

NOTES FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF II THESSALONIANS - INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTER ONE

Before beginning a study of this letter it is strongly recommended that you start by reading the account in Acts 17 of Paul's first visit to Thessalonica. Be familiar also with I Thessalonians, his first letter to this group of Christians.

It must have been a huge disappointment to the apostle Paul to find himself needing to write a second letter to the Thessalonian Christians apparently only a few months after his first one. Paul had spoken in such glowing terms of the faith, love and hope of these people which had so impressed others that Paul and his friends hardly had to open their mouths to convince them of the truth of the gospel.(I Thess.1:3-10) Rather than concentrating on problems as he had to do when writing to places like Corinth, Paul had been able instead to give them a solid understanding of the principles of effective ministry. What had gone wrong in such a short time? How can we learn from their mistakes?

The answer is very simple. In a few short months false teaching had arrived in Thessalonica which had caused deep confusion, led to wrong behaviour and threatened to bring the work of God in their area to a halt.(II Thess.2:2; 3:11) Time and time again through history, subtly wrong teaching has taken hold in the church with devastating results. The Devil is a cunning liar who knows how to trap us if we are not awake, of a clear mind and well armed as Paul had urged these believers to be.(I Thess.5:4-8) The leaders in Thessalonica had 'dozed off' and so been misled or unaware of the danger of some new teaching. So how did Paul deal with the crisis? And how should we?

Paul's strategy was interesting. Instead of jumping straight in to rebuke them, he began with some encouragement concerning the positive way they had handled persecution, and a review of all they had in Christ which had enabled them to deal with affliction and which could now equip them to deal with this new kind of attack. He reminded them as he had done in his first letter,(I Thess.4:13-5:3) how the promise of Christ's return, by letting us know the final, winning score half way through the game, gives us confidence to face the toughest opposition. But this also happened to be the very same teaching over which they were now struggling.

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER ONE

1:1,2 Q.1 Who were the three writers of this letter? How would it have increased the effectiveness of the letter to have exactly the same team as last time?(I Thess.1:1) How would it also have helped to use exactly the same greeting as last time? How would this greeting take on new significance in a new situation?

1:3,4 Q.2 For what is Paul thankful when he thinks of the Thessalonian Christians? How is he restating his delight about their progress which he had recorded before?(I Thess.1:3) What has happened to the three attributes of faith, love and hope since the

previous letter? Under what kind of conditions had they needed to test these characteristics? How do faith, love and hope work in our tough times?

1:5-8 Q.3 What is the first reason Paul gives for us to be comforted by the certainty of Christ's return during persecution? For what will those who give us a hard time now be punished when Jesus comes back? How should knowing this change our behaviour?(Rom.12:19)

1:9 Q.4 What will be the worst aspect of God's judgement on unbelievers? How does knowing this help to answer the question, 'Won't a loving God take everyone to heaven anyway?' How does the story of Lazarus and the rich man illustrate this warning?(Luke 16:19-31)

1:10 Q.5 What will the return of Jesus mean to suffering believers? How will Jesus be 'glorified in His saints' when He comes back? What do we have to do to be sure which side we will be on when that time comes?

1:11,12 Q.6 What is the meaning of Paul's prayer for the Thessalonian Christians? What would be the secret of being 'worthy of your calling? How has this first chapter prepared for the difficult things Paul will have to go on to deal with?