2 Thessalonians - Commentaries by Edward Cross

Book Study: 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

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Edward Cross

2 Thessalonians 1

1. Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

2. Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth;

4. So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure:

5. Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer:

6. Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you;

7. And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels,

8. In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:

9. Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power;

10. When He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.

11. Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness, and the work of faith with power:

12. That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified to you, and ye in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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The epistle may be divided into three sections:

1. Encouragement in the affliction through which the saints at Thessalonica were passing, in view of the righteous retribution of God in the day of the manifestation of His power (ch. 1.).

2. Correction of erroneous views which they had received regarding the day of the Lord, as though it had already come (ch. 2:1-14).

3. Exhortation to stand fast in the instruction they had received, and to avoid the company of the idle and the disorderly (ch. 2:15 ad finem).

One expression in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 is the key to the whole epistle, “as though the day of the Lord is present” — had already come; not as in the A.V. “is at hand.” So misunderstood, the whole point of the epistle is lost. This will be more fully explained when we come to the consideration of that chapter, but it is referred to at once, as showing the occasion of the apostle’s writing to them this letter, to correct their misapprehensions regarding that day.

Young in the faith and inexperienced, they had misunderstood or inadequately apprehended the instructions the apostle had given them; and the enemy, ever watchful, had quickly sought to misinterpret or contradict what he had taught, and thus to lead their minds into confusion, not only as to this “day of the Lord,” but, by implication also as to the “rapture” (1 Thess. 4:13-17); for the proper understanding for this latter would have guarded them from the error into which they had fallen as to the former (cf. 2 Thess. 2:1).

The date of the epistle cannot definitely be fixed; but it was probably not long after the writing of the first epistle. The form of the salutation is very similar in both.

2 Thessalonians 1:3-4

The apostle recognizes at once his obligation — his and that of his fellow laborers with him — to give thanks to God, “as it is right” he says, always on their account, because their faith was growing, above measure, and their love, the love of every one of them was abounding, each towards the other, in the truest altruistic spirit, so that the apostle himself, as well as the others who knew of it, could boast of them in the assemblies of God for their patience and faith in all the persecutions and tribulations they were enduring at the hands of those who were their adversaries.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-6

And all this was to him a proof of the righteous judgment of God, both in regard to the saints and to the world — to those who were suffering affliction, and to those who were causing these afflictions — to the former in view of their being counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for the

sake of which they were suffering; to the latter “if so be” (i.e. assuredly) it is a righteous thing with God — the great judge of all — “to recompense trouble to those who trouble you, and to you who are troubled, rest along with us,” who are also sufferers now as well as you (cf. Psa. 18:22-27).

2 Thessalonians 1:7-9

These things will be all put right at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven, when He comes with angelic ministers of His power. He now sits at the right hand of God, waiting in patience till that time comes (Psa. 110:1; Matt. 22:44) and it is into that same patience the apostle would now direct their hearts (ch. 3:5, R.V.).

It is noticeable that in 2 Thessalonians 1:3 the “hope,” which is the sustaining spring of this patience, is omitted from the enumeration of the trinity of virtues which are so markedly characteristic of the first epistle (compare 1 Thess. 1:3). Patience there might be up to a certain point amongst them-patience there was certainly to a large extent; but without at all saying that this “hope” was absent from them, the way that he does not speak of it (ch. 1:3) and the way he does speak of it (ch. 3:5) seems to imply in this delicate manner, and avoiding all semblance of discouragement, that he writes at least to enforce the need of its cultivation.

On the whole there was considerable ground for thankfulness in regard to their general state; but also there is plainly revealed the internal weakness that belongs to every institution committed to the hands of men; a weakness which shows itself only too quickly, and which here ends in failure, both doctrinal, (ch. 2.) and moral (ch. 3.).

But evil at the longest is short lived and always under control, and good is the conquering power (Psa. 76:10). This was always so, and was brought to light by the resurrection and exaltation of Christ; and however much we may have to do with evil, it is nevertheless a passing thing, and its limitations are strictly defined. The home, the habitation of our souls is, by the Spirit, in the contemplation and the power of good (cf. Phil. 4:8).

We cannot think the apostle was deceived as to the fruit of his labors. Acts 20:17-38; 2 Tim. 3., and such like scriptures plainly show us that he was fully alive to the future of the Church as a responsible witness for God; and 2 Thessalonians 2 makes plain in the most distinct manner that there was to be looked for, not only a failure in the testimony, but a complete apostasy from all truth — from the very recognition of God and of Christ in any and in every form.

Moreover to regard this forecast, the signs of the verification of which seem to multiply vividly around us every day, as the result of the shrewdest and most far-seeing wisdom on the part of the man himself, would leave his writings on the level of what is merely human, thereby ignoring their divine inspiration: while also no mere human foresight would be sufficient to picture with such photographic precision as the writings of the apostles do the history of succeeding times. They, as other holy men of old, “spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” But while that is so, they spake also as men, — men of like feelings to ourselves, fully alive to the actual circumstances in which they moved, and acted upon by the scenes through which they passed, as we ourselves today in similar scenes, to be reproduced until the climax of their period comes.

It is a matter of the deepest interest to see how these men spake by the Spirit of God, for so it is we are assured that it is God who speaks through them. Their mind is the mind of the Spirit, i.e., the mind of God; hence we reverence their writings with the reverence which is their due: while their feelings are the feelings of men, acted on by that Spirit: and hence they speak to us in language native to our own hearts.

It was in this way the apostle was able to enter sympathetically into the sufferings through which these Thessalonian saints were passing: whilst also prophetically to picture to them circumstances of increasing difficulty right on to the end; and yet to dwell himself, and to encourage their hearts to dwell, in the serenity of present peace and the assurance of final triumph; for the whole question of power was to be solved by the introduction of the power of Christ at His coming.

He is to come, to be revealed from Heaven with the messengers of His power, in flame of fire — symbols and accompaniments in the Old Testament of the glorious majesty of Jehovah, here attributed to the Lord Jesus Christ (compare Ex. 3:2; 19:18; Dan. 7:9-10; Mal. 4:1; Matt. 3:12) — taking vengeance on those who know not God, that is, the Gentile nations in the darkness of their pagan state, blind worshippers of false gods, and on the unbelieving Jews, who were ever characterized by disobedience, and are here specially so, in respect of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These all shall pay the penalty of everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His might, when He shall have come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that have believed, in that day.

This plainly shows that that day has not yet come. The persecution they were suffering was a proof of it. When the day of the Lord should come everything for them would be entirely changed. Peace and rest would be their portion, tribulation and vengeance the portion of their adversaries. Such was the contrast that he pictures between their actual circumstances and the day of the Lord. It was a sort of a priori argument to prove that that day could not possibly have come; and in this way to disprove and nullify all the assertions whereby the enemy sought to disturb their souls: that is, he argues from the circumstances of today, that to-morrow had not come; when the circumstances of tomorrow come, it will be an a posteriori proof, if such were needed, that the day is there (ch. 2:3-12).

2 Thessalonians 1:10

When the Lord comes, He will be glorified in His saints; and as “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” is the fullest measure possible of punishment to be meted out to those who suffer it, so by contrast we have here the height of privilege and blessing that will be the portion of the saints at the manifestation of His glory in that day. He will come to be glorified in them — not through them, nor among them, but as the sun is reflected in a mirror (Alford) so will His glory be reflected in the saints, — and He will be wondered at in all them that believe (compare Isa. 8:18; Heb. 2:13; and for “wonder” of a different kind, Rev. 13:3).

But as these things were not so then, it was proof enough that “that day” had not come. “I would it had come,” says the apostle elsewhere to some who were regarding it in a different light from the Thessalonians. “I would to God ye did reign that we also might reign with you” (1 Cor. 4:8). The Corinthians were betrayed into an opposite error from that of the Thessalonians. They were ante-dating the glory of that day: the Thessalonians were overwhelmed with its terrors. What poor creatures we are! How easily deceived and led from one error to another! How feeble, too, our sense of the helplessness that characterizes us, and how little in the Spirit of Him, the attitude of whose soul is exposed

to us in the words, “Preserve me O God, for in Thee do I put my trust” (Psa. 16:1).

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

With the end as thus set forth in view, his prayer was constantly on their behalf for two things, namely: 1St, in respect of their present life, that God would count them worthy of the calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness, and the work of faith with power, so that the name of the Lord Jesus might be glorified in them here, and 2nd, that they might be glorified in Him in the day of His manifested glory according to the grace of our God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Book Study: 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Edward Cross

2 Thessalonians 2

1. Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto Him,

2. That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.

3. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;

4. Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

5. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?

6. And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time.

7. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.

8. And then shall that Wicked he revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:

9. Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,

10. And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

11. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie:

12. That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

13. But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth:

14. Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

15. Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

16. Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace,

17. Comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work.

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The apostle now enters upon the more direct consideration of the error which was the occasion of his writing this epistle. This is the subject matter of verses 1-12; and, considering the extreme importance of what is here set forth — the complete overthrow of the power of Satan in the instrument of his opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ — we can easily understand how the Spirit of God would unfold it to these young believers in the clearest terms, so as to counteract in their minds the simultaneous effort of the enemy, by every means of deceit in his power, to becloud or distort it.

2 Thessalonians 2:1

To prove to them how baseless was the error into which they had been led, of believing that “the day of the Lord is present” (N.T.), he appeals, first to facts within their own experimental cognizance, namely, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, as he had already taught them in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, and as to which, by their very presence here in this world they could not be deceived; and secondly, he instructs them in regard of events which must precede that day, and which had evidently not yet taken place, namely, the apostasy full blown and the revelation of the man of sin.

2 Thessalonians 2:2

And on this ground be begs them not to be soon, that is, in a precipitate or unreasonable manner, shaken from their ordinary sober mind — from their common sense, as we would say — nor troubled, either by what might be spoken to them or written, even though it came to them

under the cloak of having been written by him. The consideration of these two facts should show them that it was impossible that the day of the Lord had already come.

Saints there will be, no doubt, at that day on the earth; there will be the godly remnant of the Jews, and there will be the white-robed throng redeemed from all nations (cf. Jer. 30:7 and Rev. 7); but the saints of the present period, who are connected with Christ, now, during His rejection, and whose portion it is to form the Church which is His body (Eph. 1:22), have the special privilege of being “kept from the great tribulation” that will close up this present period, prior to the introduction of the age to come (Rev. 3:10).

The rendering of the A.V., “the day of Christ is at hand,” is doubly misleading: first, as to “the day of Christ,” a reference to 1 Corinthians 5:5, Philippians 1:5,10; 2:16 will show that the day of the Lord Jesus, or of Christ, is connected, as the words Jesus or Christ imply, with the blessing of the saints, while “the day of the Lord” is connected always with the judgment of the world: and again the word “at hand” implies nearness in the future, whereas the word in the original means very emphatically that they thought that it had “come already.” The word is used seven times in the New Testament, in two of which, Romans 8:38 and 1 Corinthians 3:22, “things present” are expressly distinguished from “things to come.”

Moreover there was nothing new in the fact that the day of the Lord was “at hand.” Its coming had been declared from the time of Isaiah, and implied as far back as Hannah’s song (1 Sam. 2:1-10); so that the apostle had no need to correct them in that respect. The error they had fallen into was that it had “already come.”

2 Thessalonians 2:3

But they were not to be deceived, for that day will not be until the apostasy has first come, and the man of sin be revealed, who exalts himself above all that is called God, whether the true God or false gods, or that is an object of veneration, so that he sets himself down in the temple of God showing himself that he is god. This is not the apostasy; the apostasy leads up to this; this is the ripe fruit of it; the full-blown and resultant head. The apostasy is necessary to the Antichrist: the Antichrist is the heading up of the apostasy.

The spirit of apostasy is at work already: compare verse 7 and 1 John 2:18. It has been going on unceasingly ever since the apostle’s time. But here we have its climax. This is the result of Genesis 3:5, 6. the man of sin, the son of perdition, completing his role under the instigation and power of Satan. This is the end of the apostate Jew, and of the temple of God, rebuilt in unbelief, not for the glory of God, but for the apotheosis of this “blasphemy.” This is the end of Christendom, the total giving up of all faith in Christ. This is the liar, who denies that Jesus is the Christ. This is the Antichrist, who denies the Father and the Son.

It is not the secular power of the world, represented by the first beast in Revelation 13, that is the subject here, but rather the religious character of this wickedness, represented by the second beast in that chapter. This is the man of sin, the false prophet, who in the temple of God, sets himself up against God, the God of Israel. It is the apostasy of man against God, the rational outcome of the first suggestion of Satan in the garden of Eden, “ye shall be as gods”: It is the revelation in full of the mystery of lawlessness; as Christianity is the revelation of mystery of piety (1 Tim. 3:16); It is the lawless one who throws off all restraint and does according to his will (Dan. 11:36), the anti-climax of Him who came, not to do His own will, but the will of Him who sent Him (John 6:38).

The world assumes that it is getting better, and the Church joins in this vain boast, and every fresh sect that arises amid the divisions of Christendom thinks that the future is with it, but “Scripture cannot be broken”; and one has but to look around to see the general trend of things making unmistakably for the apostasy that is here predicted. Ritualism and rationalism are doing their deadly work; superstition and atheism for the nonce in league, like Herod and Pilate (Luke 23:12), to destroy the testimony of God and the gospel of the Christ; and often where there is professed orthodoxy, the gospel is presented in such an adulterated form that they who believe it are not saved thereby. How much reason, then, there is for those who know the gospel to preach it with increased earnestness, for the time is already come of which the apostle prophesied, “when they will not bear sound teaching... but they will turn away their ear from the truth and will have turned aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-5). In the mad race for popularity, they who should know better won’t stop to think; and all this is preparing the way for the last and great apostasy.

2 Thessalonians 2:5

The apostle had already told them of these things, but they had forgotten them, or had so feebly seized them at the first that they were unable to resist the perverting influence of the enemy. Now he recalls them to their memory, and he assumes that they “know that which restrains, that he, the Antichrist, should be revealed in his own time.”

Note that it does not say that the evil was to be restrained. The evil is not restrained: it has been ceaselessly working ever since the apostle’s time, and will continue to work to the end; but the final manifestation of it is restrained, “that he should be revealed in his own time.”

In verse 6 he speaks of that which restrains — a restraining power; in verse 7 he speaks of a person who exercises that power. He does not say what that power is. What it was then may not be what it is today. Then it was the form of government established in the Roman Empire; at least so the early Christians thought, and many prayers were in consequence offered up for its continuance. Today the same principle of governmental order is maintained by God in different forms in different countries, and evil is thereby to a certain extent restrained: and in countries where this restraint has been most released, we see the consequent growth of atheism correspondingly, and the dissolution of all religious profession, as witness, that is, the French Revolution. But as the presence of the Spirit on earth, and the formation of the Church thereby, are characteristic of God’s present actings in the world, doubtless we may find in connection with this the fundamental reason of this restraining-power, which will surely be maintained until the purpose of God in regard to the gathering out of the Church is fulfilled. When that has taken place and the Church raptured is no longer here, and the operations of the Spirit in connection with it cease, then the apostasy will take its unbridled form, and the Antichrist will be revealed.

All this plainly shows the present working of evil towards its final issue, and the hopelessness of any remedy until the Lord comes. The rejection of Christ was the rejection of God come in grace and bringing salvation. “His blood be on us and on our children” was an awful imprecation on the part of those who invoked it. The answer to it is the energy of evil working ceaselessly ever since, and restrained only in view of its open manifestation under the Antichrist in the latter day.

But this restraint being removed, the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the spirit of His mouth, that is, the word of truth judicially applied, probably in allusion to Isaiah 11:4, and annul by the brightness of His coming, the epiphany of His presence — not His presence, but the epiphany, the outshining of it. These two, His presence and the brightness of it, are not to be confounded — him whose coming, in contrast with the coming of Christ, “is after the working of Satan in every possible form of power, and signs, and wonders of falsehood,” accrediting himself by the imitation of those things whereby Jesus was accredited of God (Acts 2:22), and “in every form of deceit of unrighteousness to them that perish,” as they are adjudged retributively by God to this fearful doom, “because they received not the LOVE of the truth that they might be saved.” The forms of the truth in their broad outlines have been received in Christendom in every section of the professing Church; the common creed is the same everywhere; but the love of it? that was the real test, and it was not there. Judas was ordained an apostle as truly as the rest, but he loved money; they loved their Master: and his end is emblematic of what the apostle here sets forth. “Satan entered into him”; and how terrible is the Satanic energy, “the energy of error,” here predicted. No stronger words could be used to describe it: no more fatal picture could be drawn of the state of those who “believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

Serious and solemn words and terrible to contemplate: all the more so that we know that the spirit of it all is actually at work. We live in the midst of it: the effects of it are all around and its influence pervades the very air (Eph. 2:2).

2 Thessalonians 2:13

What cause, therefore for thanks on the part of those to whom light is vouchsafed and who are chosen of God to salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth, called by the glad tidings of Paul to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. What a contrast to the judgment that was to overtake the world.

2 Thessalonians 2:15

And for this very reason he urges them to stand firm and to hold fast the instructions they had been taught, whether by word or by letter from him, that is, the former Epistle. Had they indeed held fast the truth of “the rapture” as given to them (1 Thess. 4.), they would not have been misled into errors as they were. Now, in spite of this warning, Christendom as a whole has wholly given up this important truth, the precious treasure of the Church, the guerdon of her hope. To be caught up to be with Christ is not known or understood amongst the great mass of Christians, and where spoken of is denied; and even those who have received the light of it seem little under its power of late years. For it is possible to hold this glorious truth in the letter and not have it as a bright hope in the heart. It behooves us, therefore, all the more to take heed to the apostle’s words, and “hold fast” the instructions that we have learned from him.

2 Thessalonians 2:16

And now again, as is his wont, he turns from them and his exhortations, to a higher and a firmer trust — he turns to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and to the love of God the Father, who has given us eternal consolation and a good hope by grace, that their hearts might be encouraged, and that they might be established in every good work and word. May we too turn with increasing earnestness to the same source, that we may be preserved from the many perils of these “difficult times,” and be “like men that wait for their Lord.”

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