

# The two letters to the Thessalonians

Mark Vincent

*Paul's letters to the Thessalonians are amongst the shortest and the earliest of his writings, written in the flush of excitement (and danger!) of his recent preaching experiences there, and the recent news of how well the brethren were progressing after Paul had been forced to leave. The ecclesia was established during the Second Missionary Journey (A.D. 50 or so), but Paul's departure due to Jewish persecution was hasty and unplanned, necessitated by his desire not to bring more suffering than was necessary upon the fledgling ecclesia he would leave behind. Anxious about the welfare of his new brethren, Paul sends Timothy to investigate and encourage. Upon receiving a positive report, he writes 1 Thessalonians, which is shortly followed by the second letter, dealing with some developing concerns. The letters are characterised by a warmth and enthusiasm as he urges the brethren and sisters to grow in their new faith, and as he tells them (more so than in any other epistle) about the circumstances preceding and surrounding the Second Coming of Christ.*

**WRITTEN** SO SOON after Paul's hurried departure, it is no surprise that 1 Thessalonians spends more time dealing with the aftermath of a recent visit than any other letter. This takes up three out of the five chapters. There are several themes in this part of the letter that Paul presents and then revisits:

- Paul gives thanks for them (1:2,3; 2:13,19,20; 3:7-10). Although thanks are a usual part of his epistolary introductions, there is a warmth here, and an emphasis which is notable. He is evidently overjoyed that they have fared and grown so well spiritually since he left them. News of their faith and example is spreading to the local and not-so-local ecclesias (1:8-10; 2:14; 3:6). They have been busy in outreach and welfare work (4:10), and news of their faithful response to continued intense per-

secution must have touched the hearts of other brethren in easier circumstances.

- He talks of the path of affliction and persecution that disciples may be called upon to suffer (1:6). This is a very relevant topic, because he had been forced to flee the city prematurely because of it, and they too have felt the impact of it. He writes therefore of his own sufferings for the sake of the gospel; how he expects such sufferings, and his approach to them (2:2,15,16; 3:7). And he writes of what they too may expect as they follow in the footsteps of Christ (2:14; 3:3,4).
- He reminds them of his impeccable personal conduct while he was with them (1:5; 2:2-12). These passages of self-justification imply that there was some criticism or insinuation with respect to either his conduct or motives, whether arising from opponents to the gospel or from whisperings amongst some of the less perceptive brethren, perhaps looking for an excuse to travel an easier road than following in the footsteps of Paul's own discipleship.
- He reiterates the point that the gospel to which they have been called comes from God and not man. Its Divine origin means that there is no option or negotiability about it. It is what it is, the Word of God Himself (1:4,5; 2:9,13; 4:8,9,15; 5:18).
- Finally, Paul tackles the aftermath of his visit and hurried departure (2:17,18; 3:5,6). He had been "torn away" from them (2:17, ESV) and thwarted in his multiple attempts to get back to Thessalonica. He had been able to send Timothy, however, who had brought back the wonderfully positive report. He hopes that he will be able to follow up his letter with

a visit soon. In the meantime he prays earnestly for their spiritual development (1:2; 3:10-13) in a way which anticipates his prayers in Ephesians and Colossians.

In reviewing these points it becomes apparent that in this (most likely) Paul's earliest recorded letter, there lies in embryo (at the very least) a great deal which Paul will subsequently take further and elaborate upon in later letters.

### Exhortations

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the future road of discipleship that the new brethren must tread: "Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus" (4:1,2).

Launching from this introduction, the broad content of Paul's exhortations and points of practical encouragement may be summarised as follows:

- sexual purity (4:3-8)
- brotherly love (4:9,10)
- work for yourself (don't be idle!) (4:11,12)
- those who are dead in Christ (4:13-18)
- the times and seasons; the coming of Christ (be alert and sober!) (5:1-11)
- a dozen or so miscellaneous exhortations (5:12-22).

This is followed by a concluding doxology and signing-off. We shall come back to some of these exhortational themes in more detail when we pull together the topics that span both letters. First, though, an outline of the content and purpose of the second letter.

### Another letter

2 Thessalonians was probably written fairly soon afterwards, and links with some of the key themes of the first letter. It is sometimes noted that the letter has a more formal or official tone than the first.<sup>1</sup> There are probably two reasons for this:

- 1 Opposition to Paul has become stronger, resulting in letters falsified in his name preach-

## The Thessalonian letters: a schematic

### First letter

**Chs. 1-3 Follow-up to Paul's curtailed preaching mission:**

Prayer, thanks, testimony to their example  
Encouragement in persecution; Paul's conduct

**Chs. 4-5 Exhortations and practical issues:**

The dead in Christ; Christ's coming

### Second letter

**Ch. 1** Prayer, thanks, encouragement

**Ch. 2** Man of Sin to precede Second Coming.

**Ch. 3** Exhortations; work to support yourself; final prayers

ing another doctrine (2:2; 3:2). Paul is forced to become more assertive to combat this (3:14,15), and even to provide proof of his own signature to authenticate the letter (3:17).

- 2 False doctrine had taken a more well-defined shape—especially the teaching that Christ had come already (2:2,3). From the wording of 2:1, it appears that he may have been asked specifically to unfold again the teaching of the Second Coming and the events that would precede it. Furthermore, Paul's more forceful exhortation that brethren should have paid work to support themselves, picking up on a more gentle message in this direction in the first letter, suggests that his message in the first letter had not necessarily got through and had to be made more emphatic.

Even though it is true that Paul is more forceful in combating false teaching and misguided practice in the second letter, the letter is still loving and enthusiastic, and continues the broad flow of the first.

Paul opens, once again, by giving thanks for the wonderful faith and example of the brethren (1:3-6), and by continuing to pray for their development and growth in the face of persecution (vv. 11,12). There is an interesting interlude in the middle of this first chapter where Paul introduces the future coming of Christ and the recompense that will be poured out upon the ignorant and the persecuting forces at that time (vv. 6-10).

Here Paul gives away the main topic of his letter: the Second Coming and the events that will precede it. This he unfolds with great power in chapter 2. He directly picks up on teaching

---

1. This is not to say that Paul did not know how to be firm or formal in the first letter when he so chose; see 4:8; 5:27.

introduced in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, but presents a counterweight to it. The Lord will indeed come, but this will not happen until the Man of Sin has been revealed. We shall return to this, but for now continue onwards through the letter to see how Paul follows up the Man of Sin passage. By God's grace, Paul and the Thessalonians have been spared this ignorance and delusion, so the apostle reprises his thanks for their faith, and exhorts and prays that they will remain strong in the faith and continue to grow in it (2:13-17).

Chapter 3 opens with "Finally, brethren", leading us to expect more practical exhortations and perhaps reproofs. The practical encouragement and summons are certainly there (vv. 1-5,13,16,17), but the exhortations are more general than in the first letter. Aside from these broad words of encouragement, the main theme of chapter 3 is that disciples should support themselves financially through work, just as Paul and the other apostles had even though they had the right not to (vv. 6-12; cf. vv. 14,15?). That Paul considers this very important is emphasised by his threefold use of the term 'command', including one at the beginning and one at the end of the passage (vv. 6,10,12). Finally, Paul signs off with his official signature (v. 17). The challenge of other doctrines rivalling gospel truth is now in the open, and Paul must stand for what is right.

### The big themes

Having explored the two letters in their own right, I want now to put them together to look at the common themes and motifs. This is particularly relevant given that both letters were likely written close together. Here are the obvious similarities:

- 1 Paul's thanks, praise and prayer for the Thessalonians
- 2 encouragement in persecution
- 3 the importance of received teaching/tradition
- 4 discharging one's human responsibilities (specifically, working for a living)
- 5 the Second Coming (before, during and after). These are discussed in the panel on page ???, except the last, which is so critical and so distinctive to Thessalonians that we will deal with it now.

### The Man of Sin and the Second Coming

The Thessalonian letters probably say more about the before-and-after of the Second Coming than any other epistle, making a unique and essential contribution to the New Testament writings.

Some of the references, like 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:19 and 5:23, are very much in passing, but

show that the Second Coming was certainly 'top of mind' for Paul. Others emphasise the aspect of judgement and retribution on evildoers at Christ's return (1 Thess. 5:3,9; cf. 2:15,16; 2 Thess. 1:7-9; 2:8). This leaves four key extended passages that tackle different aspects of the theme:

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.** A concern has arisen about those who have died in Christ; will they be in the Kingdom when Jesus returns? Paul assures them that the resurrection of believers who have fallen asleep is as sure as Jesus' own death and resurrection. Christ will descend from heaven with great fanfare, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Those who are alive will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and will ever be with him. This teaching—a word from the Lord—ought to be a source of great comfort and encouragement.

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11.** The day of the Lord, by implication a judgement of the world (v. 9), will come like a thief in the night as "they" are proclaiming peace and safety. (Paul had already taught them of these "times and seasons" when they were originally instructed.) But it ought not to be that way for believers, for we are not in darkness, and God has not destined *us* to wrath. This, too, is a source of encouragement, as well as an exhortation to be sober and alert.

**2 Thessalonians 1:5-10.** Jesus will be revealed from heaven in flaming fire with his mighty angels, taking vengeance on the ignorant and disobedient to the gospel, and those who have caused suffering to the elect. He will be glorified in and marvelled at by his saints, but others will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and disassociation from his glory.

**2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.** Before Christ comes and we are gathered to him there will be a "falling away" as the Man of Sin (generally understood as the Catholic Church) is revealed. He takes his seat in the temple of God and proclaims himself as God. (Paul had also already taught them about this development of apostasy.) This spirit is already at work in the world, but will not be fully revealed (personified?) until the current restraining power is removed (v. 7). When Jesus returns he will kill the Man of Sin with the breath of his mouth, but his work will have been to gather for condemnation those who have refused to love or believe the truth and took pleasure in sin. This is a highly allusive, complex and unique passage.

## The combined themes of 1 and 2 Thessalonians

### Theme 1: Thanks and encouragement

Paul's thanks for the way in which the Thessalonians have embraced the gospel is not merely a celebration of the success of his own preaching, but also a genuine delight at seeing Christ being formed in others. He is taken by the way the seed of the gospel is already realising its massive potential in their hearts. He urges them to follow his example:

"ye became *followers* [imitators] of us, and of the Lord . . . so that ye were *ensamples* to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia" (1 Thess. 1:6,7);

"For ye, brethren, became *followers* [imitators] of the churches of God, which in Judæa are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered *like* things of your own countrymen, *even as* they have of the Jews" (2:14);

"For yourselves know how ye ought to *follow* us" (2 Thess. 3:7);

"[We wanted to] make ourselves an *ensample* unto you to *follow* us" (v. 9).

But he also recognises that they themselves are already an example to other converts and believers because of their tangible spirituality and their faithfulness in persecution. Notice here the obvious enthusiasm Paul has for the spiritual growth of his brothers and sisters.

### Theme 2: Persecution

The relevant passages are 1 Thessalonians 1:6,7; 2:2,14-16; 3:3,4,7; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-7; 3:2.

### Theme 3: Tradition/apostolic teaching

Although we might normally be inclined to think of 'tradition' with some scepticism, when it refers to the gospel message and received doctrine it is, of course, entirely good. Consistently Paul emphasises that the brethren already have received and know the core elements of the faith. He unpacks some of these received truths and illustrates how they need to continue and grow in them. In addition to the passage emphasising the *Divine* origin of the gospel and calling, the following passages emphasise the gospel truth as being that which Paul has already taught them. They already know most of what they need to know, and in the face of false teachers and modifiers of the message they need to be reminded that Paul has already told them much, and that what he tells them now is fully consistent with what he had originally said.

- 1 Thessalonians 1:5 (our gospel); 2:2 (we declared to you the gospel of God); 2:4,8,9,13; 3:4 (what Paul told them beforehand is happening); 4:1,2 (as you received from us the instructions we gave you); 4:6-9,11 (told you beforehand, instructed); 5:2 (you are fully aware).
- 2 Thessalonians 1:10; 2:2,5; 2:14,15 (stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us); 3:4,6,10,14 (the tradition you received from us).

Also related are the references to being steadfast, established, and continuing in the doctrine, for instance 1 Thessalonians 3:2; 5:21; and 2 Thessalonians 2:17; 3:3,5. Note also the references to truth and its opposite, especially in the second letter.

### Theme 4: Working and eating

Some of the passages on this theme are tangential or in passing, like 1 Thessalonians 5:14 (do not be idle) and Paul's reminder of how the apostles conducted themselves as missionaries, doing manual work and being busy all hours of the day so as not to be "burdensome" or "chargeable" to anyone (2:6,9). This is stepped up in 4:11,12 with a friendly reminder that they should have their own employment, as Paul had originally commanded them, so that they are self-sufficient and not maligned by or burdensome to outsiders.

It is in the second letter (3:6-12 [and 14?]) that Paul really steps up the emphasis. He reiterates his own example, and speaks out strongly against 'sponging' off the generosity of others. Working goes with eating as part of the curse; laziness, being a busybody, and other forms of disorderliness, are condemned in the strongest terms.