

NOTES FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF II THESSALONIANS - PART THREE

Having begun as he usually did with positive encouragement about their growing faith towards God and love for each other, Paul now moves gently into showing the Thessalonians where they are wandering off track. In the first letter he had also commended them for their 'steadfastness of hope' and explained how Christian hope is about Christ's return to earth at the end of history to take all believers, dead or alive, to be with Him for ever. The false teaching which has somehow infiltrated their church is undermining that hope. They have been taught that Jesus has already come back apparently unnoticed. If that is true they have nothing more to hope for.

Paul raises three possibilities as to how such teaching could have so easily persuaded the church. Someone might have had a vision or dream of what they supposed to be an angel. He had warned them elsewhere against depending on vision or dreams.(Col.2:18) Alternatively a member of the church could have claimed falsely to be passing on a message from Paul. Finally there might have been a forged letter from Paul, which was a common event in the first and second centuries. Under all such circumstances we have a simple solution, to check the message with the rest of scripture and with God in our hearts, like the Berean Christians.(Acts 17:10,11) Had they done this it would have been clear that the teaching was wrong.(2:1,2)

Two events will precede Christ's return. There will be an 'apostasy' which literally means 'defection' or 'failing to stand for the truth'. Presumably this will be on a world-wide scale based on a different religion or philosophy. Secondly the 'man of lawlessness' will come first. This could be Paul's way of describing what Jesus calls 'false Christs',(Matt.24:5,24) or John calls 'the antichrist'.(I Jn.2:18,22; 4:3). Paul gives us his essential characteristics to allow us to recognise such a person. His purpose will be to destroy. His strategy will be to oppose every other god, culminating in elevating himself as the only god in the temple. Neither of these things has happened yet although from time to time various candidates for the antichrist are proposed. Paul had spelt this out both on his first visit and in his first letter,(I Thess.4:13-5:8) so there was absolutely no excuse for being taken in by such teaching.(2:3-5)

The Bible gives various clues to the identity of the 'man of lawlessness' while not always using the same title to describe him and therefore leaving us in some uncertainty. It seems that God's purpose is that we should have a general awareness of what is to come but He has deliberately left gaps in our knowledge to keep us dependent on Him as we face difficulties. Daniel gives such a series of hints about someone who was to come who seems to fill many of these criteria.(Dan.7:23-26; 8:25; 11:36; 12:1) He also speaks of Michael, an angel, who could be the one described in Paul's letter who restrains the 'man of lawlessness'. Daniel's evil force will be destroyed by the coming of Christ and 'the breath of His mouth', implying the powerful words which come from Him, elsewhere pictured as a 'sharp two-edged sword coming out of His mouth'.(Rev.1:16) The enemy's methods will be those of Satan, deception by supposed miracles and the attractiveness of wickedness which appeals to those who have chosen not to believe the

truth. The fairness of God's judgement on those who reject Christ will therefore be obvious because they will so clearly have chosen to follow the 'man of lawlessness'.

Although the Thessalonian Christians had for the moment been misled by wrong teaching Paul remains confident of their ultimate salvation. He knows that the Lord has 'sanctified' them, taken them as His, and will never let them go. He reminds them of God's process of salvation in which He chose them from the beginning, called them through the gospel and then brought them to Himself when they responded by faith to the truth. The end will be God's glory, all that He is made visible in their lives. False teaching may slow this process but will not be allowed to prevent it. Their responsibility is to hold on tight to what Paul had taught them either when he visited or in his letters.(2:13-15)

Paul had done his part in teaching. The Thessalonians were responsible to depend on the truth but it is a great relief to know that the whole outcome will be the result of the unfailing work of a loving God. By grace He gives us inner and lasting strength which maintains hope, which as we have repeatedly seen, is based on the certainty of His future return – not an event already in the past. In the meantime we are to get on with the job of telling and showing His grace to others.(2:16,17)

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER THREE

3:1-5 Q.1 For what two reasons did Paul want the Thessalonians to pray for him? Did he really believe that the effectiveness of his ministry in other places would be increased by their prayers? If not, what result might he have hoped would come from them listening to God? How might Paul and his friends be rescued from 'perverse and evil men'? What then was Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian Christians? How could they be 'protected from the evil one'? How did his instruction to them to pray and his own prayer relate to the problems they were having?

3:6-13 Q.2 What 'undisciplined' behaviour was occurring? How had it resulted from the wrong teaching they had received? What forms might it take if we saw such things happening today? What teaching can change such situations? What practical effect did Paul expect that teaching would have? How can we sometimes offer ourselves as an example of our message?

3:14,15 Q.3 Why were they to keep away from those who were making mistakes? Surely we should be witnessing to them? How can we avoid someone but treat him as a brother not an enemy? Give practical examples of how this can happen.

3:16 Q.4 In what way would God's peace be so important in the light of all they were going through? Just how do we find God's peace at such times?(Phil.4:4-7)

3:17,18 Q.5 Why does Paul emphasise his distinguishing mark at the end of his letter? How does the last line sum up the secret of handling every problem in our lives and churches?