

# I. Welcome to Thessalonica

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1 Thessalonians 1:1; Acts 15-18

**Aim:** To introduce Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians.

The gospel reached Macedonia less than twenty years after the death of Christ. The Thessalonian letters are among the earliest of the Apostle Paul's letters found in the New Testament (c. 50 AD). In fact, with the probable exception of his letter to the Galatians and the epistle of James, they are possibly the earliest of all our New Testament documents.

All of Paul's letters, including 1 Thessalonians, have the same overarching form of 'X to Y, grace and peace,' augmented with additional qualifiers. How does the opening of 1 Thessalonians compare with Paul's other letters? It has the least amount of additional material; it is the shortest prescript among the Pauline *homologoumena*.

## A. The Evangelists of the Thessalonians (1 Th. 1:1a; Acts 15-16)

'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy...'

These three names appear in the prescript of 2 Thessalonians as well.

### 1. The Missionary Team (1:1a, Acts 15:22-16:5)

a) Paul (1:1a)

#### (1) Authorship

The first epistle to the Thessalonians twice claims to have been written by Paul (1:1; 2:18), harmonizes with the Acts account of his travels (2:1-2; 3:1-2; Acts 16-18), and contains many intimate details about him. Paul wrote this epistle from Corinth, where he went after he left Athens (Acts 18:5). Paul's inclusion of Silas in the greeting of the letter indicates it was written on his second missionary journey, since Silas did not accompany him on his third journey (Silas is not mentioned again after Acts 18:5). 1 Thessalonians was written shortly after Paul's arrival in Corinth, probably in late AD 50.

Paul is clearly the author of First (& Second) Thessalonians. The extent to which Silas and Timothy were actually involved in composing them is unclear. There is a clear implication in the letters that Paul is the author and that Silas and Timothy endorses what he writes. It may be that the three men consulted and prayed together about the contents of the letters before Paul dictated them, possibly to Silas. All three certainly shared the same concern for the Thessalonians, and undoubtedly all concurred with what was written.

When Paul in other letters expresses his thanks to God for those to whom he writes, he usually does so in the first person singular ('I give thanks') even when others are associated with him in the prescript (cp. 1 Cor. 1:4; Phil. 1:3; Phm. 4; Colossians is an exception, but it was a church not personally known to him). In both the Thessalonian letters the first person plural is used (1:2; 2 Th. 1:3). This use of the first person plural is maintained throughout both letters, apart from certain places where the singular suddenly appears (2:18; 3:5; 5:27; 2 Th. 2:5; 3:17). In two of these five places the first personal pronoun is accompanied by the name 'Paul' (2:18; 2 Th. 3:17). All of them are best explained by the supposition that they are Paul's personal additions,

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

whether inserted by him orally—possibly in his own hand—when they were being read over after completion.

### (2) Apostle

That Paul does not call himself an apostle, as he often does in his other epistles, may indicate that he felt no need to emphasize his authority to this group of believers. Apparently in the Macedonian churches, his apostleship was never in question, because in neither of his letters to the church at Thessalonica, nor in his letter to Philippi, did he begin by identifying himself as an apostle. Another explanation for the lack of any epithet is related to the fact that 1 and 2 Thessalonians were early letters. Subsequently, Paul routinely included epithets as part of his standard letter format.

#### *b) Silvanus (Acts 15:22-41)*

Silas (or Silvanus), probably a Hellenistic Jew, was originally a respected member and prophet of the church in Jerusalem. He was one of the ‘leading men among the brethren’ (Acts 15:22). He had taken part in the meeting of elders and apostles in Jerusalem that had determined whether or not the Gentile Christians needed to observe Jewish customs (Acts 15). As a measure of his standing, he was chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch (along with Judas Barsabbas) to explain and confirm the decision of the meeting (Acts 15:32). Paul later asked him to be his traveling companion after a serious dispute ruptured relationships with his earlier fellow missionary, Barnabas (Acts 15:40).

Silas was associated with Paul and Timothy in the evangelization of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9) and Corinth (Acts 18:5). Silvanus is mentioned in 2 Cor. 1:19 as having shared with Paul and Timothy in the evangelization of Corinth. So, it is clear beyond doubt that the ‘Silas’ of Acts is the ‘Silvanus’ of the Pauline epistles. ‘Silvanus’ is a Latin name and may reflect his prestigious Roman citizenship (Acts 16:37). He is probably also the ‘Silvanus’ of 1 Peter 5:12, the scribe for Peter’s first letter.

#### *c) Timothy (Acts 16:1-5)*

Timothy was the junior member of the missionary team. The son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father, he had risen to a place of high esteem among the churches of Lystra and Iconium, churches established by Paul and Barnabas during an earlier missionary campaign. Timothy was most probably converted under Paul’s ministry during his first missionary journey to this area. In the course of visiting these churches with Silas, Paul was impressed by Timothy and asked him to accompany them. Before doing so he was circumcised to prevent offending the Jews of that area.

Timothy was to become Paul’s most intimate and valued helper in the years ahead. He was Paul’s son in the faith (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1) and protégé. He toured with Paul on the second and third missionary journeys. Paul entrusted him with responsible missions, e.g., to Thessalonica (3:2, 6), to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10) and to Philippi (Phil. 2:19). Timothy remained near the apostle during Paul’s first incarceration in Rome (cp. Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Phm. 1). Later Timothy served the church in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) and was himself imprisoned (Heb. 13:23).

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

### 2. The Mission to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-40)

Paul first came to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. After traveling west across Asia Minor to the region known as Mysia, the apostle and his entourage reached an impasse. They had been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach in the province of Asia (to the south of Mysia), and their attempt to turn north into Bithynia was similarly blocked. With no other way to proceed, they went into Troas, a city on the Aegean Sea. There Paul saw a vision of a Macedonian imploring him to come to that province and preach the gospel. Crossing the Aegean Sea, they came to Philippi, where Paul's fearless preaching of the gospel sparked a riot. As a result, he and Silas were seized, beaten, and placed in stocks in the city's jail. God miraculously released them by means of an earthquake, as a result of which the jailer came to faith in Christ. Horrified at the realization that they had beaten Roman citizens without the benefit of a trial (an act that could have had serious repercussions both for them and their city), the magistrates begged Paul and Silas to leave Philippi.

### B. The Church of the Thessalonians (1 Th. 1:1b; Acts 17:1-9)

*'...to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:'*

#### 1. The City of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1)

Forced to leave Philippi after being shamefully treated by its officials, Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Luke behind with the new converts and set out in a general west-southwest direction on the Roman road known as the Egnatian Way. After a journey of some 90 miles, which took them through the important towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia, they eventually reached the seaport of Thessalonica, the capital and most influential town in Macedonia.

Ancient Thessalonica was an important, prosperous city. It was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia (the northern part of modern Greece). Nowadays it is known as Thessaloniki (formerly Salonica) and is the second-largest city in modern Greece with a population around 400,000.

Thessalonica was founded in 315 BC on the site of an earlier city called Therme (presumably because of nearby hot springs) by Cassander, a general under Alexander the Great. He called it Thessalonica after his wife, the daughter of King Phillip II and half-sister of Alexander. The original inhabitants included the former inhabitants of Therme and some twenty-five neighboring towns or villages, whom Cassander forcibly settled in his new foundation.

The city became famous for trade and commerce due to its strategic situation. Located at the head of the Thermaic Gulf (the Gulf of Salonica), a branch of the Aegean Sea, Thessalonica was a thriving seaport. But perhaps Thessalonica's greatest asset was its location astride the Via Egnatia, the major east-west highway of the Roman Empire, which ran from what is now Albania to Byzantium. Thessalonica's main street was part of that great highway linking Rome with the eastern regions of the empire. It had a cosmopolitan population of about a quarter of a million people, including native Greeks, Romans, sailors, travelers, tradesmen, and businessmen.

Jews were attracted to it, as they were to commercial centers throughout the world at that time. Unlike Philippi, which did not have a large enough Jewish population to support a synagogue (cp. Acts 16:13), the Jewish presence in Thessalonica was significant and influential (cp. Acts 17:1, 5-9). Many Gentiles found the Jewish religion an attractive alternative and attached themselves to the Jewish community, becoming known as 'God-fearers.'

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

When the Romans conquered Macedonia (168 BC) and divided it into four republics, they made Thessalonica the capital of one of them. And when all of Macedonia became a Roman province (148 BC), Thessalonica became its capital. During the Roman civil war, the city was wise (or fortunate) enough to back Antony and Octavian (later the emperor Augustus) in their successful campaign against Brutus and Cassius. As a reward, it was made a free city in 42 BC. As such, although it was the seat of the Roman governor, the city was not occupied by Roman troops. It remained largely a Greek city, unlike Philippi, which was heavily influenced by Roman laws and customs. As a free city, Thessalonica also enjoyed freedom from certain taxes. But most important, the city was granted a large measure of self-government; its people chose their own magistrates, known as *politarchs* ('city authorities'; cp. Acts 17:6). Thessalonica is one of the few cities visited by Paul that has existed continuously from his day to modern times.

### 2. The People of Thessalonica (Acts 17:2-9)

#### *a) Welcome to Thessalonica ... (Acts 17:2-4)*

As he customarily did, Paul began his ministry in Thessalonica by preaching the gospel in the synagogue there. For three Sabbath days, Paul reasoned with the Jews of Thessalonica in their synagogue, arguing from the Old Testament Scriptures that the Messiah had to die and rise from the dead. Some Jews believed in what he said and identified themselves with the missionaries. Other converts included Gentile 'God-fearers' and the wives of prominent members of the community (Acts 17:4). The fact that these people 'joined Paul and Silas' suggest that they became the nucleus of a church. According to tradition, Paul's traveling companion Gaius of Macedonia was the first bishop of Thessalonica (cp. Acts 19:29). Other members of the Thessalonian church included his host Jason (Acts 17:5-8), Aristarchus, a co-laborer and fellow prisoner (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; Col. 4:10; Phm 24), Secundus (Acts 20:4), and possibly Demas (2 Tim. 4:10).

Just how long the three missionaries continued to preach in the city is uncertain. It does seem, however, that they stayed there for some time. They were there long enough for Paul to find productive work to support himself and Silas and Timothy so as not to be a burden (2 Th. 3:8), for the church at Philippi to send aid more than once (Phil. 4:16), and for a significant number of pagan Gentiles to become believers, converted from idol worship (1:9). That implies that Paul had a ministry in Thessalonica outside of the synagogue, as he did in Corinth (cp. Acts 18:4-7). The depth of the pastoral care Paul gave the Thessalonian converts (cp. 2:11-12) and the deep affection that developed between them (cp. 2:8; 3:6-10) also suggest a longer stay. In all likelihood, the initial brief Jewish mission in the synagogue was followed by a longer Gentile mission to the market place.

#### *b) ... Now Get Out! (Acts 17:5-9)*

A militant messianism was spreading among the Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire. It was just about this time that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of their persistent rioting (Acts 18:2). If (as is most probable) the 'Chrestus' at whose instigation, according to Suetonius (*Claudius* 25.4), this rioting had broken out was identical with the Jesus whom Paul proclaimed to be Christ, then the events which played out at Thessalonica meant that Paul and his team were in serious jeopardy.

As they jealously watched Paul's success at winning Gentile proselytes to Christ, the Jews' smoldering resentment burst into flame. Gathering a gang of thugs from the marketplace, the

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

assaulted Jason's house, looking for the Christian preachers. When they could not find them, the frustrated Jews seized Jason and some of the other Christians and hauled them before the politarchs. The false charge of treason (Acts 17:7) was an exceedingly dangerous one, calculated to stir up 'the crowd and the city authorities who hear these things' (Acts 17:8).

The fact that the rival emperor – Christ – whom Paul and the others were accused of proclaiming had been sentenced to death by a Roman judge on a charge of sedition—as anyone could ascertain who took the trouble to enquire—spoke for itself. Evidently the proclamation of another emperor was the most serious respect in which the missionaries were accused of contravening the decrees of Caesar. In these circumstances, one can only admire the wisdom of the Thessalonian politarchs in keeping cool heads and refusing to take panic action.

Perhaps Jason and the others brought before them were known to be men of substance who would not readily encourage troublemakers. At any rate, the politarchs contented themselves with 'taking security' (Acts 17:9)—making them responsible for the missionaries' good behavior and keeping peace in the city. Given the inflammatory attitude of the Jews, this must have seemed impossible to do if Paul and his companions remained with them. No doubt some harsh penalty would have been imposed on Jason if Paul had come back.

To protect his friends, Paul had no option but to leave, but he left most reluctantly. He believed that the new Christians in Thessalonica had received insufficient introduction to prepare them for the life which they would henceforth have to lead, but successive attempts which he made to return to them were thwarted (2:18).

### 3. The Church of Thessalonica (1:1b)

#### a) Assembly

Paul uses the Greek word *ekklēsia* ('assembly') which referred to a gathering of people who had assembled for some purpose. It is used about a hundred times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to Israel as God's congregation. Gathered before Him as His worshipping, obedient, servant people, Israel formed God's 'church', or his assembly. The Thessalonians now belonged to that assembly. By AD 50, the term *ekklēsia* or 'church' had become a technical term for the Christian covenant community. It is related to the phrase *ek kaleō*, 'to call out,' and means 'the called out ones' or 'the elect ones.' Paul was certain that the Thessalonians were among God's elect because he had seen the evidence of their transformation.

Interestingly, in Paul's first five canonical letters (Galatians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Corinthians), 'church' is used in the opening address to his readers. In his later canonical letters to congregations (Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians), 'saints' is used. Obviously, the 'church' is composed of 'saints.'

#### b) Christian Assembly

Public gatherings to transact civil affairs in towns and cities were called assemblies, the same term Paul now uses to describe the church in Thessalonica. However, the Thessalonians could be assured that their assembly was totally different from all others. It was 'in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' It had its origin and life in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus. It belonged to God and was in living union with him.

Modifying the phrase 'in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' with only a single preposition emphasizes the equality of essence between Father and Son. It bears witness to the

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

exalted place which the risen Christ occupies in the thoughts of Paul and his colleagues (cp. 3:11). ‘Lord’ describes Him as creator and sovereign ruler, the One who made us, bought us, rules over us, and to whom we owe full allegiance. ‘Jesus’ (‘Jehovah saves’) refers to His humanity; it was the name given Him at His birth. ‘Christ’ (‘the anointed one’) is the Greek term for the Messiah, the one promised by God to fulfill His plans of redemption

Churches today need to remember that this is their identity, too – in union with the Father and Son. When tempted to follow the trends of secular organizations or facing threatening crises, their leaders in particular need to recall that the church is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It belongs to God, is governed by God, and has its resources in God.

### C. The First Letter to the Thessalonians (1 Th. 1:1c; Acts 17:10-18:5)

#### 1. Occasion for the Letter (Acts 17:10-18:5)

##### *a) Separation in Athens (Acts 17:10-34)*

After being forced to leave Thessalonica, the missionary team traveled to Berea, about fifty miles away. There they had a successful ministry, until Jews from Thessalonica arrived, stirred up trouble, and Paul was again forced to leave. This time however, Silas and Timothy were able to stay behind. From Berea, Paul went to Athens in the province of Achaia, where they later rejoined him (cp. Acts 17:15).

Paul had been virtually expelled as a troublemaker from one Macedonian city after another. Had he and his companions been mistaken when they crossed the sea from Asia Minor to Macedonia under a conviction of divine guidance? Had the Macedonian mission proved abortive? In each Macedonian city they visited they had established a community of believers. But the missionaries had been forced to leave these young converts abruptly, quite inadequately equipped with the instruction and encouragement necessary to enable them to stand firm in the face of determined opposition. The first gospel campaign in Macedonia, in the light of the sequel, can be recognized as an illustrious success, but at the same time when Paul was compelled to leave the province it must have felt as a heartbreaking failure.

At the time this letter was written, the church in Thessalonica was a few months old at most. There had been little time to acquire a grasp of Christian teaching or to come to terms with the demands of Christian behavior. They were still raw recruits. Moreover, they faced the additional pressure of being denied access to Paul himself, combined with persecution from the wider community. Paul and co-workers Silas and Timothy felt an intense concern for the Christians there. The three men had been forced to abandon their mission in that city prematurely and knew they were leaving behind a vulnerable young church to face torrid opposition.

More than once Paul tried to return to them, but for one reason or another he was unable to do so (2:17-18). Eventually, after being forced to leave Berea, the apostle found a way of re-establishing contact from Athens. Choosing to be left alone there, he commissioned Timothy to go and visit the Thessalonian Christians (3:1-2). He was to strengthen and encourage them in the faith, and to bring back a report of their spiritual welfare. So great was his concern for the Thessalonians that he chose to face the formidable task of evangelizing Athens by himself, for he also sent Silas from Athens to Macedonia, possibly to Philippi (cp. Acts 18:5).

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

### *b) Reunion in Corinth (Acts 18:1-5)*

For a short time after Paul's departure the three missionaries were separated, but they were reunited in Corinth, for Paul had moved on to Corinth by the time Timothy had returned from this mission (Acts 18:5). Corinth thus suggests itself as the place from which the letters to the Thessalonian church were sent.

To Paul's immense relief and joy, Timothy's encouraging report comforted and cheered the apostle. Two positive aspects of Timothy's message are summarized in 3:6: firstly, the church was spiritually healthy despite outside opposition (cp. 2:14); and secondly, the Thessalonians still appreciated the apostle. The news had been reassuring, so much so that Paul expressed himself in an exuberant way: 'Now we really live' (3:8).

Nevertheless, Timothy's report made it clear that problems needed to be addressed. Because the persecution that drove the missionaries out of Thessalonica had not abated, the church needed encouragement to stand firm (1:2-10; 2:13-16). The church in Thessalonica was facing a smear campaign. Paul himself was the object of the attack. Jewish opponents of the church hoped to undermine it by denigrating his character. They were trying to undermine the gospel by slandering its preachers, claiming that they were just another of the many bands of self-serving maverick philosophers that tramped the Egnatian Way, only in it to make money and build their reputation. To counter their insidious lies and slander, Paul vigorously defended his, Silas's, and Timothy's integrity (2:1-12). He took great pains to defend himself against the accusations of his detractors. In his concern for the church, he is a superb role-model for any Christian who wants to be a committed yet responsible evangelist.

Timothy brought news not only of their faith and charity and of their steadfastness under persecution, but also of the failure of some of them to grasp the ethical implications of the gospel. Many of the converts in Thessalonica had come to Christ from a pagan background. They needed help to appreciate the demands of their new-found faith. Paul was concerned to leave them in no doubt about implications of holiness in such areas as sexual morality and the need to live an orderly life that would not bring the gospel into disrepute (4:1-12; 5:12-28). The earnestness with which the writers warn them against sexual laxity suggests they had learned that such a warning was necessary.

The Thessalonians had received some eschatological instruction while the missionaries were with them. But the missionaries had to leave the city before the teaching necessary for their convert's equipment had been completed; some questions were therefore left unanswered in their minds. What would be the relation of the Lord's Advent to the condition of the 'dead in Christ'? Would believers who died before the Advent be at some great disadvantage as compared with those who survived to witness the great event? What was going to happen when God finally brought the affairs of this world to a conclusion? Within the church itself confusion about aspects of the Lord's return was causing anxiety on the part of some, and indolence on the part of others (4:13-5:11). Every chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the Second Coming!

### *c) Writing to Thessalonica*

News of these things stirred Paul, at the beginning of his 18-month stay in Corinth (Acts 18:11) to write the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians, perhaps within six months of the founding of the church. Hence, the purpose of 1 Thessalonians is for Paul to convey to the members of that

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

church how encouraged he is by the good report about them (3:7) and to deal with other aspects of the news brought by Timothy.

We do not know who delivered 1 Thessalonians to the Thessalonian church. But apparently after delivering the letter, this person (or persons) returns to Paul, who is evidently still in Corinth, with more recent news about the church. Paul writes 2 Corinthians shortly (a few weeks or months?) after 1 Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians was also written from Corinth in either late 50 AD or early 51 AD.

This second report, which prompted the writing of 2 Thessalonians, is also primarily positive but does contain two negatives. The positive aspect is explicitly once again that the church is spiritual healthy (2 Th. 1:3-4) despite continued outside persecution (2 Th. 1:5-6), and that the Thessalonians still have a high regard for Paul, which is implied by the fact that he no longer has to defend himself. The negative aspects are that the Thessalonians have received false information about the Second Coming (2 Th. 2:2), and that the problem of idleness on the part of some in the church has worsened (2 Th. 3:6-15).

### 2. Themes of the Letter

Paul uses the word *παρουσία* (*Parousia*) in the sense of the future Advent of Christ: it occurs in this sense six times in the two letters to the Thessalonians. The event is depicted repeatedly in language borrowed from portrayals of OT theophanies. But it is the ethical implications that are chiefly stressed.

In the relatively short interval since the missionaries' departure from Thessalonica some members of the church had died. The others were concerned about the status of these departed friends at the Parousia. Would they in some way forfeit the glory of being associated with their returning Lord? It is implied but not expressly stated, that the Parousia is expected within the lifetime of most Christians then living, including the writers. At a later stage in Paul's career he expected rather to be among those who would be raised from the dead (2 Cor. 4:14; 5:1-10). However, this shift in perspective has no material impact on the theology of Pauline eschatology. The apostolic doctrine of the Parousia is independent of its timing.

The 'Day of the Lord' would come unexpectedly, 'like a thief in the night' (5:2; cp. Mk. 13:33-37). It is on the ungodly, however, that the day will break with such unwelcome suddenness: believers will be prepared for it—not because they know when it will come (they do not know), but because to live the Christian life is to be permanently ready for the great day. Others may remain in the darkness and fall asleep; believers live in the light and stay awake (5:1-11). Although in his later letters he does not use the apocalyptic terms of the Thessalonian correspondence, the substance of Paul's outlook remains unchanged, as may be seen even in the maturity of his letter to the Romans (cp. Rom. 13:11-13).

There is a tendency to view the Thessalonian epistles merely as treatises on eschatology. But to do so is to overlook the fullness of the riches they contain. They *do* include important teaching on the end times, but only in the context of Paul's passionate pastoral concern for his beloved Thessalonian flock that they not lose the joy and hope of a sound eschatology.

Though he had ministered for only a brief time in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul was thrilled with what was happening in the church there. His letters reflect joy over the spiritual progress the Thessalonians had made in the short time they had been believers (1:2; 2:13-14. 19-20; 3:9;

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

4:9-10; 5:11; 2 Th. 1:3-4; 2:13). The Thessalonian epistles catalog the marks of a healthy, growing church.

In these letters, Paul pastors his converts with the gospel. Here we can gain a glimpse of a young first-century church facing severe opposition. We will see its defects and its strengths. But more than that, we will see in Paul and his companions a model of pastoral care. Here, perhaps as nowhere else in his letters, we see how the apostle loved his converts and labored to lead them on in the faith.

### 3. Relationship to the Second Letter

Because we have two letters written to the church in Thessalonica, questions are raised about their relation to one another. In general, 2 Thessalonians covers much the same ground as 1 Thessalonians, if more perfunctorily. Again there is thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonian Christians' faith and love, amid the persecutions they are enduring. The one outstanding feature which distinguishes 2 Thessalonians is the eschatological section in 2:1-12. This is followed by exhortation of a general kind, including a severe warning against idleness.

If both letters are authentic, they were evidently sent within a brief interval, one after the other. Why then should there be so much repetition and overlapping between them? And why at the same time, should there be a different eschatological outlook in the one as against the other. Liberal scholars have posed the following solutions: 1) 2 Thessalonians was written by someone who disapproved of the eschatological perspective of 1 Thessalonians and attempted to replace it deliberately; however, both the original and the forgery survived; 2) Paul changed his eschatological perspective between sending the two letters; 3) the two letters were sent to two different but distinct groups within the Thessalonian church – 1 Thessalonians to the Gentile Christians and 2 Thessalonians to the Jewish Christians.

Others have suggested that 2 Thessalonians was written first. There is nothing antecedently improbable in dating 2 Thessalonians before 1 Thessalonians. The traditional sequence of Pauline letters to churches is based on length, not on date. If 2 Thessalonians is indeed the earlier of the two, this does not affect what has been said above about the occasion of 1 Thessalonians. It would simply have to be assumed that when Timothy was sent back from Athens to Thessalonica (3:2), he carried with him a letter for the church—2 Thessalonians. Then, when he returned with good news from Thessalonica, 1 Thessalonians was written in response to the good news. While there are some arguments for the priority of 2 Thessalonians, it must be said that there is no explicit mention in 1 Thessalonians of a previous letter sent to the church, whereas in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 there is what could well be a reference to an earlier letter.

In particular, the eschatological teaching of the two letters is easier to understand if 1 Thessalonians is the earlier. In 1 Thessalonians the Parousia is spoken of as if it were likely to take place in the lifetime of most of the readers and writers (5:2). This may have led some readers to conclude that it was so imminent that there was no point in going on with the ordinary concerns of daily life. To correct this error, the writers say in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, 'The Parousia is imminent indeed, but not so imminent as all that. Do not be misled into thinking the great day is already with us. It will come soon enough, but certain things must first take place.'

The eschatological teaching of 1 Thessalonians is mainly on a personal level: it is given in response to questions about the lot of believers who have died before the Parousia. This is

## Thessalonians – Lesson 1

followed by a brief reference to the Day of the Lord as it affects men and women in general: it will take the ungodly by surprise, but believers, being children of light, will be awake and prepare for it. In 2 Thessalonians believers are told further how they may be prepared for the great day: they will recognize the events which signal its approach.

### 4. Prescript to the Letter (1:1c)

*‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’*

Grace (*χάρις*, *charis*) is the undeserved favor of God, His kindness to those who merit his wrath and condemnation. It comes to the sinner in the form of complete forgiveness of sin and the granting of eternal life.

Peace (*ειρήνη*, *eirēnē*) follows naturally on from grace; it is the result of that amazing gift of love. Where once there were enmity and estrangement, now there is peace.

### D. Postscript: Paul and the Macedonian Churches

Paul continued to have relationships with the Thessalonians and other churches in Macedonia after the two Thessalonian letters were written (c. 50 AD). In addition to the letter addressed to the Philippians, he alludes to the Macedonian churches further in writing to the Corinthians and the Romans. From these references we gather that his relations with them were outstandingly happy. They were consistent in their generous giving—not only to himself personally but also to the Jerusalem relief fund—in circumstances of deep poverty (cp. 2 Cor. 8:1-5; 11:9; Rom. 15:26).

Six years after Paul’s enforced departure from Macedonia, he was able to revisit the province, this time without difficulty. Toward the end of his Ephesian ministry (spring 56 AD), Paul planned to pass through Macedonia and continue south to see his friends in Corinth (1 Cor. 16:5), and, although troubles in the Corinthian church caused some modification in his plans (2 Cor. 1:15-2:13), he did spend a considerable time in Macedonia. It is indicated also by the narrative of Acts (19:21; 20:1-2) that he visited Macedonia at this time, but a careful reading of the evidence suggests that his stay in the province was longer than might appear on the surface of the Acts narrative—that, in fact, he was able to travel farther west along the Via Egnatia than he had been allowed to do on his first visit. In Romans 15:19 Paul says that he has completed preaching of the gospel ‘from Jerusalem as far around as Illyricum.’ The mention of Illyricum, as the farthest west area where he had preached hitherto, implies that he had traveled along the Via Egnatia possibly as far as its terminus at Dyrrhachium and then turned north to cross the frontier separating Macedonia from Illyricum. He returned from Illyricum in (probably the late summer of 56 AD and traveled back east along the Via Egnatia: then he moved south from eastern Macedonia to Corinth to spend the winter there. The next year 57 AD, Paul traveled north to Macedonia by land and took ship from the port of Philippi, where he was rejoined by the author of the ‘we’ narrative. Paul returned to Jerusalem where he was arrested and began his long imprisonment and slow journey to Rome, arriving in the spring of 60 AD. This brief (and unplanned) visit to Philippi (on which he no doubt passed through Thessalonica) was the last occasion by Paul spent on Macedonian soil. But the churches of Macedonia never forgot him, and his apostolic achievement in the province has endured in vigor to the present day.

For next time: Read 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10.