

THE FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS - PART I

THANKSGIVING FOR A SPRINGTIME OF THE FAITH

I. The First Letter to the Thessalonians opens with a brief introduction, followed by an optimistic thanksgiving that outlines many bases for the Christian faith.

A. The greeting is brief and distinguished by the fact that here St. Paul, unlike most of his letters, does not identify himself as an apostle or servant of the Lord, but simply by his name, and that of Saints Timothy and Titus.

- The letter was likely written at such an early date that the freshness and power of the gospel (a common theme of the letter) was the authority.

- The letter also refers to the church "of the Thessalonians in God," rather than "in Thessalonica." Most of the Pauline letters, like the book of Revelation, would refer to the "holy ones" in a city. There may be an emphasis that the people of a land, not the city itself, are the earthly members of the church. The letter emphasizes a judgment on the world outside, including the cities, and so the letter may be emphasizing the distinction between Christians and the world outside. Our homeland is in God.

- There is an early emphasis on the idea of a church (ekklesia), that is a gathering of the people together. Here as elsewhere in the Pauline letters, there is a strong emphasis on salvation together.

B. The thanksgiving, which constitutes the rest of chapter 1 strikes an optimistic tone about the Thessalonians' faith, although also a warning about the "wrath to come."

1. The letter speaks of the gospel (evangelion) coming in word, power and the Holy Spirit. The term gospel was used in the Septuagint to mean news and thanksgiving for victory in battle or other struggle and, among the Greeks, especially to mean joy at the birth of a king. See, e.g., 2 Sam. 18:20, 31, Is. 40:9, 41:27, 52:7, 61:1. Here, as with the Gospels and elsewhere in St. Paul's writings, the term has both implications.

- The gospel is not merely words of wisdom or knowledge, as philosophy might be, but rather comes with the

power and Spirit to sanctify us.

2. There is an optimistic note that the Thessalonians' faith had become known to all of Achaia. The notion of evangelization through living the faith is present from an early time. Here and for the first three chapters, the letter over and over again uses the term thanksgiving, eucharistia, which is the basis for the term Eucharist and a common focus of early Christian worship. See 1 Thess. 1:2, 2:13, 3:9, 5:18; Acts 2:42; Didache, ch. IX

3. The thanksgiving does have a note of dramatic contrast as it ends with the praise that the Thessalonians have turned from idols to the true and living God and to Jesus "who will deliver us from the wrath that is to come."

- It appears that most of the Thessalonians were Gentile converts; St. Paul has little good to say about their former religion.

- The Old Testament contrasted the living God who gives life to dead idols, whose worshipers became like them. See, e.g., Ps. 115:4-8, 135:15-18; Wis. 14:12-15:6; Is. 44:6-23.

- The passage ends with a reference to the "wrath that is to come." The Old Testament prophets spoke of God's judgment coming to the world, a reference that the Gospels and the Book of Revelation would build upon. See, e.g. Joel 3:3-5; Zech. 12-14; Dan. 7; Mal. 3:1-5; Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21:7-36. The reference to the coming wrath could be a judgment withing history, as chapter 2 seems to refer to, or the end of all things on earth as chapters 4 and 5 refer to, or both.

4. The thanksgiving also refers to the Trinity.

a. In the greeting the letter refers to God the Father, in verse 3 to God our Father, and finally in 10 as the Father of Jesus. There is perhaps a reflection of the fact that God is Father from all eternity and, through Jesus Christ, become our Father in a more personal fashion.

- In ancient Israel, angels, kings, and the Chosen People as a whole were sometimes referred to as sons of God by metaphor. E.g., Duet. 32:5; Ps. 2:7, 29:1, 110:3; Job 1:6, 2 Sam. 7, Hosea 11:1, Wisdom 3:18. But only with Jesus is this sonship so clearly available to the faithful. See, e.g., John 1:12; Gal. 3:26; Eph. 1:5.

b. St. Paul usually refers to Jesus with the title Lord or Christ (i.e., the Anointed One.) However, in verse 10 he uncharacteristically uses the name Jesus alone, although in connection with God as His Father. See also Phil. 2:9. There may be here, as with the Phillipians hymn an emphasis on the real humanity and humility of Jesus in joining with us in our human condition and suffering for us.

c. The thanksgiving describes the Holy Spirit in the context of the power of the gospel and the joy of being Christian. The term "Holy Spirit" had been used in the Old Testament to refer to the wisdom, grace, and protection God gave to His beloved. See, e.g., Ps. 51:13; Wis. 1:5, 9:17. At times, the Spirit, like Wisdom, was described in very personal terms. See, e.g., Wis. 1:5; Ez. 3:12; 37:9-10. The Jews would have interpreted the passages that indicate a personal spirit metaphorically. But, as St. Paul begins to reveal, they have a deeper meaning as well, referring to the divine Person.

5. The thanksgiving likewise, refers to faith, hope and charity, which will be a frequent theme of St. Paul and become known in Christian thought as the theological virtues.

a. There is clear connection between the virtues and good works, with St. Paul using the phrases "the work of faith" and the "labor of love." Cf. John 6:29, 14:15. Thus, faith and good works, love and labor, are intertwined.

b. Likewise, hope shows itself in endurance. The Christian virtue of hope is not an optimistic view that the future will be better than the present or that all will work out well, but rather, as the letter will go on to argue, that all good will be rewarded and restored by Christ in the Resurrection. Thus, true hope shows itself especially in endurance when things are not going well. See, e.g., Rom. 5:1-5; 1 Pet. 1:3-9.

II. Chapters 2 and 3 then describes the news up to this point, with both an emphasis on St. Paul's successful ministry among the Thessalonians and the report St. Timothy brought back about their continuing growth in faith.

A. This section consists mostly in four parts: (1) the description of St. Paul's ministry among the Thessalonians; (2) a thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' eager reception of the gospel; (3) St. Paul's desire to be with the Thessalonians again and the resulting mission of St. Timothy to them; and (4) St. Paul's thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' continued faith.

B. The first 12 verses of chapter 2 describe St. Paul's ministry among the Thessalonians, with special emphasis on his dedication.

1. As Acts of the Apostles would later do, St. Paul describes the beating and imprisonment he and his associates received in Phillipi because of some pagans who had lost business due to the conversion of a girl who had acted as an oracle. See Acts 16:16-40. Nevertheless, it does seem from the later letter to the Phillipians that the Christian community there gradually flourished.

2. The letter dramatically contrasts the blunt message of St. Paul and his companions with the flattering words that one would expect from a false prophet promoting a human religion.

- The letter especially emphasizes that the missionaries look to God, not human beings to find them worthy. Nevertheless, in order to avoid giving any credibility to allegations of greed, they work for a living in addition to proclaiming the word.

- The Pastoral Letters would warn against appointing greedy clergy. See 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 5:1-9. Likewise, early Christian instructions would likewise warn against wandering preachers who seem to be trying to get money for their services. See Didache ch. 11.

3. The letter also emphasizes the gentleness and exhortation of St. Paul and his companions. Part of the idea is that the gospel is offered, never forced. Acceptance of the gospel depends on God's grace and people's free choice.

4. This description of the original mission to the Thessalonians ends with a description of the call that the Thessalonians "conduct yourselves of the God who calls you to His kingdom and His glory."

- Once again, the faith and conduct of Christians are intertwined. St. Paul does not usually use the term kingdom. When he does, it is often: (1) in contrasting this world to the kingdom of God, see Rom. 14:17, 1 Cor. 4:20; (2) in describing how one must conduct oneself in order to be worthy, see Eph. 5:5; Gal 5:21, Col. 1:13, 2 Thess. 1:5; or (3) in describing the final kingdom of God, see 1 Cor. 15:24, 50, 2 Tim. 4:1. Here the aspect of behavior is more the focus, although there is an emphasis on being different from the world and awaiting the consummation of all things in the letter.

C. In verses 13-16 of chapter 2, the letter then turns to a thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' generous response to the gospel.

1. There is a clear contrast between the word of men and the word of God, with St. Paul unhesitatingly describing the word of God as not only proclaimed but at work. Here as elsewhere, the word of God is not merely descriptive, but has its own power. See, e.g., Is. 55:10; Wis. 18:14-15.

2. It is clear that the Thessalonians are being in some way persecuted in the faith, but are receiving strength from the churches in Judea.

- Here the idea is that each area is a church, a part of the universal church.

- The struggles here are particularly difficult because they come from fellow citizens.

3. The reference to the wrath of God beginning to come upon the Christians' enemies in Judea is mysterious. It could mean the deteriorating political and economic situation with Caligula now emperor and making things more difficult for everyone, including the Jews. The implication of that interpretation would be that, if they have relied upon the imperial government to persecute Christians, they will find that government turning on them. The reference to the wrath of God could also mean the multiplication of sin for those who reject the word of God, the meaning of God's wrath in the letter to the Romans. See Rom. 2:18-32.

- The references to the Jews sounds particularly harsh, especially for St. Paul. Nowhere else is he as critical of his own people. Compare with Rom. 11 (saying all are under the judgment of God.) However, he is not more harsh than Jesus was with His own people. See, e.g., Matt. 23:37-24:2. And, especially at this early time, there was probably a particular disappointment with his people's rejection of the gospel, where he thought it would be accepted.

D. The end of chapter 2 and most of chapter 3 describe St. Paul's eager desire to be with the Thessalonians, and the resulting mission of St. Timothy to them.

1. St. Paul, as with any good missionary, does not simply present the gospel in the abstract, but deeply cares about each place he evangelizes.

- Thessalonica seems to have a special place in his heart. He compares that church to his "crown of glory," an athletic metaphor to the honor for a winner in a race or other contest. See 1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim 4:7-8.

2. St. Paul refers to Satan preventing him from returning to the Thessalonians. The term satanos literally means accuser, and St. Paul may well be referring to the false allegations made about him in Corinth, which required him to stay there for some time.

3. It is interesting that St. Paul refers to sending St. Timothy from him when he was in Athens, whereas Act of the Apostles indicates Saints Timothy and Silas returned to him later, when he was in Corinth. See Acts 18:5. It is possibly that St. Timothy returned earlier in Athens, was sent by St. Paul to Thessalonica, and then returned to St. Paul when he was in Corinth. The two cities are not far apart and St. Paul may also have been traveling back and forth between them.

4. In any case, it is clear that St. Paul heard about persecution beginning in Thessalonica, as he knew they eventually would, and was anxious to see how the Christians there were dealing with the situation. One gets the sense of drama at this early time in evangelization as St. Paul does not know where his ministry will lead him next or how things will turn out.

5. St. Timothy gave him a good report of the Thessalonians, who were steadfast in the midst of persecutions. There is a special gratitude that for their continued remembrance of St. Paul.

- There is one very subtle note of criticism. Verse 6 refers to the Thessalonians remaining steadfast in faith and love, but does not mention hope. It could be that St. Paul's later assurances of the resurrection of the dead are meant to bolster deficiencies in their hope for the future.

6. St. Paul knows the struggle is not over, for verse 8 says, "We now live, if you stand firm in the Lord," recognizing the opposite possibility.

- St. Paul identifies with the Thessalonians so much that his very life is affected by their steadfastness in faith.

- Elsewhere, St. Paul also exhorts Christian communities to stand firmly in the faith together, generally alongside a call to holiness of life. See 1 Cor. 16:13; Ga. 5:1; Phil. 1:27.

E. The last 4 verses of chapter 3 then turn again to a thanksgiving, here with a warning about the need to make up for deficiencies in the faith.

1. Verses 9 and 10 balance each other. Verse 9 once again gives glorious thanks to God for the Thessalonians' progress, in a manner reminiscent of Psalm 116, which praises God for delivering the psalmist from evils, and asks what thanksgiving he can offer. The answer is to raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. Verse 10, however, expresses St. Paul's eagerness to be with the Thessalonians so that he can correct errors in their faith, which will be the subject of chapters 4 and 5.

2. In verses 11-13, the letter ends this first section with a blessing, referring to God the Father and the Lord Jesus. The Spirit is not directly mentioned, but is probably associated with the love and holiness that St. Paul prays for.

- There are three prayers here: (1) that St. Paul be able to come to the Thessalonians soon; (2) that the Thessalonians increase in love; and (3) that the Thessalonians be strengthened so that they can be blameless and holy.

- This blessing presents the judgment referred to earlier as the coming wrath now in terms of the return of Jesus "with all His holy ones." The term holy ones could mean the angels, the saints, or both.

- Chapters 2 and 3 already dealt with St. Paul's desire to be with the Thessalonians. The first half of chapter 4 will describe the call to increase in love and be blameless and holy. The latter half of chapter 4 and the first half of chapter 5 deal with the return of Jesus with the holy ones.