

The First Letter to the Believers at Thessalonica

Here we have the beginning of what will ultimately become the New Testament. Paul's letter to the Christian community in the town of Thessalonica can rightly be called "the probable beginning of Christian literature,"¹ as it is widely believed to be the earliest extant (existing) Christian document that we possess. He writes from a sense of pastoral relief and continued concern for this gathering of believers who have only recently "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Th. 1.9). But it may be best to begin at the beginning.

Luke tells us that while in Troas Paul had a vision, in which "a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'" (Acts 16.9). In response, Paul—along with Silas and Timothy we presume (see 1 Th. 1.1)—adjusted his plans and journeyed to the region of Macedonia, bringing the gospel into Europe for the very first time. Paul and his companions made their way to Philippi, "a leading city of the district of Macedonia" (Acts 16.12), where they established a community of believers in the home of Lydia. They were eventually compelled to leave town (Acts 16.11-40; 1 Th. 2.2), and journeyed down the *Via Egnatia* to the town of Thessalonica.² There they began proclaiming the gospel for an indeterminate period of time,³ before they were forced to flee once more (Acts 17.1-10). At Berea the trio again proclaims the good news of Jesus, but opposition forces Paul to depart, this time to Athens where Silas and Timothy eventually join him (Acts 17.11-18.5). Paul became concerned for the well-being of the community at Thessalonica and worried that "the tempter might have tempted [them], and [their] labor would be in vain" (1 Th. 3.5). So Timothy went back to Thessalonica while Paul journeyed to Corinth (with Silas? cf. Acts 18.5, 3.1-6), where he remained until Timothy brought back a positive report regarding this upstart community of faith (1 Th. 3.6f). Thus, the first letter to the Thessalonians is written out of a sense of relief at their steadfastness coupled with a call to "excel still more" (1 Th. 4.1), while also offering clarification on a pressing issue in this community, namely, the fate of those who have died before Christ's coming (1 Th. 4.13-18).⁴

Paul's initial visit had been long enough to establish the community and convey some fundamental truths of the gospel, and so Paul "is able to appeal to what the Thessalonians already know" through much of the letter [cf. 1.3, 5; 2.1-2, 5, 9, 11; 3.3-4; 4.2; 5.2].⁵ As such, Paul's primary purpose is not to impart new information—though this is needed as well (cf. 1 Th. 4.13-5.11)—but rather, to exhort them to carry on by remembering the truths they had been taught. Regarding structure, N.T. scholar Luke Timothy Johnson suggests that we read 1 Thessalonians as a paraenetic letter; that is, a moral exhortation that "involves the interplay of three elements...memory, model, and maxims."⁶ Using this paradigm, 1.1-3.13 combines the memory

¹ Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 260.

² , Thessalonica was "about 100 miles or a five-day walk" from Philippi, Robert L. Thomas, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition: Volume 12 – Ephesians ~ Philemon*, "1 Thessalonians," (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 363; "[Thessalonica] straddled the Via Egnatia, the Egnatian Road...Its main street was part of the very road which linked Rome with the East. East and West converged on Thessalonica; it was said to be 'in the lap of the Roman Empire,'" William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 180.

³ In reading Acts 17.1-3 we learn that Paul preached in the Thessalonian synagogue for three (3) Sabbaths. Some take this as the time from Paul's arrival to his forced departure. A longer stay cannot be ruled out, however, as "it is possible that he continued his ministry in the city for some time after being forced from the synagogue," Thomas, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 364.

⁴ "The evidence suggests that 1 Th. was written fairly soon after Paul's visit and Corinth is most likely to be the place of writing...Most scholars place Paul's appearance before Gallio in the period of AD 51-2 [cf. Acts 18.12-16] and 1 Th. would therefore date from about this time and the visit to Thess. be a year or two earlier," Ernest Best, *Harper's New Testament Commentaries: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 11, 13-14. Raymond Brown offers an earlier date of AD 50-51, a few months after Paul's forced departure from Thessalonica, *And Introduction to the New Testament*, (NY: Doubleday, 1996), 457. "It is difficult to separate occasion and purpose. In the strict sense the occasion was the news Timothy brought back from Thessalonica but it was the content of what he said that led Paul to write and it was Paul's purpose to deal with what Timothy reported...[Paul] had sent Timothy, not merely on a fact-finding mission, but to help the Thessalonians as well as he could. Timothy has now returned, Paul rejoices at the good news he has brought and writes to the Thessalonians," Best, *Harper's*, 13-14.

⁵ Brown, *An Introduction*, 460.

⁶ A paraenetic letter is one whose contents focus upon moral exhortation—a term "used broadly of loosely arranged moral maxims....Moral instruction was thought to be best accomplished by imitation of an example. The model was brought to life by memory, but since it was only an outline, it required filling out by means of maxims," Johnson, *The Writings*, 261-2.

and model elements, whereby Paul recalls their conversion during his initial visit (1.2-10)⁷ and defends the example he set while among them (2.1-3.13).⁸ This leaves 4.1-5.22 as the maxims section of the letter, in which Paul exhorts the community based upon his past teachings (4.1-12);⁹ clarifies the fate of those who die before Christ's *parousia* (4.13-18)¹⁰ and offers guidance for living in this time between the times (5.1-11);¹¹ concluding with a few parting instructions and blessings (5.12-28).¹²

⁷ After a customary greeting noting the senders and recipients (1.1), Paul reveals his continued prayers for these believers (1.2-3) and his joy that the "message of the gospel came to [them] not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1.4-5). Paul then recalls how they imitated himself, Silas and Timothy (1.6a), which "has nothing to do with arrogance" because "imitation is the normal mode of moral education in Paul's world," Johnson, *The Writings*, 262. See 1 Corinthians 11.1 for a similar expression. He concludes this opening section by praising the Thessalonian believers whose actions have been made known across Macedonia, Achaia, and other regions, concluding with a summary of the gospel message encapsulated in a statement about the Thessalonians' conversion—"you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven..." (1.6b-10). As we will learn, difficulties have tested their turning to God (3.1-5) and the length of the waiting for the Son of God from heaven has become a matter of concern for this community (4.13ff), so Paul also writes to address these matters.

⁸ Having praised the Thessalonians (1.2-10), Paul begins recalling how they (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) had acted appropriately and honorably during their initial visit (2.1-3.13). One gets the sense from reading 2.1-16 that Paul had received some criticism as he defends their steadfastness (2.1-2), the purity of their motives (2.3-8), their self-sufficiency (2.9-12), and the fruitfulness of their labor (2.13-16). It is quite possible that those who had forced Paul to leave Thessalonica had spread false rumors about him, yet Brown points out that "the fact that most Thessalonian Christians did *not* have this attitude toward Paul is clear from Timothy's report in 3.5 that Paul was remembered kindly and would be welcomed if he came back," *An Introduction*, 461, NOTE 15. Moreover, "the antithetical statements are rather typical of those by which Hellenistic philosophers and prophets sought to present themselves as trustworthy moral guides by distinguishing themselves from the numerous charlatans who claimed the same vocation," Wayne A. Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, eds., *The Writings of St. Paul*, (NY: Norton, 2007), 3-4. Paul concludes the memory/model unit by explaining why he had been unable to return (2.17-20) and had sent Timothy in his place (3.1-5) whose report led him (Paul) to send the letter out of joy and relief at "the good news of [their] faith and love" (3.6-13). Two more times (2.19; 3.13) Paul mentions the coming (*παρουσία*, *parousia*) of Christ, the topic which will occupy the maxims (sayings/teaching) portion of the letter (4.1-5.22).

⁹ 4.1-12 offers a reminder of the things "you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God" (4.1a) coupled with the exhortation to "do so more and more" (4.1b; cf. 4.10b). "Thus [Paul] passes from a discussion of his own relation with [the Thessalonians] to a consideration of their life and faith," Best, *Harper's*, 154. The instructions (given in vv 3-12) "have been firmly tied in to the Lord Jesus [see 4.2]; they are Christian instructions arising in the Christ-event and intended for the followers of Christ," Best, 158.

¹⁰ While 4.1-12 functioned as a review of prior teachings, 4.13-5.11 offers clarification of and expansion upon the period between the present time and the return (*parousia*) of Jesus the Christ, in which the Thessalonian believers are called "to serve a living and true God, and to wait for [God's] Son from heaven" (1.10). From 4.13 we can be sure that some of the converts have died since Paul's departure—whether from natural causes or persecution (see 2.14) is unclear—and Paul seeks alleviate concern over their fate. During his visit "Paul had taught the Thessalonians about the ultimate fulfillment of that hope [in Jesus], namely Christ's second coming from heaven...Yet, probably because he thought this would take place soon, Paul did not broach the issue of believers who would be dead before that coming," Brown, *An Introduction*, 262. Paul must now clarify the fate of believers who have died in order to help a community bewildered by this unexpected event. Paul reveals that Jesus' death and resurrection provide hope for believers who die, for they too will rise again (4.15-16). Paul's purpose is to comfort the Thessalonians who are grieving and confused over the death of fellow believers. Encouragement—not information about the concrete details as to the time of Christ's return, the experience of the believer between death and resurrection, or the specific details of the resurrection event—is Paul's goal, which is evidenced by the fact that he ends both sections (4.13-18; 5.1-11) with the statement "therefore encourage one another" (4.18; 5.11). Regarding the imagery used by Paul in 4.13-18, Ernest Best provides an excellent summary of the ideas conveyed in the Greek term *parousia*. "In the Hellenistic world the word came to have particular associations in relation to the sense 'come, arrive.' It denoted the ceremonial arrival of a ruler to a city where he is greeted with honors of one kind or another; the *parousia* was more than the physical act of arrival; it included the attendant ceremonies in which the ruler was honored. The word was also used of the coming of a god to help those in need....The secular significance of *parousia* reinforces the conception of a coming of Christ which is a public event, in which he returns from 'outside' history to end history....Just as a king comes from elsewhere to visit a city so Jesus comes to the earth," Best, *Harper's*, 353-4.

¹¹ "Paul wants the Thessalonians to live appropriately within this in-between time. Their lives should be filled with alertness and watchfulness (5.51-10)," revealing the contrast between their former life (compare 1.9 to 5.7) and their new life in Christ (compare 1.10 to 5.8) by using the contrast of light and darkness, reminiscent of the language found in the gospel according to John, Johnson, *The Writings*, 261-266.

¹² Paul concludes with: a final appeal to unity, peace, and love within the community (5.12-13), instructions regarding behavior as believers (5.14-22), a closing benediction (5.23), and a final farewell (5.25-28). As Best put it, "We have here a series of largely unrelated exhortations; on the whole they deal with the internal life of the community, and the first part may be influenced by the exhortation to build up one another in v. 11. It is difficult to know how far they refer specifically to the Thessalonian community and not to every Christian community. Certainly the later part, vv. 14 (15)-22, is very general and is derived probably from traditional material, and this may be so of the first portion also," 223.

Outlines of and Commentaries on First Thessalonians

Luke Timothy Johnson¹³

- I. Greeting (1.1)
- II. Extended Thanksgiving (1.2-3.13) + Reflection on the Initial Visit
- III. Moral Exhortations (4.1-5.22) + Closing Prayer (5.23-24)
- IV. Final Greeting (5.25-27)
- V. Farewell (5.28)

Raymond Brown¹⁴

DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS

- 1.1-10 Address/greeting and thanksgiving
- 2.1-12 Paul's behavior at Thessalonica
- 2.13-16 Further thanksgiving about the reception of the gospel
- 2.17-3.13 Timothy's mission and Paul's present relationship to the Thessalonian church
- 4.1-12 Ethical admonitions and exhortations
- 4.13-5.11 Instructions about the Parousia
- 5.12-22 Instructions about church life
- 5.23-28 Concluding blessing, greeting

For Further Study

Barclay, William. *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Revised edition. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975.

Best, Ernest. *Harper's New Testament Commentaries: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986.

Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: DoubleDay, 1996.

Holmes, M.W. *NIV Application Commentary: 1-2 Thessalonians*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

Johnson, Luke T. *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Malherbe, Abraham. *Anchor Bible: The Letters to the Thessalonians*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Meeks, Wayne A. and John T. Fitzgerald. *The Writings of Saint Paul*, second edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007.

Metzger, Bruce M. and Michael D. Coogan, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Thomas, Robert L. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 12 – Ephesians ~ Philemon*, Revised edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.

¹³ Johnson, *The Writings*, 261.

¹⁴ Brown, *An Introduction*, 456-66