

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

PREFACE

One reason I so enjoy reading history, which includes biographies, is that it gives one *perspective*. Reading and studying God's word has the same benefit: a sound perspective on this world and living in it.

We live in a time of alarming shortsightedness; most people—especially the young—imagine the world began the day they were born, and if they do not literally think that, they behave and think as if it were true.

One phenomenon of this malady is the erroneous perception that “things have never been so bad.” Whether it is economics, the value of a dollar, or morality, or politics one can always hear someone declaring, “It's never been this bad before.” The truth is, as Solomon pointed out, “there is nothing new under the sun” ([Ecclesiastes 1:9](#)). Things have, indeed, been this bad before—in fact, in most cases they have been far worse.

Another part of this is more personal; ignorant of history, the individual—and again, especially the young—having only themselves as a yardstick, inflate every encumbrance, every challenge or inconvenience into something more dire than it is. This feeds into our day's favorite malady of “stress,” as in “I'm so stressed.”

History gives us perspective. You want to talk about stress? How about

- a soldier during the first world war crouched against the ladder that will take him up out of the relative safety of the trench into the murderous machine gun fire of the enemy. He waits for the signal of his commander's whistle, that will almost surely be prelude to his being killed. *That's* stress.
- Or today's soldier, already sweating under the load of his gear in the desert heat, ready to enter a dwelling where he may discover an innocent family gathered around their meal—or a nest of murderous terrorists.
- Or think of a wife and mother during the second world war. Her young husband has been overseas for one or two years in the thick of the fighting. No e-mail, no Skype, no telephone calls, and no leave; her only contact with him for all this time has been the occasional letter hastily scrawled from the battlefield. Meanwhile, she must work in a factory during the day, and take care of her children at night—all the while living in dreadful fear of the knock on the door by the Western Union man. *That's* stress.

As the modern, civilized world has become more wealthy and comfortable, we have been forced to invent our own stress, dumbing it down to the point at which someone in a different time or place would consider such “stress” a holiday on the beach.

One of the primary factors for such skewed perspective is ignorance and bad information—which brings us to the Thessalonians. In Chapter Two of his second letter to them Paul must give evidence to set them straight from the bad information they have heard from “a [disturbing] spirit or a message or a letter as if from us.” Like some today, they, too, considered their trials and affliction so bad that they began to think they were already *experiencing* the Tribulation—that that moment of the End Times had already arrived.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2.

v1

In v1 Paul sets the topic for what follows, in the process revealing the reason he must address it. The topic is, once again, the *parousia*—the coming, or presence of “our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him.”

Sidebar: Interesting that Paul puts it this way, choosing “gathering together” to describe the Rapture, instead of “caught up together,” which is how he put it in his first letter (4:17). The first (*harpazo*) is the image of being snatched, or plucked up from the earth, while the second (*episyngōgē*) describes an assembling, such as Christians for worship—which is how it is used in the letter to the Hebrews.

Read Hebrews 10:24-25.

Jesus used a form of the word in the gospel of Mark when He described His coming at the end of the Tribulation:

“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send forth the angels, and will **gather together** His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven.” (Mark 13:26-27)

I find it somehow poetic that Christ gathering His people to glory is described using the same word for our gathering to worship Him on a Sunday morning.

Paul puts his counsel in the form of a “request,” which should not be interpreted as something sterile and detached. The word, *erotomen*, has some juice in it, translated in other settings as beg, implore, urge, intreat, beseech. We might paraphrase this, “Please, my brothers...” And just what is Paul requesting?

v2

That they disabuse themselves of the notion that the *parousia* has already occurred—that Christ has already come. Because he mentions it in v1, what Paul is addressing specifically is the Rapture, which is the inaugural event of the Day of the Lord. Let’s review what he has already told them.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

In the beginning of Chapter Five he describes the flip-side of Christ’s coming—the day of wrath that will follow the Rapture. And there he assures the believers in Thessalonica that they needn’t worry about that, because

...God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him. Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11)

And as we studied a few weeks ago, in this letter they will be reading that they can look forward to “relief” or “rest” from their afflictions when

...the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (1:7b-8)

They can also look forward not just to rescue, but sharing in Christ's glory

when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed (1:10a)

...that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed

Since his first letter to them Paul had received word that they had probably been receiving some bad counsel. As Robert L. Thomas puts it,

[This] false instruction had denied them an imminent "rest." They would first have to undergo the severe persecution of the tribulation and possibly even suffer martyrdom before Christ's coming, according to these misrepresentations. They were even told that their current suffering indicated the arrival of the expected tribulation.

How did they get so off-course? Did they not understand Paul's earlier teaching? Their confusion could have stemmed from either misunderstanding his teaching in the first place, or an immature understanding combined with his absence. We, with our handy printed Bible, can check our "authority" anytime we like. But the Thessalonians did not have that; if our authority has been a teacher and his spoken word only, then our understanding and memory may get a little hazy, and become easily shaken in his absence.

In such a state they would have been susceptible to (Paul suggests) some external source: a (bad) spirit, a word or written epistle from someone falsely claiming to be the apostle Paul. The evidence seems to be that that is what happened. Now, if not their fundamental faith, at least their understanding of God's redemptive timeline was truly shaken, agitated. The KJVs and ESV have the more literal translation: "shaken in mind."

Adam Clarke: The word to be shaken, signifies to be agitated as a ship at sea in a storm, and strongly marks the confusion and distress which the Thessalonians had felt in their false apprehension of this coming of Christ.

either by a spirit

The NIV probably interprets this correctly, assuming that Paul speaks not of some luminous, disembodied apparition (*pneuma*), but by "prophetic utterances of individuals in Christian assemblies, claiming the authority of divine revelations" (Vincent).

Young believers of any age, less familiar with the substantive truth of Christ, can be easily led astray by someone claiming the authority they do not have—which is why Paul counsels that young believers are not to be placed in positions of authority within the church. They are not just unschooled in God's economy, but they can have their heads turned; as Paul wrote to Timothy, this can cause them to "become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil" (1 Timothy 3:7)—a fearful contemplation indeed.

or a message

This (*logos*)—again the KJVs and ESV interpret it literally as “word”—would be a word written or spoken, and, depending on the interpretation could mean

- teaching from a different person, speaking in opposition to Paul; or, applying “as if from us” to this as well,
- someone claiming to have a message from Paul that modifies what he had previously taught, or wrote in his first letter to them.

Either of these would effectively erode the groundwork Paul had laid in the church for the gospel of Christ.

or a letter as if from us,

Think the Mormons, or Jehovah’s Witnesses, who may knock on your door and entice you with the claim that they hold to the Bible as well—the only problem being *their* Bible has been altered to fit their skewed theology (JW translation of John 1:1, “and the Word was a God,” rather than “the Word *was* God”.)

Anyone could show up claiming to have a new letter from Paul, an “addendum” to what he had earlier taught or written; how would they know it to be true? The best Paul could do was what he does at the end of this letter.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:17.

Let us not pass too quickly over this without appreciating the harm done both to the Thessalonian church and the apostle himself by this situation. Paul had made it clear—probably in person, but certainly in his first letter—that Christ would return to gather believers to Himself, thus sparing them from the tribulation that would commence immediately. This had filled them with comfort and assurance regarding any mention of “the Day of the Lord.” But then, in his absence and between letters, the Thessalonians had been led astray, thus losing their comfort and assurance.

Imagine being one of them, not just questioning the teaching of the apostle, but now trembling with fear over the possibility that Christ had already come *and left them behind* to suffer the Tribulation! Was it all for naught? Was Paul’s teaching all a sham?

Imagine the helpless feeling Paul must have experienced, far away from them and seemingly impotent against the false teaching of some nearer the church. Appreciate his position, of having to not just evangelize and teach, but at the same time protect his “territory,” as it were.

to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

The combination of their ignorance of, and grounding in the truth, combined with this spurious information regarding the end times, resulted in the Thessalonians imagining that, in so many words, they had missed the train, and that their current afflictions meant that they were now in the midst of the actual Tribulation.

And Paul begins v3—you can almost *hear* him shouting—by upbraiding them with, “Let no one in any way deceive you!”