

## **Covenant History—Second Thesalonians: *The End is Near...Or Is It?***

### **Introduction and Review**

The letters of First and Second Thessalonians were written by the apostle Paul to the church which he founded at Thessalonica, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia.

Paul first preached the gospel in Thessalonica in about the year 50, while on his second missionary journey. We read about it in the seventeenth chapter of Acts. We're told that Paul reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue for three weeks, "explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ' " (Acts 17:2). As a result, a good number of Jews and an even greater number of Gentiles came to believe. But you'll recall from last week that there was also a great deal of opposition. The Jewish leaders became jealous of the large following Paul had gained for Christ and so stirred up some of the rabble, who formed a mob and set the city in an uproar.

The specific charge laid against Paul—the Jews would have had other concerns, but the charge they knew would get him into trouble with the authorities—was his teaching that Jesus was the Christ.

Why would this get him into trouble with Rome?

Remember that the word "Christ" (from the Greek, *Christos*, Χρίστος), like the Hebrew "Messiah" (*Mashiah*, מָשִׁיחַ), means "anointed one". It refers to the fact that kings were inaugurated into office with a ceremony that included being anointed with oil.

Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on [Saul's] head and kissed him and said, "Has not the LORD anointed you to be prince over his people Israel? And you shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their surrounding enemies" (1 Sam. 10:1)

Now [David] was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the LORD said [to Samuel], "Arise, anoint him, for this he." Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward (1 Sam. 16:12-13)

Then Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, "Long live King Solomon!" (1 Ki. 1:39)

When Jesus of Nazareth is said to be "the Messiah," "the Christ," "the anointed one," the meaning is clear. He is God's appointed King of Israel. The Jews were not wrong to think of the coming Messiah as a king, or even as a warrior. *They just mistook the nature of his kingdom and the manner in which he would wage war.*

They also failed to grasp the notion that he was appointed to rule not just Israel, but all the nations of the earth as well. He would become the universal sovereign, seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and over the course of time he would bring all the nations of the earth to humble submission to his gracious rule, not through the force of arms, not through violent revolution, but through the seemingly impotent (but in the really efficacious) method of preaching the gospel.

Paul preached Jesus as the universal sovereign. We can get a pretty good idea of what Paul must have preached by reading his letters. Surely his letters are not all that different in content from his sermons. In his letters he speaks frequently of the Lordship of Christ.

[God] raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he has put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 2:20-23)

...Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet (1 Cor. 15:24-25)

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11)

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord [meaning, if you acknowledge his universal sovereignty by humbly yielding to his authority] and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:9)

Do you get the idea from his letters that this is a major theme of Paul's teaching? The people of Thessalonica no doubt caught on to this as well. Jesus is the "King of kings and the Lord of lords," "the ruler of the kings of the earth." This is the language of the book of Revelation (see 19:16 and 1:5).

Now Paul's opponents seized upon this and no doubt distorted it in order to make it appear that Paul was advocating some sort of rebellion against Roman rule.

I think it is without question that Paul referenced the second Psalm when he was reasoning from the Scriptures and proving that Jesus was the Christ. In the second Psalm it says,

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
    be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
    and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son,  
    lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
    for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Ps. 2:10-12).

This, of course, applies as much to Caesar as to any other ruler. And the Roman authorities in Thessalonica got a bit nervous when they learned that there was a Jewish rabbi running about saying that there was another king, and a *Jewish* one at that! And the authorities learned about it because the Jewish leaders played the part of community organizers and paid off some wicked men of the rabble who formed a mob and caused a riot.

By the way...little known fact...they called themselves ACORN—the Association of Community Organizations for the Roman Nation

At any rate, they chased Paul out of town. He went to the next town, Berea, where he had some good success. The noble Bereans faithfully checked out what Paul was saying and weighed it in the light of Scripture. As a consequence, many came to believe. "But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds" (Acts 17:13). ACORN set up an office in Berea too, and Paul was forced to flee again.

This time he went to Athens. And when he got there, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out how they were doing. He was concerned that they may have caved under the pressure; that they may have given up the faith as a result of their persecutions. But his heart was filled with joy when Timothy returned and told him that they

were standing fast in the truth, and they loved him and couldn't wait to see him again.

When Paul heard this, he sent them a letter (1 Thessalonians) to encourage them. And he followed this up with a second letter shortly afterward. Apparently, he had received some further information concerning a misunderstanding about the coming of Christ. You'll recall that this had been mentioned by Paul in his first letter several times.

...you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God...to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thes. 1:10)

What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy (1 Thes. 2:19-20)

may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thes. 3:13; see also 4:13-18; 5:23-24)

These were things Paul had taught them while he was with them. He had taught them to endure their persecutions, and as a motive to endurance he told them that those who afflicted them would themselves be afflicted in due time. When Christ comes again, he said, all their persecutors will get their heads handed to them.

But some of them got the wrong idea. They thought that the second coming was imminent. They thought the day of the Lord was already at hand, that they were already experiencing the beginning of it. Perhaps they even interpreted their affliction as a sure sign that the day had come.

This is not unlike some American Christians in our day. We have an economic downturn in our country, and an administration that seems hell-bent on making it worse by putting forward some radical economic policies; a president who favors abortion, is soft on radical Islam, who opposes the Defense of Marriage Act, and there is increasingly a dismissive attitude toward Christians in the public square, and people are asking, “Is Obama the Antichrist? We must be near the end.”

Good heavens! Does everything center on the United States? Has God attached the consummation of his eternal plan to the fate of the U.S. economy, or to the comfort of the American church? People think we might be close to the end because here there’s been a little bit of a rise in hostility toward believers? What about *real* persecution of Christians in the Middle East? In North Korea? In China?

Surely believers there must think American Christians are awfully full of themselves to think that because we have experienced a wee bit of discomfort here lately, that it’s a sure sign of the end times. *They’ve* had to deal with imprisonment, torture, and death. *We’ve* had to deal with...what, really? Maybe on account of his Christian faith someone gets passed over for a promotion that he really *is* deserving of, or maybe a professor fails to get tenured because of his Christian worldview, or a references to Jesus Christ are edited out of a valedictorian’s speech by public school administrators, or a Christian contestant who everyone thinks should win a beauty pageant is bypassed because she only somewhat weakly expresses disagreement with homosexual marriage (although one *does* have to wonder about the propriety of a Christian woman parading herself on stage in a skimpy bikini). But all these instances of Christians being treated unfairly, pale by comparison with what our brothers in other Christians have to endure.

If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you,  
How will you compete with horses? (Jer. 12:5)

Well, the Thessalonians seemed to have taken their persecutions as a sure sign that they were living in the end times.

There had apparently been some in the church who “prophesied” that it was so. And it looks as if someone had forged a letter in Paul’s name indicating as much, too. But Paul writes to correct their misconceptions, and in essence he says, the second coming is not yet because there are certain intervening events that must first take place; these haven’t yet taken place, so it is not yet the end.

Another theme that may be related to the first is that of *idleness*. I say it may be related to the first because although there is no direct link made between them, it’s at least conceivable that those who believed the end of all things had come thought that all labor and all the ordinary affairs of the life at this point were meaningless because history was soon to come to an end.

Or perhaps this was just an excuse to be idle. One of the effects of the Fall is our tendency to be lazy.

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