

e x p o s i t o r y n o t e s

INTRODUCTION

live for the future NOW

a study of 1 and 2 Thessalonians

The arrival of the year 2000 and a new millennium has created much speculation about the future among many people. Among Christians it has stirred up renewed interest in biblical teachings about the end time (which is called eschatology). Will the Lord return soon? What will happen when He does return?

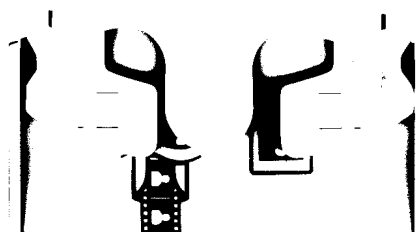
Believers in the early church asked similar questions. Their questions were not generated by a change in a millennium. Yet their anticipation that the end might come soon parallels the anticipation of believers today concerning the return of Christ. As a result Paul's teaching and advice to the Thessalonians about the return of Christ can provide insights valuable to people today who struggle with similar concerns.

Content. Only a small portion of 1 and 2 Thessalonians deals directly with eschatology. For the most part both letters instruct the church on how to live daily for the Lord. Even the sections that teach us about the end time have a consistent and clear message for believers: living each day for the Lord is the best way to be prepared for His eventual return. The outline for this study (found in full in the textbook *Live for the Future Now: A Study of 1 and 2 Thessalonians*) reflects this wide range of topics and the challenge to live today in a manner that prepares for tomorrow, whatever tomorrow may bring.

The City. The believers to which Paul sent these letters lived in Thessalonica. The city was a seaport located on the Aegean coast of the Roman province of Macedonia (the northern part of modern Greece) near the three-fingered peninsula of Chalcidice. A major Roman road, the Via Egnatia, also ran through the city. This trade route ran from the Adriatic coast at Apollonia across to Thessalonica and then along the coast through Philippi to Kypsela in Thrace. The city's location on sea and land trade routes made it important commercially.

Thessalonica was also politically prominent. In Paul's day it was the capital of Macedonia. The Roman proconsul of the region had his residence and administrative offices there. The charge made against Paul of insurrection against Rome (Acts 17:6,7) would have been taken very seriously in such a setting. At the same time the influence of Roman law reduced the threat of mob violence in favor of more peaceful, legal solutions to conflicts brought before the Roman court (Acts 17:9).

The modern Greek city of Salonica is built on top of biblical Thessalonica's ruins. As a result archaeologists have excavated very little of the ancient Hellenistic city. A visitor to the modern city can view an area about the size of a city block undergoing excavation. Honoring its history, the modern city has a major thoroughfare following the general path of the Via Egnatia that retains the name. Today an excellent museum provides exhibits illustrating the city and the region's illustrious history.



Introduction

Paul and the Church. Paul established the church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey (Acts 15:36—18:22). The account in Acts informs us that Paul preached three Sabbaths in the synagogue and saw the conversion of a large number of Jews, "God-fearing Greeks," and "leading women" (17:1-4). Next Acts narrates the unbelieving Jews' attempt to rid themselves of Paul by charging him with crimes against Rome (17:5-9). Their attempt failed, but Jason and other converts immediately sent Paul away to Berea under cover of night (17:10). Reading verses 1-4 and 5-10 as a seamless event leaves the impression that Paul only worked in Thessalonica for three weeks, but that impression may be wrong.

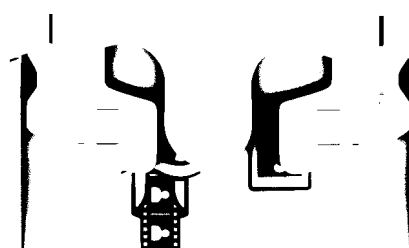
Paul was in Thessalonica long enough to work at his trade (1 Thess. 2:7-9), to receive assistance from Philippi more than once (Phil. 4:16), to provide an example of Christian living (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:1-12; 2 Thess. 3:7-10), and to give wide-ranging instruction to the church (1 Thess. 4:1-2; 5:1). This complex series of events seems to require more than three weeks and implies a number of weeks passed between the first event described in Acts 17:1-4 and the subsequent event narrated in verses 5-10.

Paul's ongoing interaction with the church was also richer than the author of Acts had space to narrate. Paul did not leave the church to fend for itself. He remained concerned for it and wanted to return to the city (1 Thess. 3:11). Since that had not been possible, he had sent Timothy from Athens once and perhaps twice more during his year-and-a-half ministry at Corinth (1 Thess. 3:1-8). After ministering in Ephesus Paul visited the Thessalonian church again and involved them along with other Macedonian churches in the collection for the saints in Jerusalem (Acts 20:4; 2 Cor. 8—9). Finally, the Aristarchus who traveled with Paul when he sailed to Rome as a prisoner may have been the brother from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4; 27:2).

Date. On the basis of the history already mentioned, we understand 1 Thessalonians was written from Corinth early in Paul's ministry there. Since Paul's stay in Corinth overlapped with the proconsulship of Gallio, it is normally dated about A.D. 50 to 52. Thus Paul must have written 1 Thessalonians about A.D. 51, making it one of the earliest of Paul's Letters.

Dating 2 Thessalonians is more difficult. Those who assert Pauline authorship generally assume the letters were written at about the same time. But their chronological order is debated. Paul did not number his letters. Paul's Letters in the canon seem to be arranged by size and recipient as much as by date. So Timothy may have taken 2 Thessalonians with him when Paul sent him to Thessalonica from Athens (1 Thess. 3:2) early in A.D. 50. Or Paul may have sent the letter later from the Corinthian ministry (about A.D. 52) or later still from the Ephesian ministry (about A.D. 55-57). The date one chooses will in some measure shape the historical context assumed for the letters.

Authorship. A large majority of scholars affirm the Pauline authorship of 1 Thessalonians. The letter was known and accepted as Paul's in the early church, and its content is entirely consistent with the teachings of the apostle in other letters. Evidence from early church history affirms 2 Thessalonians as Paul's too. But in spite of this and of content consistent with Paul's other writings, perceived eschatological differences between the letters have fueled debate about the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians. What follows in these *Expository Notes* addresses the eschatological variation between the letters but ultimately asserts Pauline authorship of both.



I THESSALONIANS

Salutation: 1:1

I. Apologia. 1:2-3:13

1. Paul's present interest and confidence in them. 1:2-4
2. Defense of his behavior while there. 1:5 - 2:16
 - (1) His gospel. 1:5a
 - (2) His character. 1:5b
 - (3) Their confidence then in him and imitation of him. 1:6-10
 - (4) His conduct not in error, uncleanness, or guile. Nor in flattery, covetousness, or haughtiness, etc. Waived rights as Apostle to become one of them (babes). 2:1-12
 - (5) Their constancy under persecution and emotional outburst against Jews. 2:13-16
3. Defense of his failure to return. 2:17 - 3:13
 - (1) Hindered only by Satan. (broken with emotion as he thinks of them). 2:17-20
 - (2) His concern shown in sending Timothy. 3:1-5
 - (3) Timothy's report from them gave him new life. 3:6-10
 - (4) Prayer for them. 3:11-13

II. Exhortations in view of imperfections of the group.
4:1 - 5:22

1. The Weak (heathen combined consecration and sex)
Exhorted to Purity, 4:1-8
2. The Idlers exhorted to brotherly love and work.
Be calm about second coming; work so as to win respect of heathen and not to burden the church.
4:9-12
3. The Fainthearted anxious about: 4:13-5:11
 - (1) The Christian dead. (not touched on in oral teaching) 4:13-18
 - (2) The Parousia (their own salvation). 5:1-11
 - a. Certain but unpredictable. 5:1-3
 - b. Christian to be alert and sane. 5:4-11
 - (3) Order in the church. 5:12-22
 - a. Respect for leaders. 5:12-13
 - b. Leaders to tactfully deal with the Idlers, the Fainthearted, the Weak, and all others. 5:14
 - c. Mutual respect and interest. 5:15-18
 - d. Rightly evaluate inspired preaching. 5:19-21
 - e. Abstain from every species of evil. 5:22

Salutation and benediction. 5:23-28

Commentary on 2 Thessalonians

Outline

- I. Signature and address (1:1-2)
- II. Present situation in Thessalonica (1:3-12)
 1. Paul's thanksgiving (1:3-4)
 2. God's judgment (1:5-10)
 3. Paul's prayer (1:11-12)
- III. Problems of the Parousia (2:1-12)
 1. Matter of time (2:1-2)
 2. Man of lawlessness (2:3-10a)
 3. Men of delusion (2:10b-12)
- IV. Thanksgiving and encouragement (2:13-17)
 1. Gratitude for the saints (2:13-14)
 2. Challenge to the saints (2:15)
 3. Prayer for the saints (2:16-17)
- V. Exhortations to the Thessalonians (3:1-15)
 1. Appeal for prayer (3:1-2)
 2. Faithfulness of God (3:3-5)
 3. Deal with the disorderly (3:6-13)
 4. Deal with the disobedient (3:14-15)
- VI. Conclusion (3:16-18)
 1. Gratitude for the saints (3:16)
 2. Paul's token of authenticity (3:17)
 3. Benediction (3:18)

I. Signature and Address (1:1-2)

¹ 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 the
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This salutation is the same as in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 except that here Paul added *our* before Father. He also used a longer statement in ascribing *grace* and *peace*. It is *from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. This phrase is found in some manuscripts of 1 Thessalonians 1:1 but is not genuine. Grace and peace appear in all other of Paul's epistles (but see Col. 1:2; "mercy" is added in 1 and 2 Tim.). "God our Father" and "Lord Jesus Christ" are equal but not identical; they are separate persons in the Godhead.

II. Present Situation in Thessalonica (1:3-12)

1. Paul's Thanksgiving (1:3-4)

³We are bound to give thanks to God all ways for you, brethren, as is fitting, because

your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. ⁴Therefore we ourselves boast of you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which you are enduring.

Paul usually began his epistles with a note of thanksgiving (but see Gal. 1:6 and Titus). He had problems in Thessalonica but in both epistles he began with thanksgiving for the believers there. In a sense he used good psychology, complimenting them before correcting them.

Bound renders a verb stating obligation. Perhaps some in Thessalonica had claimed any right to Paul's thanks in his first epistle. He insisted that there was much for which he was thankful. *thanks* (see comment on 1 Thess. 2:17). *Bound . . . fitting*—the former expressing obligation to God; the latter a proper attitude toward his readers.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul prayed for their growth in faith, love, and hope (1:3). Here he thanked God that the Thessalonians had achieved this. In 2 Thessalonians he did not mention hope with *steadfastness* but it is seen in 1:10.

Faith is growing abundantly (present tense of continuous action). It is like a tree growing beyond measure. Each person's love for others was *increasing, flourishing* like a tree. This is another present tense (1 Thess. 3:12).

Boast renders a present infinitive. They kept on growing in faith and bearing abundant fruit in love, Paul kept on boasting about them in other churches of God. His boast was for their steadfastness (1 Thess. 1:3) and faith. Regarding their trials, *persecutions* and *afflictions*, their faith was more than equal to them. "Persecutions" (*diōgmois*) is added to "afflictions" (1:6). *Diōgmos* was used of religious persecution (Arndt and Gingrich; cf. Rom. 8:35; 2 Cor. 12:10; 2