

NOTES ON THE THESSALONIAN EPISTLES

INTRODUCTION

Messages

The message of 1 Thessalonians is, “The return of the Lord is a proper motivation for thanksgiving, ministry, and personal sanctification.” There is a reference to the return of Christ at the end of every chapter (1:9–10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:23).

The message of 2 Thessalonians is, “Proper understanding of the return of the Lord to judge (the Day of the Lord) is important because it can be an encouragement to believers who are suffering, it keeps one from misinterpreting current events, and it provides the proper motivation to practice personal diligence.”

Authorship

There is a general consensus that 1 Thessalonians was written by Paul.¹ It is one of seven epistles that critical scholarship generally regards as indisputably Pauline (the others are Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon). The basis for accepting Pauline authorship is strong. The epistle itself twice claims to be written by Paul (1:1; 2:18). The statement regarding the rapture in 4:15 would not have been made after Paul’s death since the statement shows Paul to have expected to be among those raptured. The fact that 1 Thessalonians is included among both the Marcionite (A.D. 140) and Muratorian Canons (A.D. 170) suggest that the epistle was considered to be genuine, that is, written by Paul. Early church fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian seem to regard the epistle as genuine. Eusebius apparently includes the epistle among the “fourteen epistles” of Paul (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.3.4–7). Indeed, there is no extant evidence that anyone in the early church questioned its authenticity.

Although there is a general consensus that 1 Thessalonians was written by Paul, 2 Thessalonians does not enjoy such acceptance. Even though 1:1 clearly states that Paul is the author and even though 2:2 warns against forged letters a number of interpreters have suggested that 2 Thessalonians was not written by Paul.

The case against Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians is drawn along several lines. Some see differences in theology, most notably, the eschatology between the two epistles. That is, the Lord’s coming seems less imminent in the second epistle compared to the first. It is also argued that a number of words and phrases used in 2 Thessalonians do not occur elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. Similarly some have noted a change in tone between 1 and 2 Thessalonians. It is

¹ Although there have been some who have rejected Pauline authorship of 1 Thessalonians (the Tübingen and Dutch schools of the nineteenth century), these arguments have not proven to be persuasive among most New Testament scholars.

argued that 2 Thessalonians feels more formal and less personal than 1 Thessalonians (cf. 1 Thess 1:2 and 2 Thess 1:3; 2:13; cf. also 2 Thess 3:6, 12). Ironically, those who reject Pauline authorship also argue that 2 Thessalonians is too similar to 1 Thessalonians! The argument is that Paul would not have written epistles that are so similar to the same church around the same time.

While the above observations can be explained by denying Pauline authorship, it does not require it. Good, alternative explanations can be made and thus there is insufficient warrant to discount the claim of the text itself. Furthermore, the external evidence in favor of the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians is quite solid. Indeed, R. L. Thomas argues that, "The external evidence for the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians is stronger than for 1 Thessalonians."² This evidence includes probable references to 2 Thessalonians in the Didache, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr. Second Thessalonians is included in both the Marcionite (A.D. 140) and Muratorian Canons (AD. 170) and Eusebius apparently includes the epistle among the "fourteen epistles" of Paul (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.3.4–7). Indeed, there is little if any extant evidence that anyone in the early church questioned its authenticity. So there is good reason to affirm Pauline authorship of the epistle.

Date

Data from Acts 17–18 place Paul in Thessalonica (the destination of the epistle) and Corinth (the likely city of origin for the epistle). One can surmise that Paul wrote the epistle from Corinth by correlating the picture in Acts 17–18 with 1 Thessalonians 3:1–10. Since Paul was in Corinth a year and six months (Acts 18:11) and since Paul's stay probably ended shortly after Gallio became proconsul in Corinth (Acts 18:12–18) it remains only to date Gallio's proconsulship. Fortunately, an inscription (the Delphi inscription) refers to Gallio as proconsul of Achaia and dates from the first seven months of A.D. 52. The inscription suggests that Gallio took office one year prior to the inscription and since proconsuls typically entered their office on July 1, Gallio probably took office as proconsul in Achaia around July 1 A.D. 51. This means that 1 Thessalonians was likely written around A.D. 50–51. Second Thessalonians was likely written shortly after 1 Thessalonians (maybe two or three months).³ This would make 1–2 Thessalonians some of Paul's earliest epistles, preceded only by Galatians.

² Robert L. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," in *The Expositor's Biblical Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 302.

³ Although the titles first and second would suggest that 1 Thessalonians was written first, some have questioned whether this is an accurate assumption. Since the epistles do not state the order, since Canonical order might have more to do with size than dating, this proposal merits some consideration. A few examples commonly used in arguing the priority of 2 Thessalonians will suffice to illustrate the strength of the position. One example relates to the practice of Paul of signing his epistles. In 2 Thessalonians 3:17 Paul notes the practice but he does not note it in 1 Thessalonians presumably because they already know of the practice. The problem with this view is that Paul does not seem to note the practice in his initial epistles to other churches and that the mention of it in 2 Thessalonians relates more to the specific problem of forgery in Thessalonica (2 Thess 2:2). Another example relates to the issue of persecution which appears to be present during the time of 2 Thessalonians (1:4–7) but ended by the time of 1 Thessalonians (2:14). However, the beginning and ending of persecution cannot be considered definitive since Paul seems to suggest that persecution would continually be an issue (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14–16; 3:4, 7; 2 Thess 1:6–7) and that at this time persecution was sporadic and episodic throughout the Roman Empire. In the end,

Original Recipients

Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians identify the original recipients as “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). The church at Thessalonica was established during Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 17:1–15). According to Acts 17:4, the original converts were: (1). Jews; (2). God-fearing Greeks; and (3). a number of prominent women. According to 1 Thessalonians 1:9, a number of these converts came from idolatrous backgrounds which would argue against a Jewish background. On the other hand, it is possible that the leadership of the church was Jewish whereas the rest were primarily Gentile.

Historical Setting

Thessalonica was a prominent city located strategically with a port on the Thermaic Gulf (part of the Aegean Sea) and as an intersection point of the Egnatian Way (the main road between Rome and the Orient). Thessalonica as the capital of the Macedonian province was also an important government center and military city. It was a relatively large city with an estimated population of 200,000. Its citizens were ethnically diverse with native Greeks, Romans, Orientals, and Jews. As with other cities within the Roman Empire, pagan religions were prominent, but Judaism also had a solid presence. As noted earlier, the church in Thessalonica was established during Paul's second missionary journey (read Acts 17:1-15). How long Paul stayed in Thessalonica is debated. In Acts 17:2, Paul spent at least three Sabbaths in Thessalonica. Some scholars suggest that Paul stayed longer than what Luke reports in Acts.⁴ Nonetheless, there are good reasons for holding to a shorter stay. In any case, Paul seems to be writing to an infant church experiencing persecution, and as a consequence, doubt. The church apparently had doubts about what Paul had taught them, why they were undergoing persecution, and what should they do in the midst of these difficulties. Apparently, the immediate motivation for the epistle was a visit and report from Timothy which raised several issues which needed to be addressed (cf. 1 Thess 3:1–5).

Purposes

Paul's purposes for writing 1 Thessalonians can be grouped into three broad categories. First, Paul wanted to express thankfulness for the spiritual progress of the

while good evidence can be presented for the priority of 2 Thessalonians, the reading of the evidence is generally inconclusive.

⁴ Scholars who hold that Paul had a longer stay than three Sabbaths do so for at least the following reasons. First, 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 suggest a more extensive ministry than could have occurred in three weeks. Second, the doctrinal perspective presumed in 1 Thessalonians, namely eschatology, would have taken longer than three weeks to teach and develop. Third, the story in Acts 17 focuses on ministry within a Jewish context, whereas, 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 focuses on ministry in a pagan context. This fact suggests that Luke did not record Paul's entire ministry in Thessalonica. Fourth, according to Philippians 4:16 the Philippians “more than once” sent Paul support while he was in Thessalonica (a distance of about 85 miles). Sending more than one gift would be easier if Paul was in Thessalonica for more than three weeks.

Thessalonians (1:2–10). Second, Paul wanted to defend himself against false accusations and slanders (2:1–3:13). Third, Paul wanted to teach and correct the church (4:1–5:22).

Paul's purposes for writing 2 Thessalonians can be grouped into four broad categories. First, Paul wanted to express thankfulness for the spiritual progress of the Thessalonian church (1:2–4). Second, Paul wanted to encourage the Thessalonians in the midst of their persecution (1:5–12). Third, Paul wanted to clarify and explain the Day of the Lord and its futurity (2:1–17). Fourth, Paul wanted to exhort the church to greater spiritual maturity and diligence (3:1–18).

Basic Outline of 1 Thessalonians

- I. Paul introduces his epistle and expresses a word of greeting to the church of the Thessalonians (1:1).
- II. The return of the Lord is a basis for thanksgiving and ministry (1:2–3:13).
- III. The Lord's return is a proper motivation for personal sanctification (4:1–5:22).
- IV. Paul concludes his epistle with affirmations, personal requests, and a prayerful benediction (5:23–28).

Basic Outline of 2 Thessalonians

- I. Paul introduces his epistle and expresses a word of greeting to the church of the Thessalonians (1:1–2).
- II. Paul offers encouragement and commendation to the suffering Thessalonians by praying in light of the return of the Lord (1:3–12).
- III. Paul offers explanation and correction to the confused Thessalonians by teaching about the return of the Lord (2:1–17).
- IV. Paul offers exhortations and commands to the unruly Thessalonians to pray for him and to work hard until the return of the Lord (3:1–15).
- V. Paul concludes his epistle with a wish-prayer, a confirming note, and a prayerful benediction (3:16–18).

EXPOSITION OF 1 THESSALONIANS

- I. Paul introduces his epistle and expresses a word of greeting to the church of the Thessalonians (1:1).**
- II. The return of the Lord is a basis for thanksgiving and ministry (1:2–3:13).**
 - A. Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians who are waiting for the return of the Lord (1:2–10).
 1. Paul expresses appreciation for the Thessalonian Church (1:2–5).

- a. Paul expresses appreciation for the work of the Thessalonians (1:2–3).
 - (1) Paul expresses the extent of the thankfulness (1:2).
 - (2) Paul explains the reason for his thankfulness (1:3).
- b. Paul expresses appreciation for the work of God (1:4–5).
 - (1) Paul expresses appreciation for God's election (1:4).
 - (2) Paul expresses appreciation for God's empowerment (1:5).

Paul's Thanksgiving
Was directed to God: "We give thanks to God"
Was continual: "always"
Was inclusive: "for all of you"
Was through prayer: "in our prayers"

- 2. Paul expresses acknowledgement of the Thessalonian Church (1:6–10).
 - a. Paul acknowledges the imitation of the Thessalonians (1:6).
 - b. Paul acknowledges the influence of the Thessalonians (1:7–8).
 - c. Paul acknowledges the impact of the Thessalonians (1:9–10).
 - (1) Their acceptance of the apostolic band was reported (1:9a).
 - (2) Their acceptance of the gospel was reported (1:9b).
 - (3) Their anticipation of Christ's return was reported (1:10).

B. Paul points out that his ministry in Thessalonica was motivated by the return of the Lord (2:1–16).

- 1. Paul recalls the arrival of the missionaries in Thessalonica (2:1–2).
- 2. Paul recalls the attitude of the missionaries in Thessalonica (2:3–4).

A Comparison of 1 Thessalonians 2:3-4	
The ministry in Thessalonica was not . . .	The ministry in Thessalonica was. . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In error • Impure • Deceitful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approved of God • To please God • Examined by God

3. Paul recalls the approach of the missionaries in Thessalonica (2:5-12).
4. Paul recalls the affirmation of the missionaries in Thessalonica (2:13-16).

The Referent of the "Wrath has come upon them"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius in A.D. 49-50 (cf. Acts 18:2) • The severe famine in Judea around A.D. 46 (Acts 11:28) • The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 • The eschatological Tribulation

- C. Paul's plans for ministry are motivated by the Lord's return (2:17-3:13).
 1. Paul's desire to revisit Thessalonica is motivated by the Lord's return (2:17-20).
 2. Paul's sending of Timothy and the possibility of revisiting Thessalonica is motivated by the Lord's return (3:1-13).
 - a. Paul explains his rationale for Timothy's visit (3:1-5).
 - b. Paul expresses relief at Timothy's report (3:6-10).
 - c. Paul reiterates his desire to revisit Thessalonica (3:11-13).

III. The Lord's return is a proper motivation for personal sanctification (4:1-5:24).

- A. Sanctification includes avoiding unhealthy relationships (sexual immorality) and cultivating healthy relationships (Christian love) in the body (4:1-12).
 1. Paul gives general exhortation to sanctification (4:1-2).

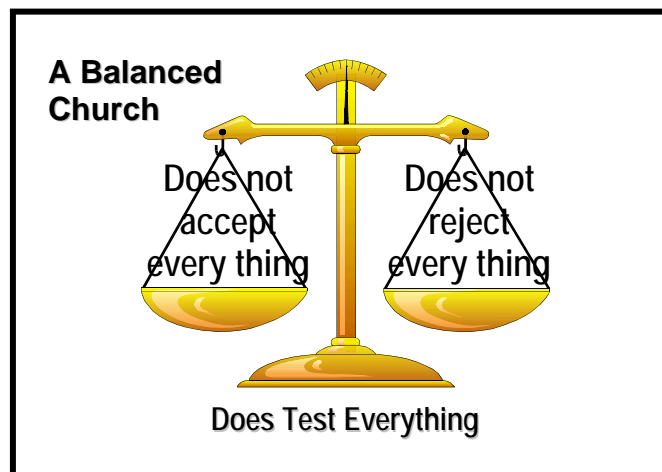
2. Paul gives specific exhortations to sanctification (4:3–12).
 - a. Sanctification is expressed through sexual purity (4:3–8).
 - b. Sanctification is expressed through love of the brethren (4:9–10).
 - c. Sanctification is expressed through responsible diligence (4:11–12).

1 Thessalonians 4:11: The Christian L.A.W.
L ead a quiet life A ttend to your own business W ork with your hands

- B. Sanctification includes a proper understanding of eschatology (4:13–5:11).
 1. To live for the Lord one needs to understand what it means to die in the Lord (4:13–18).
 - a. Paul provides comfort to the Thessalonians so that they would not grieve as those without hope (4:13).
 - b. Paul provides clarification that the resurrection and rapture are inexorably linked (4:14–17).
 - c. Paul provides comfort to the Thessalonians by encouraging them to consider what he has just taught (4:18).
 2. To live for the Lord today is to understand the Day of the Lord (5:1–11).

Changing the Topic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \delta\grave{\epsilon}$ introduces a new topic • The contrast between 4:13 (“we do not want you to be ignorant”) and 5:1–2 (“we do not need to write you”) • Change of pronouns from 3rd to 2nd person in vv. 3–4 • The contrast between light and darkness • The Day of the Lord refers to the wrath from which Christians are delivered (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9; Amos 5:12–20; Joel 2:31; Isa 2:12; Zeph 1:14–18; Mal 4:5)

- a. The Day of the Lord will come and unbelievers will not escape (5:1–3).
 - b. The Day of the Lord will come but believers will not be overtaken by it (5:4–5a).
 - c. The Day of the Lord will come so believers need to live differently than unbelievers (5:5b–11).
- C. Sanctification includes proper responses within the body (5:12–22).
- 1. Believers are to maintain proper responses to their leaders (5:12–13).
 - 2. Believers are to respond properly to one another (5:14–15).
 - 3. Believers are to respond properly to God and His Word (5:16–22).



- IV. Paul concludes his epistle with affirmations, personal requests, and a prayerful benediction (5:23–28).**
- A. Paul's offers a final wish for the Thessalonians (5:23–24).
 - B. Paul's offers a final word to the Thessalonians (5:23–28).

EXPOSITION OF 2 THESSALONIANS

I. Paul introduces his epistle and expresses a word of greeting to the church of the Thessalonians (1:1–2).

II. Paul offers encouragement and commendation to the suffering Thessalonians by praying in light of the return of the Lord (1:3–12).

A. Paul prays thankfully because the faith, love, and perseverance of the Thessalonians will result in their vindication at the Lord’s return (1:3–10).

2 Thessalonians 1:7: The Description of the Return of Christ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>From heaven:</i> As the Lord ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9–11) so He will likewise return. • <i>With His mighty angels:</i> Angels are elsewhere associated with the Lord’s return (e.g., Matt 16:27; 25:31) • <i>In flaming fire:</i> Fire imagery recalls several OT theophanies (e.g., Exod 3:2; Deut 5:4; Dan 7:9 –10)

B. Paul prays regularly that the Thessalonians will continue glorifying God (1:11–12).

III. Paul offers explanation and correction to the confused Thessalonians by teaching about the return of the Lord (2:1–17).

A. Paul offers explanation and correction concerning the Day of the Lord (2:1–12).

1. Paul identifies the confusion concerning the Day of The Lord (2:1–2).

2. Paul introduces corrections concerning the Day of The Lord (2:3–12).

Some Identifications of the Restrainer	
Divine Restrainers	Worldly Restrainers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Holy Spirit • The church • The gospel • The binding of Satan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human government • The Roman empire • Demonic powers/Satan • Gentile world domination

Comparing Christ and the Antichrist	
Jesus Christ The Son of Man	The Antichrist The man of lawlessness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus had a coming (Matt 1:18ff.) • Jesus did signs, wonders, and miracles (Acts 2:22) • Jesus is God (John 1:1, 14) • Jesus has His followers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antichrist will have a following (2:9) • Antichrist will do signs, wonders, and miracles (2:9) • Antichrist claims to be God (2:4) • Antichrist will have followers (2:10-12)

- B. Paul offers explanation and correction concerning the deliverance of the Lord (2:13-17).

IV. Paul offers exhortations and commands to the unruly Thessalonians to pray for him and to work hard until the return of the Lord (3:1-15).

- A. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to pray for him and his fellow workers (3:1-5).

Four Reasons to Pray for Spiritual Leaders
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Because it is commanded 2. Because of the great challenges of ministry 3. Because prayer strengthens the bond between the one praying and the one prayed for 4. Because the end result will be more effective ministry

- B. Paul commands the Thessalonians to reject unruly behavior (3:6-15).

The Identity of the Idle (Disorderly)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who believe in the imminent return of Christ led them to abandon mundane matters such as work • Christian workers who were taking advantage of church support • Christians who held the common Greco-Roman disdain for manual labor

V. Paul concludes his epistle with a wish-prayer, a confirming note, and a prayerful benediction (3:16-18).

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