

1 THESSALONIANS

Introduction

Author. The pauline authorship of the Thessalonian letters has never been seriously disputed. Internal evidence (1:1, 2, 18) and external evidence supports Paul as the writer. Early church writers as early as Marcion (140 A. D.) are agreed as well.

Date. The date of A. D. 51, during Paul's second missionary journey while at Corinth is generally accepted. Gallio's proconsulship is dated at 51-52 A. D. by an inscription at Delphi, Greece. This combined with the account of Acts 18:12-17 which places Paul in Corinth at that time give firm support for the proposed date.

Occasion. The occasion of the Thessalonian correspondence is fairly well outlined in Acts, chapter 17. While on the second missionary journey and after Paul's call to Macedonia, Paul and his companions moved from Philippi, on to Thessalonica. They were at first well received but because of the jealousy on the part of the Jews Paul was ultimately driven out of town. Although Paul, himself was not captured in the riot, a certain believer named Jason was seized and made to pledge some kind of bond (that Paul would leave town?; Acts 17:9). Paul then left for Berea and Athens. While in Athens, Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica and returned again to Paul after Paul had reached Corinth. Then upon Timothy's arrival in Corinth and based upon his report, the first epistle was written. It is assumed that the second letter to the Thessalonians was written from Corinth as well after an appropriate passage of time. In both letters Paul encourages the believers to live holy lives as they look forward to the coming of Christ. Each chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the return of our Lord.

Message Statement. *The second coming of Christ motivates the Christian to holy living in the midst of persecution.*

Argument

- 1A PAUL'S THANKSGIVING FOR THE THESSALONIANS 1:1-10
As Paul writes back to his recently converted and "orphaned" friends, his heart is filled with thanksgiving. The introduction of this epistle seems to be longer and more descriptive of the personal relations between the writers and readers than any other. The reason is probably the feelings of frustration which Paul felt over the circumstances and timing of his departure from Thessalonica. It is clear that the perseverance of the Thessalonians despite the absence of Paul was an encouraging testimony to the apostle of the genuineness of their conversion.
- 1B The Thanksgiving for Their Conversion 1:1-4
Paul thanks God for the development of Christian virtue on the part of the Thessalonians. The triad characteristics of faith, hope and love are the basis for Paul's thanks.
- 2B The Genuineness of Their Conversion 1:5-10

Paul is persuaded of the sincerity of their conversion because of their endurance in the face of persecution. This persecution which drove Paul out of town remained to afflict the believers, a point of much concern for the apostle. In spite of the persecution, however, their testimony not only grew but flourished throughout Macedonia and Achaia.

- 1B THE DEFENSE OF THE APOSTOLIC MINISTRY AND ABSENCE 2:1--3:13
Because of Paul's quick departure under the threat of persecution and his seeming abandonment of the Church, he felt the need to defend not only his motives while there but also his absence since. It surely appeared to many of the relatives of the believers there that Paul was an unethical and financially motivated trickster who desired to dance the dance but would not pay the piper. Paul answers these questions early and at length.
- 1B The Defense of Apostolic Ministry 2:1-16
Paul's detractors at Thessalonica would first question the kind of ministry which he had in the city. Paul thus, appeals to the persecution which he endured before his arrival at Thessalonica as a testimony to his sincerity. He then discusses his internal motives (2:3-4) and his external conduct (2:5-12). All of these serve to defend and uphold the virtue of the ministry of the gospel at Thessalonica.
- 2B The Defense of Apostolic Absence 2:17--3:10
Paul's detractors would next point to his alleged reluctance to return to the flock. His departure and then continued absence would be a source of strong suspicion of his motives. Thus Paul defends his absence at length. Paul first points to his desire to return but blames his absence on Satanic opposition. A sign of his desire to learn of their welfare was his sending of Timothy. The report which Timothy brought back to Paul was a cause for ecstatic joy on Paul's part and also a renewed prayer of thanksgiving.
- 3B The Apostolic Prayer 3:11-13
This prayer was offered as the result of the good news which Timothy brought on his return to Paul. Paul prays that he would be able to return to the Thessalonians and that they would continue to grow in love for each other and in holiness toward God.
- 1C EXHORTATIONS IN DOCTRINE AND LIFE 4:1--5:22
Finally, after three chapters of apology and thanksgiving Paul exhorts the readers in the area of Christian living. He discusses first the personal life and then answers questions about the return of Christ and Church life.
- 1B Concerning the Personal Life 4:1-12
Paul's two concerns for the personal lives of the believers are their personal purity and love for one another.
- 1C Exhortation to advancing in Christian virtue 4:1-2
Paul begins this section with a general exhortation to growth. He commends them for their past growth and encourages them to continue in the following ways.
- 2C Purity in Life 4:3-8
Sexual immorality was common in the Greek world of Paul's time and his exhortation here indicates that the Thessalonians may have been susceptible to secular ideas in this area. Paul recommends absolute purity and warns them that each member of the godhead has an interest in their virtue.
- 3C Love of the Brethren 4:9-12
Once again, very diplomatically, Paul congratulates the Thessalonians on their love for each other and then urges even more growth. Another aspect of love for each other seems to be personal industry so that one will not have to depend upon the good graces of others for his own needs.
- 2B Concerning the Coming of Christ 4:13--5:11
The coming of Christ presented two questions for the Thessalonians. They were concerned about the lot of their deceased and Paul was concerned that they be ready for the coming of the Lord by their personal watchfulness.
- 1C The lot of the dead in Christ 4:13-18
The purpose of this passage is not to introduce the concept of the rapture nor to discuss its timing but to comfort living believers that their deceased love ones who had faith would not miss out on the events of the Lord's return. The Lord's return is pictured in terms which are much different from his second coming (Revelation 19, *et al.*).

- 2C The need to watch 5:1-11
The point of this passage is not really to inform about the events of the second coming; rather, it is an exhortation for believers to live soberly now so that the events of the end time will not come upon them unexpectedly. The emphasis is not simply being aware of the coming of Christ, but more importantly, being prepared for it spiritually.
- 3B Concerning Church Life 5:12-22
Paul instructs the Thessalonians in this section about matters of corporate interest to them. He first encourages respect and esteem for the leadership. He then instructs how to deal with erring brothers of different types. He then exhorts them concerning joy and thankfulness and finally addresses the matter of prophetic utterances. The verses of 5:19-22 seem best interpreted together as they relate to the church body responding to and evaluating the supernatural revelatory gifts.
- 1D CONCLUSION 5:23-28
Paul both prays for the Thessalonians and requests prayer for himself from them. He then asks that the letter be read before the congregation.

