

## THE BOOK OF 2 THESSALONIANS

### ORIENTING DATA FOR 2 THESSALONIANS

- Content: a letter of further encouragement in the face of suffering, of warning against being misled regarding the coming of the Lord, and of exhortation for some to work with their own hands and not sponge off others
- Author: the apostle Paul, joined by his traveling companions Silas and Timothy
- Date: A.D. 51 (probably), very shortly after 1 Thessalonians (although some would reverse the order of our two letters)
- Recipients: see 1 Thessalonians
- Occasion: Paul has received word that some (probably by prophetic word) have spoken in Paul's name to the effect that the day of the Lord (= the coming of Christ) has already taken place, plus the fact that the disruptive loafers spoken to in 1 Thessalonians have not mended their ways
- Emphases: the sure salvation of the Thessalonian believers and the sure judgment of their persecutors; the day of the Lord is still ahead and will be preceded by "the rebellion"; those who are idle and disruptive should work for their food

### OVERVIEW OF 2 THESSALONIANS

If you read this letter hard on the heels of 1 Thessalonians, you may notice that in general it lacks the warmth of feeling that you found in the first letter; and the material in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 is just obscure enough, especially in light of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, to cause you to wonder what gives. But what has caused the tone of this letter is easy to see. Both of the major items taken up (2 Thess 2:1–12; 3:6–15) give good reason for Paul to be upset—even more than he actually comes across as. In any case, the other sections of the letter (the thanksgiving and prayer in 1:3–12 and the prayer and request for prayer in 2:16–3:5) are full of the same kind of affection and concern Paul expresses in the earlier letter.

So what does give? First, Paul has learned from someone that the church is being thrown into confusion (2:2) by a declaration given in Paul's name that the day of the Lord has already happened. Both sides of this matter are enough to upset him—the falsehood itself and the fact that it is being put forward under Paul's authority. Since in 2:15 he tells them to hold fast to what he himself had taught them—by "word of mouth" (when he was present with them) and by "letter" (1 Thessalonians)—the problem in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 probably comes from an untested prophetic utterance (see 1 Thess 5:19–22) claiming to speak in Paul's name on this matter.

Second, he also has reason to be a bit miffed over those who are idle and disruptive, since he has already spoken to this issue in his first letter (1 Thess 4:9–12; 5:14).

Together these account both for the ambivalent tone and the specific content of the letter.

## SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 2 THESSALONIANS

For a brief letter, 2 Thessalonians has more than its share of difficult moments. First, although Paul expects certain events to take place before the coming of Christ (as you will see in 2:1–12), the specific nature of these events is less than certain. Most of our difficulty stems from the fact that at two crucial places (the identity of “the man of lawlessness” and “what is holding him back”), the Thessalonians had previously been informed, so Paul does not here repeat himself (2:5–6). Although these questions are obviously matters of interest for us as later readers, we will very likely have to be content to live with the main point of the passage, since we are outside the loop on these matters.

Second, there is also plenty of speculation—often given out as though it were plainly in the text—on the reason why the disruptive-idle continue not to work. The reason most commonly suggested is that they’ve quit working because they are expecting the soon coming of Jesus. But that hardly squares with what is actually being promoted in 2:2, that the day of the Lord has *already* come. More likely it is related to the general disdain of manual work on the part of Greek aristocracy. But nothing can be known for certain about the why; Paul’s concern is, and ours should be as well, altogether with the *what*—both the exhortation to the disruptive-idle to get to work and the instruction to the church on how to treat such people.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 369–371.