

New Testament Literature — Philemon and Thessalonians

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson | **Session 24**

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson explores Paul's social and eschatological teachings in the New Testament letters of Philemon, 1 Thessalonians, and 2 Thessalonians. He first analyzes why Paul implicitly subverts Roman slavery through the transformative equality of the gospel rather than issuing an explicit political condemnation. Transitioning to the Thessalonian correspondence, Dr. Mathewson clarifies Paul's pastoral responses regarding sexual purity, the resurrection comfort for deceased believers at Christ's return, and different views on end-times tribulation. Finally, he examines 2 Thessalonians as a corrective for those mistakenly believing the Day of the Lord had already arrived, detailing necessary historical precursors such as the rebellion, the man of lawlessness, and the removal of the restrainer.

Outline

I. Introduction and Context of Lecture 24

- A. Opening prayer and course objective
- B. Canonical placement and focus on Philemon and Thessalonians

II. Paul's Approach to Slavery in Philemon

- A. The core problem: Why Paul regulates rather than explicitly condemns slavery
 - 1. Paul's instruction on master-slave duties in Colossians and Philemon
 - 2. Consideration of first-century political entanglements versus modern free speech
- B. Three key characteristics of Greco-Roman slavery
 - 1. Slavery was not racially or nationally motivated
 - 2. Slavery was not universally cruel; some found better security as slaves
 - 3. Slavery was deeply ingrained in the Greco-Roman cultural fabric
- C. Implicit subversion through the power of the Gospel
 - 1. Proclamation of spiritual equality and shared inheritance in Christ (Galatians 3:28)
 - 2. The Gospel as an internal catalyst causing slavery to gradually wilt and die

III. Background and Themes of 1 Thessalonians

- A. Historical context and background

1. Paul's brief ministry in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (Acts 17)
2. Establishment of the Thessalonian church after a few months
- B. Pastoral themes and instructions
 1. Commendation and extended thanksgiving for their faith (Chapters 1–3)
 2. Exhortations to holiness and sexual purity in a pagan environment (Chapter 4:1–8)
- C. Eschatological comfort regarding the Second Coming (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11)
 1. Pastoral concern: Anxiety regarding deceased Christians at Christ's return
 2. Apostolic assurance: 'The dead in Christ will rise first'
 3. Parallels with Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24)
- D. Theological perspectives on End-Times Tribulation and Rapture
 1. Jewish apocalyptic background: 'Eschatological woes' / 'birth pangs' preceding the Kingdom
 2. Three primary historical views on the timing of being caught up (Rapture):
 - a. Pre-tribulation view
 - b. Mid-tribulation view
 - c. Post-tribulation view (Rapture and Second Coming as a single event)
 3. Call for theological humility and unity around core creeds

IV. Corrective Eschatology in 2 Thessalonians

- A. Occasion and background of 2 Thessalonians
 1. Misinterpretation or overreaction to 1 Thessalonians 4
 2. False reports or forged letters claiming the Day of the Lord had already arrived
- B. Paul's primary message
 1. Clarification that believers are not currently in the Day of the Lord
 2. Definition of the Day of the Lord: The final divine intervention, judgment, and new creation
- C. Required historical precursors prior to the Day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:2–11)
 1. The Apostasy / Rebellion
 2. The revelation of the Man of Lawlessness
 3. The removal of the Restrainer holding back evil
- D. Interpretive challenges and practical takeaways
 1. Uncertainty surrounding the identity of the Restrainer and Man of Lawlessness
 2. Warning against apocalyptic panic, date-setting, and fanaticism