

A LOOK AT A BOOK: I Thessalonians

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Near the middle of the first century A.D., Paul wrote a pair of letters to a recently established congregation of Christians in the town of Thessalonica. The people to whom he addressed the two letters we now call 1 and 2 Thessalonians were for the most part new converts to Christianity who had grown up in, and hence were thoroughly socialized in, a Greek cultural environment. One of Paul's major challenges was that of resocialization – helping these believers to learn, understand, and live by the very different social and ethical code of early Christianity.

As a result of their commitment to Jesus, they were experiencing social ostracism and isolation as well as physical attacks from society around them. As if this were not enough, Paul's task was further complicated by a high degree of apprehension, misunderstanding, and speculation about the return of Jesus.

The city of Thessalonica

Thessalonica was the largest and most important city in Macedonia. As the capital of the province it enjoyed numerous civic and commercial privileges, including the right to mint its own coins. In 42 B.C. it became a free city, governed by its own local rulers, a group of five or six men known as "politarchs." It was situated some ninety miles or so west of Philippi on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway that connected Rome with its eastern provinces.

Religiously Thessalonica offered something for nearly everyone. Not surprisingly for a Greek city, the traditional Greek cults and philosophic traditions were well represented, as were various mystery religions. In contrast to Philippi, there was in Thessalonica a Jewish community large enough to support a synagogue (17:1). In Thessalonica, city leaders fostered devotion to the imperial cult in order to solidify good relations with Rome. As a consequence, any perceived attack on the cult of the emperor was viewed as a serious threat to the city's economic and political well-being.

Christianity comes to Thessalonica

In A.D. 49, not long after Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Philippi, where they had "suffered and been insulted" (1 Thessalonians 2:2; cf. Acts 16:16-40), they came to Thessalonica. There they stopped, probably because of the presence of a sizable Jewish community and its synagogue. For the next three Sabbaths, Paul in

particular shared the Christian message in the synagogue, seeking to prove from the scriptures that Jesus was the predicted Messiah, who had died and risen from the dead on their behalf. The apostle was successful in persuading “some of the Jews,” as well as a large number of “God-fearing Greeks” and “not a few prominent women” (Acts 17:2-4).

A substantially larger number of converts came to faith directly from paganism as they “turned to God from idols” (1 Thessalonians 1:9). The private homes of converts, such as Jason, would also have provided a setting for evangelism and instruction. As a result, a new, predominately Gentile congregation came into existence. Paul, Silas, and Timothy devoted themselves to encouraging and instructing the recent converts in the basics of their new faith, becoming deeply attached to them in the process (2:8-12).

The synagogue would have been upset by the loss of members to a new cult. On the other hand, the conversion of leading women of the community inevitably brought the cult to the notice of civic leaders, to whom the proclamation of an alternative emperor (Jesus as the messianic King) would have sounded more than a little seditious. These two groups apparently made common cause against the missionaries and their converts, as civil charges were soon brought against them. Luke describes the critical episode in Acts 17:5-9. After some disreputable folks from the marketplace (whom the KJV colorfully describes as “certain lewd fellows of the baser sort”) had been instigated to start a riot, they were encouraged to locate the visiting missionaries and haul them before the civil authorities. Failing to find Paul and Silas, they instead seized Jason and some other brothers (clearly members and supporters of the news movement, and perhaps its leaders) and basically charged them with treason for their allegiance to Jesus.

Given this turn of events, Paul, Silas, and Timothy had little choice but to leave town. That Paul left unwillingly and sooner than he had intended is clear from 1 Thessalonians 2:17, in which he describes himself as having been “torn away” from his new friends and fellow believers. The sudden departure of the missionaries no doubt had a dramatic and shocking impact on the congregation, which unexpectedly found itself alone and facing “persecutions and trials” that severely tested their faith and perseverance (2 Thessalonians 1:4; cf. 1 Thessalonians 3:3).

The setting and occasion of 1 Thessalonians

Two concerns seem to have been uppermost on Paul’s mind. (1) He was deeply concerned that the young congregation might collapse in the face of hostile external pressures. (2) Paul was also concerned that his behavior and that of his

companions might be misunderstood – or more likely, misrepresented – in a way that would call into question the validity and integrity of the gospel itself. Religious charlatans and frauds were a dime a dozen in the ancient world, and the way Paul and Silas slipped out of town in the middle of the night would have made it only too easy to pigeonhole them as just one more pair of rip-off artists out to scam people.

The missionaries' first impulse was to return to Thessalonica as soon as possible. This they tried to do – in Paul's case, repeatedly (2:18) – but for unspecified reasons (which he attributed to the working of Satan, 2:18), that proved to be impossible. Frustrated and anxious to learn what was happening in Thessalonica, Paul decided to send Timothy back in his place as his designated representative, in order to strengthen and encourage them (3:1-2). This he did from Athens (where he had arrived by way of Berea, Acts 17:10-15). After a brief time in Athens (17:16-34), Paul moved on to Corinth (probably arriving there in late summer, A.D. 50), where in collaboration with Aquila and Priscilla he began to evangelize that city (18:1-4).

It was while Paul was in Corinth that Timothy returned with the good news from Thessalonica that the congregation was not only standing fast and faithful in the face of persecution, but was even growing in faith and love (3:6-7), to the extent that it was becoming a model for believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia (1:7).

In the first part of this letter (1:2-3:13) Paul sought to encourage and strengthen the Thessalonians, to defend the integrity and truthfulness of the gospel message, and to affirm and develop his friendship with them as brothers and sisters. In the second part (4:1-5:24) Paul sought to encourage and instruct them regarding some specific matters of Christian living: holiness, sexual ethics, social relationships, the death of believers, the return of Jesus, and congregational behavior. This choice of topics almost certainly reflects something of Timothy's assessment of the situation in Thessalonica; it may also reflect one or more questions raised by the Thessalonians themselves and transmitted to Paul via Timothy (either orally or in writing).

Who wrote the letters?

Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians were sent out under the name of not one but three people, Paul, Silas, and Timothy. The consistent use of first personal plural pronouns (“we,” “us”) throughout both letters makes it clear that the inclusion of Silas and Timothy in the salutation is no mere formality (contrast Philippians, which includes Timothy in the prescript but uses the first person singular

thereafter). At the same time, the order of the names and the occasional use of “I” (1 Thessalonians 2:18; 3:5; 5:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:5; 3:17) reveal that Paul was almost certainly the person who drafted or dictated the letters.

Congratulations

Read 1 Thessalonians 1-3

The first main section of 1 Thessalonians consists of congratulations to the Thessalonian believers on their conversion and progress in the Christian life (chs. 1-3). Their fidelity even in the midst of persecution was proving to be an example to other Christians in Macedonia and Greece (Achaia). Timothy’s report about them had indeed been good (2:17-3:9).

As usual, Paul combines the typical Greek greeting in a transmuted Christian form (“grace”), with the typical Semitic greeting (“peace”) (1:1). The form of the word “grace” which non-Christian Greeks used simply meant “Hello,” but Paul changes the term to carry overtones of divine favor bestowed on ill-deserving sinners through Jesus Christ. A well-known triad of Christian virtues appears in 1:3: faith, love, and hope. Faith produces good works. Love results in labor, which means deeds of kindness and mercy. And hope, an eschatological term referring to confident expectation of Jesus’ return, generates steadfastness under trial and persecution.

Exhortations

Read 1 Thessalonians 4-5

The second main section of 1 Thessalonians (chs. 4 and 5) consists of exhortations:

- against immoral conduct (4:1-8)
- to increased mutual love (4:9, 10);
- to comfort and watchfulness in view of Jesus’ return (4:11-5:11); and
- concerning a variety of practical matters in Christian conduct (5:12-28)

The commands in 4:11, 12 to live quietly and keep working may rebuke those who believed so strongly in the immediacy of Jesus’ return that they were leaving their jobs. Paul’s unblushing advocacy of manual labor contrasts with the view typical of the Greeks, who held that sort of work in contempt.

The Thessalonians Christians were sorrowing over deceased fellow Christians, apparently because they did not realize that their deceased fellow Christians would share in the joy of Jesus’ return. Perhaps they thought death before the Parousia

was chastisement for sin, or even an indication of having lost salvation. Paul reassures his readers by explaining that deceased Christians will be resurrected just before the Rapture in order that they may be taken up along with the Christians who are still alive on earth.

In chapter 5, Paul shifts from comfort to warning. Christians must watch for the day of the Lord (the Second Coming and following events) lest they be taken by surprise. Failure to watch is to put oneself in the category of the wicked, who will be caught unexpectedly. On the other hand, preparedness for the day of the Lord is more than mental awareness. It is also a mode of conduct characterized by obedience to commands such as those with which the epistle closes.

A Summary Outline of 1 Thessalonians

Themes: congratulations to the Thessalonian believers on their conversion and progress in the Christian faith, and exhortations toward further progress, with particular emphasis on comfort from and expectancy toward the Parousia.

Introduction: greeting (1:1)

I. Congratulations (1:2-3:13)

- A. Thanksgiving for the exemplary conversion of the Thessalonian believers (1:2-10)
- B. Paul's reminiscences concerning his ministry in Thessalonica (2:1-16)
- C. Timothy's glowing report about the progress of the Thessalonian Christians (2:17-3:10)
- D. A prayer for the Thessalonian believers (3:11-13)

II. Exhortations (4:1-5:22)

- A. Morality (4:1-8)
- B. Mutual love (4:9-12)
- C. Consolation over deceased fellow Christians in view of their Participation in the Parousia (4:13-18)
- D. Expectant readiness for the day of the Lord (5:1-11)
- E. Miscellaneous exhortations (5:12-22)

Conclusion: benediction and final instructions (5:23-28)