

# Second Thessalonians: The ABCs

## Authorship, Background, and Contents

### *Authorship*

Second Thessalonians claims to be written by the apostle *Paul*, but it is sometimes grouped among the “disputed” letters; that is, its genuineness as a letter of the apostle is doubted, on the basis of internal evidence.

“External evidence” refers to the historical data, such as quotations by other early writers, ancient manuscripts, and explicit references. The odd thing about the charge of inauthenticity is that the external evidence for this letter is actually stronger than that for 1 Thessalonians, which is seldom doubted, if ever. Second Thessalonians is referred to in the very early work, the *Didache*, and by the writers Ignatius, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr in the second century.

“Internal evidence” refers to the text of the letter itself, and considers such things as grammar, expressions, and thought patterns. Some liberal scholars have maintained that Paul’s doctrine of the end times (eschatology) is different than that found in 1 Thessalonians and his other letters.

Questioning the authenticity of biblical books for reasons like this is common among liberal scholars, but the problems with basing a case upon internal evidences are many. One is their subjective nature. In other words, these opinions are based on no more than the “gut feeling” of the scholars. Along with that, differences in grammar or expression can be accounted for by other reasons, such as the use of a different amanuensis (secretary). We should in humility also admit that there might have been circumstances that affected it of which we know nothing.

Most Bible students have found no inconsistency in the doctrine of 2 Thessalonians, and they believe that, along with the weight of historical witnesses, should carry the argument over subjective speculations.

Conservative scholars and Bible students have therefore dismissed the charges of those who rely on their “gut feeling” that the letter is not genuine. They have found that the strong historical evidences and the marks of Paul’s genuine teaching and doctrine are sufficient reasons to trust that this letter is from the apostle and the Word of God.

### *Background*

Within weeks or, at most, a few months of writing 1 Thessalonians, the apostle Paul wrote this second letter to that young congregation. Like the first, it was written from Corinth during Paul’s eighteen month ministry there. Since this letter followed the first so quickly, most of the Background discussion in “1 Thessalonians: the ABCs” applies here (see that webpage).

Some further information about the church had reached Paul, which stimulated him to write this letter. There seem to have been three major issues:

1. The opposition faced by the believers in Thessalonica, which he alluded to in the first letter, had apparently become worse. Paul wanted to strengthen them to endure suffering for Christ’s sake.

2. A counterfeit letter claiming to be from Paul, or some “prophetic” messages regarding the Lord’s Day, had unsettled them. Paul wanted to clarify his teaching and establish their expectations accurately.
3. In light of those misunderstandings of what we commonly call the “end times,” some of the believers in Thessalonica were dropping out of normal everyday labor to “wait for the Lord.” Paul wanted to set them straight.

The estimated time of writing is the second half of A.D. 50, making it one of Paul’s earliest letters.

## ***Contents***

Paul’s letter deals with each of the issues mentioned in Background. They correspond with the three chapters into which the letter is divided.

- ***The persecution faced by the Thessalonians and God’s promised answer.***

In the first chapter, Paul acknowledges the persecution being received by the church, and commends them for their persevering faith. One reason they can take heart is the knowledge that God is observing their trials, and in his justice will one day deal with their persecutors:

**God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. (1:6-7)**

In the meantime, Paul prays for their encouragement:

**With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. (1:11)**

While none of us wants to experience opposition for our faith, it is always possible in this world. Paul’s perspective and prayers can guide us in how to respond when either we or other believers we know are persecuted.

- ***Responding to confusion caused by a counterfeit message.***

Paul begins the teaching portion of the letter by referring to a counterfeit message:

**Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. (2:1-2)**

In the formative years of the church before the New Testament was written, the Lord sometimes delivered direct revelation through living prophets. It’s possible that a member of the church or a visitor had delivered a false prophecy that created confusion and fear among the people. It’s also possible that a counterfeit letter with Paul’s name attached had made its way there with the same kind of message.

Either the reality or the possibility of such a false letter moved Paul to add this at the end of 2 Thessalonians:

**I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. (3:17)**

In other words, the original letter sent to Thessalonica included this sentence in Paul's own handwriting with his autograph. It enabled them to check the authenticity of future communications.

- ***Correcting their doctrinal understanding of end times prophecy.***

The false message had apparently claimed that the Lord's final wrap-up of history prior to inaugurating his kingdom had begun. Members of the church were afraid and confused, wondering if they had missed out somehow. In **2:1-11** Paul clarifies the specific order of events before "the Lord's Day" to calm them and impart confidence.

In summary, the order of events is:

1. The "rebellion" or "apostasy" comes first — a decisive and widespread falling away from professed "faith" which opens the way for:
2. The appearance of "the man of lawlessness," a world-wide leader who will arise. In other passages, he is known as "antichrist."
3. This "lawless one" will oppose the true God, and eventually reveal his true nature to the world by taking his place in God's temple and demand to be honored as God. This event is predicted in the Old Testament book of Daniel, and was specifically referred to by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 24:15.

- ***Encouragement for the Christians in Thessalonica.***

The believers apparently feared that they had somehow been left for judgment, so Paul writes to reassure and encourage them. They were destined for salvation, not the wrath of God:

**But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. (2:13-15)**

- ***Clarifying priorities: Live and work faithfully and responsibly.***

Throughout Christian history (even as this article is being written!) there have been misguided leaders who have set dates for the Lord's return and urged believers to stop living ordinary lives, and instead to sell their possessions, wait on rooftops, etc. Paul decisively opposes such actions:

**In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. (3:6)**

Paul points to his own example in contrast. He was not idle, but worked with his own hands in order to provide the right pattern for them to follow. In this context Paul delivers the strong message,

**For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." (3:10)**

Paul urges the church to confront this irresponsibility where it occurs. But lest overzealous believers overdo it and deal with others too harshly, Paul explains,

**Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. (3:15)**

This is a pattern caring Christians should continue to follow today. Throughout the New Testament we are told to accept our mutual responsibility for one another. We should teach, encourage, counsel, admonish, and warn each other. But none of these things should be done in a harsh or vindictive manner. We are to speak and act in love, mercy, and grace, just as the Lord has done toward us.

### ***Conclusion***

In 2 Thessalonians can be seen the close relationship between the believer's future hope and present responsibilities. Hope in the Bible is never uncertain. It is not, as you hear in everyday speech, "I hope so" representing wishful thinking. **Hope in the Bible is our firm assurance and eager expectation of God's sure promises.**

And yet, Christians' focus on future events surrounding the return of Christ does not produce the quality that's been described "so heavenly-minded that they're no earthly good." It's just the opposite. Our sure hope in Christ and in God's coming kingdom lead us to live appropriately today. We should go about our business, working at our occupations, being good neighbors, and doing good in Jesus' name *while we wait* for his return from heaven. The Scriptures give us enough understanding of future events that we can be alert and ready should we be the generation that lives to see them.

Second Thessalonians is a great help for keeping this balanced focus.