

INTRODUCTION TO 52ND and 53RD BIBLEBOOKS

THE 1ST AND 2ND LETTERS TO THE THESSALONIANS (autumn, A.D. 50)

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A. THE FOUNDING OF THE FIRST CHURCHES IN EUROPE.

During Paul's first missionary journey from A.D. 47-48, Paul and his helpers, Barnabas and Mark, founded churches only in Asia Minor. During Paul's second missionary journey from A.D. 50-52, Paul and his helpers, Silas, Timothy and Luke founded the first churches in modern Europe, beginning in the modern country of Greece. By comparing the history in the book of Acts with the contents of Paul's letters, we know that the first churches that were founded in Europe were in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth.

1. The founding of the church in Thessalonica.

It is not sure where Paul, Silas and Timothy stayed. The house of Jason is mentioned, but we do not know whether they stayed, worked or taught there¹. Paul did two things in Thessalonica: he earned his own living by working with his hands for his daily bread², and he preached the gospel. He worked in order not to burden the local people and also to show the people that he was not to be classified together with the travelling philosophers, whose motives were often selfish. Already after the first three weeks of Bible discussions in the synagogue, some Jews were persuaded, as well as a large number of God-fearing Gentiles and quite a few prominent women³. And soon after some more preaching, many idol worshippers in Thessalonica turned away from idolatry to the living God⁴.

The new Christians *followed* the example of Paul, Silas and Timothy. They learned how to live the Christian life by *imitating* the more mature Christians⁵. They were undaunted by severe persecution from especially the Jews. Soon the Christians of the church at Thessalonica became a *model* for Christians everywhere. They went out to preach the gospel, not only in Thessalonica, but also in their own province of Macedonia and the neighbouring province of Achaia. The faith of the Christians of Thessalonica became known everywhere⁶.

2. The persecution of Christians in Thessalonica.

The Jews in Thessalonica regarded Paul's work as 'success' and it made them jealous and angry. With the help of wicked people, they rushed to the house of Jason, expecting to find the evangelists there. Failing to find them, they dragged Jason and some converts off to the politarchs or city-officials and shouted, "These people, who have turned the world upside down, have now come here ... They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus"⁷. Notice that these Christians were falsely accused by their enemies of rebelling against the government, a tactic still used today. The crowd and city-officials were disturbed, took security from Jason and the rest and let them go⁸. During that night, the Christian brothers in Thessalonica decided that it was wise not to keep Paul and Silas in Thessalonica. So they sent Paul and Silas away to another city, called Berea⁹.

B. THE WRITER, THE OCCASION AND THE DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING THESSALONIANS.

1. The writer of 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Both letters to the Thessalonians begin with the words "Paul, Silas and Timothy." From 1 Thessalonians 2:18 it is clear that only Paul wrote the letters. Silas, also called Silvanus, was his travelling companion during his second missionary journey¹⁰ and Timothy was their assistant during the second missionary journey¹¹. According to the form of the letters, the vocabulary and phrases used, both letters are clearly letters from Paul. But not only the internal evidence, but also the external evidence proves that these letters are from Paul. Several of the early Christian Church leaders testify that Paul was the writer of both letters to the Thessalonians. In about A.D. 300, Eusebius writes that the entire Christian Church accepted the thirteen letters of Paul as written by Paul.

¹ Acts 17:5

² 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8

³ Acts 17:1-4

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 1:9

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 1:7

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 1:8

⁷ Acts 17:6-7

⁸ Acts 17:8-9

⁹ Act 17:5-10

¹⁰ Act 15:40

¹¹ Act 16:3

The church fathers Origen in A.D. 225, his teacher, Clement of Alexandria in A.D. 190 and his contemporary, Tertullian, in A.D. 190, all ascribe these letters to Paul and quote from them.

The most important external testimony is from Irenaeus in A.D. 170, because he travelled widely and was intimately acquainted with almost the entire Christian Church of his time. In his book called 'Against Heresies', he ascribes both 1st and 2nd Thessalonians to Paul and quotes from both books. The Muratorian fragment dated about A.D. 170 contains a list of nine of Paul's letters written to the seven churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, Galatia, Thessalonica and Rome. He especially mentions that Paul wrote two letters to Corinth and two letters to Thessalonica. The second letter to the Thessalonians is even known to Polycarp in about A.D. 135. Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John and later the bishop of Ephesus.

2. The date and place of writing 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

These letters could only have been written after Paul founded these churches. According to Acts chapter 17-18, the order of travelling during his second missionary journey was Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. This order corresponds with what is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:2, which mentions Philippi (1 3:1), Athens from where Timothy was sent to the Thessalonians (1 3:6) and refers to the place to which Timothy returned after his visit to the Thessalonians and from where Paul wrote the letter to the Thessalonians. Thus the letters to the Thessalonians must have been written from Corinth during Paul's second missionary journey. 2 Thessalonians was written soon after 1 Thessalonians, because Paul refers to his previous instruction and letter in 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

As to contents, the purpose of 2 Thessalonians was to give them more instructions concerning the Second Coming of Christ, which he introduced in 1 Thessalonians.

Silas was with Paul when he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In the book of Acts, Silas is only mentioned in relationship to the second missionary journey of Paul. Paul stayed in Corinth for 1½ years and towards the end of this period, the Jews brought Paul into court before the proconsul Gallio. According to an inscription found in limestone rock at Delphi, Gallio became proconsul of Achaia in July A.D. 51. Paul had written his letters to the Thessalonians after the return of Silas and Timothy from Thessalonica and before this trial before Gallio. Therefore, we conclude that Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians during the autumn of A.D. 50 from Corinth.

C. THE PURPOSE OF WRITING THESSALONIANS.

1. The first letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul was concerned about the church in Thessalonica. The Jews were persecuting the Christians. The Christians of whom we only know Jason, Aristarchus and Secundus by name, were still immature¹². Under pressure of their relatives and neighbours, these new Christians might revert back to Judaism or paganism. Moreover, the Christians living in Thessalonica were poor¹³.

When Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth, they brought both good and bad news from Thessalonica. The very encouraging news was that the Thessalonian Christians were standing firm in their faith and in love for one another¹⁴. This good news gave Paul new energy to preach the gospel in Corinth¹⁵ and caused him to write his first letter to the Thessalonians. Paul's purpose was to express his gratefulness for what God was doing in and through the new Christians in Thessalonica, and to encourage the new Christians to keep on growing.

The discouraging news was that there were enemies of the Christians, who were trying very hard to undermine Paul's influence and to destroy the Christian church in Thessalonica. They spread evil concerning Paul and insinuated that Paul had impure motives, was trying to trick the Thessalonians, used flattery in trying to please men and win their praise, and had put on a mask to cover his greed for money¹⁶.

The other bad news was that there was confusion concerning the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Some Thessalonian Christians expected that Christ would return any moment and therefore they did not need to work for a living anymore. Others were concerned that some of the new Christians, who had died, would not share in the glory of Christ's Second Coming.

Paul thus wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians with the following purposes: He wanted to answer the false accusations made against his personality and motives (chapter 1-2). He wanted to express his joy and gratitude because of the good things God was doing in and through their lives (chapter 3). He wanted to teach them the truth concerning the Second Coming of Christ and what would happen to Christians who died before that Second Coming (1 4:13-5:11). And he wanted to exhort them how to live as Christians after they had been drawn out of idolatry and immorality.

¹² Acts 17:5-9; 20:4

¹³ 2 Corinthians 8:2-3

¹⁴ 1 Thessalonians 3:6-8

¹⁵ Acts 18:5

¹⁶ 1 Thessalonians 2:3-10

He stressed the fact that the Christian faith demands a complete break with every kind of idolatry and sexual immorality, which characterised the pagans¹⁷. And he stressed the need to respect the Christian leaders, to love one another, to live at peace with one another, to especially help the weak and needy Christians and to grow in holiness.

2. The second letter to the Thessalonians.

Soon after Paul had written the first letter, he received news about the condition of the Thessalonian Christians. He probably received this news through those who had delivered the first letter and had returned. The encouraging news was that the Thessalonian Christians were growing in spite of severe persecution¹⁸.

The discouraging news was that there was confusion concerning the Second Coming of Christ. In his first letter, Paul had taught that the Second Coming of Christ would be *suddenly and unexpectedly*¹⁹. Some Christians however interpreted this to mean that the Second Coming would take place *imminently*. The confusion concerning the Second Coming of Christ was aggravated by some prophecy, report or letter which some people claimed came from the apostle Paul, which said that the Second Coming had already taken place²⁰.

Paul thus wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians with the following purposes: He wanted to express his gratefulness for their continued spiritual growth in the midst of severe persecution and he wanted to encourage them that at the Second Coming of Christ, Christ would punish their enemies while they themselves would be glorified²¹. He wanted to calm those who became confused concerning the Second Coming and to inform them that certain events²² had to take place before the Second Coming occurs²³. He wanted to exhort them to hold on to the teachings of the apostles and to warn them against that imaginary or spurious letter that distorted the truth concerning the Second Coming of Christ²⁴. And he wanted to give directions with respect to those Christians who did not obey the instructions of the apostles²⁵.

D. THE DIVISION OF LETTERS TO THE THESSALONIANS.

1. First Thessalonians.

Because 1 Thessalonians has several important subjects, it cannot be summarised under one theme. A good **title** would be, **“Paul writes to the new Christians in Thessalonica.”**

1 Thessalonians may be divided into 5 parts as follows:

- Part one. 1 Thessalonians 1:1 to 3:5. Paul commemorates how the gospel had come to Thessalonica.
- Part two. 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13. Paul expresses his joy over their continued spiritual progress even in the midst of severe persecution.
- Part three. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. Paul exhorts them to live a daily life of holiness and love, *especially towards the opposite sex*, in order to win the respect of outsiders.
- Part four. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 to 5:11. Paul instructs them concerning the Second Coming of Christ. The Christians who will still be alive at the Second Coming will have no advantage over the Christians who died before the Second Coming. The Second Coming will be sudden and unexpected, taking all Christians and non-Christians by surprise.
- Part five. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28. Paul exhorts them to obey their leaders, live in peace with one another, help the weak, and live a characteristic Christian life.

2. Second Thessalonians.

The theme of 2 Thessalonians is, **“The Second Coming of Christ.”**

2 Thessalonians may be divided into 3 parts as follows:

- Part one. 2 Thessalonians 1. The purpose of the Second Coming of Christ is to punish those who are disobedient to the gospel and to be glorified in Christians. Paul prays that God may fulfil their good purposes and acts of faith and that Christ may be glorified in them.
- Part two. 2 Thessalonians 2. The Second Coming of Christ will be preceded by ‘the falling away’ (apostasy or rebellion) and by the appearance of ‘the man of lawlessness’. Paul exhorts them to stand firm and prays that God may encourage them and strengthen them in every good deed and word.
- Part three. 2 Thessalonians 3. The expectation of the Second Coming of Christ should not turn into disorderliness, but into calm assurance. Believers should continue their daily work, obey the instructions of the apostles and pray that the Christian message may spread rapidly and be honoured everywhere.

¹⁷ Idolatry and sexual immorality also characterises modern western man.

¹⁸ 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4

¹⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3

²⁰ 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

²¹ chapter 1

²² The long period of proclaiming the gospel to all nations (Matthew 24:24) and the short period of the great tribulation under the man of lawlessness.

²³ chapter 2

²⁴ chapter 2

²⁵ chapter 3

E. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THESSALONIANS.

1. The contents of the Christian message.

Paul preached that the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament had found their fulfilment in Jesus Christ. He preached that Jesus Christ died and was resurrected and that he would come a second time. He preached that idol worship was evil, that Christians should live a life worthy of God and that they should be orderly in their daily conduct in the midst of a wicked world.

2. The method of Christian evangelisation.

Before Paul preached the gospel to others, he made sure *that he himself practised what he preached*²⁶. Therefore he could write “*you know how we lived among you for your sake*”²⁷. People do not only want to hear the good news; they also want to see the effect of the good news in the lives of believers in Christ. The example of Christian preachers in their daily conduct is as important as the truth they proclaim.

When Paul preached, he made *no attempt to please people*, he never used flattery and he did not put on a mask to cover greed²⁸. He was absolutely sincere in his motives as well as in his speaking.

He proclaimed the gospel, not in the power of his own personality, but *in the power of the Holy Spirit*, who convicts people of sin, righteousness and judgement²⁹. Such power of the Holy Spirit is often the evidence of someone who prays often. In 2 Thessalonians 1:11, Paul says that he prays for the Thessalonians constantly, that their good purposes and acts of faith may be fulfilled in dependence of God’s power and to the glory of God. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18, he teaches the Thessalonians to also pray continually and to thank God under all their circumstances.

Paul did not speak like a philosopher, but spoke *in great personal conviction*, deeply persuaded of the supreme importance of his message³⁰. He spoke of the gospel message, not as a word of men, but as it really is, as the Word of God³¹.

Paul also studied and *discussed the Bible* with people week after week. In Acts 17:1-4 we read that he had discussions for three weeks with people around the Bible, helping people to discover that Jesus Christ was really the expected Messiah. After the beginning of opposition from the Jews, he probably continued elsewhere. Thus, *Paul used direct preaching as well as evangelistic Bible studies to evangelise people*.

3. The method of helping young Christians to grow.

When the Holy Spirit applied the gospel message to the hearts of people, they were converted³². They accepted the message, not as the words of men, but as it actually is, as the Word of God³³.

According to 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, Paul was gentle with the new Christians, caring for them *like a mother*. He loved them and shared his daily life with them. But he also encouraged them *like a father*. He exhorted them to live the Christian life as people belonging to God’s kingdom.

Genuine Christians were especially taught to please God, to love one another more and more and to avoid every kind of sexual immorality³⁴. They were also exhorted to live a quiet life, minding their own business and to work with for their own living, so that they may win the respect of outsiders³⁵. And they were taught to respect the church leaders and to especially warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak and to be patient and kind to all people³⁶.

4. Teaching on the Second Coming of Christ.

See the study concerning the Second Coming of Christ in dota radio programmes 129-130 and in www.dota.net manual 12, supplement 18.

²⁶ Matthew 23:3

²⁷ 1 Thessalonians 1:5

²⁸ 1 Thessalonians 2:4

²⁹ John 16:8

³⁰ 1 Thessalonians 1:5

³¹ 1 Thessalonians 2:13

³² 1 Thessalonians 1:5

³³ 1 Thessalonians 2:14

³⁴ 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5

³⁵ 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

³⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15