

Introduction**2 Thessalonians 1:1—4**

When Paul visited the Thessalonians, many Gentiles turned away from their dead gods to serve the living God. While there, Paul was able to instruct them on end-time events and godly living. After Paul left them he went to Athens and then to Corinth. He probably wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians while in Corinth although it could have been while in Athens. His letter answered their questions about those who became believers but then died. He also encouraged them to continue on their spiritual journey to mature in their faith.

The Thessalonian believers were under a lot of persecution (1 Thessalonians 1:6). Unbelieving Jews who had followed Paul were also tormenting these new believers (1 Thessalonians 2:2). Family and friends had also turned their backs on them. The persecution was so severe that many thought they had missed the Rapture and were going through the Tribulation. Then, to compound their fears, an unbelieving deceiver, wrote a letter in Paul's name saying that they had missed the Rapture (2:2). Previous to this they were actually commended for their steadfastness of hope (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Going through their persecution and reading a letter, supposable written by Paul, saying they were in the Tribulation, brought on great alarm and shook their faith to the core. How can they trust anything Paul says?

Paul's reply is contained in 2 Thessalonians. He reiterates the distinctions between Israel's prophetic program and the church's Mystery program as he taught them in the past and encouraged them to hang on to the doctrine originally given to them on his first visit (2:15).

Paul finishes by reasserting his authority as an Apostle by telling them to disassociate from anyone teaching contrary to his instruction (3:14).

As we turn to 2 Thessalonians, it's important to understand that God deals with Israel in a much different manner than He does with the Church, the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, many people miss these differences. One major difference between the Church and Israel is that Israel is composed of both believers and unbelievers and God deals with them as such. This is why God sent His prophets to have them repent as a nation. These national blessings and cursings are outlined in Leviticus 26. This is why Peter, in Acts 2, told them to repent and return. The nation of Israel was once following God but needed to repent of the sins of Leviticus 26 and come back to God.

On the other hand, the Body of Christ is composed only of believers and we live by the doctrine revealed to Paul. Paul never speaks of an eternity with Christ on this earth like he does with Israel. Instead, he assures us that our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). We alone are given the promise eternal life by the indwelling and sealing of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Timothy 1:14; Ephesians 1:13—14).

I believe most disagreements about interpretation come about because most people do not separate Israel's program from the Church's program for today. The end result of not understanding the differences between Israel and the Body of Christ is confusion.

Grace and peace (verses 1—2)

Paul uses the salutation "grace and peace" in each of his books. From a dispensational perspective, this phrase has special meaning. With the stoning of Stephen, God's wrath was to be poured out on Israel for rejecting their Messiah (Psalm 110:1; 7:6). What happened next was unexpected because it was unprophesized, although God had planned it out before past generations (Colossians 1:26). Instead of God's wrath being poured out, the world experienced a special manifestation of His Grace when God made a declaration of peace between man and God through the Son.

In all fairness, God's grace is evident throughout history. Without His grace Adam would have no promise of a future Redeemer, Noah would not have the opportunity to build the ark and Nineveh would not have had the opportunity to repent. Paul actually highlighted God's grace toward those not in this special Age of Grace by saying we are saved by grace in the same way as they are, referring to Israel under the prophetic program (Acts 15:11). However, Paul sets God's grace in this age apart from His grace in other ages. This is evident by seeing the Gospel of the Grace of God was not preached until it was given to Paul after he was saved (Acts 20:24) and Paul contrasted grace with the previous age of law (Romans 6:15).

So how can Peter use grace and peace for his salutation if he is writing to Israel under the Prophetic program (1 Peter 1:2)? Quite simply he, as well as Israel, experienced God's Grace by holding back His wrath. They were also the recipients of God's grace when Jesus Christ was crucified for their sins (and the sins of the world). Also at the time of his writing, He was living in the new age of Grace and understood first-hand that God had delayed pouring out His wrath on Israel and the world.

Spiritual growth (verse 3)

One thing Paul was always concerned about was that they would grow up in their faith. Within a few months to a year the Thessalonians had made good progress in their Christian walk. Paul says their faith had grown exceedingly. Along with that, their love toward each other had grown even greater.

Compare this with 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and 5:8 which both mention their faith, hope and love. Months later, when Paul writes them to correct wrong doctrine, he can praise them for growing in their faith and love but is unable to do so about their hope. Paul taught them about the Rapture, how they did not need to deal with the wrath to come but they were now shaken in their understanding of this hope and saw their hope go up in smoke. When they put aside Paul's original teaching of end-time events and accepted that they were now going through the Tribulation, their hope vanished.

If these Thessalonians had clung on to what Paul had originally taught them, they would not have been shaken by the forged letter. They could have pulled out his original letter (1 Thessalonians) and seen that they were not and would not be going through this special wrath from God. They should have understood that the tribulation they were going through at that time was just a momentary light affliction as Paul calls it in 2 Corinthians 4:17. They had what they needed to differentiate between tribulation in everyday life and the Tribulation to come by the hand of God. This Tribulation will be used to purge and purify Israel, making her ready for the marriage supper of the Lamb at the Second Coming and has nothing to do with the Church.

This is why we need to expand our knowledge of Scripture beyond Paul's 13 books. Although his books were written directly to us, the rest of the Bible was given for our learning and understanding (Romans 15:4). We would be in the dark if God had not given us the whole Bible to study. But just as Israel will not (should not) turn to Paul's writings during the Tribulation for their instruction, we shouldn't go to writings that were given for Israel to instruct them. How sad is it that brothers in Christ condemn us for differentiating between Israel's program and the church's program. Some will go so far as to call us heretics because we do not believe as they do. Satan has done a great job in confusing and subverting the doctrine given to the church through Paul.

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