

Understanding the Bible

Lesson 33: First and Second Thessalonians

Part 1: First Thessalonians

I. Background Information

- A. *Author*: Paul, with Silas and Timothy
- B. *Audience*: the church in Thessalonica, capital of the province of Macedonia; Paul's three-week ministry in Thessalonica resulted in a number of conversions before Jewish opposition forced him to leave (see Acts 17:1-9)
- C. *Occasion/Purpose*: to respond to Timothy's report on the Thessalonian church by encouraging these Christians and providing clarification about several matters of general and personal eschatology
- D. *Literary Genre*: epistle (letter)
- E. *Main Theme*: Christians should live holy lives because we know that Jesus will return again at the end of history to raise the dead and complete the salvation of his saints

II. Basic Outline:

- (I) *Words of Thanksgiving and Encouragement* (1)
- (II) *Reflections on Paul's Ministry among Them* (2-3)
- (III) *Words of Instruction and Exhortation* (4-5)

III. Key Themes

- A. *Encouragement*
 - 1. Paul is thankful to God for their faith, hope, and love (1:2-3)
 - 2. Paul is confident in their election because of how they responded to the gospel (1:4-5); he is confident that God will sanctify and perfect them (5:23-24)

3. Their willingness to suffer for the gospel is an example to other believers and a testimony to the genuineness of their faith (1:6-10; 2:14)
4. They received the Word as God's Word and that Word is at work in them (2:13)

B. *Personal Eschatology*

1. For the Christian, bodily death is likened to sleep because we know that our bodies will be awakened to new life on the last day (4:13)
2. The Christian's resurrection hope (4:13) is based upon Jesus' death and resurrection (4:14; 5:10)
3. Christians are not destined for wrath but for salvation (1:10; 5:4, 9)
4. God's wrath will come upon all who are not found in Christ on the last day (2:16; 5:3)
5. The dead who die in the Lord will participate in all of the blessings of Christ's second coming (4:14-17; 5:10)
6. Need to be prepared because the day of the Lord will come suddenly (5:1-11)

C. *Christ's Second Coming*

1. All five chapters end with a reference to Christ's second coming (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23)
2. 4:14-17 teaches that Christ's second coming will be a single event, not the two-stage event taught by dispensationalists (i.e. rapture first, followed by seven years of tribulation, then Christ's return)
3. No mention of an intervening period; only describes one coming of Christ
4. 4:14-17 does not teach a secret rapture of believers but a public event that will be seen by all (cry of command, voice of the archangel, sound of trumpet)

5. "in the air" (4:17) points to the final defeat of the "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Eph. 2:2)
6. "clouds" (4:17) points to climactic moments in redemptive history (see Ex. 13:21; 14:19; 19:16; 40:34-38; Mk. 9:7; Acts 1:9); imagery of going up on a cloud evokes Dan. 7:13, which speaks of the vindication of the covenant people after suffering (see Dan. 7:21-27)
7. Close parallel with 1 Cor. 15:51-52 indicates that being snatched up into the air = being changed so that one's body is no longer corruptible
8. The Greek phrase translated as "to meet" in v. 17 was a technical phrase used to describe a public welcome given to the emperor or a dignitary on an official visit. People would meet the visitor outside the city and then accompany him as he entered it. This passage does not teach a "rapture", but the opposite: believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and will then accompany him the rest of the way to earth as he consummates his kingdom
9. "The Second Coming of Christ must be thought of as a single event, which occurs after the great tribulation. When Christ returns, there will be a general resurrection, both of believers and unbelievers. After the resurrection, believers who are then still alive shall be transformed and glorified."¹

D. *Ministry*

1. Boldness in the face of opposition (2:2)
2. Not about pleasing man but about pleasing God (2:3-6)
3. Characterized by self-sacrificial service (2:8) and love for the saints (2:17-20; 3:8)
4. Characterized by diligence and hard work (2:9)
5. Calling others to live holy lives by both word and example (1:6; 2:9-12)

¹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 170.

E. *Suffering*

1. Christians are destined to suffer affliction (3:3b-4)
2. Joy in the face of suffering is a key mark of the Christian (1:6; 5:16)

F. *The Christian Life*

1. Love and respect the church's leaders (5:12-13)
2. Live holy lives (2:12; 3:11-14; 4:1-8; 5:14, 23)
3. Work diligently (4:9-12; 5:14)

Part 2: Second Thessalonians

I. Background Information

- A. *Author*: Paul
- B. *Audience*: the church in Thessalonica
- C. *Occasion/Purpose*: written shortly after 1 Thessalonians to respond to a report that came to him about this church shortly after he sent his first letter
- D. *Literary Genre*: epistle (letter)
- E. *Main Theme*: Jesus' second coming will be preceded by apostasy and the emergence of the man of lawlessness (the Antichrist), but when Jesus returns he will bring justice to his people and judgment upon his enemies

II. Basic Outline:

- (IV) *Thanksgiving and Comfort* (1)
- (V) *The Day of the Lord* (2)
- (VI) *Prayer, Reassurance, and the Problem of Idling* (3)

III. Key Themes

A. *Eschatology*

1. Paul corrects their thinking that the second coming of Christ had already taken place (2:1-2)
2. God's judgment will be made manifest at Christ's return (1:5-10; 2:9-14)
3. Christians will share Christ's glory (1:10, 12; 2:14)

B. *Signs Preceding the Second Coming*

1. A wide-scale rebellion will take place (2:1-3, 7); see parallel in Rev. 20:7-9
2. The Antichrist will emerge
 - a) a person under demonic influence; called "the man of lawlessness" (2:3) because he opposes true worship and will demand worship of himself (v. 4)
 - b) advances his cause through deceptive miracles and false teaching (vv. 9, 11)
 - c) The power of antichrist ("the mystery of lawlessness" - v. 7) is at work throughout the church age, but the final and personal incarnation of the antichrist will occur just prior to Jesus' return (see 1 Jn. 2:18; 4:3)
 - d) Antichrist will be revealed after that which "restrains" him is taken away (v. 7); parallels the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:2-3
 - e) Antichrist will be overthrown by Christ at the Second Coming (v. 8); see parallel in Rev. 20:9-10

C. *Christian Perseverance*

1. Hold to the apostolic gospel (3:15); "traditions" simply refers to the gospel that Paul conveyed to them both in person and by letter; it

does not refer to tradition in the Roman Catholic sense (as an extra-biblical source of authority that is infallible)

2. Don't be idle but work diligently and earn your own living (3:6-15)
3. Don't grow weary in doing good (3:13)
4. A beautiful benediction: "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word." (2:16-17)