

The Structure of 2 Thessalonians for Preaching

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I recently finished preaching through Ecclesiastes at Kenwood, and I knew that a sermon series through the Song of Songs was on the immediate horizon (we are in it at the time of this writing). I wanted to take a short foray into the New Testament, preferably into a smaller Pauline Epistle, between Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. I chose 2 Thessalonians, initially thinking I might complete the three-chapter letter in three Sunday sermons.

As I read the Greek text of the letter closely and repeatedly in preparation, however, I began to suspect that Paul was using the term “brothers” at or near the beginning of each new section. I tracked down all the instances of “brothers” and used this key term to delimit the thought-units in the letter, finding that this tracked pretty well with the paragraphing in both the Greek text and in English translations. As I began to meditate on the relationships between the thought-units in the text, I began to suspect that Paul had structured the whole letter as a chiasm.

Rather than go with the chapter divisions that have been foisted on the text by later students of the letter, I was compelled to try to exposit the thought-units

the author of the letter, Paul, had built into it and signaled in various ways. The corresponding thought units of the letter fall out as follows (beginning matches end, second section stands across from second to last, third corresponds to third to last, and then the central turning point):

The grace and peace in the opening of the letter (2 Thess 1:1–2) is matched by an inverted peace and grace in its closing (3:16–18). The thanksgiving that Paul opens the body of the letter with in 1:3–11 really focuses on the second coming, and that teaching on the second coming is applied in the command not to tolerate undisciplined, disorderly, unruly idleness in 3:6–15. Paul’s teaching on the man of lawlessness whose rebellion will precede the second coming in 2:1–12 is matched by his request that the Thessalonians pray that he will be delivered from wicked men in 3:1–5. These sections frame the central statement in 2:13–17, on how Paul thanks and praises God for choosing the Thessalonians and calling them to himself in the Gospel.

Often the central piece of a chiastic structure will reach back to the beginning as it also anticipates the end. In this case, the language of 2:13 exactly matches the language of 1:3, and the reference to “good work” in 2:17 anticipates the final section on not tolerating idleness in 3:6–15.

The literary structure provides the medium through which the message gets communicated. The divisions of the text that the author himself built into the text provide any preacher with natural thought-units to exposit.

In the rest of this short piece, I provide summaries of the chiastic structure of 2 Thessalonians, and then in the appendix I provide the full text of the letter in the ESV, broken down into the individual chiastic structures that work together to build the overarching chiasm, with key terms and phrases highlighted in corresponding colors. Hopefully this will help you not only in your study of 2 Thessalonians but in your own examination of the rest of the Bible.¹

¹ In a book set to appear in July of 2025, I seek to demonstrate the chiastic structure of John’s Gospel, which like 2 Thessalonians is an overarching chiasm built out of smaller chiasms. See James M. Hamilton Jr., *In the Beginning Was the Word: Finding Meaning in the Literary Structure of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2025).

A SHORT SUMMARY OF THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF 2 THESSALONIANS

1:1–2, Grace and Peace

1:3–11, We always give thanks/pray for you

2:1–12, The rebellion, the man of lawlessness, activity of Satan

2:13–17, We always give thanks

3:1–5, Pray for us: wicked men; the evil one

3:6–15, We command you not to tolerate idleness

3:16–18, Peace, Grace

A SLIGHTLY ELABORATED SUMMARY OF THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF 2 THESSALONIANS

1:1–2, Greeting, Grace and Peace

1:3–11, We always give thanks/pray for you, faith, love, return of Christ

2:1–12, We warned you about the coming of the man of lawlessness

2:13–17, We always give thanks, election, Spirit, Gospel,
Christ, stand firm, may God comfort you

3:1–5, Pray for us to be delivered from wicked men; he will guard
you against the evil one.

3:6–15, We command you not to tolerate idleness but to persevere in doing
good

3:16–18, Peace, Greeting, Grace

APPENDIX

**The Full Text of 2 Thessalonians (ESV) Formatted as a Chiasm
with Highlighted Corresponding Terms and Phrases**

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴ Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

⁵ This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—

⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels

⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,

⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶

And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time.

⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.

Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.

⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

⁹ The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,

¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

¹¹ Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, ¹² in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

¹³ But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by his Spirit and belief in the truth.

¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷ comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

Finally, brothers, pray for us,

that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, ² and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men.

For not all have faith.

³ But the Lord is faithful.

He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

⁴ And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.

⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.

⁶ Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.

¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.

¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³ As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵ Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

¹⁶ Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.

¹⁷ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.

¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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