

# Faith, Hope, and Love: Paul's Message to the Church at Thessalonica

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## The Background of Paul's Letters to Thessalonica

In interpreting the distinct message of the Thessalonian correspondence, it is sufficient for us to recognize that Paul always addressed the particular needs and problems of his churches. As a "missionary theologian" he applied the Gospel with which he had been entrusted to the varying circumstances he found within his congregations. We need not suppose that these letters represent an early stage of Paul's thought. By the time he wrote the Thessalonian correspondence, Paul had engaged in mission to the Gentiles for at least fifteen years (see 2 Cor 1:30-33; Gal 1:17; Acts 9:30; 25:26). His mission in Thessalonica, and the evidence of the Gospel which he preached there as we find it in his letters show that his theology is already mature. This judgment applies to Paul's eschatology as it appears in the Thessalonian correspondence. His obvious anticipation that the day of the Lord might come within his lifetime is balanced by his reckoning with the possibility of delay. He speaks of himself not only as among those who might be "remain alive" until the coming of the Lord, but also among those who might "sleep" before then (1 Thess 4:15, 5:10). He appeals to the expectation of the appearance of "the lawless one" in order to correct the confused claim that the day of the Lord had already arrived—the end shall be delayed until the restraint against evil

is removed—but thereby provides no basis for the calculation of the end (2 Thess 2:3-12). Some six or seven years later when he wrote Romans, his thought on this matter had not changed: "It is already the hour for you to rise from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us than when we believed" (Rom 13:1). As was the case earlier in his ministry, the end was imminent, but incalculable for Paul (cf. Rom 14:8). He judged its proximity not in terms of the regular marking of time, but in terms of God's saving purposes, especially the gathering in of the Gentiles. His treatment of questions concerning eschatology in these letters shows that when he arrived in Thessalonica he had already developed a detailed understanding of eschatology, in which he had taken up Jesus' teaching and its biblical precedents (1 Thess 4:13-18; 2 Thess 2:3-4; cf. Mark 13:14-17, 24-27; Dan 11:4-39, 12:1-4). Likewise, there is no good reason to suppose that Paul's thinking concerning the resurrection of the body underwent significant development subsequent to his writing to the Thessalonians. What we find in his letters to them is characteristic of his thought elsewhere.

The setting of the Thessalonian correspondence has been variously described. Some have pointed to the obvious disorder within the church, and its confusion concerning eschatology as an indication that a large portion of the congregation had taken Paul's announcement of the

coming of the Lord too far, landing in a “millenarian radicalism.”<sup>1</sup> Others have taken the similarity between the advice of Greek moral philosophers and Paul’s admonitions to “work with your own hands” as an indication that his primary concern was to provide a model for the urban poor of the congregation.<sup>2</sup> In both instances, it is assumed that the Thessalonian believers were of relatively low economic status. Yet Paul reminds them that he did not come to them with “pretence of greed,” which makes sense only if the Thessalonians had some disposable means (1 Thess 2:5; 2 Thess 3:8; cf. Acts 17:4, 9). He commends them moreover, for their love toward other believers in Macedonia, which in all probability reflects monetary gifts on their part (1 Thess 4:10). Furthermore, the very freedom not to work which some Thessalonians exploited presupposes that someone was supporting them (2 Thess 3:1). Very likely, such persons were taking advantage of patron-client relations which had recently been formed with other believers.<sup>3</sup>

A more satisfactory background to Paul’s message to the Thessalonians is found in the waves of persecution which the congregation endured.<sup>4</sup> When Paul composed the first letter, the church had already undergone “severe affliction” (1 Thess 1:6, 2:14; cf. 1 Thess 3:1-5). In its wake, the congregation was left with some measure of social dislocation, and questions about the state of believers who had died (1 Thess 4:12, 5:14; 1 Thess 4:13-5:11). With considerable solicitude for them, Paul instructs the believers concerning both these matters in his first letter. With the resurgence of persecution, the problem of idle and disorderly persons within the congregation increased, as did

questions of eschatology. Paul, therefore, found it necessary to correct error and deliver sharp admonition to the wayward in his second letter (2 Thess 2:1-12; 2 Thess 3:6-12). It is impossible to know precisely how the persecution which the congregation faced led to eschatological error (prompted by a letter written in the apostle’s name) and to the withdrawal of some from gainful employment. Nevertheless, it is clear that the difficulties are correlated. The Thessalonian correspondence is addressed to the church under persecution. It is this backdrop which we must bear in mind before all else in reading the letter. Although we in the West may have difficulty in appreciating the full impact of Paul’s words, they speak with great relevance and vital comfort to believers in most parts of our world.

The Lukan report in Acts 17:1-9 also sheds some light on Paul’s message to the Thessalonians, even if we must use caution in drawing conclusions from it. Paul undoubtedly stayed in Thessalonica considerably longer than the three Sabbaths he went to the synagogue (Acts 17:2). The two successive gifts which the Philippian church sent to Paul indicate a lengthy ministry there (Phil 4:16). As was the case later in Corinth, Paul’s relatively brief witness in the synagogue was followed by a considerable period of ministry from the base of a house, in this case that of Jason (Acts 17:6-9). The congregation at Thessalonica, therefore, was much like that in Corinth in that it was constituted largely of Gentiles. Although Paul’s ministry was abruptly cut off because of persecution, in all probability he had provided rather thorough instruction to the congregation (1 Thess 2:17; Acts 17:5-9). The detailed teaching which he had given to them concerning the coming of the Lord is reflec-

tive of a much broader body of knowledge (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:5; cf. 1 Thess 12; 1 Thess 3:4). Therefore, while the Thessalonian letters are colored by Paul's forced departure and the fragility of a relatively new church, they ought not be regarded as reflective of some initial stage of catechesis. The large space which he gives to Christ's coming is prompted by the needs of this congregation as it faced persecution, not by some deficiency in their instruction. Nor is it proper to say that Paul is concerned simply and narrowly with the *parousia* in these letters. Hope for Paul proceeds from the Gospel, and therefore is inseparable from faith and love. Paul begins 1 Thessalonians with this triad and returns to it again in his conclusion (e.g., 1 Thess 1:3, 5:8; cf. Thess 3:8; 2 Thess 1:3, 2:15-16). This fourfold summary of the Gospel constitutes his message in these letters.

### **Paul's Message in the Letters to Thessalonica**

#### *The Gospel and Faith*

Much has been made of the absence any discussion of the Law and justification in the Thessalonian correspondence. Paul's thinking on this issue had not yet developed so far as we see it in Galatians and Romans, or so it is argued. Brief reflection on the content of the letter, however, discloses just the opposite. Paul writes to Gentiles, converts from paganism, whom he assures of salvation in the final judgment on the basis of faith alone (1 Thess 1:9-10; 1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 Thess 5:9). This judgment, we should remember, includes God's righteous wrath and just recompense of evil (1 Thess 1:10, 5:9; 2 Thess 1:5-10). It is striking, too, that the question of circumcision or keeping the Law does not at all appear. In his exhortations Paul makes no appeal whatsoever to the Law, even though he might well have done so, particularly in the matter of sexual conduct. Nor does he describe the disturbances within the congregation as "lawlessness," but "disorder." He characterizes his instructions as "traditions," which go back to Jesus himself. And, indeed, there are remarkable connections to the Gospel traditions in these letters. As we shall see shortly, Paul's exhortations are derived from God's work in Christ, in which the Law itself is taken up and transcended. Here it suffices to observe that the Thessalonian correspondence presupposes the basic elements of the teaching on justification which we find elsewhere.

1 Paul finds little need to elaborate the content of the Gospel for this congregation apart from its eschatological significance. The saving effect of Jesus' death was not in question, and therefore could be presupposed or expressed in brief summaries, as is also the case in Philippians and the Corinthian letters (1 Thess 1:10, 4:14, 5:10; 2 Thess 2:16). His glance is cast forward toward the day of the Lord, final judgment and salvation: by means of the Gospel God had called the Thessalonian believers to share in his kingdom (1 Thess 1:4-5, 4:7; 2 Thess 2:13-14). In speaking in this way, Paul clearly thinks in terms of an effective calling. The Gospel came to them "not with word only, but with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with (their) full assurance" (1 Thess 1:5; cf. 5:24). The word of God performed its work within them as they believed (1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 3:1). In this manner and savingly loved them (1 Thess 1:4; 2 Thess 2:13, 16). Though the Gospel, the kingdom of God had entered the present

age. On this account, the Thessalonians suffered and endured persecution. God was thereby making them worthy of the kingdom which through Christ was theirs already (2 Thess 1:5; 2 Thess 1:12). They belonged already to the age of salvation, not the present, fallen world. All of those who had believed were “sons of light, sons of the day,” and not “of the night or darkness” (1 Thess 5:4-5).

Of course, the day of the Lord had yet to arrive. The Thessalonian believers possessed what was truly theirs through Christ only in hope. The expression “already-not yet,” which is often used to summarize this situation, has become much over-used and little understood. We misrepresent Paul’s thought if we suppose that he regards salvation as partly ours now, and partly still to come. Instead he juxtaposes absolutes. The whole of salvation is ours already in Christ—God has claimed us as the “first fruits” of salvation—yet we must still obtain it (1 Thess 5:8-9; 2 Thess 2:13-14; 1 Thess 4:13). Because we are “sons of the day” we are to live as “sons of the day,” remaining morally alert and sober (1 Thess 4:4-5). “Sanctification” appears here not as a process, but as a present reality, which shall be instated in its fullness by God himself at Christ’s coming (1 Thess 4:3-7; 1 Thess 5:23-24; 2 Thess 2:13). All of Paul’s exhortations proceed from what has been effected for us in Christ, who “died that we might live” (1 Thess 5:10; cf 1 Thess 4:14). Obviously, the need for instruction, warning and admonition remains in this present world, as these letters themselves show. Yet Paul always bases his appeals on the fullness of salvation already given. Indeed, this inseparability of “the indicative” and “the imperative” means that disobedience takes on the greatest serious-

ness. God, who through Christ has overcome the slumber of sin, effectively works in those who believe. And his will is their holiness (1 Thess 5:6-9).  
 oReject the apostolic instruction regarding sexual purity is therefore to reject God, his call to salvation, and the gift of the Spirit (1 Thess 4:7-8). For this reason, Paul instructs the Thessalonians to exclude anyone who ignored his admonitions from the fellowship of the congregation (2 Thess 3:6-14). The shame which such persons are to feel corresponds to the way in which their conduct denies the Gospel. Of course, it is not that Paul supposes that a single transgression excludes a person from salvation. Such discipline is intended, in fact, to restore a wayward brother (2 Thess 3:15).

The Gospel, then, is simultaneously an absolute gift and an all-encompassing demand. Or, put in another way, for Paul all obedience is a matter of faith. And faith itself is obedience to the will of God expressed in the Gospel (2 Thess 1:8). It is not idle nor merely inward. The faith of the Thessalonians was a matter of report among the churches of Paul, namely, how they “turned from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven” (1 Thess 1:8-10). Such faith was nothing other than the message of the Gospel working itself out in their lives (1 Thess 2:13). For this reason, the faith of the Thessalonian congregation stands at the center of Paul’s concern. It is on account of this faith which had “sounded forth ... in every place,” that Paul anxiously sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, and about which he rejoiced and boasted as it increased (1 Thess 1:8, 3:5-7; 2 Thess 1:3-4).

In such rejoicing and boasting, the theme of imitation which is so prominent

in these letters appears. Paul repeatedly reminds the Thessalonians of his conduct among them, in which he intentionally provided them with a model of a believing life (e.g., 1 Thess 2:1-12; 2 Thess 3:6-10). Because such imitation derives from faith, one need not see another to imitate them: the Thessalonians imitated the churches of Judea without knowing them (1 Thess 2:14-16). Their imitation derived from the hidden *communio sanctorum*. Moreover, in making itself visible, faith provides an example for others and brings them encouragement (1 Thess 3:6-10). The theme of imitation, since it is bound up with faith, lies very close to that of the love of Christians for one another, and that of joy in the Holy Spirit. All imitation is ultimately imitation of Christ himself (1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:5).

### *The Gospel and Hope*

Paul's aim and joy is nothing other than that the Thessalonians "stand in the Lord," that they hold fast what is theirs through Christ (1 Thess 3:8; 2 Thess 2:15) and joy (1 Thess 2:19-20). In the end this His backward gaze upon the cross and resurrection brings with it a forward look to the coming of the Lord: "if we believe that Jesus died and rose, thus also God shall bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus" (1 Thess 4:14).

The triumph of God does not take place without opposition. The Gospel polarizes as it enters into the world. Not only does it effect God's saving purposes, it also brings divine judgment. It intensifies the reality of evil: "already the mystery of lawlessness is at work" (2 Thess 2:7). The "man of lawlessness," an obvious mimic of Christ, represents the culmination of human rebellion against God (2 Thess 2:3-12; cf. 1 John 2:18-27). Those who disobey the Gospel, who refuse to believe, shall be given over to this evil (2 Thess 9-12). It is no surprise, then, that those who belong to Christ are thrust into the contention between God and the world. The intense persecution which the believers in Thessalonica had to endure was not an exception, but the norm. Paul expected that his converts would undergo trial. He had forewarned the Thessalonians about what was going to take place while he was still with them (1 Thess 3:4; Acts 14:22).

This time of trial shall have its end, of course. The day of judgment is coming, in which God shall judge with vengeance those who disobey him (2 Thess 1:8). The wrath of God is coming upon this world, not as capricious anger, but justice that is charged with love for the truth and hatred of evil (1 Thess 1:10, 5:9; 2 Thess 1:6-9).

To those called to salvation, the Gospel brings joy. This joy, which comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit, transcends earthly circumstances (1 Thess 1:6). It delights in God and his saving purposes. The Thessalonians themselves are Paul's glory and joy (1 Thess 2:19-20). In the end this joy is a delight in Christ himself, a longing for his appearing, "when he shall be glorified by his holy ones, and marveled at by those who believed" (2 Thess 1:10). Above all else, salvation means possessing the glory of Christ (2 Thess 2:14). Because of their joy the Thessalonians persevered in their trials (2 Thess 1:4; cf. 2 Thess 3:5). It is on the basis of this joy in Christ that Paul calls the Thessalonians to "rejoice always . . . give thanks in all things" (1 Thess 5:16,18).

Christian hope is quite concrete. The revelation of Jesus Christ shall bring persecuted believers across the face of this earth rest from their trials, even as it brings affliction to their persecutors (2 Thess 1:5-7). And even more, God shall then keep

and preserve our whole being, including our body (1 Thess 5:23). We therefore possess the great comfort that those believers who have preceded us in death, who have “fallen asleep through the Lord” shall suffer no disadvantage at the last day (1 Thess 4:15). We shall be taken up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. *In this way*, i.e., in this bodily resurrection and reunion, we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thess 4:16-17). As might be expected in a Hellenistic environment, Paul emphatically underscores the resurrection of the body. Throughout the centuries Christians have rightly turned to this promise for comfort in times of grief.

Paul’s moral injunctions therefore cannot be described as anything other than an “interim ethic,” in which all of life is measured by the hope of Christ’s coming. From this perspective, his exhortation to “lead a quiet life and work with your own hands” is quite remarkable (1 Thess 4:11-12; 2 Thess 3:12). One might have expected something more dramatic, a call to a separate and unusual way of life for believers. Indeed, that is what some of the Thessalonian believers themselves seem to have thought. This was their temptation: to withdraw into a sort of sectarian existence, supported by the goodwill and gifts of the more affluent members of the believing community. Clearly then, Paul’s instruction in this matter is no capitulation to a bourgeois existence. It is rather the commitment of Christian hope, which takes present responsibility seriously even as it waits for the transformation of the present order. The world and its concerns necessarily assume a secondary significance, even without losing their importance. The “first things” of the public square remain penultimate matters for

those awaiting the coming of the Lord.

### *The Gospel and Love*

Christian hope is inseparable from Christian love, of which Paul is the primary example in these letters. It is impossible to miss the unhindered way in which Paul expresses his affection toward the Thessalonian congregation. Although temporarily separated from them by circumstances, his heart remains with them. He longs to see them, and especially rejoices in their love toward him. His very life is taken up with them and their faith. He likewise encourages them, more than once, to practice love toward one another, and makes this a matter of his prayer for them (1 Thess 1:3, 3:12; 2 Thess 1:3). The in-breaking eschaton, the light of day in which believers are to walk, brings with it the reality of love, which constitutes an essential element of the Christian’s armor (1 Thess 5:8). Believers as “ones taught by God” (*theodidaktoi*) to love one another (1 Thess 4:9). They are the people of God, set apart from “the Gentiles,” who do not know God (1 Thess 4:5). Paul here recalls the promise that all the people of God would be “taught by the Lord,” one form of the new covenant (Isa 54:13; Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 1:19-20; Deut 30:6). This promise is fulfilled in the eschaton, which is now present in Christ (1 Thess 5:5-8). Love is the fundamental reality of the age to come, as is clear from the prominence which Paul gives it by speaking of it in this way. The implicit appeal to the new covenant brings his thought close to that of Galatians and Romans, where he speaks of love as the fulfillment of the Law (Gal 5:14; Rom 13:10). Again we find here the paradox that salvation is present as whole, even though it is not wholly present: the Thessalonians have no need

for someone to write them about love, yet Paul does precisely that.

### Summary

Only the full triad of faith, hope, and love adequately summarizes Paul's message in the Thessalonian letters. The eschatological questions to which he responded, as important as they are, are part of a broader and deeper theology rooted in the Gospel. The living hope of Christ's coming, which sprang forth from faith in Christ and his saving work, meant not only deliverance from death, but also from the tribulations into which the Thessalonian believers had been thrust on account of their faith in Christ. They, with all believers, were placed in the great struggle between the fallen world and its Creator, which shall come to an end only with the arrival of the day of judgment. In the community of "the sons of light and the day" the eschaton has entered the world already. Among them the age to come is present in the reality of love. If we are to teach the Thessalonian letters properly, we must remember that Paul's eschatology is hope, which is inseparable from faith and love.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Abraham Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); R. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>R. Russell, "The Idle in 2 Thess 3:6-12: An Eschatological or a Social Problem?," *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988) 105-119; B. Winter, "If a Man Does Not Wish to Work . . . A Cultural and Historical Set-

ting for 2 Thessalonians 3:6-16," *Tyn-dale Bulletin* 40 (1989) 303-315.

<sup>4</sup>K. Donfried, "The Theology of 1 Thessalonians as a Reflection of Its Purpose," in *To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer*, ed. M. Horgan and P. Kobelski (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 243-260.