

AN INTRODUCTION TO 1 THESSALONIANS

(Dan Wallace)

Occasion and Purpose

Paul certainly would have wanted to write to the Thessalonians after his brief stay in the city, if for no other reason than for encouraging the saints he had been cut off from. But the catalyst was a return visit from Timothy in which he reported several issues which needed clearing up (cf. 1 Thess 3:1-5).[1] Since Timothy's name is absent from Acts 16:6 to 17:13 and since the pledge which Jason had to make to keep peace seems to have prevented Paul and Silas from returning, it is our view that Timothy was not with them on their visit to the city. To be able to send Timothy back to them when neither Silas nor Paul could return is in perfect harmony with this supposition.

This epistle essentially has a fourfold purpose: (1) to express Paul's joy that the church is growing and doing well; (2) to vindicate Paul's ministry and the Thessalonians' conversion; (3) to correct some misunderstanding about eschatology both because Paul's message on that topic was "cut short" and, in the meantime, some of the Thessalonians had died (leaving nagging questions as to when they would be reunited with living believers); and (4) to correct some other, moral and practical, matters (which were not unrelated either to the vindication of Paul's ministry or to eschatological issues).

Argument

Paul opens his letter with a customary salutation (1:1), written to the Thessalonian believers.

He then spends the next three chapters setting forth his relation to the Thessalonians (1:2–3:13). He does this apparently because Jews from the synagogue in Thessalonica were trying to discredit Paul, arguing that he was no different than those who peddled their philosophy for profit on naïve audiences. The opponents attacked Paul on three grounds: (1) the Thessalonians' conversion was not genuine—hence, Paul's message could not be from God; (2) Paul was a peddler for profit; and (3) the proof that Paul was not interested in the Thessalonians is that he has not even bothered to visit them again. To these charges Paul now responds.

First, the apostle expresses thanks to God for the confirmation of the Thessalonians' salvation as seen in their spiritual growth (1:2-10). He commends them to God because of their spiritual productivity which is motivated by their focus on salvation, their present walk with the Lord, and their hope of glorification (1:3). The apostle now reveals the evidence of their salvation (which is the reason he knows that they are saved): (1) his gospel was proclaimed with full conviction in the power of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5); (2) the Thessalonians accepted the gospel and followed Paul's pattern in words and works (1:6-8); and (3) the Thessalonian believers remained steadfast in the apostolic kerygma (1:9-10).

The second reason Paul sets forth his relationship to the Thessalonian believers is to defend/confirm the genuineness of his apostleship and their conversion (2:1-16). Here Paul first presents positive (and objective) evidence (2:1-12), followed by negative (and subjective) evidence (2:13-16). Positively, the first reason that Paul's apostleship (i.e., that he was sent from God) and, consequently, the Thessalonians' conversion should be accepted as genuine is because (1) Paul's message was from God (2:3-4), (2) his motives were pure (2:5-8), and (3) his method was characterized by sacrificial service and hard work among the Thessalonians (2:9-12). These points are all stated in 2:1-2, then elaborated on in 2:3-12.

Then the negative evidence is presented: The second reason Paul's apostleship and the Thessalonians' conversion should be accepted as genuine is because (1) the Thessalonians accepted Paul's message as from God (2:13-14a), and (2) those who maligned the Thessalonians' faith belong to the class of men who reject the truth and will be rejected by God (2:14b-16). In this second point Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they have suffered at the hands of their (Jewish) countrymen who are just like the Jews in Judea in their rejection of the truth. The wrath of God will certainly come (ἐφθασεν is a proleptic aorist) on them because of this.

The third reason Paul sets forth his relationship to the Thessalonian believers is to express his deep desire to visit them again (2:17–3:10). He



begins with a negative argument, offers a “Plan B,” and shows the result of this second plan. The negative argument is that Paul and Silas have not returned to Thessalonica because Satan has prevented them (2:17-20)—an oblique reference, we believe, to the security taken from Jason. The “Plan B” then goes into effect: Timothy, who had not visited Thessalonica the first time, was sent to them to strengthen their faith in the midst of forewarned persecutions (3:1-5). The result of Timothy’s visit is that Paul now has a renewed desire to visit the Thessalonians as well as much encouragement about their faith (3:6-10).

At this stage the first major section of the epistle concludes with a transitional benediction. The content of Paul’s prayer (in light of the fact that the genuineness of his ministry, his message, and their faith stand vindicated) is that the Lord would (1) bring the apostles back to the Thessalonians, (2) continue to sanctify these believers, and (3) perfectly sanctify them at the time of the second coming of Christ (3:11-13).

Having vindicated himself and their conversion, Paul now can get to the heart of the epistle (4:1–5:22). Since this section contains prophecy as well as authoritative exhortations, Paul necessarily had to establish that he was a spokesman for God before proceeding. Hence, as long as the first three chapters are, they function basically as backdrop to chapters 4 and 5. In essence, these last chapters are an argument for proper relations within the body of Christ in the light of the imminent return of Christ. There are three basic parts: (1) an emphasis on proper conduct with other Christians in the body (4:1-12), (2) encouragement about the Lord’s return with some specific eschatological details (4:13–5:11), and (3) exhortations concerning proper attitudes toward authorities within the body (5:12-22). The middle position of the eschatological paragraph is no accident: it governs the other two sections in terms of rationale. That is to say, the reason believers should have proper horizontal relations (in terms of authority) within the body and proper hierarchical relations within the body is because the Lord’s return for the saints is imminent.

First (since his authority is from God), Paul argues that the manner of the believers’ lifestyle should be characterized by proper horizontal relations within the body (4:1-12). In 4:1-2 he summarizes this by stating that the Thessalonians’ lifestyle should be characterized by continually pleasing God (4:1-2). Then he gives specifics (4:3-12): (1) negatively, the believers’ lifestyle should be characterized by the absence of irresponsible lust (4:3-8); (2) positively, the believers’ lifestyle should be characterized by a mutual edification (extending beyond the local body) and an individual work ethic (affecting the non-believer’s view of the church) (4:9-12).

Second (in light of the fact that Paul’s message is from God), Paul now encourages the Thessalonians with reference both to living and dead Christians on the basis that all will be resurrected/raptured imminently—before the day of the Lord begins (4:13–5:11). This section really has two distinct parts as seen by the $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}$ in 5:1. In the first part Paul encourages the saints with some positive news about their destiny and that of their dead. In the second part Paul encourages the saints by denying negative news (the wrath of God).

In 4:13-18 the apostle essentially encourages the believers about the status of Christians who have died (4:13). In essence, his argument is that he has received a prophecy (“word of the Lord” in 4:15) that both living and dead saints will be together with the Lord imminently in their translated bodies at the rapture (rather than the dead saints having to wait seven years) (4:14-17).

In 5:1-11 Paul exhorts the saints to be alert (5:6-8) since they are sons of light (5:4-5) and since the day of the Lord will come suddenly (5:1-3). This alertness has to do with proper Christian conduct, rather than watchfulness for signs of the Lord’s return, as is evident by the abrupt unexpectedness of the Lord’s return. Paul follows this challenge with a promise: just as the non-elect are destined for the time of God’s wrath (cf. 2:16), God’s children are destined for escape from it (5:9). This wrath almost certainly carries a double entendre force to it: both the tribulation period and final wrath (namely, hell). Believers are not destined for either. This promise extends even to those believers who are not alert (5:10). A state of non-alertness affects present sanctification, but has no impact on the time of future glorification. Paul concludes this eschatological section with a final encouragement (5:11) which appropriately forms an *inclusio* with the encouragement in 4:18.

Third, the manner of lifestyle believers should have in relation to intrachurch authority (in light of the imminence of the rapture) is respect for leaders (5:12-13), responsibility toward imperfect saints (5:14-15), reverence for God (5:16-18), and critical receptiveness toward prophecy (5:19-22).

The epistle concludes with a benediction and final greetings (5:23-28).