

FIRST AND SECOND THESSALONIANS – PART I – INTRODUCTION AND THEMES

I. Thessalonica was an old and important governmental and trading center that St. Paul, along with Saints Silas (probably the same as Silvanus) and Timothy, evangelized during his second and third missionary journeys.

A. Founded in 315, Thessalonica was a prominent trading center with a rich cultural history.

1. Cassander, a general of Alexander the Great founded the city, naming it after his wife, a half-sister of Alexander.

2. After the Battle of Pydna in 168 B.C., the Romans secured control of all of Macedonia, including Thessalonica. Under Roman influence, it became a trading center and the capital of Macedonia. In 42 B.C., the city backed Octavius and, when he prevailed to become Augustus Caesar, the city won more prominence and it became a "free city," and thus largely self-governing.

3. Thessalonica had an excellent harbor and was on the Egnatian Way, the central Roman road across the Balkans. As a result, it was a prosperous trading center and had a cosmopolitan atmosphere.

4. Religiously, there were numerous pagan temples there by the first century, A.D., reflecting the city's varied population, but also there was a large Jewish presence. Among the pagan temples, those of the Egyptian gods, especially Isis, Serapis, Osiris and Anubis, were prominent. The Egyptian religion had a particularly developed view of the afterlife, with rewards and punishments for behavior in this life.

- The populations seemed to get along reasonably well when St. Paul began his evangelization there.

B. St. Paul, with his assistants, arrived in Thessalonica about 50 A.D. and began proclaiming the gospel with some success, but also substantial opposition. See Acts 17.

1. After leaving Phillipi at the request of that city's magistrates, St. Paul went to Thessalonica and preached in the synagogue on three successive Sabbaths, staying at the house of one Jason. Some Jews converted, as did numerous Greeks who sympathized with the Jews. The latter group included some prominent women.

- While in Thessalonica, St. Paul worked with his hands, presumably as a tent maker, to support himself, in order to give good example to the people. See 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7-10.

- It appears from First Thessalonians that most of the early Christians had been idol-worshippers of one sort or another, although many also presumably believed that the Jews had special insights as well. See 1 Thess. 1:9.

2. The synagogue leaders were jealous and hired a mob to attack St. Paul. They found Jason and some Christians and dragged them to the magistrates, who took a surety payment from Jason. Saint Paul quickly left for the next town, Beroea. Saints Silas and Timothy apparently stayed behind for a short time to help the new Christian community there before rejoining St. Paul.

3. St. Paul apparently intended to come back soon to Thessalonica, but was hindered from doing so, presumably because he had to deal with opposition in Corinth.

- While St. Paul was in Corinth, Saints Silas and Timothy rejoined him and presumably gave him news about the progress of the new church in Thessalonica. He then sent St. Timothy back to the Thessalonians; and St. Timothy came back with what was evidently mostly good news about the faith there. See 1 Thess. 3:1-3. This news was apparently the occasion for the First Letter to the Thessalonians.

- The community in Thessalonica was evidently undergoing some persecution, the first recorded persecution of Christians in Gentile territory. See 1 Thess. 2:14, 3:3-4.

4. Although the city is not directly mentioned, St. Paul visited Macedonia during his third missionary journey and sent St. Timothy ahead of him. See Acts 20:1-3. Being Macedonia's largest and most prominent city, Thessalonica presumably would have been a part of this journey.

C. Thessalonica has continued as a city to this day. It was controlled by the Byzantine Empire until 1454, and then the Ottoman Empire until 1912, when Greece gained control of the area. It was called Saloniki for a time, but more recently its more common name has gone back to Thessalonika. It is now the second largest city in Greece.

II. The First Letter to Thessalonians appears to have been written in about 51 A.D. shortly after Saints Silas and Timothy reported back to St. Paul about the progress of the church in Thessalonica.

A. There is general agreement that St. Paul wrote the letter while during his lengthy stay in Corinth, which would place it at about 51. It is thus probably (although not certainly) the first written book of the New Testament. See Acts 18.

1. The early date of the letter would account for some of its unusual aspects, in particular the somewhat rambling structure and the rather brief beginning and end, with no description of St. Paul with a title such as "apostle" or "slave of the Lord."
2. The letter is also co-signed by Saints Timothy and Silas, presumably because St. Paul was using their report for the letter. However, the letter quickly makes it clear by its autobiographical references to St. Paul, especially in chapters 2 and 3, that he is the main author. The use of the first person plural, however, does indicate that the other two figures co-wrote the letter.

B. Different commentators see slightly different structures to the letter, but the basic organization is as follows.

1. There is a rather brief opening and thanksgiving in the first 10 verses.

- The opening says in verse 1 says little more than the authors and the audience.
- The very optimistic thanksgiving has a Trinitarian structure to it, referring to "our God and Father," "the Lord Jesus Christ," and the Holy Spirit.

2. Chapters 2 and 3 then give an account of St. Paul's ministry and the reports he has received about the Thessalonians.

- In the first 12 verses, St. Paul recounts how kind he and his fellow missionaries were in their witness to the Gospel. The next four verses give thanks for the Thessalonians' eager and courageous reception of the message, with a note of judgment on the enemies of the gospel.
- Verses 17 to 20 of chapter 2 then describe St. Paul's frustration as not being able to visit the Thessalonians.

- Verses 1 to 8 of chapter 3 comment on St. Timothy's mission to the Thessalonians and the report he brought back of faithfulness in the midst of persecutions.
- Verses 9 to 13 then give a thanksgiving and prayer that God will lead the Thessalonians to ever more advancement.

4. Chapter 4 moves on to a general moral exhortation, with special emphasis on sexual morality, mutual love and dedicated labor. These exhortations continue for 13 verses and reflect previous instructions.

5. The remainder of chapter 4 and the first 11 verses of chapter 5 build upon the moral exhortations and turn to eschatology to assure the people that the Lord Jesus will return and that all the dead will rise with Him.

- The end of chapter 4 was apparently written in response to some concerns about the prospects of those who died before the return of Jesus.
- There is an emphasis in chapter 5 on the possibility that Jesus may return at any time and thus that one must always be ready.

6. Verses 12 to 21 of chapter 5 then contain another series of moral exhortations, with a special emphasis on church unity.

7. The final seven verses conclude the letter with a prayer and final greetings. The prayer reiterates the importance of holiness in preparation for the return of Jesus, and the fact that our good works are God working within us.

C. This letter is important both for its historical portrait and for its description of early doctrinal development. Historically, it gives the image of a Christian community in its first enthusiastic growth. Doctrinally, there is a focus on the return of the Lord Jesus and the holiness we must live in preparation for that glorious event.

1. The letter reflects a community still experiencing the first spring of the faith. The letter reflects that optimism, especially in the repeated expressions of thanks and praise. See 1 Thess. 1:6-9, 2:13-16, 3:9-13. The end of the letter indicates an active openness to the Holy Spirit and the gift of prophesy. See 1 Thess. 5:19-20. In the midst of this enthusiasm, there is a clear call to holiness and church unity, as well as a need to test new ideas and inspirations to be sure they are valid.

- St. Paul's description of his own ministry in chapters 2 and 3 is also an example for evangelization through patience, determination, and good example.

2. In this letter, the clearest doctrinal issues at stake are the return of Jesus and the resurrection from the dead, addressed in chapters 4 and 5. St. Paul describes Jesus' return with the contrasting images of: (1) a trumpet blast and glorious proclamation; (2) an approach suddenly like a thief in the night; and (3) a great battle. Taking up a Jewish metaphor, St. Paul describes the dead as like those asleep who will be raised again and rejoined with those who are now alive. St. Paul emphasizes the moral life needed to prepare for Jesus, in contrast to those who would simply get along with the world.

III. The Second Letter to the Thessalonians is most probably a follow up to the first letter, although the relationship is rather debated.

A. The two general views are that the second letter was either: (1) written a few months or perhaps a year or so after the first letter to clear up some misunderstandings; or (2) written by an associate of St. Paul presumably shortly after his death designed to take the ideas of the first letter and re-apply them

1. In the early Church, it was virtually unanimously agreed that St. Paul wrote this letter as a follow up to the first one. There are many similar themes, and stylistic devices, although the emphasis is different.

- Most importantly, both letters focus on the second coming of Christ, although the second letter is more warning that it may not be imminent.

- Both letters are ascribed to Saints Paul, Timothy and Silvanus and have a similar introduction and conclusion, although the second one adds a special emphasis on St. Paul.

- Both letters give a thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' eager acceptance of the faith, and an anticipation of judgment against those who reject it. See 1 Thess. 1:2-10, 2:13-16, 3:9-13; 2 Thess. 1:3-10, 2:13-15.

- Both letters give a summary of St. Paul's mission, with an emphasis on how St. Paul worked with his own hands as an example to others. See 1 Thess. 2:1-9, 2 Thess. 3:6-9. The first letter describes the missionary work more in terms of the background of thanksgiving, while the second is more adamant on the point of people supporting

themselves.

- Both letters reflect reports of persecution against the early Christians and assure the people that God will strengthen them. See 1 Thess. 2:13-16, 3:1-3; 2 Thess. 1:5-7.

2. Starting in the nineteenth century, some scholars argued that the letter was likely a later writing by an associate of St. Paul, meant to compliment the first letter, but deal with some new misunderstandings that arose later in the context of more intense persecutions.

- They argue that there are some aspects of this letter not typical of St. Paul, such as the: (1) absence of much reference to the death and resurrection of Christ; (2) the absence of much reference to his (St. Paul's own ministry); and (3) much more apocalyptic language that is typical of St. Paul, especially I chapter 2. There is more a notion of God's just judgment, rather than grace, as is more common with St. Paul. See Fr. Charles Giblin, S.J., "The Second Letter to the Thessalonians", chapter 53 in the New Jerome Biblical Commentary (1990); Fr. Ivan Haverney, O.S.B., "2 Thessalonians", in the Collegeville Biblical Commentary: The New Testament (1992)

- Those who defend Pauline authorship point to the fact that, if this letter was meant to be read in union with First Thessalonians, St. Paul would not need to include elements already in the first letter. See The Navarre Bible; The Letters of St. Paul (1999) at 502-503. The idea is that the second letter works well as a continuation of the first one. They also emphasize the fact that the end of the letter is particularly adamant about its Pauline authorship.

3. Another possibility is that Second Thessalonians was written as a draft for what would become First Thessalonians.

4. In either case, the background of the letter comes from a controversy over whether Jesus would return immediately. Based upon one or more alleged messages or letters of St. Paul, some had been saying that the return of Jesus was imminent and, as a result, focusing all attention on that, and not actually progressing in their spiritual life or building the church. See 1 Thess. 2:2, 3:6-16. The letter is responding to that error.

B. The structure of the letter is similar to that of First Thessalonians, although shorter, and with greater emphasis on the judgment

of God, contrasting the faith with false teachers.

1. There is a short opening, followed by a thanks. As with the first letter, St. Paul commends the Thessalonians for their eager acceptance of the faith. Here, St. Paul quickly focuses on God's just judgment and the emphasis on how He will punish those who oppose the Church by excluding them from His presence.
2. Chapter 2 then focuses on the Day of the Lord. The letter emphasizes that that day will not come immediately, but rather that a great lawlessness will come to separate out the good from the evil.
3. Chapter 3 then turns to a call for prayer, especially for protection against evil, and a call to work for the community in preparation for the Lord.
4. The last two verses then conclude the letter with an insistence on Pauline authorship.

C. Like First Thessalonians, this letter gives some insight into an early Christian community, but here with more of an emphasis on maintaining the faith, with prayer and good works.

1. Historically, one gets the sense, as with the first letter, of an enthusiastic expansion of the faith, and of a community mostly living in harmony. But more so than in that letter, there is here a warning against problems, here particularly those associated with the expectation of Jesus' imminent return.
2. Doctrinally, there is more of an emphasis on Jesus as the judge who is even now judging all people and who will come with complete judgment on the end. The letter leaves no room for a middle way between God and the world, instead emphasizing that as time goes on one will need to make a clear choice. There is also, as with the Gospels there is a clear warning against trying to calculate the day of the return of Jesus. Cf. Mk 13:3-8, 32-37. The call is to continued faithfulness and fidelity to the constant teachings of the Church.