PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

The King's Justice

2 Thessalonians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Justice: Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

2 Thessalonians is one of the shortest books in the New Testament, only three chapters. You can read it in about five minutes. But it deals with some of the biggest questions people ask: Why do good people suffer while bad people seem to get away with it? Is the world about to end? Who is the mysterious figure Paul calls the man of lawlessness? And what do you do in the meantime?

The church in Thessalonica was still young, still being persecuted, and now it was confused. Someone had told them that the day of the Lord had already arrived, maybe even using a letter that claimed to be from Paul. Some people were so stirred up that they had quit working and were living off others. The whole church was shaken.

Paul's answer is calm and steady. God sees what you're going through, and He will set things right. The end hasn't come yet, so don't be fooled by people who say it has. Evil is real, but it's on a leash, and Jesus will defeat it completely. In the meantime, stand firm, hold on to the truth, get back to work, and never get tired of doing good.

If you've ever been overwhelmed by scary predictions, viral rumors, or the feeling that the world is falling apart, this little letter has a lot to say to you. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all three chapters of 2 Thessalonians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Because the letter is so short and packed, each chapter here goes slowly and includes extra background on the people, places, and ideas behind it, along with the main ways Christians have understood its hardest passages.

Before chapter 1, a longer-than-usual section called Setting the Scene explains what had happened since Paul's first letter, why some scholars question whether Paul wrote this one, and the Old Testament and Jewish background you need to make sense of chapter 2. Don't skip it.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes 2 Thessalonians sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read the whole letter first, then each chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to 1 Thessalonians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes. Because 2 Thessalonians is so short, I've quoted it very sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase, background, and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Paul's description of the man of lawlessness and what is holding him back (2:1–12) is one of the most debated passages in the New Testament. I've presented the main Christian interpretations, futurist, preterist, historicist, and idealist readings, and the main proposals about the restrainer, briefly and fairly, without endorsing one. I've also noted that some Protestant Reformers identified the man of lawlessness with the papacy, a view the Catholic Church rejects and that many Protestants today do not hold. You may want to share your own church's view with your teen.

I've also presented the debate over whether Paul wrote this letter, giving the main arguments on each side. The letter presents itself as Paul's, and I refer to the author as Paul throughout.

Paul's rule that anyone unwilling to work shall not eat (3:10) is often quoted out of context. I've explained carefully that Paul was addressing able-bodied people who chose idleness and disrupted the church, not people who cannot work because of illness, disability, age, or circumstances, and that the early church was known for caring generously for those in need.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will find steady confidence in a just and faithful God, and the courage never to tire of doing good.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Where We Left Off

If you read 1 Thessalonians, you know the story. Paul, Silas, and Timothy started a church in Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, on Paul's second missionary journey. After only a short time, a mob forced them out of the city (Acts 17). Paul was worried sick about the new believers, sent Timothy back to check on them, and was overjoyed when Timothy returned with good news. Then he wrote 1 Thessalonians to encourage them, answer their questions about believers who had died, and remind them that Jesus would return like a thief in the night.

The church was mostly made up of Gentiles who had turned away from idols, and they were being harassed by their neighbors for it. In a city proud of its loyalty to Rome and the emperor, people who said there was another king named Jesus were seen as troublemakers.

What Changed

2 Thessalonians shows that, some time later, things had gotten more difficult in three ways.

First, the persecution had continued, and maybe gotten worse. Paul talks about their persecutions and trials and promises that God will bring justice.

Second, someone had confused them about the return of Jesus. Some people were saying the day of the Lord had already come.

That might sound strange, but it may have meant that the final events had begun, and that the church's suffering was part of the end. Paul says this idea may have come through a prophecy, a spoken message, or a letter supposedly from him. Somebody may even have been using Paul's name to spread it.

Third, the problem of idleness that Paul mentioned briefly in his first letter had grown. Some members of the church had stopped working and were depending on others, while busying themselves in other people's affairs. Paul has to deal with it more firmly.

When Was It Written?

If Paul wrote it, 2 Thessalonians was probably written from Corinth, a few months after 1 Thessalonians, around AD 50 or 51. Silas and Timothy were still with Paul, and the situation in Thessalonica seems similar, only more intense. That would make it one of the earliest Christian writings we have.

A few scholars have suggested that 2 Thessalonians was actually written before 1 Thessalonians, since the New Testament usually arranges Paul's letters by length rather than date. But most think the order in our Bibles is the order they were written.

Who Wrote It? The Case Against

Most scholars agree that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians is more debated. Some scholars think it was written later by a follower of Paul who used his name. Here are their main reasons.

It follows 1 Thessalonians very closely in its structure and some of its wording, which some think looks like someone copying. Its tone is more formal and less warm than the first letter. Its picture of the

end seems different: 1 Thessalonians says the day will come suddenly, like a thief, while 2 Thessalonians says certain events must happen first. And the emphasis on Paul's signature at the end, as the mark in all his letters, along with the warning about a letter claiming to be from him, makes some suspect the writer was trying hard to sound like Paul.

Who Wrote It? The Case For

Many other scholars hold that Paul wrote it. Here are their main reasons.

The early church accepted it as Paul's without question. It appears in the earliest lists of Paul's letters, and an early bishop named Polycarp seems to echo it. If Paul wrote both letters to the same church only a few months apart, it would be natural for them to sound similar. The difference in tone fits a new situation: Paul was dealing with a specific problem, not reuniting with friends. The teaching about the end isn't really a contradiction; Jesus Himself taught both that the end would come suddenly and that certain signs would come first (Mark 13). And Paul signed other letters in his own hand too (1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11), especially if forged letters were going around.

Christians on both sides agree that 2 Thessalonians belongs in the Bible and speaks with authority. In this book, I follow the letter's own claim and call the author Paul.

Background: Daniel

To understand chapter 2, it helps to know some Old Testament background. The book of Daniel, written about a time when God's people lived under foreign empires, describes a proud ruler who would exalt himself above every god, speak against the true God,

and set up a terrible abomination in the temple (Daniel 9, 11, and 12).

Many Jewish readers saw that prophecy fulfilled in 167 BC, when a Greek king named Antiochus IV, who called himself Epiphanes, meaning God made visible, took over Jerusalem, banned Jewish worship, and set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus in the temple. The Jewish people rebelled under the Maccabees and eventually rededicated the temple, an event still remembered at Hanukkah.

Background: Caligula

Just about ten years before Paul wrote to Thessalonica, something similar almost happened again. Around AD 40, the Roman emperor Gaius, better known as Caligula, who wanted to be worshiped as a god, ordered a statue of himself to be set up in the temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish people were horrified, and many were ready to die rather than allow it. The plan was delayed, and Caligula was assassinated in AD 41 before it could be carried out. But the memory was fresh. When Paul talked about someone setting himself up in God's temple, claiming to be God, his readers knew exactly what that could look like.

Background: Jesus' Teaching

Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians also echoes what Jesus taught His disciples on the Mount of Olives, shortly before His death (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). Jesus warned that false messiahs and false prophets would come, performing signs to deceive people. He spoke of the abomination that causes desolation from Daniel. He told His followers not to be alarmed or deceived, and said that no one knows the day or hour. Many of the same themes appear in 2

Thessalonians: don't be alarmed, don't be deceived, certain things must happen first, and Jesus will return in glory.

Later, the letters of John use the word antichrist, saying that many antichrists had already come, as well as a final antichrist to come (1 John 2:18). And Revelation describes a beast who demands worship. Many Christians connect these figures with Paul's man of lawlessness, though the Bible never explicitly says they are the same.

Why It Matters

2 Thessalonians was written to a church that was suffering, confused, and being misled. Paul's goal wasn't to give them a detailed timeline of the end of the world. It was to steady them. God is just. Jesus will win. Evil is limited. Don't believe every rumor. Hold on to the truth. Keep working. Keep doing good.

That makes it a very practical letter for anyone living in a world full of fear, rumors, and predictions.

The Map

Chapter 1: Thanks for the Thessalonians' growing faith and love, and a promise that God will bring justice when Jesus returns.

Chapter 2: The day of the Lord hasn't come yet. The rebellion and the man of lawlessness must come first. But God is in control, and the believers can stand firm.

Chapter 3: A request for prayer, and firm instructions about idleness, work, and church discipline.

Contents

Setting the Scene.....7
1 God Will Set Things Right *1*.....13
2 Don't Be Shaken *2*.....19
3 Never Tire of Doing Good *3*.....27
Now What? The Bottom Line.....34

CHAPTER 1

God Will Set Things Right

2 Thessalonians 1

The letter opens almost exactly like 1 Thessalonians, with the same three names: Paul, Silas, and Timothy. (The NIV footnote reminds us that the Greek calls Silas by the longer form of his name, Silvanus.) They write to the Thessalonian church, which lives in the Father and in Jesus the Lord, and they wish them grace and peace.

Then Paul says something interesting. We ought to thank God for you, he says, and it's right to do so. The word ought sounds like an obligation, and some readers think it makes this letter sound cooler than the first one. But Paul may simply mean that thanking God for them isn't optional. It's the only fitting response to what God is doing in them.

What is God doing? Their faith is growing like crazy. And the love they have for each other keeps increasing. In his first letter, Paul prayed that their love would overflow (1 Thessalonians 3:12). Now he sees that prayer being answered.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Growing Faith**
>
> Paul uses a word for growing that means growing beyond what's normal, like a plant shooting up much faster than expected. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul worried that something might be missing in their faith. Now he's bragging about it. Faith isn't static. It can grow, especially under pressure. Sometimes the hardest seasons are when faith grows fastest.

In fact, Paul says, he's boasting about the Thessalonians to other churches, telling them about their perseverance and faith in the middle of all the persecution and trouble they're going through.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Persecution**

We don't know exactly what the Thessalonian believers were facing. It probably wasn't official, empire-wide persecution; that came later. It was more likely local pressure: being shunned by family and friends, losing business or jobs, being mocked in public, being reported to city officials, maybe occasional violence. That's still what many Christians face in parts of the world today. For some, following Jesus costs relationships, jobs, safety, or even their lives. Organizations that track religious freedom estimate that hundreds of millions of Christians live in places where they face serious persecution.

Paul says their suffering actually shows that God judges rightly. That's a surprising statement. How can suffering be evidence of justice? Paul seems to mean that their faithful endurance shows that God is at work in them, preparing them for His kingdom. Their perseverance is a sign that they really belong to Him. And it's a reminder that God will one day make everything right.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Worthy of the Kingdom**

Paul says the Thessalonians will be counted worthy of God's kingdom, for which they are suffering. That doesn't mean they earned it by suffering. Paul's other letters make clear that salvation is a gift of grace. It means their faithfulness under pressure shows that they are the real thing. Gold is tested by fire to show that it's pure. The fire doesn't make it gold. It shows that it was gold all along.

Then Paul talks about justice. God is just, he says. He'll repay with trouble the people who are troubling them, and He'll give rest to them, and to Paul and his friends as well.

That's a big deal for people who are being treated unfairly. When you're bullied, mocked, or mistreated, one of the hardest things is the feeling that nobody sees and nothing will ever change. Paul says God sees. He keeps the books. And one day, He will settle every account.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Leave It to God**
>
> Knowing that God will bring justice frees you from having to get revenge yourself. Paul says the same thing in Romans 12: don't take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath, because He will repay. That doesn't mean you have to stay silent when you're mistreated. It's right to tell a trusted adult, to stand up for yourself and others, and to seek help. But you don't have to carry the burden of getting even. God will handle it, better and more fairly than you ever could.

When will this happen? Paul says it will be when Jesus is unveiled from heaven, surrounded by flaming fire and His mighty angels. Paul uses dramatic images, many of them borrowed from the Old Testament, where fire often represents God's holy presence, as at the burning bush or Mount Sinai.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Revealed**
>
> The Greek word for revealed is apokalypsis, where we get the word apocalypse. Today, apocalypse usually means a disaster, the end of the world. But the word actually means an uncovering or unveiling, like pulling a sheet off a statue. Right now, Jesus' rule is hidden from most people. One day it will be revealed for everyone to see. For people who love Him, that will be the best day ever.

Then Paul says something sobering. Jesus will punish those who don't know God and who refuse to obey the gospel. They'll be punished with everlasting destruction, shut out from the Lord's presence and from His glorious power. This will happen on the day

Jesus comes to be honored among His people and admired by all who have believed, including the Thessalonians, because they believed Paul's message.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What Is Final Judgment Like?**
>
> Christians agree that the Bible teaches a real, final judgment, and that God's judgment will be perfectly just. They have discussed what it involves. Many Christians throughout history have understood passages like this one to describe eternal, conscious separation from God. Some Christians, sometimes called conditionalists or annihilationists, understand everlasting destruction to mean that the lost will finally cease to exist. A smaller number hope that God will ultimately rescue everyone, though most Christians believe that passages like this one rule that out. What Paul emphasizes here is that the worst part of judgment is being cut off from God's presence, the source of every good thing. And he says it so that his readers would trust that God is just, not so they would delight in anyone's destruction.

That's not an easy passage to read. But notice two things. First, Paul is writing to people who are being harmed by others, and he wants them to know that evil won't win in the end. Second, Paul's point is not that we should look down on anyone. Every one of us needs God's mercy. The same Jesus who will judge is the One who died to save. The gospel is an invitation to anyone who will turn to Him.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Justice and Mercy**
>
> People sometimes think a loving God wouldn't judge anyone. But think about it: if God didn't care about evil, would He really be loving? Imagine a judge who let a criminal who hurt your family walk away without consequence, because he was nice. You wouldn't call that love. You'd call it injustice. God's love and justice go together. And on the cross, they meet: God takes evil seriously enough to punish it, and loves us enough to take that punishment on Himself.

Paul ends the chapter with a prayer. With all this in mind, he says, we keep praying for you, that God will make them worthy of the life He's called them to, and that His power will bring to life every good desire you have and every action that comes from your faith.

Notice that Paul doesn't pray for their persecution to stop. He prays that they'll live well in the middle of it. He asks God to take their good intentions, the things they want to do for Him, and give them the power to actually do them.

And the goal is this: that Jesus' name would be honored through them, and they through Him, all by the grace of God and of Jesus Christ.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **God and Lord**
>
> The NIV footnote on verse 12 points out that the last phrase could also be translated our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. In that reading, Paul calls Jesus God directly. Greek grammar allows both translations, and scholars debate which Paul meant. Either way, this letter, written only about twenty years after Jesus' resurrection, puts Jesus right alongside God the Father as the source of grace.

KEY VERSE

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.

2 Thessalonians 1:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the Thessalonians' faith was growing under pressure. Have you ever seen your faith grow during a hard time?
2. How does knowing that God will bring justice change the way you respond when someone treats you unfairly?
3. Why do you think it's important that God is both loving and just?
4. Paul prays for God to give power to their good desires. What's one good thing you want to do for God but haven't done yet?

TRY THIS *Look up a ministry that serves persecuted Christians around the world. Read one story, and pray for that person or church by name this week.*

CHAPTER 2

Don’t Be Shaken

2 Thessalonians 2

Now Paul gets to the main reason he’s writing. It’s about the return of Jesus and the gathering of His people to Him. Paul begs the Thessalonians not to be easily shaken or panicked by a claim that the Lord’s day is already here.

Where did that idea come from? Paul lists three possibilities: a prophecy, someone’s spoken teaching, or a letter that was supposedly from him. He doesn’t know which it was, or he doesn’t say. But it’s possible that someone was spreading a fake letter with Paul’s name on it.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Fake News, Ancient Edition**
>
> Rumors and fake messages aren’t new. In the ancient world, letters could be forged, and false reports could spread quickly along trade routes. Today, it’s even easier. A fake screenshot, a viral video taken out of context, or a confident post about the end of the world can spread to millions of people in a few hours. Paul’s advice still works: don’t get shaken. Check the source. Compare it with what you already know is true. And remember that panic is rarely a sign that God is speaking.

Why would anyone think the day of the Lord had already come? Maybe the Thessalonians’ suffering was so intense that it felt like the end times had begun. Maybe someone was teaching that the resurrection had already happened in a spiritual sense, as some

people taught later (2 Timothy 2:18). Whatever the reason, it was causing fear, confusion, and, as we'll see in chapter 3, some people to quit their jobs.

Paul says: don't let anyone fool you. That day won't come until two things happen first. There will be a rebellion, and the man of lawlessness will be revealed, the one who is destined for destruction.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Rebellion**
>
> The Greek word is apostasia, where we get the English word apostasy. It usually means a revolt or a falling away. Paul may mean a widespread rebellion against God in the world, or a large-scale falling away from the faith among people who had claimed to follow Jesus, or both. A few interpreters have suggested it means a departure, referring to the church being taken away, but most scholars think the word refers to rebellion.
>
> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Lawlessness or Sin?**
>
> The NIV footnote says some manuscripts call him the man of sin instead of the man of lawlessness. In the Bible, the two ideas are closely connected. 1 John 3:4 says that sin is lawlessness. The figure Paul describes is someone who rejects God's authority completely and puts himself in God's place.

Paul describes him. He will oppose God and exalt himself over everything people call God or worship. He'll even take his seat in God's temple, claiming to be God himself.

If that sounds familiar, it's because Paul is drawing on the book of Daniel, which described a proud king who would exalt himself above every god (Daniel 11:36) and set up an abomination in the temple. As you read in Setting the Scene, Jewish readers had seen something like that when Antiochus IV desecrated the temple, and again, almost, when Caligula tried to put his statue there only about ten years before Paul wrote.

Paul reminds them that he taught them all this when he was with them. Then he says something that has puzzled readers ever since. You know what's restraining him, Paul says, so that he'll appear only when the time is right. The hidden force of lawlessness is active already. But the one restraining it will keep doing that until he's removed.

After that, the lawless one will appear. And Jesus will bring him down just by breathing on him, and wipe him out by the brilliance of His arrival.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Breath of His Mouth**
>
> Notice how easy the victory is. After all the buildup, the man of lawlessness, with all his power, signs, and deceptions, is defeated by Jesus' breath. It's not a long, close battle. Isaiah 11:4 describes the coming King from David's line striking down the wicked with the breath of His lips. Evil looks powerful. But next to Jesus, it's nothing.

Paul says the lawless one's coming will be the work of Satan. He'll use all kinds of power, signs, and wonders that serve a lie, and every kind of evil deception, to fool those who are perishing. They're perishing, Paul says, because they wouldn't love the truth that could save them. And so God sends them a strong delusion, so they'll believe the lie, and so everyone who has rejected the truth and enjoyed wickedness will be judged.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Powerful Delusion**
>
> This is one of the hardest verses in the letter. Does God trick people? Paul's point seems to be that God gives people over to what they have already chosen. They wouldn't love the truth. They enjoyed wickedness. So God allows them to have what they wanted. Romans 1 describes something similar: three times Paul says God gave people over to the desires they had chosen. Judgment isn't God forcing people to reject Him. It's God honoring their choice. And the warning is for everyone: loving the truth matters.

So who is the man of lawlessness? And what, or who, is holding him back? Paul said the Thessalonians knew, because he'd told them in person. Unfortunately, we weren't there. Even one of the greatest early Christian thinkers, Augustine, admitted around AD 420 that he didn't know what Paul meant. Christians have offered many answers. Here are the main approaches, briefly and fairly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **View 1: A Future Individual**

Many Christians, often called futurists, believe the man of lawlessness is a specific person who will appear in the future, shortly before Jesus returns. They often identify him with the Antichrist and with the beast of Revelation 13. Some believe he will sit in a literal, rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Others think the temple is a picture of claiming divine authority over people's worship. This view is common among many evangelical and premillennial Christians, and it has roots in early church writers like Irenaeus and Hippolytus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **View 2: Fulfilled in the First Century**

Other Christians, often called preterists, believe Paul was describing events that would happen soon, in his own century. Some point to the Roman emperors who demanded worship, such as Caligula or Nero. Others point to the Jewish revolt against Rome and the destruction of the temple by the Roman general Titus in AD 70, when Roman soldiers set up their standards in the temple area and offered sacrifices to them. In this view, Paul's words were a warning to his first readers about real events in their future, though many preterists also believe in a final return of Jesus still to come.

BACKGROUND CHECK **View 3: A Pattern in History**

A third approach, called historicist, reads Paul as describing a long-term power or institution that would arise in history and claim God's authority. During the Reformation in the 1500s, some Protestant leaders, including Martin Luther and John Calvin, identified the man of lawlessness with the papacy. That view was part of the bitter conflicts of that era. The Catholic

Church strongly rejects it, and many Protestants today do not hold it either. Other historicists have pointed to different powers in history.

BACKGROUND CHECK **View 4: A Recurring Reality**

A fourth approach, sometimes called idealist, sees the man of lawlessness as a picture of a pattern that repeats throughout history: rulers and powers that set themselves up in God's place, demand total loyalty, and persecute God's people. In this view, every age has its versions of this figure, and Paul's main point is that such evil is real, already at work, and doomed. Many Christians combine this approach with a futurist one, believing the pattern will reach a final climax before Jesus returns.

Then there's the question of the restrainer. Interestingly, Paul refers to it two ways. In verse 6, it's a what. In verse 7, it's a who. So the restrainer may be a force or institution with a person at its head, or Paul may simply be using both ways of speaking.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who or What Is Holding Him Back?**

Here are the main suggestions.

The Roman Empire and its laws. Many early Christian writers, like Tertullian, thought Rome's law and order held back chaos, with the emperor as the person in charge. Paul may have been careful not to name it in writing for safety's sake.

The Holy Spirit. Some believe the Spirit, working through the church, restrains evil in the world. Many pretribulation Christians believe the restrainer is removed when the church is caught up to meet the Lord.

The preaching of the gospel. Some think God holds back the end until the gospel has been preached to the nations (Matthew 24:14), with Paul himself, or the apostles, as the one restraining.

An angel. Some point to Michael, the archangel who protects God's people in Daniel 10 and 12.

God Himself, in His sovereign timing, or something we simply can't identify with certainty.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Christians Agree On**

Across all these views, Christians agree on the main points of this passage. Evil is real, and it's already at work. But it's restrained; it can't go one step further than God allows. Deception is dangerous, so loving the truth matters. The day of the Lord hadn't come when Paul wrote, and no one should be panicked by people who say they know the timeline. And Jesus will win, completely and easily. You don't have to solve every puzzle in this passage to receive its comfort.

BACKGROUND CHECK **End-Times Hype**

Every generation has had people who were sure the end was coming in their lifetime, and many have named dates or identified the antichrist. So far, every one of those predictions has been wrong. Paul's message to the Thessalonians was the opposite of hype: calm down, don't be deceived, keep living faithfully. If someone tells you they've figured out exactly when the world will end, remember what Jesus said: no one knows the day or hour (Matthew 24:36).

After that heavy section, Paul changes his tone completely. But we ought to thank God for you, he says, brothers and sisters whom the Lord loves. God chose you to be saved, through the Spirit's work making you holy and through your trust in the truth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Firstfruits or From the Beginning?**

The NIV says God chose them as firstfruits, but the footnote says some manuscripts read from the beginning. The two Greek words look very similar. Firstfruits were the first part of the harvest, offered to God as a sign that the rest of the harvest would follow. If that's the right reading, the Thessalonians were among the first in their region to believe, a promise of many more to come. If it's from the beginning, Paul is saying God's choice of them goes back before time. Either way, their salvation started with God.

Paul says God called them through the gospel Paul preached, so that they could share in the glory of Jesus. Notice the contrast. The man

of lawlessness grabs at glory that isn't his. The believers receive glory as a gift.

So, Paul says, stand firm, and hold on to the teachings he passed on to them, whether in person or by letter.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Teachings or Traditions?**
>
> The NIV footnote says the word translated teachings can also mean traditions. It means something handed down. Paul is referring to the message about Jesus and the instructions he had given them. Christians have discussed how this applies today. Catholic and Orthodox Christians believe that the church's authoritative tradition, handed down from the apostles, stands alongside Scripture. Protestant Christians generally believe that what the apostles handed down is now preserved for us in the New Testament, which is the final authority. All agree that the apostles' teaching is the foundation the church must hold on to.

Then Paul prays. He asks Jesus Himself, and God the Father, who loved us and graciously gave us lasting comfort and a good hope, to encourage their hearts and strengthen them in every good thing they do and say.

After all the talk about lawlessness and deception, Paul ends with love, grace, encouragement, and hope. That's the point. He didn't tell them about the man of lawlessness to scare them, but to steady them. The God who controls the timeline loves them.

KEY VERSE

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

2 Thessalonians 2:16–17 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Have you ever been scared by an end-times prediction, rumor, or video? How did you respond?
2. Paul says people perish because they wouldn't love the truth. What does it look like to love the truth, even when it's uncomfortable?
3. Which view of the man of lawlessness have you heard before? Which questions does this chapter raise for you?
4. How does it help to know that evil is restrained and that Jesus will defeat it easily?

TRY THIS *The next time you see a dramatic claim online, about the end of the world or anything else, practice Paul's advice: don't panic. Check the source, look for evidence, and compare it with what you know is true before you share it.*

CHAPTER 3

Never Tire of Doing Good

2 Thessalonians 3

Paul begins his final chapter with a request. Pray for us, he says, that the Lord's message will spread quickly and be honored, the way it was among the Thessalonians. And pray that we'll be rescued from wicked and evil people, because not everyone has faith.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Running Fast**
>
> The word Paul uses for spreading literally means running. It may echo Psalm 147:15, which says God's word runs swiftly. Paul pictures the gospel like a runner racing from city to city. In Paul's day, the message had already run from Jerusalem to Syria, Asia, Macedonia, and Greece in about twenty years. Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray that it keeps running, and that people will honor it when it arrives.

Paul knew he was facing real opposition. In Corinth, where he was probably writing, some of the local Jewish leaders opposed him so strongly that they eventually dragged him before the Roman governor, Gallio (Acts 18:12–17). Paul wasn't a superhero who didn't need help. He asked his friends to pray for him.

Then Paul turns from people who aren't faithful to the God who is. But the Lord is faithful, he says. He'll make you strong and guard you against the evil one.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Evil One**

Paul uses a phrase that Jesus also used in the Lord's Prayer, where He taught His followers to ask to be delivered from the evil one (Matthew 6:13). After all the talk in chapter 2 about Satan's deceptions, Paul wants the Thessalonians to know that they're not defenseless. God Himself guards them. Satan is real, but he's not equal to God. He's a defeated enemy on a short leash.

Paul says he's confident that they're doing what he taught them and will keep doing it. And he prays that the Lord will steer their hearts toward God's love and toward the endurance Christ showed. That's a beautiful prayer. When life is hard, you need two things: to know you're loved, and the strength to keep going. Paul prays for both.

Now Paul gets to a practical problem that's been building since his first letter. He mentioned it briefly in 1 Thessalonians, telling them to live quietly and work with their hands, and to warn those who were idle. Apparently, it hadn't gotten better.

With Jesus' authority, Paul says, stay away from any believer who is lazy and disorderly and doesn't live by the teaching he gave them. The NIV footnote says teaching here can also mean tradition, the same word as in chapter 2.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Idle and Disruptive**

The Greek word Paul uses originally described soldiers who broke ranks and wouldn't stay in formation. It came to mean disorderly, undisciplined, or out of line. The NIV translates it idle and disruptive, because these people weren't just lazy. They were also causing problems. They had stopped working, depended on others to support them, and spent their time meddling in other people's business.

Why had they stopped working? We don't know for sure. Some think it was connected to the end-times confusion in chapter 2: if Jesus might come back any day, why bother working? Others point

out that in Roman society, many poorer people attached themselves to wealthy patrons, who supported them in exchange for loyalty and public praise. Maybe some believers expected wealthier Christians to support them that way. Maybe it was a mix of both.

Paul reminds them of his own example. When he was in Thessalonica, he didn't sit around. He paid for every meal he ate. He and his team worked hard, night and day, so they wouldn't be a burden. And Paul adds that he had the right to ask for support, as a teacher of the gospel. But he chose not to, so he could be a model for them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Paul the Tentmaker**
>
> Acts 18:3 says Paul was a tentmaker. That probably meant he worked with leather and heavy cloth, making tents, awnings, and other goods. Jewish teachers were often expected to learn a trade, so they wouldn't have to charge for teaching. Paul probably rented space in a workshop and talked with customers and coworkers about Jesus while he worked. Many Christians today follow his example by sharing their faith at work, at school, or wherever they spend their days.

Then comes the verse that has often been quoted, and misquoted. When we were with you, Paul says, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Read It Carefully**
>
> Notice exactly what Paul says. He doesn't say anyone who doesn't work shall not eat. He says anyone who is unwilling to work. Paul is talking about able-bodied people who could work but chose not to, and who expected others to support them while they stirred up trouble. He is not talking about people who can't work: children, the elderly, people who are sick or have disabilities, people who have lost their jobs, people caring for family members, or anyone else in genuine need. The Bible repeatedly commands God's people to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (Deuteronomy 15:7–11;

James 1:27). The early church shared food with those in need every day (Acts 6:1), and Paul himself spent years collecting money for poor believers in Jerusalem.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Verse Used Out of Context**

Paul's rule has been quoted in many settings over the centuries. Captain John Smith used it in the English colony at Jamestown in 1609 to force colonists to work. A version of it was written into the first constitution of Soviet Russia in 1918. Politicians and commentators still quote it in debates about welfare and poverty. Whatever your views on those debates, it's important to remember what Paul was actually addressing: a specific problem in a small church, where people who could work were choosing not to and were taking advantage of others' generosity.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How the Early Church Cared**

The early Christians became famous for their generosity. In the fourth century, the Roman emperor Julian, who wanted to bring back the old gods, complained in a letter that the Christians supported not only their own poor but pagans too, while the pagans did nothing for their own. An early Christian handbook called the Didache, probably from around AD 100, told churches to welcome traveling believers, but if a visitor wanted to stay, he should work for his food if he had a trade, and the church should help him find a way to make a living. It warned against people who used the name of Christ to make money without working. That's the balance Paul was aiming for: generosity to those in need, and responsibility for those who are able.

Paul says he's heard that some of them aren't busy, they're busybodies. In Greek, it's a pun, something like they're not working; they're working around. Instead of doing their own work, they were in everyone else's business.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Busybodies**

A busybody is someone who meddles in other people's lives, spreading gossip, stirring up drama, and minding everyone's business except their own.

Social media makes it easier than ever. You can spend hours following other people's drama, commenting on it, and passing it along. Paul's advice is simple: focus on your own work. Do what you're responsible for, and do it well.

To people like that, Paul says, in the Lord Jesus Christ, settle down and earn your own food. Get to work, quietly.

And then Paul turns to everyone else, those who had been working hard and supporting others, and who might have been getting frustrated. As for you, he says, never tire of doing good.

That's important. When some people take advantage of your kindness, it's tempting to stop being kind. Paul says don't. Use wisdom, but keep doing good. Don't let the people who abuse generosity make you stop being generous.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Work**

In the Bible, work isn't a punishment. Before sin ever entered the world, God gave Adam the job of working the garden and taking care of it (Genesis 2:15). Work is part of how we reflect God, who works too. Your work right now might be homework, chores, a part-time job, sports practice, or helping your family. Doing it well, without being asked twice, is a way of honoring God. And earning your own way, as much as you're able, is a gift to the people around you.

If anyone refuses to listen to what Paul says in this letter, take note of them, he says, and don't associate with them, so they'll feel ashamed. But don't treat them like an enemy. Warn them like a brother or sister.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Discipline with Love**

Paul's instructions about stepping back from someone can sound harsh. But notice his goal. It's not to punish or reject them, but to help them realize something is wrong and turn around. And he insists that they're still family.

> Don't treat them as an enemy. In healthy churches, correction is always aimed at restoring people, not pushing them out. If you ever need to step back from a friend who's making destructive choices, you can still care about them, pray for them, and hope for them to come back.

Paul finishes with a prayer for peace. He asks the Lord of peace to give them peace always, in every situation, and to be with all of them.

That's a great prayer for a church that had been shaken by persecution, confusion, rumors, and conflict. Paul doesn't promise that their circumstances will be peaceful. He prays that the Lord of peace will give them peace Himself, always and in every situation. Peace isn't just the absence of trouble. It's the presence of Jesus.

Then Paul takes the pen and writes the final greeting himself. He says this is the mark in all his letters, how they can tell a letter is really from him. Remember the possible fake letter from chapter 2. Paul wants them to recognize his handwriting so they won't be fooled again.

And his very last word, as always, is grace. He prays for the grace of Jesus to be with them all. Notice the word all. Even the idle and disruptive. Even the confused. Even the ones who needed a warning. Grace is for everyone.

KEY VERSE

And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

2 Thessalonians 3:13 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul asks his friends to pray for him. Who could you ask to pray for you? Who could you pray for?
2. What's the difference between people who can't work and people who won't? Why is it important to be careful not to confuse them?
3. Have you ever stopped being kind because someone took advantage of you? What would it look like to keep doing good, with wisdom?
4. Where are you tempted to be a busybody instead of minding your own work?

TRY THIS *Pick one responsibility you usually put off, homework, a chore, practice, or a job, and do it this week without being reminded. Then find one way to quietly do good for someone who can't pay you back.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. It's a letter about justice: God will one day set everything right. That's good news for the people who've been hurt. But it raises a hard question for all of us, because we've all done wrong too. Here's the good news about how God's justice and His mercy meet.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He's calling you.

Paul says God calls people through the gospel so they can share in the glory of Jesus. You were made for that.

> *He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.* **2 Thessalonians 2:14 (NIV)**

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is just, so He doesn't shrug off evil, ours or anyone else's. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus took our place.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. On the cross, God's justice and His love met. Jesus took the punishment we deserved.

> *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* **Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Love the truth, and you'll find it sets you free.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, You are just, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus took the punishment I deserved when He died on the cross, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as*

my King. Help me love the truth, stand firm, and never get tired of doing good. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 and 2 Thessalonians side by side. Then read 1 Timothy, the next letter in the New Testament.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Stand firm together. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Pray for others, as Paul did, and ask them to pray for you. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, God will one day set everything right, and it's worth finding out for yourself where you'll stand.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

2 Thessalonians 3:16 (NIV)