

THE MESSAGE OF 1&2 THESSALONIANS

a summary for Messianic teaching and preaching

Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation, Matthew 24, Zechariah: these are all the parts of Scripture that people commonly consider to be related to the phenomenon known as “Bible prophecy.”¹ Most of the attention that is given to those who examine the end-time themes of Scripture are often focused around these texts. But how many of you are aware that there are other books of the Bible that likewise have a prophetic message? How many of you consciously think about how the blessed hope of Yeshua’s appearing is to be applied to everyday life? What might today’s Messianic community be missing as it considers the Second Coming of our Lord, and events that are to precede His return?

1&2 Thessalonians are, to me, two of the most important yet overlooked books of the Bible not only for end-time studies, but also for considering how the message of Yeshua’s return is to change a person. The Apostle Paul briefly visited the city of Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-10, having been forced out of the city due to persecution levied by the local Jewish leaders. He was not able to spend a great deal of time in training the Thessalonians, but his two epistles to them reveal that he certainly had to correct some misunderstandings that they had somehow adopted, possibly because he was forced to leave them so soon. The Thessalonians were largely former pagans (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10), but were set on the right path of faith.

Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians largely as a message of encouragement to them, as he attests “You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed this message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 1:6). The Thessalonians became an example to emulate as they received the good news of salvation with enthusiasm, becoming “a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thessalonians 1:7). The Thessalonian Believers experienced radical change in their lives as they met the Living God!

Paul summarizes some of the things that happened during his visit to Thessalonica, recalling “As apostles of Messiah we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:6b-8). The Thessalonians were very hospitable to Paul and his party, and they started out well on the path of sanctification (1 Thessalonians 2:12). Paul was also forced to say, though, “For you, brothers, became imitators of God’s [assemblies] in Judea” (1 Thessalonians 2:14a), as they were “suffer[ing] from your own countrymen the same things those [assemblies] suffered from the Jews” (1 Thessalonians 2:14b).

Paul expresses a strong desire to see his Thessalonian friends again (1 Thessalonians 2:17-20), noting how Timothy was sent to them and how he brought back a positive report of their development (1 Thessalonians 3:1-9). He issues the encouraging word, “May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Yeshua comes with all his holy ones” (1 Thessalonians 3:10), then discussing some of the basic ways that the Thessalonians were to live holy lives (1 Thessalonians 4:1-11).

The most important exhortation Paul issues to the Thessalonians in his first letter is undeniably his emphasis on the return of the Lord. Knowing that their teacher had been thrust away from them just as spiritual progress was being made, and that they were enduring similar hardships to the Believers in Judea, the young Thessalonian Believers needed to be assured that there was something good to look forward to in

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Biblical quotations in this article are from the New International Version (NIV).

the end. While none of them are said to have been killed or martyred, some likely wondered if imprisonment, bodily harm, or death were on the horizon. To them, Paul says,

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Yeshua died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Yeshua those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Messiah will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

In these words, Paul affirms the reality that death for the Believer is not something to fear at all. He attests that if one believes that Yeshua the Messiah died and rose again, “so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died” (NRSV). Those who have died in the faith, presently with the Lord in Heaven, will be brought back with Him to be present at the resurrection and transformation of their physical bodies. Any loved ones who have gone on will be united with those who are living. And as Paul astutely concludes, “comfort one another with these words” (NASU). The return of the Lord is to be a great, encouraging sign to all generations as it signals the beginning of a new and different age on Planet Earth!

Paul ends his first letter to the Thessalonians by telling them, “Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2). The Second Coming of Yeshua will come like a thief (or burglar) for sinners who are in the darkness and unaware (1 Thessalonians 5:3-8).² As Paul admonishes them, “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11), as one day the world will be greatly changed and any of the persecutors or potential persecutors of the Thessalonians will find themselves subject to the wrath of God.

Paul ends his first letter to the Thessalonians by asking them to “respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you,” and also remind them “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Messiah Yeshua” (1 Thessalonians 5:12, 15-18). All in all, **1 Thessalonians attempts to be a very upbeat letter to people who by-and-large were very discouraged.** It reminds all of us that even though our world may be stressful, or even be collapsing all around us, we as Believers still have responsibilities and the Lord Himself is going to one day directly intervene to radically change the course of this planet.

Something changed between the Thessalonians receiving Paul’s first letter, requiring him to write a second letter. Not only was 2 Thessalonians a likely response to how the Thessalonians had reacted to his first letter, but it also was written a very short time thereafter.

Paul, the gracious teacher that he often was, opened his second letter with expressing thanks for the faithfulness of the Thessalonians. He tells them, “We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God’s [assemblies] we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring” (2 Thessalonians 1:3-4). Those who would persecute the Thessalonians, and thus reject the gospel of salvation, will receive just punishment from the Almighty (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). And as Paul further tells his Thessalonian friends, “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” (2 Thessalonians 2:11).

It is after such compliments that Paul issues some careful instructions about the end-times, having told them about the encouraging vindication they—and indeed all Believers will receive—when Yeshua the

² Cf. Matthew 24:23 (NEB).

Messiah finally returns. Paul, likely having to clarify some misconceptions of his previous letter, details that specific events must precede the coming of the Lord:

“Concerning the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah 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. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4).

Paul has just described the Abomination of Desolation (Daniel 9:27; Matthew 24:15), the time when the antimessiah/antichrist will be revealed to the world. Other specific events such as an “apostasy” (NASU) must also precede the Second Coming of the Lord. While telling them about Yeshua's return in His first letter to help their despair, Paul must now calm them not to be too overanxious about it. As he asks the Thessalonians, “Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?” (2 Thessalonians 2:5). Interestingly enough, he then issues a severe warning against the lawlessness that is supposed to grow prior to the Lord's return (2 Thessalonians 2:7-10), saying that many will “perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie” (2 Thessalonians 2:10b-11).

Paul is not harsh in his wanting to calm the Thessalonians about the return of Yeshua. He urges them to continue in what they have learned from him, saying, “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 Yeshua the Messiah. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-15). Paul then asks his Thessalonian friends to pray for him, so “that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you” (2 Thessalonians 3:1), specifically that Paul and his party may be protected as they continue in His work (2 Thessalonians 3:2-3).

The only negative word that is seen in Paul's entire correspondence to the Thessalonians is seen at the end of his second letter. He tells them that in order for them to continue to follow in what they have been taught, that they must work. As he recalls, “We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat’” (2 Thessalonians 3:7b-10). Paul then comes to the clincher:

“We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Yeshua the Messiah to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed” (2 Thessalonians 3:11-14).

Somehow, because of how Paul's previous letter included references to Yeshua's return, people were quitting their jobs—being “busybodies”—and were just lazily waiting for it to happen, or in more modern jargon, “come down.” Paul is sure to tell the Thessalonians “do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thessalonians 3:15), as the individual doing this was not to be treated as one in apostasy, yet still in extreme error. Such people were to be spurned so to change their behavior (2 Thessalonians 3:14), but not totally cast aside. Hopefully, such people would see the error of their ways and turn from such a ridiculous course of action, being joined to their daily work *and* the work of the gospel.

Does 1&2 Thessalonians have any important message for us as the emerging Messianic movement? I believe that it does when we weigh how significant it was for the Ancient Thessalonians. Many of us endure trials in our lives, and we need to be reminded that in spite of all the times we are wronged, mistreated, or even persecuted for our beliefs in God and His Word—Yeshua the Messiah *is going to return* to execute righteous judgment on those who reject Him. At the same time, though, certain events must precede His return and we cannot be overanxious. We do not have the option of quitting our jobs or our daily

responsibilities, via the guise of “He’s returning soon so it doesn’t really matter.” *That is exactly the sin that Paul chastised the Thessalonians for!*

It is not that difficult to see that there have been end-time teachings circulating in our movement that have deterred us from fulfilling the mission of God’s *ekklēsia*. An admonition that can frequently be forgotten is, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). Much of the development of the modern Messianic movement has been guided by the idea that we absolutely must be “the final generation,” and sadly this idea has kept us—just like those who quit their jobs in Thessalonica—from performing some of the critical work that needs to be done. This critical work, both spiritual and theological, will transform us into a mature Messianic movement that will not only be able to answer the challenges of the current time, but also enable us to endure the Tribulation when it does take place.

How will we be able to take the message of 1&2 Thessalonians, seriously? Who must we ignore that has quit the required, daily tasks of God’s Kingdom? What work have we avoided that now ***absolutely must*** be accomplished—if the Messianic movement is to have any kind of future? Perhaps we need to reconsider the agendas of some in our midst to teach about the End of the Age. Do they teach about prophecy via an ethos consistent with the Apostle Paul in 1&2 Thessalonians, or are they more about quitting the daily tasks God requires of His people to make a short-term name for themselves? Are such people encouraging others to live lives of holiness (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-11)? These are questions that are admittedly very difficult for us to answer. Yet, if we desire to be “fully Biblical,” 1&2 Thessalonians might just need to be two texts that we consult *first*, **before** examining any other “end-time” book of the Bible.