

CHAPTER 7

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL EPISTLES

(1 & 2 Thessalonians)

Paul's first two extant epistles (assuming a later date for Galatians) were written on his second missionary journey. He wrote them from Corinth to the newly established church in Thessalonica in Macedonia. Since they emphasize the second coming of Christ and the events, which will surround it, they often are called the eschatological epistles.

Authorship and Date

These two epistles claim to be Pauline (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; 3:17). Nearly all NT scholars accept 1 Thessalonians as Pauline, but many dispute 2 Thessalonians. It appears that Silas and Timothy, Paul's companions on his second journey, joined with him in composing and sending the letters.

Both epistles were written within a few months or even weeks of each other. Paul's ministry in Corinth during his second missionary journey can be dated fairly accurately. The Proconsul Gallio was in office there in the first half of A.D. 52, according to the Delphi inscription (cf. Acts 18:12-17; see above notes on Pauline chronology). Since proconsuls had one-year terms, he could have ruled in that case from early A.D. 51 through early A.D. 53. Working that date within the rest of the Pauline chronology, it seems that Paul's ministry in Corinth took place approximately from late A.D. 49 through the first half of A.D. 51, when the hearing before Gallio would have taken place. Thus a good date for the Thessalonian epistles would be A.D. 50 (only 20 years after Jesus' crucifixion). Virtually all scholars agree upon this date.

Background of the Epistles

Paul visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, after being beaten and imprisoned at Philippi (Acts 17:1-9). While in Thessalonica Paul preached in the synagogue for three Sabbaths, converting many Jews and even more Gentiles. He supported himself during this time by manual labor, and was assisted by at least two special gifts from the new small church he left behind in Philippi (2 Thess 3:8; Phil 4:16). Because of Jewish inspired persecution, Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica, after only a very brief stay, perhaps as short as three weeks. He

left behind him a new, immature Christian church, most of whose members were recent converts from paganism, and which faced continuing persecution.

- Paul then traveled to Berea with Silas and Timothy, and was chased out of town, himself going to Athens (Acts 17:15).
- Later Silas and Timothy joined him in Athens (1 Thess 3:1-2).
- Paul and Silas then sent Timothy to Thessalonica to strengthen the church (1 Thess 3:2), and Paul also sent Silas back to Macedonia, perhaps to Berea or to Philippi (cf. Acts 18:5).
- Paul himself went on to Corinth (Acts 18:1).
- Later Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5), Timothy bringing word of the Thessalonians' progress and condition (1 Thess 3:6).
- As a response, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, Silas and Timothy being in Corinth with him (1 Thess 1:1).

The subscripts to 1 and 2 Thessalonians found in the KJV are found in a few early (starting in the fifth century) and many later NT Greek MSS; they say “the first (or second) writing to the Thessalonians, from Athens.” Apparently they are based on an incautious inference from 1 Thess 3:1, by which a fairly early copyist assumed that Paul was writing from Athens.

After Paul sent 1 Thessalonians, he heard a mixed response: some good (as in 2 Thess 1), and some bad. Many misunderstood Paul's teaching concerning the day of the Lord, thinking that it was already past, or in progress (2 Thess 2:2); Paul wrote to clarify this point. To make matters worse, there apparently were rumors or even forged writings circulating which misquoted Paul's teaching (2 Thess 2:2; cf. 3:17).

Some in the church were still “disorderly” (2 Thess 3:11), and these needed rebuke, as well as the others needing instruction concerning them.

Also, there was a new outbreak of persecution (2 Thess 1:5-7), and they needed support. Paul and his companions in turn asked for their prayer and encouragement (2 Thess 3:1). All these motives lead Paul to write 2 Thessalonians from Corinth.

Contents of the Epistles

There are several strains that run through both 1 and 2 Thessalonians:

- 1) Encouragement in time of persecution (1 Thess 2:14; 2 Thess 1)

- 2) Defense of Paul's conduct and leadership (1 Thess 2-3; 2 Thess 2:2; 3:1-5, 7-10)
- 3) Basic Christian life, fulfilling daily responsibilities (1 Thess 4; 2 Thess 3)
- 4) Special emphasis on eschatology

—End of each chapter in 1 Thessalonians:

1:10

2:19

3:13

4:13-18 (continues in 5:1-11)

5:23

—Long section in 2 Thess 1:5 - 2:12

Outline of 1 Thessalonians

Salutation, 1:1

I. Paul's thanksgiving for the Thessalonians, 1:2-10

Notice their good testimony (v. 3) is based on the fact that God has elected them (v. 4). Their testimony has reached to people in two provinces and beyond.

II. Paul's defense of his actions and absence, ch. 2-3

1. Paul's defense of his actions, 2:1-12

Paul recalls to their remembrance how he behaved unselfishly and properly and with love as he had ministered among them. This shows his character.

2. The Thessalonians' acceptance of Paul's actions, 2:13-16

(Note the strong condemnation of the unbelieving Jews who opposed the gospel in vv. 14-16)

3. Paul's defense of his absence, 2:17 - ch. 3

Paul had left them suddenly, and now was absent, while they faced persecutions. He wants them to know he is not absent because he is afraid or selfish, but for adequate cause. His character is shown by the way he acted when he was in Thessalonica.

Paul explains how he sent Timothy to them, and how that action has helped them.

III. Paul's exhortations to the Thessalonians, ch. 4 - 5:22

1. Introduction to the exhortations, 4:1-2

The rules for Christian living are an authoritative part of the apostolic teaching; they are not optional for believers.

Παραλαμβάνω *paralambano*, to receive official instruction, the “apostolic tradition”

2. Exhortations concerning their personal lives, 4:3-12

Paul emphasizes the need for moral purity, for brotherly love, and for an orderly life.

3. Exhortations concerning their understanding of the second coming of Christ, 4:13 – 5:11

a. Living and dead saints at the second coming of Christ, 4:13-18

In this famous passage Paul explains the doctrine of the “Rapture.” When Christ returns, the dead saints will be raised before the living saints are glorified; they will not be left out.

Christ's coming is a παρουσία *parousia*, a royal visitation (v. 15). This word was used in Koiné Greek to describe a royal visit of a king to a city in his domain (see Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 4th ed., 1922, pp. 368-73). The people would go out of the city for the official meeting (ἀπάντησις *apantesis*) of the king, welcoming him to the city (cf. v. 17; Matt 25:6; Mark 14:13; Acts 28:15).

b. The saved and the lost at the second coming of Christ, 5:1-11

Paul warns them to be alert so as not to be found unprepared for Christ's coming.

4. Exhortations concerning their ecclesiastical conduct, 5:12-22

Paul discusses their attitudes: toward church elders, toward one another, toward religious worship, and toward the use of spiritual gifts.

IV. Conclusion to the epistle, 5:23-28

Paul concludes with a final prayer, final exhortations (including the public reading of this epistle), and his benediction.

Outline of 2 Thessalonians

Salutation, 1:1-2

I. Paul's prayers for the Thessalonians, 1:3-12

Paul gives thanks for their progress in faith, both internal and external.

He then gives thanks that God will vindicate them in the day of judgment by destroying the Antichrist and all who persecute the church.

Paul intercedes for them that they will be faithful and encouraged.

II. Paul's doctrinal instruction, especially concerning the last days, ch. 2

Paul warns about false teachings about Christ's coming that were circulating in his name. He explains the necessary prelude to the day of the Lord, the revealing of the Antichrist.

The identity and work of the restrainer in vv. 6-7 is a vexed question. Most take it to be either the Roman Empire's rule of law, or the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul had taught the Thessalonians before; so they knew what he meant (vv.5-6).

Paul describes the temporary glory and then the destruction of the Antichrist, and the fate of all unbelievers. He concludes the section with encouragement and a prayer for the Thessalonians.

III. Paul's practical injunctions, 3:1-15

1. His request for prayer, 3:1-2

2. His confidence in their obedience, 3:3-5

The following instructions may be difficult, but Paul is confident that they will carry them out.

3. His injunction regarding disorderly brothers, 3:6-15

Some in the church were taking advantage of the generosity of others (perhaps the wealthy women mentioned in Acts 17:4) and of the excitement of misunderstood eschatology, and were refusing to work, living off the charity of other church members. Paul rebukes them severely, and orders the church to place them under discipline until they repent.

IV. Conclusion, 3:16-18

Paul informs them of his custom of personally signing each epistle. He bestows the apostolic benediction.