

An Introduction to 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – An introduction to the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians
2. aim – To cause us to understand the context of the letter which will help us see its purpose.
3. passage – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2

b. outline

1. The Background of the Letter
2. The Context of the Letter
2. The Purpose of the Letter

c. opening

1. moving from two (2) narrative studies (**Genesis & Exodus**) to a more *didactic* study (**1 & 2 Thess.**)
 - a. didactic = material designed primarily to *teach*; biblical material of a more *doctrinal* and/or *theological* content designed to increase knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith
 - b. **i.e.** the various N.T. epistles are written as letters to others (typically by apostles) for the express intent of *instruction* (**e.g.** Paul's letters written to churches, each having a specific message)
 - c. **note:** this does *not* imply that narratives like **Genesis, Exodus, the Gospels, or Acts** cannot instruct, but we need to be *very careful* about drawing *explicit* doctrinal truths from them *unless the material is specifically didactic in nature*
 1. **e.g.** the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel accounts are clearly didactic in nature, like the instructions given to Moses in Exodus (**i.e.** they teach timeless truths)
 2. however, epistles are *explicitly designed* to be didactic in nature, so the *bulk* of Christian doctrine is taken from them (**i.e.** under the inspiration of the Spirit)
 3. and, given the *unique nature of the apostolic ministry of Paul*, the majority of Christian doctrine is gleaned from his inspired works in the N.T. (**i.e.** as the greatest interpreter of Jesus)
2. the opening lesson (then) is designed to establish the context and background of the study material
 - a. because context is extremely important in understanding the intention of the material

I. The Background of the Letter

Content

a. the city

1. “to the church of the Thessalonians” (1:1)
 - a. Thessalonica (today, Thessaloniki), the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia in N Greece
 1. **note:** I visited Thessaloniki in 2005 during a trip to Turkey and Greece; I have pictures of the remains of the Roman forum, agora, and acropolis, and the (active) Basilica of St. Demetrius
 - b. the city was situated between Philippi to the E and Berea to the W along the E-W Egnatian Way
 - c. the city was founded in 315BC by Cassander of Macedon, and remained a significant cultural metropolis during the Roman and Byzantine periods, falling to the Ottoman empire in 1430AD
 - d. the city had a population of about 100,000 in Paul's day; 800,000 today including the suburbs
 - e. the city maintained a harbor into the Aegean Sea on the Thermaic Gulf at its farthest N point
 - f. the city was considered “free” and governed by “*politarchs*” (local officials; **Acts 17:6ff**)
 - g. the city was a center of trade and philosophy; it embraced the Greco-Roman pantheons and the imperial cult, along with prominent Egyptian cults; a sizeable Jewish population (**see Acts 17:5**)

b. the author

1. the *primary* author of both letters is Paul, the apostle formerly known as Saul
 - a. church tradition has held this authorship from the earliest church fathers
 - b. he is specifically mentioned in **Acts 17** visiting the city, which lends strong credence to this view
 - c. and, the fact that he *identifies himself* at the beginning strongly supports that authorship
2. there has been some (very minor!!) debate over the authorship of the *second* letter in modern times:
 - a. there appears to be “differences” in the eschatology of the letters (**i.e.** the imminence of Christ's return in **1 Thess. 4:13-5:11** appears inconsistent with the need for certain signs in **2 Thess. 2:1ff**)
 1. however, the sudden nature of Christ's return is *often* spoken of in relation to certain signs that would precede it (**e.g. Matt. 24-25**)

- b. the commonalities of the two letters suggests *literary dependence* (i.e. the second written by a different author using the first as a template or copy)
 - 1. however, it is likely that Paul wrote the second letter *shortly after* the first (see below), thus his “state of mind” would be similar, and his thoughts re: the church would be very similar in nature
- c. the *overt* statements in **2 Thess. 2:2; 3:17** suggest a pseudonymous (sue-don-o-mus) author (i.e. someone *pretending* to be Paul and trying to convince them it was him)
 - 1. however, it is possible that Paul was simply afraid of the existence of a forged letter to them

c. the dates

- 1. both letters, close together, c. 49-51AD, probably in the Fall of 50AD – the timeline:
 - a. Jesus ascends, Pentecost occurs c. 30AD (using the earlier dating of Christ’s birth c. 4-6BC)
 - b. Saul is converted c. 33AD, stays in Tarsus until c. 47AD (**Acts 11:25-26**)
 - c. Paul and Barnabas travel on First Missionary Journey to Galatia c. 47-48AD (**Acts 13-14**)
 - d. the Jerusalem Council is convened in c. 49AD (**Acts 15:1-35**)
 - e. Paul and Silas travel on Second Missionary Journey c. 49-52AD (Paul and Barnabas separate)
 - 1. from Antioch into Galatia, picking up Timothy at Lystra (**Acts 15:36-16:8**)
 - 2. the Macedonian Call to Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (**Acts 16:9-17:15**)
 - 3. Paul (alone) to Athens (**Acts 17:16-34**), to Corinth for 18 months (**Acts 18:1-18**)
 - 4. Silas and Timothy meet up with Paul in Corinth shortly after he arrives there (**Acts 18:5**)
 - 5. and, it is from Corinth, that Paul dispatches Timothy back to Macedonia, and then writes this letter after Timothy returns with his report (see below)
 - f. so, the letters were written close together near the beginning of Paul’s time in Corinth (c. Fall 50AD)
 - 1. i.e. Paul would want to write to them *as soon as possible* after being forced out (see below)

II. The Context of the Letter

Content

a. the mission to Thessalonica

- 1. Paul and Silas are imprisoned in Philippi for casting the demon out of the slave girl (**Acts 16:19ff**)
 - a. they head to Thessalonica, heading W through Amphipolis and Apollonia on the Egnatian Way
 - b. **IMO**: they probably preached in those cities, but made no converts (no mention of them)
- 2. once in Thessalonica, Paul goes to the synagogue to preach to the Jews
 - a. **note**: a synagogue required 10 men to begin; little Jewish presence in Philippi, but strong here
 - b. **note**: Paul has a tendency to preach *first* to his own (i.e. the Jews) and *then* to the Gentiles once the Jews reject his message
 - c. Paul preaches for three (3) Sabbath days – his message is: that the Christ had to suffer and to rise from the dead, thus Jesus is the Christ by virtue of his resurrection (**Acts 17:2-3**)
 - d. a number of conversions are recorded: some of the Jewish men, a great many devout (i.e. God-fearing) Greeks, and some of the “leading women” (**Acts 17:4**)
- 3. however, the “Jews” become jealous of his efforts and seek to arrest Paul (**Acts 17:5-9**)
 - a. unable to find Paul and Silas, they drag Jason (their host) before the *politarchs*
 - b. they accuse Paul (and Jason) of *treason*: teaching another “king” other than Caesar
 - c. this causes a great uproar in the city and amongst the authorities, so Paul and Silas are sent out of the city for their own protection (see **1 Thess. 2:17**)
 - d. this becomes the *backdrop* to the letter – **a continuing persecution, by both the Jews and the city authorities, against those who had come to faith in Jesus under Paul’s preaching**

b. the church at Thessalonica

- 1. based on **1 Thessalonians**, we can glean the following about the church *after* Paul left:
 - a. based on **1:9-10**, it seems that Paul *did* spend some weeks ministering to the newly formed church *before* the persecution against it broke out – he had developed a relationship with them
 - b. so, just after arriving in Corinth, Paul sends Timothy back to the city to get a report on how they are doing (**3:1-3; Acts 18:5**) – he is concerned about their faith in the midst of persecution
 - 1. **IMO**: Paul *himself* does not return to Macedonia because a) the persecution there would be *specifically* directed at him and b) the work in Corinth needed his attention
 - 2. Paul *trusts* Timothy to be a good messenger (see **1 Timothy**) and so relies on him to do this

- c. Timothy's report: the church is *mostly* doing well (**see 3:6-10**), except:
 1. some had died, and this *confused* this neophyte group of believers – would the dead “miss out” on the return of Christ since they were gone (**4:13**)?
 2. some were asking *specific* questions about the “*day of the Lord*” – when can we expect it to come and what will be the sign of its coming (**5:1-2**)?
 3. some were concerned about continuing persecution – is this somehow the “displeasure” of God (or of you, Paul) regarding us (**3:3-5**)?
 4. some were treating “the future” as an excuse to be “lazy” – after all, if Christ is coming soon, why should we labor and work, both financially and in faith (**4:10ff; 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6-15**)?

III. The Purpose of the Letter

Content

a. the theme of the letter

1. the most prominent theme in **1 Thess.** (continuing into **2 Thess.**) is the **second coming of Christ**
 - a. it is mentioned in every chapter of the first letter, and is the main point of **2 Thess. 2**
 - b. all of the other issues are related to this one: 1) those who died; have they missed his coming; 2) when will it come and what are we to be doing about it; 3) does the persecution we are experiencing have anything to do with the *delay* of Christ's return; and 4) what does the return of Christ have to do with our day-to-day lives (**i.e.** earning a living)?

b. the purpose of the letter

1. **Paul's main purpose: to establish the hope of the Thessalonian Christians in the wake of some unexpected deaths amongst them, to reassure them that both the dead and the living were destined to be saved at the Parousia, but that there is still much for the living to be doing in the meantime (read 4:1-2)!**
 - a. fundamentally, Paul strives to answer some questions *regarding daily living* in light of the promise of Christ to return for his own
 - b. in essence, while it is good to have one eye “on the future” (**i.e.** anticipating the return of Christ), it is *essential* to have one eye “on the present” (**i.e.** doing what we are called to do *now*)
 - c. so, the living are to be striving to *obey Christ before he returns*; the dead have entered into his presence, and will return to receive their reward (**i.e.** their work is done!)