

2 Thessalonians – Dealing with Spiritual Conflict

Introduction

In 2 Thessalonians Paul discusses three kinds of trouble for individual Christians and the church collectively: Persecution, false teachers, and loafers. (Not the shoes.) These represent external hardship, internal controversy, and strained personal relationships. The issue is not just in terms of identifying trouble but how we should react to each in a godly way from a Christian perspective.

³We 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; ⁴therefore, 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.

[Read 1:3-4]

Q: What is Paul acknowledging as having occurred amongst the Thessalonian church in v.3? What might have prepared them for times of persecution?

A: Their personal faith has grown as well as their love for each other.

Q: Did they discontinue these things as they came under siege of persecution and hardship?

A: No. They continued in spite of circumstances.

Q: How does Paul describe their continuing in these things in v.4 in spite of circumstances?

A: Perseverance, faith, endurance.

Point: One of the signs of Christian maturity is to continue loving God with all our heart while loving our neighbor as our self under all conditions, not just “the good times”. How do we personally fare in comparison? (An example might be Jesus on the cross, forgiving His executioners, still taking care of His mother, taking time for a repentant thief....)

[Read 1:5]

Q: Why would suffering make us “worthy” to attain the kingdom? What is the precedent for this?

A: Satan asked to test Job. Satan asked to “sift” Peter. We find that Satan repeatedly tries to produce circumstances in our life that might shake our faith. It’s usually a test of whether we trust in God more than in the things, relationships and/or desires of this life.

Point: If we are following in Jesus’ footsteps to become like Him, we must recognize that He also suffered greatly for the kingdom, therefore we will not be exempt from this experience.

[Read 1:6-10]

Q: Summarizing these verses, Who is going to “make things right”? Who is going to render justice?

A: Jesus, not us.

Q: WHEN can we expect Jesus to mete out justice?

A: At His return.

Q: Why not sooner? Why won’t He zap our enemies with a lightning bolt right now?

A: God always relents, allowing the maximum time possible for all to repent and return to Him. When Christ returns there will be no more opportunity for repentance. Our endurance and example both refutes Satan’s attempts to dislodge our faith and provides a testimony to others – even our enemies – that faith and love can grow even in the most

⁵This is a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.

⁶For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed.

adverse of circumstances.

Q: In v.8 Paul identifies “those who do not know God” as the ones to whom God will deal out retribution. What is the defining characteristic of people that do not “KNOW” God?

A: They “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” In other words, **HEARING** is not enough, only **DOING**.

Point: *It’s not a test of knowledge but a test of faith. If we truly know God’s character, our faith is the tangible choices of our behavior to the point of even enlarging our faith and love in spite of circumstances. We know that we will prevail in Him in the end regardless of the circumstances of our life.*

[Read 1 (FIRST) Thessalonians 1:6 and 2:14]

Q: What might be a practical way of coping with persecution according to these observations of Paul concerning the way the Thessalonians dealt with hardship and persecution?

A: Become imitators of Christ. [Ask the group how this applies to us personally.]

[Read 2 (SECOND) Thess. 2:1-3]

Q: What are the three tools of deception – false teaching – that Paul warns of in v.2?

A: “...a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us...”

Q: What do these three things represent?

A: The “spirit” is false prophecy, the “message” is false teaching, and the “letter” is false authority, a counterfeit spiritual leader.

Q: What might be inferred from Paul’s command (as well as Jesus’ in Matthew 24 covering this same topic), “Let no one deceive you”?

A: Though powerful attacks may come using any or a combination of these tools, we **CAN** see through them if we continue to be imitators of Christ, enlarging our faith and love regardless of the circumstances.

Q: What is “apostasy”? Is it the same as false belief or error, a temporary misunderstanding on our part?

A: Apostasy is generally defined as the determined, willful rejection of Christ and His teachings by a Christian believer.

“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Hebrews 10:26-29)

Q: Who are some examples, otherwise known as “apostates”, found in Scripture?

A: King Saul (1 Samuel 15:11), Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Timothy 1:19-20), perhaps Demas (2 Timothy 4:10) and definitely Judas. The commonality between these is outright rejection of God’s ways to pursue their own. They were all once followers of God that reversed their personal decision and left Him.

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⁶For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you...¹⁴It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

^{2:1}Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, ²that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,

¹³But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. ¹⁴It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.

⁶Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.

[Read 2:13-15]

Q: All of Paul's advice for dealing with deception and false teaching is inward focused. What's the first thing we should focus on as explained in the first half of v.13?

A: God has chosen us from the beginning. We're not subject to the random whims of fate or earthly circumstances. We have a greater calling.

Q: What are the identifying processes of that calling in the last half of v.13?

A: Sanctification by the Spirit – being set apart and wholly obedient to God – and faith in the truth – that the façade of present circumstances will melt at Christ's return to reveal the real work of God.

Q: V.14 essentially summarizes God's will and calling for our life. Why were we called through the Gospel?

A: The objective to "gain the glory of our Lord" is really answered in the two processes in v.13, that salvation is the result of our personal obedience by way of sanctification and faith.

Q: What is Paul's practical advice for us in our present situation according to v.15?

A: "...stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught..."

Point: At the core of deception and the false teachers that facilitate it is the attempt to introduce something "new", something that can't be "fully explained" by the basic teachings in which we've been disciplined or clearly supported by Scripture. Our best defense is to "keep it simple" and cling to the basics that we already know and Scripture substantiates.

[Read 3:6]

Q: What are the two main characteristics of the "loafer"?

A: "...leads an unruly life..." and "...not according to...tradition", meaning disobedience to what they've been taught.

Q: What was Paul's first advice in regards to dealing with "unruly" believers? How does it differ from now?

A: 1 Th. 5:14, "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul encouraged mild censure, but not having responded appropriately Paul now encourages a more stricter form of discipline.

Q: Is this a formal sentence of "excommunication" of a fellow believer?

A: No. The words "keep away from" literally mean "to furl the sails" or, as we might say today, "steer clear of."

⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; ⁹not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example.

¹⁰For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. ¹¹For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. ¹²Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. ¹³But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good.

¹⁴If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. ¹⁵Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

[Read 3:7-9]

Q: Summarize what Paul and his ministry team did while living with and ministering to the Thessalonians.

A: They lived by example. They provided a model of obedience. Like a good Army officer, they are not asking the Thessalonians to do anything the ministry team has not done itself.

Q: Therefore, what is the best thing the Thessalonians can do for the loafers they should steer clear of?

A: Shine as a model in their own good behavior and obedience. Be a living example.

[Read 3:10-15]

Q: These Christians believed, as do we this very day, the Jesus would return soon. And yet what was Paul's admonishment?

A: That they should consistently pursue a normal, disciplined life.

Q: What might an application of this be regarding how to live in the shadow of the End Times?

A: Seek to live a completely normal, ordered life.

Q: Concerning the End Times Jesus states in Mt. 24:40-41, "Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left." How does that compare with Paul's teaching here?

A: We are to be working, leading a normal life, obedient to the Word – not forsaking everyday life.

[Summary]

Q: What is the desired response in times of persecution and hardship?

A: Continue to seek every opportunity to grow our faith and love, "faith" being the sum choices of our behavior to obey God's ways rather than our own and "love" being an outward expression to others regardless of our circumstances or feelings.

Q: What is the desired response to avert deception and diffuse false teaching?

A: Continue the work of sanctification – being wholly set apart and obedient to God's ways rather than our own ways – and stand firm in the basic Biblical teachings we've already been taught.

Q: What is the desired response should other believers not live a normal, disciplined life devoted to God?

A: Be a personal example, a model in our imitation of Christ.

Q: What is the common denominator that will bring us through external trials, internal controversy, and even inequality in personal relationships?

A: [Rhetorical question you/the group should answer.]