

## Unit 1 Introduction

# Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians

Long distance relationships are always challenging. Even in today's day and age with cell phones and social media, it is hard to feel like someone you care about is truly present with you when they are not there physically. Now try to imagine how difficult it would be to sense the presence of someone in a world where these modern conveniences did not exist. Yet, even though Paul was a preacher that God kept calling to go from one city to the next, his churches still needed for him to be present with them, including the Thessalonian church. Fortunately, he did have a tool that brought great comfort to his churches. That tool was his letters. And, fortunately for us, these letters are still available to provide comfort and instruction to us today.

### *Paul's Ministry to the Thessalonians*

Before we take a closer look at Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, we need to start with a summary of his relationship with the Thessalonian church. It began with Paul's call to start churches in Greece. According to Acts, Paul was led away from his work in the Roman province of Asia Minor and was directed in a vision to go to Macedonia instead (Acts 16:6-10). There Paul along with Silas began their ministry in Greece in the city of Philippi where they established the first church in Macedonia. However, their ministry in Philippi was not very long. After being arrested for casting out an unclean spirit from a woman, they were thrown in jail (16:16-34). And then after converting the jailor and his family to Christ that night, both Paul and Silas were asked the next day to leave Philippi by the magistrates (16:35-40).

After Philippi, Paul's next stop was Thessalonica, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and situated on the Egnatian Way, the main east-west highway that connected Italy to what is now modern Turkey. In Thessalonica, Paul began his ministry in the synagogue where he preached on the sabbath. Over the course of two weeks (three sabbath days, Acts 17:2), Acts states that Paul convinced "some of the Jews" and "a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women" that Jesus is the Messiah (17:4). These new converts became the core of the Thessalonian church when "other Jews" who were not convinced by Paul's message made it impossible for these new Christians to remain in the synagogue. At some point, the tensions between Paul and these non-believing Jews became so intense that these opponents to Paul's preaching went so far as to incite a mob to riot against Paul and Silas. After the mob's efforts to locate Paul and Silas were unsuccessful, both were whisked away by believers in the night to another Macedonian city, Berea (17:10).

Though Paul could only reside with the Thessalonians for a short time, Paul still had time enough to form a very close bond with the members of this new church. In his first letter, Paul describes their connection and how proud he was of their faith. Early in the letter, he says that they "welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with joy given by the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 1:6). They also grew in their faith in Christ so much so that they "became a model to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia" (1:7), the Roman province where the cities of Corinth and Athens were located. While some were Jews, it appears that many more were Greeks who feared the God of Judaism (i.e., often referred to as God-fearers) and then became believers in Christ on account of Paul's preaching. Their Greek background is apparent when Paul talks about their past worship of idols and how they turned "to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven" (1:9-10). Like Paul, they also knew suffering (2:14) but remained faithful to God and to the message that Paul proclaimed to them about Jesus. Unfortunately, Paul could not remain physically present with them for a longer period of time. Instead, he had to leave them suddenly which left them feeling like Paul had left them orphaned (2:17; 3:6-10). Yet, even though they were separated, Paul's strong connection with this church remained. And though he could not provide comfort and instruction in person, he did provide it through his letters.

### *Introduction to 1 Thessalonians*

Because of his close bond with the Thessalonian church, he never stopped thinking about them and praying for them even though he was absent from them (1:2). Unfortunately, he could not find a way to return to them to comfort them in person and to finish his teaching among them (3:10). Paul tells this story in the first part of 1 Thessalonians (1:2—3:13). The most important message that he wanted to convey in this part of the letter was his continuous desire to return to Thessalonica. However, he was hindered from doing so (Satan blocked our way, 2:17-18). So, instead, Paul sent Timothy to check in on them (3:1-2). Unfortunately, word from Timothy was slow in coming. In all likelihood, after Timothy went to Thessalonica, Paul left Athens and then began his long ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18). It was there in about AD 50-51 that Timothy finally caught up with Paul to give his report on what was happening with the Thessalonian church. 1 Thessalonians is Paul's response to that report. From the letter, we can discern that Timothy's report likely had two components. First, he brought the encouraging news that though Paul had to leave the Thessalonians orphaned, they "were

standing firm in the Lord" (3:8) even in the midst of "distress and persecution" (3:7). After hearing this good report, Paul could only express his thanks to God and to resolve even more to return to them (3:9-13).

Besides the good report, Timothy also told Paul about some things in the church that needed his attention. That there could be problems in the Thessalonian church was already on Paul's mind since his sudden departure likely left several things incomplete in his teachings to them (3:10). So, in the second section of the letter (4:1—5:11), Paul specifically addresses these concerns, but as he does, he makes sure to remind them repeatedly about his teachings when he was actually present among them (4:1-2, 6, 9; 5:1). In this way, the letter then functions as an extension of his previous teachings that were in person and carried the same authority even though they were being brought to them in a letter. As for the issues themselves, first Paul calls the Thessalonian church to pursue holiness by avoiding sexual immorality. And second he reassures the church about what to expect at the second coming of Christ. He assures the Thessalonians that though some believers had died, they did not miss Christ's return (4:13-14). Instead, Paul reminded them that the "dead in Christ will rise first" and then after this, the living will join with the dead and with Christ (4:16-17). So, the Thessalonians did not need to be discouraged that some had died. When Christ returns, all will be united with Christ.

Thus, although he could not be physically present to these believers, Paul did the next best thing that was available to him. He wrote a letter. As far as we know, this was his first letter to a church that needed to hear from its founding apostle. And as the New Testament shows, it would not be his last.

### *Introduction to 2 Thessalonians*

Paul's deep concern for the Thessalonian church is seen in the fact that he wrote them not just one letter but two. However, before we say too much about this, we do have to touch on the fact that many modern scholars are uncertain that Paul wrote this letter. This argument is typically twofold. First, modern scholars note the striking similarities in wording and structure between the two letters. Most strange is the way that 2 Thessalonians appears to mimic the exact same literary conventions that appear relatively strange in 1 Thessalonians. For example, in most letters, there is

only one thanksgiving section, typically at the beginning of the letter (e.g., Romans 1:8; Philippians 1:3; Colossians 1:3; Philemon 4). 1 Thessalonians appears to have two of them (1 Thessalonians 1:2 and 2:13) as does 2 Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 1:3 and 2:13). Some assume then that someone other than Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians using 1 Thessalonians as a template.

The second argument typically points out an apparent change in Paul's teaching about the end times. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul emphasizes that Christ's coming would be sudden "like a thief" in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2). However, those who argue against Pauline authorship for 2 Thessalonians point out that Christ's return appears delayed in this letter and must wait for certain events to happen first before Christ can return (2:1-12). Thus, the emphasis of Christ's sudden return in 1 Thessalonians is greatly diminished in 2 Thessalonians. In the end, though, the arguments raised against Pauline authorship are not overly persuasive, especially if Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians soon after he wrote 1 Thessalonians.

That 2 Thessalonians was written after 1 Thessalonians is clear from the context of 2 Thessalonians (2:15). Any other details about when Paul wrote the letter and why are more difficult to discern since few details are recorded in 2 Thessalonians itself. Piecing together what is available, it seems most likely that Paul wrote this letter a few months after he wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth in AD 50-51. Based on Paul's references to their continued persecution (1:3-10), it appears that their suffering had become worse. Paul's purpose was to encourage them during this greater suffering. In addition, the false teachings around Christ's return continued to need his attention (2:1-2). Finally, the problem of idle Christians had not been cleared up by his reprimand in his first letter (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12) but appears to have gotten worse and was more widespread (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). As with his first letter to the Thessalonian church, although he was far from Thessalonica, Paul was needed again to provide comfort and instruction to a church where he could not be. The good news of both letters is that though he was unable to be present with the Thessalonian church in person, Paul could still bring the word of the Lord to them through his pen.

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