

Study Guide

“A Prescription for Spiritual Health”

For 2 Thessalonians, we’re going to structure our study by the *Praise* method of Bible study, described on the “6 Bible-Study Steps” page of the Library of God website:

1. Pray that God will guide you to understand and do what he wants from this book.
2. Read the whole book, preferably several times.
3. Analyze the design of the book (= Discover the structure or “shape” of the text).
4. Interpret the meanings of the sections of the book as they relate to each other.
5. Summarize the main points.
6. Exercise: Live by the main points.

Pray
Read
Analyze
Interpret
Summarize
Exercise

P: Pray for God’s Guidance.

In a sense, the process of seeking God starts, ends, and breathes in prayer. If God went to the “divine trouble” to give us the Word of God (in Jesus), inspire the written word through his Spirit, and then preserve and deliver that word to us today in the books of God, don’t you think he wants to connect with us through that word? Here’s an excerpt from the second volume of *Inkblotitis* (*Rediscovering the Books of God*, 48-50):

. . . . Then, above our perception of our motives and impediments, by all means start with God, start with prayer. How better to seek the mind and heart of God than by asking him to help? If God didn’t want to help us, he wouldn’t have done so much to offer himself to us and give us his written word. So before we open God’s books and begin to read, let’s turn our hearts toward him, honestly, sincerely, reverently, fervently, excitedly, expectantly, and prayerfully. This is the first thing. . . .

This brings us back to the first principle of good Bible reading: our hearts. If seeking God is your goal, your real motivation for reading the Bible (not to prove a point or reinforce something you already think and believe), then I believe God will deliver. He always does. He will be with you, guide you, and draw near to you as you seek him. This is why God has given so much to make his word available to us. This is why he poured forth his Spirit in days gone by through the nation of Israel, and the writers and prophets of the Old Testament. This is why he sent his Son to reveal to us the Word of God in living color (to borrow an old television phrase). This is why he inspired the writers of the New Testament and delivered these messages of truth, justice, forgiveness, and love in various times and places. This is why he preserved the texts of scripture against all odds and why he motivated men and women to bleed and burn and die so we could read it in our languages today.

Never doubt God’s resolve to find and know you. And never, ever, doubt that God wants you to know him, that he awaits you, and will draw near to you with love and strength beyond all barriers.

So please don’t let tools and rules and technical discussion ever discourage you. God wants you, and you want him. That’s what matters. When you read the Bible, ask God to show you himself—time and experience in the word then promises sights (and insights) more vivid and beautiful than anything you’ve ever seen.

R: Read the whole book, preferably several times.

This is the first step (besides having a heart to seek God, of course) for studying any Bible book: read the book from beginning to end, several times. Fortunately, this is easy to do with 2 Thessalonians because of its short length. The purpose is to begin to get a big-picture sense of what the book is about. It’s sort of like looking at the picture on the box when putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

Overview

Describe (in a brief paragraph) the overall story/picture presented in the book of 2 Thessalonians. Who wrote it? To whom? For what?

From your initial reading, what issues, requests, or ideas does 2 Thessalonians talk about? What are the main topics or themes? What do you think is the main point or purpose of the book? (Of course, you should revisit these questions as your exploration continues.)

How does 2 Thessalonians relate to 1 Thessalonians? What are the overlapping themes? What’s different about the two letters? What are the new themes, points, and purposes of 2 Thessalonians?

A: Analyze the design of the book (Discover the structure or “shape” of the text).

1. Find the Introduction and the Conclusion.

To get a clear sense of what a Bible book is about, it’s important to come to see how the book is put-together, organized, or “shaped.” Rule #3 of good Bible reading (as set out in *Rediscovering*) is to “Discover the structure or ‘shape’ of the text.” To do this, a first, helpful step is to find the Introduction and Conclusion—it’s like finding the corner pieces when putting together a jig-saw puzzle. Introductions often introduce key ideas and purposes of a text; Conclusions sum up and bring things home. Isolating the Introduction and Conclusion also reveals the basic 3-part shape: Introduction-Middle-Conclusion.

Introduction

What verses (chapter and verses) serve as the Introduction to 2 Thessalonians? What role does the Thanksgiving phrase (1:3) and Request (2:1) play in helping to isolate it? (See Study Guide 1 on 1 Thessalonians if this doesn't mean much to you.)

Conclusion

What verses (chapter and verses) serve as the Conclusion to 2 Thessalonians?

Here again—as in 1 Thessalonians—there appears to be more than one “conclusion” as you read the letter (“conclusions” in the middle of a document, we typically call “transitions”). Paul often divides his letters into two major halves, separated sometimes by a concluding or summarizing prayer. He then uses summarizing prayers, request for prayer, and various sorts of greetings at the end of his letters. We find these “ending” features in 2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5—but . . . it's not yet “the end.”

It's certainly appropriate to see 2:16-3:5 as a “concluding” or “transitioning” section. An important charge follows, however, in 3:6-12, followed by brief commands to the church (3:13-15), another (brief) prayer, signature, and closing greeting. It's easy to see 3:13-18 as the final Conclusion to the letter.

We have, in a sense, then, a two part letter shape or structure—not unlike Paul's typical pattern, but different in other ways and abbreviated in this short letter.

2. Set out the overall shape of 2 Thessalonians.

Once you find the Introduction and Conclusion (or Conclusions in this case), you should be able to set forth the basic shape of 2 Thessalonians.

Note these elements:

- Prescript: 1:1-2
- Thanksgiving: 1:3-12
- Request/Petition: 2:1-12
- Renewed Thanksgiving (as Summary/Conclusion with Exhortation): 2:13-15
- Prayer (split into 2:16-17 and 3:5) with Concluding Elements: 2:16-3:5
- Charge/Command: 3:6-12
- Concluding Items: 3:13-18

Though most of Paul's letters are divided into 2 major halves, 2 Thessalonians appears to come to an end (3:5) and start again—somewhat abruptly (at least at first glance)—in 3:6. The impact this would have on a listening audience is striking, especially in regard to the issue that the “continuation”—with very strong language—addresses (walking or living outside of the teachings/example given them in regard to honest, hard work). A little closer look does reveal some transitional

elements of 2:16-3:5, however. For example, the phrase “And we have confidence in the Lord about you that the things we command, you are doing and will do” (3:4) uses the first, key word of 3:6; while the idea that they *will do what he charges* sets up for the command he’s about to give them (on the role of the “Confidence” formula at the end of Paul’s letters, see Appendix 2, pp. 348-49 in *Rediscovering the Books for God*).

We might do something like this:

Introduction: 1:1-12
Middle/Body: 2:1-12
Conclusion/Transition: 2:16-3:5
Renewed Middle/Body: 3:6-12 [or 3:6-15]
Conclusion: 3:13-18 [or 3:16-18]

Note the similarity with 1 Thessalonians:

Introduction: 1:1-10
Middle 2:1-3:13
 Transition: 3:11-13
Middle: 4:1-5:24
Conclusion: 5:25-28

I. Interpret the meanings of the sections as they relate to each other.

1. Explore the Introduction (1:1-12).

Prescript: 1:1-2

Thanksgiving/Introduction: 1:3-12

List the primary topics introduced in 1 Thessalonians 2:3-12? What themes are the same or similar to those in 1 Thessalonians? Which are different?

How does 1:3-4 help us with our understanding of 1 Thessalonians?

What is the content of Paul’s prayer for them in 1:11-12? In what way might this provide a summary of this overall purpose in the letter? What are the topics? (Compare this to the similar function of 1:9-10 in 1 Thessalonians.)

What is the purpose of the Thessalonians performing “every good purpose and work of faith in power”? (see 1:12 and compare 1 Thessalonians 4:12).

2. Explore 2:1-12: Request/Petition Not to Be Shaken.

Summarize 2:1-12. What separates or distinguishes 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 as a section of material?

What is the primary request? What is the teaching or idea at the root of the potential for the Thessalonian Christians to be alarmed or shaken? (2:1-2)

How was this section of material introduced in the opening Thanksgiving (see 1:5-10)? How does the “mystery of lawlessness” relate to their suffering? (Does it relate?)

What evidence does Paul give to refute the idea that the day of the Lord had already come? What must happen first? How does Jesus’ *coming/revelation* relate to the *coming/revelation* of “the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction”?

Trace out the words “working,” “faith”/“belief,” and “truth” this passage. How do these ideas relate to the Thessalonians “work of faith” and “belief in the truth” of the gospel? Hint: check out 2:13-14.

What’s the relationship between loving evil or wickedness, not loving truth, and God’s place in the ultimate results? Where does “salvation” or “destruction” come from?

What is Paul’s purpose in reminding them of these things that they already know (2:5)? Hint: Remember the purpose of the petition/section: for them not to be shaken.

What in the World Does this Mean?

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. To do our best to understand what’s being said, here are a few things to keep in mind:

What does it mean—why would anyone think—that the “day of the Lord” had already come or was present? (That seems really strange to us for the reasons Paul says.) Is this the same thing as saying that “the second coming” had already happened? Is there anything about or within Christianity that could be conceived as evidence of the “the day” or “time/presence of the Lord” (sometimes called “realized eschatology”)? In other words, how could they believe that the “day of the Lord” had already come?

In describing the “man of lawlessness” and what will become of him, Paul shifts—at least to some extent—into the Jewish style of “apocalyptic” (see pp. 125-32 of *Rediscovering the Books of God*). Apocalyptic literature had a long history among Jewish people as a way of communicating to a community of people within and about an oppressive government or power in symbolic and cryptic or esoteric ways. Its purpose was to encourage in the face of oppression and suffering.

Paul relies a great deal in this section on what the Thessalonians already knew—the things he had told them while he was with them. For example, he says, “And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time” (2:6). We don’t. Paul reminds them of things they already know and thus omits fundamental things that leave us, unfortunately, in the dark (which, interestingly, is what apocalyptic writing did to those who were not “in the know”).

This passage should be read in light of 1:5-12, as well as 1 and 2 Thessalonians as a whole. The connection between their suffering, Paul’s encouragement—with the use of “apocalyptic” language—and the idea that God will ultimate rectify the situation through the coming of Jesus should be interpreted as part of the overall book-level (literary and historical) context.

The basic, broad points are clear: (1) The day of the Lord and the coming of Jesus had not already happened; (2) it wouldn’t happen until the “apostasy” or “rebellion” and the man of lawlessness comes; (3) the “mystery” or hiddenness of lawlessness (= no God/law, except this guy) was already working; (4) many who love evil, not truth, will be deceived; and (5) Christ will destroy the man of lawlessness and those who follow him with his coming. There’s more here than this, but these are some of the dominant ideas.

To what exactly does “the apostasy” or “rebellion” refer? Who/What is the man of lawlessness? No one really knows because we simply aren’t privy to enough of the information/teaching given to these early Christians. Theories and speculations abound. But that’s all they are: speculation. This passage, then, often becomes a giant inkblot—not so much, in this case, because we don’t know enough about the content of book itself (the *literary context*), but because we don’t know enough from and about the “givens” that lie behind the book (the *historical context*).

3. Explore 2:13-3:5: Conclusion: “Stand and Hold.”

What role does 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15 serve in the overall structure or shape of the letter? How does the renewal of the Thanksgiving compare to the multiple use of “Thanksgivings” in 1 Thessalonians (2:13; 3:9-10 followed by a prayer)?

What key points are summarized in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15? How do these subjects relate to 2 Thessalonians (and 1 Thessalonians)?

How does the concluding exhortation of 2:15 relate to the purpose of 2 Thessalonians?

How does the prayer of 2:16-17 relate to the themes and purposes of the letter?

Why do you think Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray for him? How does this function in regard to his relationship with the Thessalonian church? (Remember the importance of this theme in 1 Thessalonians.)

What theme(s) does the praising of God in 3:3 relate to?

How does the “confidence formula” in 3:4 reinforce the purpose of the letter? (See Appendix 2, pp. 348-49 in *Rediscovering the Books for God* for a summary of the “Confidence Formula.”)

How does the prayer of 3:5 relate to the themes and purposes of the letter? Why might Paul have separated the prayer into two brief prayers? (2:16-17; 3:5).

4. Explore 3:6-12: The “Out of Step” or “Idle.”

The Greek word *ataktos* impacts how we read/translate this section. The word generally means to be “out of line,” “out of order” or “rank,” (often so of soldiers) “unruly,” “deviating from the prescribed rule.” It did, however, come to be used with connotations of idleness or laziness. Combined with the immediate context and the emphasis in 1 and 2 Thessalonians on people not working, some translators have opted for the more specific meaning (vs. the general meaning of “out of order” or “step”). The next phrase (3:6)—“and not according to the traditions received from us”—certainly displays the idea of deviation from the teaching Paul had given them. On the other hand, the specific statement in 3:7 that Paul and his team were not *ataktos* among them, but worked hard to provide food for themselves as an example to the Thessalonians clearly brings in the idea of not-working or idleness.

A sampling of translations from some of the common versions displays the dual potential:

RSV: “. . . to keep away from believers who are living in idleness . . .”

ESV: “. . . that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness . . .”

NASB: “. . . that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life . . .”

HCSB: “. . . to keep away from every brother who walks irresponsibly . . .”

NLT: “. . . from all believers who live idle lives . . .”

NIV: “. . . to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive . . .”

Summarize 3:6-12. How does this material relate to 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, 4:11-12, and 5:14? What is the problem? Has it gotten worse?

Why do you think Paul introduces the paragraph with such strong language (“command . . . in the name of the Lord Jesus”; also compare the “Petition/Request” form)? Why might he have separated this “command” from the previous part of the letter? (Isn’t it interesting that Paul appears to be doing what he instructed the Thessalonians to do in 1 Thess 5:14: “Warn the idle/unruly . . .”?)

What charge or command is given to the main body of believers? What are the Thessalonian Christians supposed to do regarding those who will not work? And how are they to do it (3:14)? What command and encouragement (“Petition”) is given to those who are not working?

What value/lifestyle is taught and reinforced by this section? Is there any potential significance to Paul's choice of words in 3:10: "If anyone does not want [or "is not willing"] to work, neither let him eat" (in other words, are there some situations where someone might not be able to work, but still "wants to," and would not be *ataktos*, therefore)?

Why do you think some of the Thessalonian Christians aren't or won't work? Is there a relationship between this behavior and the teaching (and/or those teaching) that the day of the Lord had already come? Or with the emphasis throughout 1 and 2 Thessalonians of the certainty and possible nearness of Jesus' 2nd coming? (We don't really know, but the context suggests there might be.)

5. Explore 3:15-18: Concluding Items/Prayer.

Note the connection between the brief phrase in 3:13 to "Never get tired of . . ." or "Don't be discouraged in doing what is good" and the overall point and purposes of these 2 letters. (Remember the purpose of a conclusion as a final opportunity to summarize and drive home the main point/s.)

In light of the charge for the letter to be read to all the Christians there, how important is it for Christians to "keep in step" or "live up to" the values and teachings given to us (compare this to 1:11-12)?

Why might Paul have pointed out the authenticity of this letter (3:17; compare 2:2)?

Why do you think Paul prays for peace at the end of the letter (especially after the hard statements regarding church discipline)? (What do you think Paul means by "peace"? Any chance it relates to the Jewish concept of *shalom*? Any potential connection with the overall theme of "spiritual health" [2:13]?)

S: Summarize the main points of the book.

Summary Verses

It can sometimes be helpful to make a list of summary statements from a book. Here are a few from 2 Thessalonians:

. . . . To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:11-12).

. . . because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2:10-12).

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.(2:13-17).

. . . . But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ (3:1-5).

Never get tired of doing good (3:13).

This step of studying a Bible book is where we create a title for the book and a bullet-point summary or snapshot in order to help us encapsulate and remember the main points. How about this? (This is just my attempt—you should do it for yourself.)

Title

“A Prescription for Spiritual Health”

2:13: . . . chosen “for salvation through the sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth”

2 Thessalonians B-P Snapshot

- Don’t worry: At the right time, Jesus will come again and set things straight
- Stand and hold: Tradition and teaching matter (or simply: truth matters)
- Work hard: so you can live and share the gospel effectively
- Stay engaged: “Don’t ever get tired of doing good”
“. . . that God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every good purpose and work of faith by his power”
- Ring a bell—loud and clear—so others can follow and can stay in step

Snippets (how about a “snip-shot”?)

1. **Don’t worry . . .** (because you put your faith in God and his plans for the future)
2. **Stand and hold . . .**
3. **Work hard . . .**
4. **Engage for good . . .**
5. **Point the way . . .**

Someone Might Preach a Sermon

Suffering . . . and waiting for Jesus

Standing for truth

Working hard

Engaging for good

Helping others stay the course

E. Exercise the priorities of God (from 2 Thessalonians) into your life (= Apply the word).

There are, of course, several major applications of 2 Thessalonians to our lives. What changes of thought and behavior does this book of God prescribe for us? And for you?

Purpose: So that God might make us “worthy of his calling and may fulfill every good purpose and work of faith by his power, so that the name of Jesus might be honored” in us. . . . that we might receive and experience “salvation through the sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth.” A few potential applications:

What are your thoughts and feelings about the second coming of Jesus?

2 Thessalonians provides strong encouragement in the face of sufferings for Christ. It’s fundamental “apocalyptic” mindset points us to a lifestyle of expectation regarding the second coming of Jesus (as well as to other books of the Bible that portray this ultimate victory of God over evil). It’s principles of “expectation” and “engagement” directs us to a dedicated—even passionate—lifestyle that brings honor to God and opens the door for sharing the message of Christ.

How devoted are you to know and live by the fundamental teachings of Christ?

Since tradition and teaching matter, then we should be motivated to learn and know the fundamental teachings and values of the Christian faith. Several of these are included in the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, like reaching out with the message of God’s love and salvation in Christ, building sacred/successful marriages and families, living passionate and honorable lives, working hard to support our families and be a blessing to others, always growing, always encouraging, always holding on when times get tough, etc.

How does your level and style of “engagement” in the day-to-day “routines” honor Christ and open the way for the spread of the gospel?

What is your attitude about working? What’s its purpose? How do you use it to honor Christ and share the good news? Do you contribute to the needs and well-being of your family? In short, what’s your purpose on planet earth?

How are you devoted to God’s purposes?

To the work of faith? To doing good? In your home and your church?

Are there people around you that need your help and encouragement?

Are we afraid of “discipline” in the churches today? In what way are you—and your church—devoted to helping fellow travelers stay engaged and in step with these principles?