

2Thessalonians

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2020-10-04

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I. Introduction

Within months (possibly even within weeks) of writing the previous letter, Paul received a report of heretics and troublemakers who were still at work in the congregation at Thessalonica. According to chapter 2:2, at least one of those heretics had written a letter in Paul's name pretending that their letter was a prophecy from Paul. Talk about audacious! In that letter they told the Thessalonians that the Day of Christ had already happened and that they didn't need to worry about the future. Those false prophets had said the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 5:3. They contradicted Paul's warnings and said that there would be only peace and safety in their future. So Paul was understandably very upset that anyone would dare to write pseudepigrapha in his name, and in chapter 3:17 he gives a way of telling whether a letter is actually from him or whether it is a counterfeit. He says, "The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every epistle; so I write." Paul always signed his own name - one of many reasons that I don't take Paul as the author of Hebrews. I believe Luke was.

But in any case, if the Day of Christ that we talked about last week had already happened, it would mean that Israel and Rome were already judged (something that obviously had not happened), and it would mean that the Great Tribulation was over (a big fat lie), and it would mean that the Beast and the Man of Sin were taken away (a lie), that the Great Apostasy was over (another lie), and it would therefore mean that they didn't need to prepare for the worst (probably the most disastrous lie) - and he deals with that lie in the second section of the book. So both sections are logically tied together. Because many commentaries are futurist, they see no logical connection to the two sections. But they are very logically tied together.

The false prophets had made these Christians naively secure about the future. Demons will always try to get Christians to downplay potential danger and to not take the actions that they need to take. And if they can't succeed in that, they will try to make you fearful about the future. Either way is lacking an active faith that pleases God.

So 2 Thessalonians was designed to correct two problems: 1) The first

correction says that far from their troubles being over, they haven't seen anything yet. The mystery of lawlessness has so far actually been restrained to some degree, believe it or not, but troubles were soon to burst open like a dam. 2) The second correction has to do with laziness, irresponsible and fatalistic attitudes toward the future, and failure to prepare. So with that as a background, let's dive into the book.

II. Overview of 2 Thessalonians

A. Opening Greetings (1:1-2)

In verses 1-2 Paul encourages the saints with positive greetings of their security in Christ and of His grace and peace - in that order. Grace can only come as we are in Christ, and peace can only come as we experience His grace. And the answer to fear is to be Christ-centered, to appropriate His grace, and therefore to have peace in the face of calamity.

B. Correction 1 - several things must happen before the Day of Christ (1:3-2:12)

But after this introduction comes the first correction - that they had gotten things wrong about the Day of Christ that Paul had told them about in the previous book. Whether it was misunderstanding or simply believing the lies of the false prophets, Paul was going to correct their eschatology.

Even though this is a long section of correction, he begins even that section with positive words of affirmation, saying,

2Th. 1:3 We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other, 4 so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure...

Paul leads with thanksgiving, praise, and even bragging on the Thessalonians. Those two verses deserve a sermon all on their own. Even though there were things that they had gotten wrong, he appreciates what they had gotten right and he boasts about them. Self-boasting is never right, but boasting about others is approved of by God's Word. Proverbs 27:2 says, "Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips."

But the next few verses give a few of the hints that what Paul is going to be talking about in this whole section - all the way to chapter 2:12, has nothing

to do with Christ's coming at the end of history. There is an urgency about his teaching because they weren't taking the imminent troubles seriously. If you apply these two chapters to Christ's coming on the last day of history, there are going to be all kinds of things that won't make sense and that are contradictory. This is why a lot of people think this is one of the toughest eschatology passages in the New Testament. Let's look at the first indicators that he is talking about first century realities.

Verses 4-5 indicate that the Thessalonians were already experiencing the beginnings of the persecution that Paul had said would arise in the last days of the Old Covenant. They should not have been surprised. And the next verses talk about God's pay-back to those persecutors. This is not 2000 years later; this is in their time period.

Verse 6: "since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation [Repay who? not people 2000 years later, but] those who trouble you..." That's in the present tense - "those who are troubling you..." Those are the ones that God is going to pay back. The Jews in Thessalonica had stirred up the Roman citizens in Acts 17 and both were persecuting the Thessalonians. God is about to make both of them suffer tribulation. This section definitely relates to the first century Thessalonians. So very literally (starting with verse 6 again),

6 it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who are troubling you, 7 and to give you who are being troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels...

Let's think about verse 7. That is also in the present tense. The words "you who are troubled" is literally "you are being troubled." The very people who were currently troubling them would be fought against by Christ and His angels in ways that would bring immediate relief to these Christians.

If these words are referring to the last day of history, how did these Thessalonians get rest or a respite from persecution in a day that has still not come for even us? You might say, "Well, their persecutors would be punished in hell then. So he is assuring them that they would get payback." OK, well, yes. But how would that give the Thessalonians "rest" or literally relief from those persecutors? Another response might be that the Thessalonians will have relief in heaven when they die. But aside from the text insisting that the relief will happen when the Lord is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, you have the problem of the meaning of the term "rest" or "relief." The word ἄνεσις means "partial relief... relaxation of

custodial control, some liberty.” It’s not total relief, but it is some relief. Heaven is total relief and a different word for “rest” would have been used if it meant heaven. The word indicates that they still would have some suffering, but they would have a degree of relief from their current persecutions and suffering. And they did get this relief in the first century. The persecution would be hugely relaxed once Rome attacked Israel in AD 66 and counted the Jews to be their enemy. From that date on, Jews were so preoccupied with Rome’s persecution of them that they didn’t have the time or the inclination to persecute the Christians anymore. In Matthew 24 Jesus had said that if He didn’t cut that tribulation short, no one would have survived. The logic of Paul’s argument demands a first century fulfillment.

And in our Revelation series, we pinpointed that spectacular revelation of Christ in the sky to May 18 of AD 66. The revealing of Jesus and His armies in the sky is documented by Roman historians, Jewish historians, and Christian historians. And that angels were involved may be hinted at in verse 8:

in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All of the first century historical references to this event spoke of the sky being ablaze with these angels. And those angels were periodically seen all the way up to AD 70. For example, Sopher Yosippon said,

Moreover, in those days were seen chariots of fire and horsemen, a great force flying across the sky near to the ground coming against Jerusalem and all the land of Judah, all of them horses of fire and riders of fire.¹

Now, I disagree with the Full Preterists who only see Israel as being under covenant judgment. We will see in both of these chapters that Rome suffered hugely under God’s wrath as well. But people question whether verses 8-12 could possibly refer to anything in the first century. Even Partial Preterists like Ken Gentry don’t see it as first century. Let me continue reading with verse 9:

9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, 10 when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

Was there both a judgment of the wicked and a glorification or resurrection of the saints in AD 70? Yes. We looked at a number of Scriptures last week, and I’ll add to those today. And the reason it is so important not to deny an AD

¹ Sopher Yosippon (A Mediaeval History of Ancient Israel) translated from the Hebrew by Steven B. Bowman. Chapter 87, “Burning of the Temple.”

70 judgment is because this is the only answer to theological liberals who have rightly shown numerous passages that promise an imminent revealing of Christ, judgment, and resurrection. They claim that it didn't happen and that the Bible is therefore wrong. But both Scripture and history say that it did happen.

But we need to deal with errors on all sides here. Full preterists think this is the only judgment and resurrection. But there are others passages (like 1 Corinthians 15, 2 Peter 3, and Revelation 20) that speak of another judgment and resurrection at the end of history. Futurists think that the one at the end of history is the only one. Both extremes fail to adequately answer the heresy of theological liberals.

Let me give you a tiny sampling of imminency passages that speak of a judgment and a resurrection/glorification of the saints that would happen very soon. These passages stand in stark contrast to other passages that speak of a coming after a long time. Each one of these passages uses the Greek word μέλλω, which means something that is about to happen.

In Matthew 3:7 John the Baptist warned the Pharisees, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is about to come?” In verse 10 he said, “even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees.” In verses 11-12 he said,

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

That's clearly first century and soon. The last verse of the Old Testament tells us that John the Baptist would come to bring repentance so as to postpone the Messiah coming and striking the land with a curse. He put it off by forty years. But it still happened to that generation.

Let's look next at Matthew 16:27. It says, “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. [And people have been conditioned to think that this coming is at the end of history. But Jesus clarifies in the next sentence that he is talking about an imminent judgment:] Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” Which coming? It's the coming He has just talked about, that “the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His

angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”

Next I will read Acts 17:31. It says,

...because He has appointed a day on which He will judge [And the Greek word for judge has μέλλω added to it, which means it should be translated “He is about to judge”] the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.

The NKJV ignores the word μέλλω because that would make it look like it was a first century judgment. But it was. And Jews of the first century would not have been surprised since the Old Testament repeatedly tied the first coming of the Messiah together with a judgment. So, to repeat: Acts 17:31 promises that God has “appointed a day on which He is about to judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.” You can’t put that off by 2000 years.

Look next at Acts 24:15. This is Paul speaking. He says,

I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust.

The word “will be” is the Greek word μέλλω which refers to something very very near. It is more literally translated “that there is about to be a resurrection of the dead.” Well, he said that about ten years before the AD 70 resurrection, so it was literally true. And by the way, Daniel 12 did not promise that all would rise in AD 70. Daniel 12:2 says, “And many of those [not all, but “amny of those”] who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to everlasting contempt.” The next verse indicates that 100% of dead elect will rise, but verse 2 indicates that only some of the dead would rise, so obviously not all of the non-elect would rise. But many did.

Look down at verse 25 where μέλλω occurs again. Acts 24:25.

Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come [literally, the judgment about to come - there is that word μέλλω again], Felix was afraid and answered, “Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.” (v. 25)

It was the very imminence of this judgment that made Felix afraid. 2000 years later is not imminent no matter how you slice it, and to say it is makes theological liberals mock.

Maybe one more verse. 2 Timothy 4:1.

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge [literally, who is about to judge] the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom:

The end of history is not when Jesus gets His kingdom. 1 Corinthians 15 says that it is when He hands the kingdom back to the Father.

You see, the problem with Full Preterists is that they lump the barley and the wheat harvests together as if they were one harvest and they deny that we are going to have a future resurrection and a future judgment. They flatten out eschatology to the first century, making many passages inexplicable. The problem with the other extreme - the futurists, is that they fail to see the general barley harvest in AD 70 at all. They do not recognize a resurrection or a judgment that was “about to” happen. They too failed to adequately distinguish between the barley and wheat harvests that we looked at last week. That means that they also flatten out eschatology - this time to the last day of history.

But if you see a resurrection in AD 70 and another one at the end of history, all tension is removed from numerous passages that are otherwise tough to explain to apostates. Apostates frequently cite the imminency passages and say that they didn’t happen and so the Bible is false. We say that they happened to a “t.” Daniel 7:13-14 says that the kingdom was given to Jesus in AD 30 at His ascension to the right hand of the Father. That’s when all authority was given to Him in heaven and on earth. But verses 26-27 of the same chapter indicate that the kingdom is given to the saints of Jesus in AD 70. So it is the next stage of the kingdom. And Daniel says that AD 70 is when the kingdom would be taken away from Satan, and he and the Beast would be consumed. It’s a significant date - not as significant as AD 30, but significant nonetheless.

Well, Paul ends chapter 1 by saying that his prayer is that all the Thessalonians would be counted worthy of this calling.

But in chapter 2 we have verses that have been even more confusing to some people. Let’s go through each of the first twelve verses. Most of the sermon is just going to be focused on this controversy.

2Th. 2:1 Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, 2 not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come.

The letter of the false teachers that purported to be from Paul, claimed that the day of Christ had already come and that the gathering of the saints had already happened. The only other place where this gathering together to Him is mentioned is Matthew 24:31, which says, “And He will send His angels

with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” I believe that is a reference to the resurrection of the bodies of the elect who had died prior to AD 70 all over the world. It’s the resurrection prophesied in Daniel 12:2-3. And three verses later in Matthew 24 Jesus assured His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” - including the verse I just read. Christ’s inspired words means that it had to happen in the first century.

Anyone who had paid attention to the Gospel of Matthew, which the church at large had already had in their possession for 11 years, or to the Gospel of Mark, which the church had had for 6 years, would have known that a number of Christ’s prophecies had not yet been fulfilled. Just to show how audacious these false teachers were, let me list some of the prophesied things that had to happen prior to the AD 70 resurrection and judgment:

- Nero had to sign a 7 year covenant with Israel, the purpose of which would be to destroy the church. That would happen in AD 62, about ten years after 2 Thessalonians was written. That happened at the instigation of his Jewish wife and the many Jewish advisors Nero had in his court. If God had not cut that Jewish-started persecution short, no Christians would have survived according to Jesus.
- Another thing that had to happen was every eye had to see Christ’s very visible appearance in the sky accompanied by His fiery angels. That hadn’t happened yet. And that was prophesied to happen three and a half years before Jerusalem was destroyed. I’m assuming you’ve been through the Revelation series to understand some of this.
- Third, they had not yet heard the trumpet that Jesus had promised and that Paul had promised would happen.
- Fourth, they had not yet seen the massive earthquake and movements of every island, mountain, and land mass by several meters throughout the Mediterranean. We looked at the historical evidence of its occurrence last week. That would be pretty hard not to notice - again, showing the falsity of these false teacher’s assurances of peace and safety.
- Fifth, the sun would have to become darkened in midday and the moon would have to turn blood red. That happened in the first century, but it hadn’t happened yet in AD 51. That’s when Paul wrote this epistle.
- Sixth, there had to be massive meteorite showers.

- Seventh, Israel would have to get invaded by Rome. That had not yet happened.
- Eighth, Nero would have to die and the empire fall apart and revolutions happen in every part of the empire with massive loss of life.
- And ninth, Jerusalem would have to be conquered and the temple be burned.

But in these next verses Paul gives even more things that would have to happen. All of these things are verifiable in history and illustrate the inerrancy and perfect accuracy of these and many other prophecies.

The first part of verse 3 says that the Great Apostasy had to happen first.

Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first...

The word for “falling away” is ἀποστασία, which we normally transliterated as “apostasy.” That’s the way I take it. But just to be fair to other Partial Preterists, since the Greek word ἀποστασία can refer to either a political rebellion or to religious rebellion against God, there is debate among scholars as to which apostasy is being referred to. Both did happen prior to the day of Christ.

I think it is an apostasy of the church. And there are many Scriptures that describe that as happening in the last days of the Old Covenant. It is not future to us. 1 Timothy 4:1-5 speaks of a Great Apostasy that was already happening in AD 65. 2 Timothy 3:1-9 (also written in AD 65) speaks of that same apostasy using the present tense, and tells Timothy, “And from such people turn away. For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts.” The whole context is a first century apostasy that they were seeing before their eyes. And he concludes that section by saying in verse 13 “But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived, but you must continue in the things you have learned...”

This is not in our future. The grammar dictates that it is first century. 2 Peter 2 says that they shouldn’t be surprised by the rise of heretics since Christ and the apostles had predicted this would happen in the last days. He says much the same in chapter 3, and using the present tense indicates that those apostates were present in the churches. Jude 17-19 says that Christ and the apostles had warned them about the heretics that would arise during the last days and using the present tense says, “These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit.” So the first century would see the greatest apostasy that history would ever experience. Those were distressing times.

doubt anyone would have been able to figure it out. But all you would have to do to figure out that it was Titus was to pull a coin out of your pocket, or look at the spelling of his name on statues, or the the spelling of his name in Hebrew. It's the simplest explanation. But moving on...

Verse 3 says that there will be a time in the future when “the man of sin is revealed...” There is some kind of revelation. Just as there was inspired revelation to reveal Jesus as the Messiah, there would be demonic revelation to reveal Titus as the Savior of Rome - an empire that had fallen apart and which Titus rescued from oblivion. He and his father were both considered to be the Savior of Rome.

We saw in the Revelation series that the revelation of Titus involved dreams, visions, miracles, oracles at temples, and strange omens. Because of these revelations, virtually all the soldiers hailed him as emperor even though his father was on the throne, and Titus pretty much controlled things in the empire until he became sole emperor. But we also saw that Titus worked with Josephus and a rabbi by the name of Yohannan to deceive the Jews with miracles, signs, and wonders. To me this is the most remarkable part of history - that the Jews, who were sworn enemies of Rome, would be so convinced through these revelations that they would finally accept Titus and worship him. We'll get to that in a bit. But this points to a time when there would be a revealing of the man of sin - something that would be so publicized that no one could have missed it. For the false teachers in Thessalonica to claim that all of this had already happened was ludicrous.

Next, this man of sin is called “the son of perdition.” The only other time in the Bible that the phrase “son of perdition” is used is in John 17:12 where Judas is called “the son of perdition” after Satan entered into him. So it seems to be a reference to a demon-possessed man. Revelation 17 is another passage that associates the ruler Titus with a demonic beast that came up from the pit and will go down to the pit to perdition. Gaventa's commentary states “the ‘son of’ something is one who belongs to that realm,”³ and the realm of perdition is the realm of hell. So this is a demonic representative of the realm of hell. This is made doubly clear when the numerous verbal correspondences between Ezekiel 28 and this passage are highlighted. Andy

Greek phonetic equivalent, Teitan. Andrew Burnett, Michel Amandry, and Ian Carradice, *Roman Provincial Coinage*, volume II, part II, *From Vespasian to Domitian* (London: British Museum Press, 1999), p. 354. For statue see volume II, part 1, p. 194.

3 Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1998), 111.

Johnson shows how the man of sin in Ezekiel 28 was the demon possessed king of Tyre.⁴ This man of sin must be something like that previous man of sin. Just as Ezekiel alternates between speaking to the demon and speaking to the king as if they were one and the same, Paul does too. Titus and this creature of perdition are linked together when Titus was possessed. Titus became the embodiment of the Beast from the pit.

Verse 4 gives some of the things that will characterize Titus and this demon who possesses him:

who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

Obviously Nero had at least some of these characteristics too - which makes sense since the book of Revelation tells us that Nero was possessed with the very same demon that Titus would later be possessed by - the Beast. But Nero never got to Jerusalem and certainly never sat in the temple. Titus did. Titus was the only Caesar who was ever directly worshiped in the temple. He was the only Caesar who ever blasphemed inside the temple. He was the only Caesar who was even in the temple. Here is a quote from a second century Jewish source:

Vespasian sent Titus who mocked, Where are their gods, the rock in whom they sought refuge? (Deut. 32:37). This was the wicked Titus who blasphemed and insulted Heaven. What did he do? He entered the Holy of Holies and with his sword slashed the curtain. Through a miracle blood spurted forth and he thought he had killed God Himself. He brought two harlots and spreading out a scroll beneath them, transgressed with them on top of the altar. He began to speak blasphemies and insults against Heaven, boasting "One who wars against a king in a desert and defeats him cannot be compared to one who wars against a king in his own palace and conquers him."⁵

In saying this, Titus was claiming to be more powerful than Yehoweh and to have conquered and killed Yehoweh. But his actions on top of the altar and

4 "The language of this passage in 2 Thessalonians, however, has more verbal correspondences to Ezek 28:1–19 (see italicized words in the next sentence) than to Dan 11. There, Ezekiel has God engaging in a mock lamentation taunting the king of Tyre as if he were Adam in the garden,⁹⁵ who makes himself a god and not a mere human being (vv. 2, 9), who "multiplied his power" and whose "heart was exalted by his power" (v. 5), who had "injustices" found in him and whose storehouses were filled "with lawlessness" (vv. 15–16), and who "becomes destruction" (v. 19)." Andy Johnson, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 189.

5 Judah Nadich, The Legends of the Rabbis, volume 1, Jewish Legends of the Second Commonwealth (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, 1994), p. 350. There are several sources that have similar tales (see next footnote). It is hard to say how much is fact and how much is fiction, but the stories probably originated from at least some degree of historical blasphemy that Titus engaged in. That the purported quotes are from Christ-hating sources and yet are so close to what Revelation says Titus would say is significant.

on top of a spread-out Bible-scroll were also a very deliberate attempt to blaspheme God and to defy God to do anything about it. As 2 Thessalonians describes the man of sin, Titus opposed and exalted himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sat as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God (2 Thes. 2:4). In many ways he acted like Antiochus Epiphanes of old.

Here's another quote from a very early Jewish Rabbi by the name of Rabbi Nathan, (possibly second century). He said of this entry into the Holy of Holies,

What is more, he dragged a prostitute into the Holy of Holies and he began to blaspheme, curse, vilify and spit toward Him on high, saying, "So this is the one who you say slaughtered Sisera and Sennacherib. Here I am in his house and in his domain. If he has any power, let him come out and face me."⁶

He is daring God to a fight. The same rabbi said that when he took shiploads of prisoners to Rome for the Triumphal Entry, that,

... a gale arose to drown him in the sea. He stood on the (deck of) the ship and began to blaspheme, curse, vilify and spit toward Him on high. He said: When I was in his house and in his domain, he did not have the power to come and face me, but now here he has come forth to meet me. It seems that the God of the Jews has power only where there is water.⁷

In the book of Revelation we saw the miracles that were ascribed to Titus, and he used those miracles to induce people to worship him and his father. But when people refused to worship him, he tortured them. Even Josephus (who was a friend of Titus and therefore motivated to say good things about Titus) admits that Titus did do this. He describes how the Jewish leaders captured over 600 Jews who refused to worship Caesar and handed them over to Titus to show the leadership's total allegiance to Titus. But the 600 refused to worship Caesar. Josephus describes what happened then:

Subjected to every form of torture and bodily suffering that could be thought of, for the one purpose of making them acknowledge Caesar as lord, not a man gave in or came near to saying it, but rising above the strongest compulsion they all maintained their resolve, and it seemed as if their bodies felt no pain and their souls were almost exultant as they met the tortures and the flames. But nothing amazed the spectators as much as the behavior of young children; for not one of them could be constrained to call Caesar lord.

I've often wondered if those Jews were Christian Jews. The evidence is so strong for a Titus identification that even an Idealist like G. K. Beale admits

⁶ Anthony J. Saldarini, S.J. (translator), *Abot De Rabbi Nathan, The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, (Leiden: Brill, 1975), p. 68. While it is difficult to know how much legend has entered into these stories, they probably reflect some historical truth.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

that the evidence seems to perfectly fit him.⁸ No other Caesar and no other candidate that we know of actually sat in the temple and declared himself to be God there, and blasphemed God in the temple, as 2 Thessalonians 2 requires. Nero didn't do it. Caligula tried, but he wasn't able to do it. Only Titus fits.

Paul goes on to chastise them for forgetting that he had told them all about this earlier in the year when he was ministering in their midst:

2Th. 2:5 Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?

And based on his previous instruction he says,

And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time.

Commentators wish that Paul had told us what the Thessalonians already knew. That would have spared all of us the debate and speculation on verses 6-7 that has been going on for centuries. There are literally dozens of identifications of the restrainer that I have found in my 187 commentaries that I looked at on 2 Thessalonians. They are all over the map. Many of these modern interpreters follow Augustine of old in confessing that they simply do not know what it means, so it may seem presumptuous for me to suggest an interpretation. But I definitely think I know, and there are a handful of commentators who agree. There is no piece of the puzzle that doesn't fit.

The main problem that has puzzled commentators has to do with the Greek text. The word "what" in verse 6 (in the phrase "what is restraining") is in the neuter gender in the Greek, while the "he" in the phrase, "he who now restrains" in verse 7 is in the masculine, yet both appear to be referring to the

8 "...Both Vespasian and Titus were known to have attacked the temple by blaspheming God and desecrating it (b. Gittin 56b says Titus "blasphemed and insulted heaven"; cf. also Sifre Deut., Piska 328)." He also says on verse 4, "The multitudes likewise worship the beast because of his purported incomparability: they proclaim in their worship "who is like the beast and who is able to make war with him?" The expression of Satanic incomparability is an ironic use of OT phraseology applied to Yahweh (cf. esp. Exod. 8:10; 15:11; Deut. 3:24; Isa. 40:18, 25; 44:7; 46:5; Pss. 35:10; 71:19; 86:8; 89:8; 113:5; Mic. 7:18). This is a further attempt at Satanic imitation of God. In all these OT texts Yahweh's incomparability is contrasted polemically with false gods and idols. B. Gittin 56b uses some of these texts in a polemic against the Roman leader Titus because of his desecration of the temple in A.D. 70. Therefore, the expression of incomparability on the lips of the beast's worshipers is the epitome of blasphemy. It brings to greater expression the Danielic idea of the proud king who attempts to magnify himself above God in the end time (Dan. 8:11, 25; 11:36-37). So also the beast's incomparability in "waging war" can be considered a reflection of the horn's war against the saints in Dan. 7:8 LXX, 21 LXX, Theod. (so also 8:10-13, 22-25; 11:31ff.). The beast's power to persecute is the motivation for widespread worship of him." G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 694-698.

same restraint. So why the switch from neuter to masculine? The vast majority of interpretations simply cannot account for the switch between the two. By the way, capital letters are not in the original, so a capital H for He in verse 7 is an interpretation. And I will just give you a couple of examples of wrong interpretations: 1) The problem with saying that the neuter “what” is the kingdom and the “he” is the king is that both words are masculine in the Greek. That’s a puzzle piece that doesn’t fit. 2) The problem with McKenzie’s view that the neuter “what” is the abyss that chains and restrains the demon, and that the “he” is the beast himself is that ἄβυσσος is feminine, not neuter. And similar problems can be seen with many other views.

There are only four interpretations that take seriously this switch from the neuter in verse 6 to the masculine of verse 7. I will give all four, with the last one being my interpretation.

Some have tried to resolve this by saying that the Holy Spirit is a neuter noun (which the word “spirit” is), and yet the Holy Spirit is always modified by a masculine pronoun when only the pronoun is used (which is also true because He is a Person - a masculine person). So that interpretation would make sense of the switch in the Greek. Dispensationalists take this interpretation, as do a few Preterists. And you can see that the NKJV does as well. That is certainly possible, but why would Paul not simply say the Holy Spirit? Why would he be cryptic? And in what way was the Holy Spirit taken out of the way (the last clause of verse 7)? Is it really possible for the omnipresent Holy Spirit to no longer be present? While this interpretation is a possibility even on a preterist view, I don’t think it perfectly fits.

Others have said that since Paul has already clearly alluded to an evil spirit, the neuter “what” in verse 6 refers to this evil spirit who restrains the man of sin from acting until such time as Satan wants Titus to act. That could make sense of the Greek genders, but doesn’t seem to fit the idea that God Himself determines the timing, not Satan. And why would an evil spirit restrain another evil spirit anyway (or as some say, restrain Titus)? While possible, it seems a bit odd.

A similar view, but with the added strength that this demon has a name, is that the demon called the Beast was restraining Titus. The name Beast is in the neuter. But since the demon inhabiting Titus was the same demon inhabiting Nero, it seems unlikely that the Beast could inhabit one while restraining the other. Most commentators believe that what restrains must be

a good force, not an evil force.

My interpretation is that there are angelic beings whose title is neuter and whose pronoun is masculine. Both the living creatures around the throne and the warrior Cherubim have the noun for their titles as neuter yet the pronouns describing them are always masculine. And the commentaries that have taken this approach have provided numerous clues that this must be a good warrior angel from among the cherubim (like Michael, the archangel) who is keeping the Beast-demon in check and not allowing him to possess Titus until the timing is right. It fits the immediate context and it definitely fits the Old Testament background passages. For example, Andy Johnson gives detailed verbal correspondences between Ezekiel 28 and 2 Thessalonians 2 that show a king possessed by an evil cherub, motivating the king to boast of himself as God and characterizing him as a man of lawlessness.⁹ This will be a similar man to that man of lawlessness - a man possessed by a demon. And Beale shows that the verbal correspondences to Daniel point to a good cherub angel keeping a demonic prince in check until it is time for him to be revealed. So reading verses 6-7 together:

And now you know what is restraining [it is Michael the archangel - the only warrior Cherub strong enough to restrain the Beast. This neuter Cherub is restraining], that he [that is, Titus] may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness [that is, the Beast who will later possess Titus] is already at work [the Beast was clearly at work in Nero, according to Revelation]; only he [not capital H, but small h he - Michael the Archangel] who now restrains will do so until he [Michael] is taken out of the way.

This interpretation fits on many levels. It fits the Old Testament background passages. It especially fits Daniel 10:13 where Gabriel says that Michael was helping him to restrain the demonic Prince of Persia. It makes sense of the grammar, of Titus, of temple, and of the fact that this demon was already at work in Nero but would later come to rest upon Titus in order to destroy the temple. And Daniel 12 begins the prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by explicitly identifying the first-century restrainer as Michael, “the prince who stands watch over the sons of your people” yet who in that chapter no longer defends them, but gives them up so that temple

⁹ “The language of this passage in 2 Thessalonians, however, has more verbal correspondences to Ezek 28:1–19 (see italicized words in the next sentence) than to Dan 11. There, Ezekiel has God engaging in a mock lamentation taunting the king of Tyre as if he were Adam in the garden,⁹⁵ who makes himself a god and not a mere human being (vv. 2, 9), who “multiplied his power” and whose “heart was exalted by his power” (v. 5), who had “injustices” found in him and whose storehouses were filled “with lawlessness” (vv. 15–16), and who “becomes destruction” (v. 19).” Andy Johnson, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner, *The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 189.

and city are destroyed. Michael no longer restrains the Beast. Gary Shogren summarizes a bit more of the evidence, saying,

This sort of angelic combat occurs also in the NT. In Jude 9 Michael contends with the devil himself for the body of Moses. Michael with his angels expels the dragon and his angels from heaven in Rev 12:7–9. There are also four angels who hold back the four winds in Rev 7:1, using yet another synonym for “hold back” (κρατέω). Likewise, an angel is told to let go the four angels bound at the river Euphrates (9:13–15). They are released in order to kill a third of humankind. They had been “kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year”; that is, much like the Man of Lawlessness, they were bound by God precisely until his plan was ready, then loosed by him to do their work of destruction. Another passage that yields some light is 9:1 (and probably 20:1–3), where an angel holds the keys to the abyss and can lock up or let loose the devil and other demonic beings.⁶⁸

There is thus a substantial amount of background that suggests that in 2 Thess 2 a restraining angel is the agent whom God sends to hold back the work of Satan’s man until God’s own time.¹⁰

Back to 2 Thessalonians 2. Verse 8 covers the whole three and a half year period that this demon would be at work in Titus:

And then the lawless one [that would be the demonic Beast] will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.

Commentators point out that the lawless one isn’t destroyed the moment he is revealed, or he wouldn’t be able to do all of the things that are listed in the next verses. By the way, Titus couldn’t do any of those things on his own. Only the demon did them miraculously through Titus. In any case, verse 8 covers a period of time. On my interpretation, the demonic revelations of the Beast (the lawless one) occurred in AD 69 and the destruction in AD 70. And Gordon Fee, though not a preterist, gives the proof of this rather well. He points out that the language is identical to Isaiah 11:14, with one difference - Isaiah says that the Messiah would destroy the ungodly and the land with the breath of his mouth. So until the land is destroyed the lawless one would not be destroyed.

So was Titus destroyed in AD 70? No. Though his death appears to be supernatural, he didn’t die until AD 81. But McKenzie points out that the demon who would characterize him is the one taken away - and taken away and rendered inoperative is a better translation. The word does not mean cease to exist. And Titus’ personality changed overnight into a benevolent dictator. He didn’t have those demonic characteristics after the seven-year

¹⁰ Gary Steven Shogren, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 287–288.

war against Jerusalem - in other words after AD 74..

But before any of that could happen, the demon has to move Titus to do the things listed in verses 9-12.

Verses 9-12 give a perfect description of how Titus would deceive the Romans and would later deceive the Jews into receiving the mark of the Beast and going along with his evil program. Titus worked together with Agrippa II, Josephus, and Yohannan. And in my sermon on Revelation 13:11-15 I go through the specific miracles, dreams, prophecies, and signs that made those three so successful in deceiving both the Romans and the Jews. But let's read these verses first, beginning at verse 9:

9 The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, 10 and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. 11 And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, 12 that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

In one sermon on the whole book I can't get into all of the details, but in our Revelation series I showed how every detail of this passage was fulfilled. Both Vespasian and Titus were obviously possessed. Titus was the one possessed by the Beast, but both of them were possessed by demons. Their personality changed and they were suddenly able to prophesy and to perform amazing miracles - miracles like making a statue move and talk, fire falling from heaven, blind being healed, cripples being healed, lightning decapitating all statues of previous Caesars,¹¹ and what Tacitus calls "many miracles" and in another place, "numerous signs and wonders."¹² These are all documented in history by historians who were not known to be superstitious.

An application we can make is that being able to heal and do miracles is not a sign of spirituality. I know pastors who deny the inerrancy of Scripture, deny the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and in other ways are heretics headed toward hell, but who can still do miracles. You don't need to be a true Christian to do miracles. Out in Ethiopia the witchdoctors were able to instantly curse a person with disease or even death, and they were also able to heal people, to prophesy, and to speak in tongues.

So the bottom line is that demons can perform miracles as well. Paul warned

11 Suetonius Lives of the Twelve Caesars 7.1.

12 Tacitus, The Histories, 1, 10, translated by Kenneth Wellesley (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 263-264.

the Galatians about deceivers who had come into the church, and he didn't care how amazing these men were, or how good of a Christian they pretended to be, he said, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed." That certainly speaks of the priority of the Bible over even the apostle. 1 Corinthians 1:22 says, "Jews request a sign..." They were enamored with miracles, but they didn't follow the true Gospel. Jesus said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." (Matt. 12:39) Don't ever underestimate the deceptive power of demons to make people prophesy, speak in tongues, or do miracles. Witchdoctors in Ethiopia did all three. We have heard them speak in German and other languages that they had not learned and curse the Almighty God with those tongues. The only infallible thing in life that you can absolutely bank on is the Scripture. It is the test by which we should live. That's all I will say on the Man of Sin.

C. Correction 2 - in light of this theology, it should impact how you live (2:13-3:15)

But in verse 13 through to chapter 3:15 Paul gives his second correction to this church. And I will be much shorter on this one. Characteristically, he begins once again with praise and affirmation:

2Th. 2:13 But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, 14 to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But then he calls them to stand fast and hold the Biblical traditions that he had taught them. In chapter 3:6 he tells them,

But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.

This command of ostracizing a brother or shunning him is a step of discipline that comes prior to excommunication, and it is with the intended purpose of making the brother realize the seriousness of his sin and bringing him to repentance. He repeats the thought in verses 14-15:

14 And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. 15 Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.

So it is not excommunication, but shunning of a brother who is still in the church. We are thankful that we have not yet had to exercise this form of

discipline in the church, but I want you to be aware of it in case this ever needs to be exercised in the future.

But what was it that these brothers needed to be disciplined for?

Commentators identify four sins:

- Verse 6 says that they were being disorderly or divisive. The Greek word, ἀτάκτως, is defined as “in defiance of good order.” It may have been a critical spirit against the leaders, or it may simply have been sowing discord.
- Verse 11 adds that they were being busybodies. The Greek word for that is περιεργάζομαι, and has the dictionary definition of “meddlers.” A meddler does the opposite of what Paul had commanded in 1 Thessalonians 4:11 - “to mind your own business.” They are always in everyone else’s business. These were people who loved to talk about what was wrong in the church, and who has had this and that problem, and meddling with issues and problems that were not theirs to meddle with.
- The third sin was laziness.
- And the fourth issue was mooching off of others.

He had already addressed this subtly in the previous epistle, but here he lays it on thick. In verses 7-9 he says that he modeled the exact opposite behavior. And then in verses 10-13 he says,

2Th. 3:10 For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. 11 For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. 12 Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread. 13 But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good.

What motivated them to do this? Paul had counseled them to prepare for tough times, and now they were doing the opposite. In 1 Thessalonians 5:3 Paul wrote,

For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.

These false teachers were discounting the imminence of danger. They were preaching peace and safety. They were not taking Paul’s warnings about preparing for difficult times very seriously.

And every generation has had people who simply will not work hard to prepare for contingencies. In this epistle Paul laid out a road map of exactly what was going to happen in the next 15 years, and he wanted the Thessalonians to take it seriously. They would need to plan for the Great Tribulation, for wars and rumors of wars, for the falling apart of Rome, for

Rome's invasion of Israel, for disruption of food and finances, and for other potential problems that could arise when worldwide problems arise.

So that makes this epistle especially appropriate for our own times. No matter which presidential candidate wins this Fall, there is no quick fix to the economic problems that have been heaping up in an exponential fashion. If things fall apart under Trump, they will blame it on capitalism, when in reality Trump's policies are fascist, not pure capitalism. If things fall apart under the Democrats, they will still blame Trump, even though the Democrats have been far worse in their economic decisions. We are facing some imminent tough times just in the realm of finances. We don't even need to look at any other realm. Many economists are predicting that without massive tax increases or massive inflation, we won't be able to pay the interest on the debt. And the way our messed up economy is linked with other faltering economies, there could be a domino effect.

So whether you are thinking about finances, war, riots, germ warfare, an EMP, terrorism, or other possibilities, it is good to study up on what kind of stewardship the Bible calls for during crisis times. And we are living in crisis times. God does not want us to be paralyzed. There will be a member-only time of strategizing later in October. If you are able, I think it would be good to come to it. Don't count on recordings or handouts. This will be person-to-person. And if you miss we will want to help you person-to-person.

D. Closing benediction (3:16-18)

But it is appropriate to remind ourselves that working and planning for problems is not the same as fear. We should not fear the future. Verse 16 promises us God's supernatural peace in every situation and at all times. What a fantastic remedy for fear.

Paul signs off in verse 17 and ends by saying, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." And I pray the same grace upon you as our beloved congregation. Let's pray.