:

1. Both letters portray the Second Coming as an unwelcome and sudden surprise for unbelievers (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3 and 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12), but an anticipated and welcome event for those who are in Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:4-8, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10, and 2:13-17). Moreover, certain events precede the Lord's return in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 as well as 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 and 2:9-10, and imminence can be seen both in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, 1:10, and 2:1. A sudden and imminent eschaton was regarded as compatible with signs in Jewish and early Christian writings, e.g. Matthew Chapters 24-25.
2. Paul probably wrote 2 Thessalonians shortly after 1 Thessalonians, and may have referred to a copy of it.

3. The idea of a colder tone in 2 Thessalonians is exaggerated, as discussed in the section Writing Style.
4. Second Thessalonians 2:2 and 3:17 probably reflect Paul's concern that a forged letter may once have existed.

### Date

Second Thessalonians was probably penned from Corinth in AD49-51, shortly after 1 Thessalonians.

### Relationship to 1 Thessalonians

Some have proposed that 2 Thessalonians preceded 1 Thessalonians, but 2 Thessalonians 2:15 rules this out. Others have postulated that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians for a Jewish group within the church or even to the Philippians, but such hypotheses are in tension with 2 Thessalonians 1:1. Probably Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians soon after dispatching 1 Thessalonians, because he had received a report: <<**For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work**>> (2 Thessalonians 3:11) that the situation at Thessalonica had taken a surprising turn.

### Theme

The theme of the Second Coming of Jesus dominates 2 Thessalonians just as it dominated 1 Thessalonians. Jesus' coming will be preceded by an apostasy or rebellion, and by the revelation of the man of lawlessness, the Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. When Christ comes, he will defeat this rebellious world ruler (2:8), and bring justice to oppressed Christians; and wrath upon their persecutors and to unbelievers in general (1:5-10 and 2:9-15).

### Purpose

The Thessalonian church had accepted the strange claim that 'the Day of the Lord has come' (2:1-2). How could they have thought this? Some think they spiritualised the concept of the Day of the Lord, but Paul's argumentation seems inconsistent with this. Others postulate that they thought that tribulation was part of the Day of the Lord and that it had begun, and consequently the Second Coming was imminent. However, Paul assumes that they knew the Second Coming occurred at the same time as the coming of the Day of the Lord. As strange as it may seem, the Thessalonians may simply have fallen victim to the bizarre notion that the Day of the Lord, understood in its normal sense, had come. As a result they were shaken and frightened (2:2). The Thessalonians were also undergoing persecution (1:4), which may have exacerbated their confusion about the end. Furthermore, the community had a problem with idlers refusing to work (3:6-15). They may have stopped working to await and preach the Second Coming, but evidence for connecting the problems in this way is lacking. Lazy Christians may simply have been exploiting wealthier Christians' generosity in order to avoid work.

Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians:

1. To reassure those terrified by the thought that the Day of the Lord had come (2:1-3:5).

2. To strengthen the Thessalonians in the face of unremitting persecution (1:3-12).
3. To deal with the problem of some of the church members refusing to earn their own living (3:6-15).

### Summary of Salvation History

Christians are to wait expectantly for the Second Coming of their Saviour, Jesus Christ.

### Writing Style

Second Thessalonians follows the customary order of a NT letter. It begins with a salutation and ends with a prayer and benediction. Between these bookends is found the type of informal letter that meanders through a series of topics in the way that present-day informal letters often do. There is the usual mixture of personalia, references to the letter writer's relationship with his recipients, public information, and Christian doctrine and practical application.

In contrast to the warm and effusive tone of 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians includes some blunt commands as Paul addresses bad behaviour and bad thinking. Further, this letter is noteworthy for the author's tough-mindedness in predicting judgment on the ungodly and rebuking church members who behave and think incorrectly. Still, there is a regular swing back and forth between reproof and warm encouragement.

### Key Themes

1. God's righteous judgment will be fully manifest when Jesus returns. At that time unbelievers will be condemned and believers will be saved. 1:5-10; 2:9-14.
2. Christians will share Christ's glory. 1:10; 1:12; 2:14.
3. The lawless one's revelation and humanity's final rebellion are prerequisites for Jesus' Second Coming. 2:3-4; 2:9-12.
4. The lawless one will deceive all those who have rejected the Gospel, guaranteeing their condemnation when Jesus returns. 2:3; 2:6-12.
5. Christians must not exploit the charity of fellow Christians. 3:6-15.

### Outline

- I. Salutation (1:1-2)
- II. Thanksgiving and Comfort for the Persecuted Thessalonians (1:3-12)
  - a. Thanksgiving (1:3-4)
  - b. The Judgement at Christ's Coming (1:5-12)

- III. Refuting the False Claim about the Day of the Lord (2:1-17)
  - a. The Man of Lawlessness (2:1-12)
    - i. The false claim (2:1-2)
    - ii. The false claim refuted (2:3-12)
  - b. Chosen for Salvation (2:13-17)
- IV. Request for Prayer (3:1-5)
- V. Warning against Idleness (3:6-15)
- VI. Final Greetings and Benediction (3:16-18)