

# Hope in the Lord: Introduction to 1-2 Thessalonians<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

Paul's Thessalonian epistles both deal at length with questions related to the Parousia (Second Coming) of Christ. The Thessalonians seem to have had serious questions in this area. The two letters look at Jesus' return from very different perspectives. 1 Thessalonians is quite pastoral. In the letter Paul sought to comfort and assure the Thessalonians about Jesus' coming. In 2 Thessalonians he was less patient. Some were spreading the false word to the church that the day of the Lord had already occurred, and Paul addressed the problem more forcefully.

The Thessalonian epistles are the earliest extant Pauline epistles. Paul established the Thessalonian church during his second mission, after leaving Philippi. The time was around A. D. 50. The two epistles were written in close proximity to the founding of the church, perhaps within six months from Paul's departure from the city. The two seem to have been written close together. They are strikingly similar in both language and content.

The first part of this essay will examine Paul's establishment of the work in Thessalonica and the period of his ministry immediately following, including his work in nearby Berea and his flight to Athens. It is possible that Paul wrote his first Thessalonian letter from Athens. The remainder of the essay will introduce the Thessalonian correspondence.

## **Establishment of the Church at Thessalonica**

We have two accounts of Paul's founding of the Christian community at Thessalonica. The first is Luke's account in Acts 17:1-9. Acts 17:10-15 tells of the work at Berea, and Acts 17:16 of Paul's arrival in Athens. The same period of missionary activity is covered by Paul's own account in 1 Thessalonians 1-3. The Lukan and Pauline versions are quite distinct. They supplement one another and will be examined separately.

### ***Thessalonica (Acts 17:1)***

After leaving Philippi, Paul, Silas, and Timothy proceeded along the Egnatian Way toward Thessalonica. A journey of approximately 100 Roman miles, it took them through the towns of Amphipolis (32 miles from Philippi) and Apollonia (31 miles from Amphipolis, 38 miles from Thessalonica). Amphipolis was a large town. In previous years it was the capital of the first division of Macedonia. But, Paul did not stop to witness there. He headed for Thessalonica. With a population of 65,000 to 100,000, it was the largest city of Macedonia.<sup>2</sup>

Thessalonica was an important commercial center located on major land and sea routes. The Egnatian Way ran through the center of town. The city grew up around the best natural harbor in Macedonia. The ancient town of Therme had been located there. In 315 B.C., Cassander, one of Alexander's generals, who succeeded him as king of Macedonia, organized Therme and a number of surrounding towns into his new capital. He

renamed his new capital *Thessalonica* for his wife, who was also Alexander's half-sister. In the second century B.C., Macedonia allied against Rome and was defeated at the battle of Pydna (168 B.C.). The victorious Roman general Aemilius Paullus organized all of Macedonia into four administrative districts with Thessalonica as capital of the second. In 146 B.C. Macedonia was made a Roman senatorial province with Thessalonica as capital. The city befriended Julius Caesar and subsequently Octavian and Antony at the time of the republican war. It was rewarded for its loyalty in 42 B.C. by being granted the status of a free city, a status that was reconfirmed by Octavian in 31 B.C. In A.D. 15 Octavian (now "Augustus") removed Macedonia from senatorial provincial status and placed it directly under his own rule (imperial provincial status) because of Macedonian unrest over the heavy provincial taxes. (Unlike senatorial provinces, imperial provinces were under the direct control of the emperor and had one or more legions stationed within them.) In A.D. 44 the emperor Claudius removed the legions, returning Macedonia to its former senatorial provincial status.

The significance of all this is that Thessalonica's fortunes were very closely tied to Rome. From the time of Augustus, a temple had been established there to venerate Julius Caesar. By Paul's day a cult had been established in Thessalonica for the worship of the goddess Roma.<sup>3</sup> Thessalonica was never made a Roman colony but remained a free Greek city. This meant that the local Greeks maintained their own legislative and governing prerogatives, were exempt from the provincial taxes, had their own rights of coinage, and had no Roman troops within their borders. The city's Greek government is

reflected in the names of the local officials whom Luke mentioned in Acts 17:6, 8. He called them *politarchs* (NIV, "city officials"), a local term that only seems to have been used in Macedonia. The name has been found on some 70 inscriptions in Macedonia, 28 of them from Thessalonica alone. The number of *politarchs* at any one time seems to have varied, but Thessalonica appears to have had 5 in Paul's day. They were the main public officials, responsible for maintaining records, keeping the peace, convening the town council, and maintaining good relations with the Roman provincial officials.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Paul's Relationship with the Thessalonians According to Acts 17:2-16***

#### *Establishing the Church (17:2-4).*

Upon arriving in Thessalonica, Paul preached in the synagogue, as was his custom. For three sabbaths he "reasoned" with them from the Old Testament scriptures, seeking to demonstrate that Jesus was the expected Messiah. Luke gives no details, but probably Paul employed such texts as those used by Peter in his sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-35), by himself at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41), and perhaps the Servant passages which Philip shared with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:30-35). As was generally the case, the members of the synagogue eventually turned on Paul, but not before he had made many converts. Three categories of converts are mentioned: "some" Jews, "a number" of God-fearing Greeks, and a sizable number of prominent Greek women (v. 4). Many such Gentile women, like Lydia, seem to have been attracted to the Diaspora synagogues.

The breach with the synagogue is indicated in Acts 17:5-9 by the account of the

Jews stirring up a mob against Paul. The separation probably occurred a considerable time before the mob incident. Luke's reference to three sabbaths (17:2) most likely refers to Paul's initial period of witness in Thessalonica, which occurred in the synagogue. Paul must have continued on in Thessalonica for some time after separating from the synagogue. An extensive period of ministry in Thessalonica is indicated by the Philippians sending him aid there "again and again" (Phil 4:16) and by his having to support himself in Thessalonica with his own hands (1 Thess 2:9, 2 Thess 3:8).

*The Mob (17:5-6a).*

Eventually the Jewish opposition *did* force Paul to leave Thessalonica, a pattern all too familiar from Paul's first missionary journey. This time the Jews did not act alone. They incited the Gentile population against the Christians. Specifically, they enlisted some "rabble from the marketplace." This ruffraff succeeded in provoking a full-scale riot. The mob rushed to the house of a certain Jason, who was evidently a Christian with whom Paul and Silas had been staying. Not finding the missionaries, they dragged Jason and some of his fellow Christians off to the politarchs.

*The Charges (17:6b-8).*

Much as at Philippi, there were multiple charges, but only one that would have raised the alarm of the magistrates. This was the charge that the Christians were "defying Caesar's decrees" by proclaiming that there was another king. Roman emperors were very nervous about their job security. Both Tiberius and Augustus issued decrees against persons who made any predictions pertaining to

the person of the emperor. Everyone was expected to take an oath of loyalty to the emperor. When viewed superficially, the Christian message about Christ the King could be seen as seditious; it had been so taken in the case of Jesus (cf. John 19:12). The politarchs of Thessalonica found themselves much in the situation of Pilate with Jesus. On the one hand, the charges were unsubstantiated. On the other, there was an angry mob and a politically sensitive accusation. They arrived at a solution that they probably viewed as a reasonable compromise. No one suffered any physical harm and the peace was preserved.

*Jason (v. 9).*

The politarchs had Jason "post bond" and then dismissed the Christians. Luke did not specify the terms of the bond. The larger narrative would suggest that Jason was asked to guarantee that there would be no further disturbances to the peace. It may have specified that Paul and Silas were to leave the city. Jason's role in the incident is significant. He seems to have been a Christian of considerable social standing and the church apparently met in his house. He was its patron. It is possible that his house was an urban *insula*, an apartment with a workshop on the ground floor and living quarters in the upper floors. If so, Paul may have worked in Jason's workshop and slept in his living quarters above.<sup>5</sup> It would have been the location for Christian assembling and witness after the expulsion from the synagogue.

*Ministry in Berea (17:10-16).*

The Thessalonian Christians sent Paul and Silas out of the city under cover of night, evidently because they were still being sought by their persecutors. We are

not told of Timothy's whereabouts at the time. He was later present with Paul and Silas in Berea (v. 14). Berea was southwest of Thessalonica about 50 miles. It was not located on the Egnatian Way but somewhat off the beaten path at the foot of Mt. Bermion in the Olympian mountain range. In the second century B.C. it had been capital of one of the four divisions of Macedonia and was still a sizable city in Paul's day.

At Berea Paul continued his procedure of preaching first in the synagogues. Luke provides no time references; so it is not clear how long Paul spent in the city. The Jews of Berea are described as being "more noble" ("refined") than those of Thessalonica. Not just on sabbaths, but *daily* they joined Paul in study of the scriptures to confirm the truth of his claim that Jesus was the Messiah. The same three groups responded as at Thessalonica (v. 12, cf. v. 4), only this time "many" of the *Jews* came to faith in Christ.

Paul's ministry in Berea was curtailed by the coming of Jews from Thessalonica. As at Thessalonica, they stirred up the "crowds" against the Christian missionaries. Nothing is said about the involvement of the Berean Jews. It seems that the "crowds" were the Gentile populace. The picture is thus very much like that of Thessalonica; the Jews as the instigators, the Gentile populace as the bulk of the mob. The text of Acts 17:14 is somewhat uncertain, and the meaning of the best reading is unclear. It says that Paul went as far as the coast. This could mean either that he went to Athens by sea or along the coastal land route. Whichever means of travel he took, he arrived there alone, having left Timothy and Silas behind in Berea (v. 14). At Athens Paul sent instructions back to Timothy and Silas that they were

to join him there as soon as possible (vv. 15-16). It is unclear why they did not accompany him to Athens. They may have been working elsewhere in the vicinity when the mob arose and forced Paul's hasty departure from Berea.

### *Paul's Relationship to Thessalonica According to 1 Thessalonians 1-3*

Half of 1 Thessalonians is devoted to Paul's relationship with the church (chapters 1-3). Paul reminded the Thessalonians of his coming to them and establishing the church (1:4-2:16). He also told them of his worry about them after his departure and of the events leading up to the writing of the epistle (2:17-3:10). There are significant differences between Paul's account in 1 Thessalonians 1-3 and Luke's account in Acts 17:1-16. Some would see them as irreconcilable contradictions. We would maintain that the two accounts are complementary rather than contradictory.

#### *Paul's First Preaching (1:4-2:16).*

Paul reminds the Thessalonians of how he came to them after being insulted and made to suffer at Philippi (2:1-2, cf. Acts 16:16-24). He spoke of how he came with deep conviction and in the demonstrable power of the Holy Spirit (1:5; cf. 1 Cor 2:4, Gal 3:3). In 1:9-10 Paul summarized his initial preaching at Thessalonica. It is clear from 1 Thessalonians that the church consisted mainly of Gentiles. Paul's first preaching to them is an example of his gospel for Gentiles. They were called upon to turn from dead idols to the one true and living God.<sup>6</sup> They were informed of the resurrection of Christ, of the Parousia hope, and of the coming judgment. In verse 10, Paul mentioned Christ's Parousia for the first time in the epistle. It continues to have a prominent place

throughout the entire letter (cf. 2:19, 3:13, 4:13, 5:2, 5:23).

In 1 Thessalonians 2:3-12 Paul reminds the Thessalonians of how he sought to model selfless ministry and genuine pastoral concern when he was with them. His motives were pure. He did not seek to please people; he did not flatter; he showed no greed. He provided gentle, loving care for the Thessalonians, like a nurse cooing over her children (2:7). Paul continues his family metaphors in verses 11-12, where he speaks of how he had also been a father to them, instructing them in the Christian life through words of comfort and encouragement. He did not want to be a burden to them; so he supported himself with his own manual labor (2:9, cf. 2 Thess 3:8).

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica was not easy. He experienced strong opposition (2:2). The Thessalonians likewise had come to share in these same sufferings (1:6, 2:14-16). Just who the persecutors were is unclear from Paul's comments. He described them as "your own countrymen" and likened them to the Jews of Judaea who persecuted the churches there (2:14). "Your own countrymen" seems to be more a political than a racial designation and could embrace both Jews and Gentiles, as in Acts 17:5-9. In any event, the Thessalonian endurance in the face of persecution was well known and served as an example for Christians throughout Macedonia and Achaia (1:7). They were more than an example, however. Paul indicates that they had become active participants in the Christian mission themselves (1:8, cf. 4:10).

*Paul's Relationship with the Thessalonians After Leaving Them (2:17-3:10).*

At 2:17-20 Paul shifts from the events of his founding visit to his concern for the Thessalonians after being forced to leave them. He states that he attempted "time and again" to come see them, but "Satan" always hindered him. One wonders what Paul meant by this Satanic hindrance. In early Christianity "Satan" was sometimes employed as deliberately veiled language for Rome. One wonders if the charge of sedition and Jason's bond may not have formed the Satanic barrier to Paul's returning to Thessalonica.

In 3:1-5 Paul continues to inform the Thessalonians of his intense desire to see them. He was worried about them, especially about how they were bearing up under the persecutions they were bound to be experiencing. He tells of how he sent Timothy as his personal envoy, to make up for his absence, to bring him back a personal report about his beloved Thessalonians. The sending of Timothy is perhaps the most serious of the supposed conflicts between Acts and Thessalonians. It will be remembered that Acts left Timothy and Silas in Berea when Paul went to Athens (17:14-16). Acts does not mention the pair rejoining Paul until Paul's arrival in Corinth (18:5). But, in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, Paul stated that he sent Timothy *from Athens*. The accounts are not irreconcilable. Timothy's travels may have been more extensive than either Acts or 1 Thessalonians indicate. The two together may furnish the whole picture.

First Thessalonians 3:6-10 rounds out Paul's recapitulation of the events that preceded his writing of the epistle. Timothy came back from Thessalonica with good news: the Thessalonians were still faithful to Paul and firm in the faith. Overcome with relief and joy, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. He was perhaps still in

Athens when he sent off the epistle, quite possibly again through the agency of Timothy. The first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians fit the genre of a “friendship” letter. What Paul could not express in personal presence he attempted through his letter. His strongest desire, of course, was to see them in person, and that request became the opening petition of a prayer for the Thessalonians as he concluded this personal portion of the epistle (3:11).

### **Introduction to the Thessalonian Letters**

Several issues have occupied the attention of recent research in the Thessalonian epistles. A matter of particular prominence has been the situation of the church—its racial and social composition, its religious background, and the nature of the persecution it faced. Also much discussed is the integrity of the two letters, especially whether 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 might be an interpolation. Closely related is the debate over the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians and the occasion for that epistle. A final area of research has been the genre of the epistles.

### ***Social Composition of the Church***

The Thessalonian church seems to have been primarily Gentile in composition. This is indicated by Paul’s summary of his initial preaching in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, which is aimed at Gentiles, urging them to abandon their idols and embrace the one true God. Likewise, the emphasis on sexual purity would point toward those with a pagan background (4:3-8). The church seems to have been somewhat mixed socially, having wealthier members like Jason and the noble women (Acts 17:4) together with a significant number from the working class and urban poor.

Those tempted to idleness (2 Thess 3:11) may have come from the ranks of the latter.<sup>7</sup>

The Thessalonians probably experienced considerable social disruption when they were converted. They needed to be integrated into a new community. This would explain Paul’s extensive use of “family” language in 1 Thessalonians. The word “brother” occurs 18 times in the letter, proportionately the heaviest density for any Pauline epistle. Paul described himself with a striking variety of family terms. He depicted himself as being gentle like a *nurse* (2:7); he encouraged them like a *father* (2:11). They were his *children* (2:7, 11). Separation from them was like being *orphaned* (NIV, “torn away,” 2:17). 1 Thessalonians is permeated with the language of encouragement and comfort, even in the hortatory sections of the epistle (cf. 4:18, 5:11). It is in every respect a pastoral epistle through which Paul sought to integrate the Thessalonians into their new Christian family.<sup>8</sup>

The need for pastoral care was the more urgent because the Thessalonians were facing intense persecution (1 Thess 1:6, 2:14, 3:3-4; 2 Thess 1:4-6). The nature of the persecution is debated. The account in Acts indicates that Paul’s persecution in Thessalonica was at the hands of a Gentile mob that had been incited by Jews (Acts 17:5-9). First Thessalonians seems to point to the local Gentiles as the main persecutors of the Thessalonians, especially 2:14, which speaks of “your own countrymen.” The “countrymen” may have included Jews, as is possibly indicated by the strong anti-Jewish polemic that follows in 2:15-16.

What was the basis of the persecution? Robert Jewett suggests that it might be linked to the ancient Thessalonian cult of

the Cabiri. A local religion that venerated a slain hero, it was historically associated with the working classes. Its symbol, for instance, was a hammer. In the first century the Cabirus cult was appropriated by the aristocracy and made into an official civil religion. This left the working class feeling abandoned. The resulting vacuum made Christianity particularly attractive to them. The eschatological aspect of the Christian message was especially appealing with its promise of social redress. In Jewett's view, this "millenarian" aspect of Thessalonian Christianity was seen as revolutionary by the authorities and provoked the persecution.<sup>9</sup> One does not need to postulate a millenarian movement to account for the persecution of the Thessalonian Christians. The local emperor cult would itself have furnished sufficient basis for the persecution of the Christians. Thessalonica prided itself on its close relationship with Rome.<sup>10</sup> The cult of Caesar was initiated there very early, during the time of Augustus. There are Thessalonian coins from that period which depict Julius Caesar, designating him as *divus* ("divine"). The Acts account may actually mute the seriousness with which the Thessalonian politarchs took the Christian threat to their Roman connections. The local persecution made Paul's pastoral care to the new Christian family all the more urgent.

### *Integrity of the Epistles*

A scholarly minority have argued that the present form of 1 Thessalonians is a composite of two letters. This is usually based on the observation that the epistle has a second thanksgiving at 1 Thessalonians 2:13. It is argued that thanksgivings occur normally at the beginning of Paul's letters, thus indicating the intro-

duction of an epistle at 2:13. According to this view, 1 Thessalonians 2:13-4:1(2) is a fragment of a separate letter inserted into 1 Thessalonians. The fragment deals primarily with Paul's relief over the good report brought by Timothy. It is usually seen as written *after* the remainder of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>11</sup>

Most interpreters maintain the integrity of 1 Thessalonians. A significant number, however, argue that 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 is an interpolation. This is based primarily on its strong polemic against the Jews, which is viewed as being unlikely for Paul, who never gave up on his fellow Jews (cf. Romans 9-11).<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, one must remember that Jews incited the mob at Thessalonica and "drove [Paul] out" (v. 15; cf. Acts 17:5-9). Also, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 is not directed against Jews in general but against the Jewish *persecutors* of the Christians.<sup>13</sup>

Very few scholars argue against the integrity of 2 Thessalonians. One of the few who has is Walter Schmithals, who argued that our present two Thessalonian letters are a composite of four originally separate letters. In his view, Paul's *first* letter to Thessalonica consisted of 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12 + 3:6-16 and was primarily a warning against false teachers and idleness. It was followed by a *second* letter in which Paul had to defend himself against Gnostics in the church (1 Thess 1:1-2:12 + 4:2-5:28). In a *third* letter, Paul countered the Gnostic claim that the day of the Lord had arrived (2 Thess 2:13-14 + 2:1-12 + 2:15-3:3). A *fourth* and final letter expressed Paul's relief that the situation had been resolved (1 Thess 2:13-4:1). Schmithals based his reconstruction on the assumption that Paul was contending with Gnostics at Thessalonica.<sup>14</sup> Hardly

anyone has been convinced that Paul fought Gnostics in 1 Thessalonians, although a number who deny the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians would see Gnosticism as the target of that epistle.

### *Authorship of 2 Thessalonians*

A number of contemporary scholars argue that 2 Thessalonians was not written by Paul. Generally it is argued that a disciple of Paul wrote the letter in the latter part of the first century during a time when Christians were experiencing severe persecution. Arguments against Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians run along several lines. First, the close similarity between 1 and 2 Thessalonians is noted. Fully a third of the actual phraseology of 2 Thessalonians is paralleled in 1 Thessalonians. Even unusual structural details are identical, such as the occurrence of a second thanksgiving (1 Thess 2:13, 2 Thess 2:13). This is seen to be slavish imitation by a later writer. It is also noted that the two epistles deal with the same themes—persecution, the Parousia of Christ, and the problem of idleness. Yet, they deal with these themes in different ways. First Thessalonians *encourages* hope in the Lord's return; 2 Thessalonians stresses the *delay* of the Parousia. The tone of 1 Thessalonians is warm and pastoral; 2 Thessalonians is harsh and judgmental. Second Thessalonians 2:1-2 and 3:17 deal with the issue of forgeries. This is seen as a "diversionary tactic" on the part of the imitator. It is also argued that the emphasis on holding to the teachings that have been passed down is more indicative of the sense of tradition of a later age than of Paul (2:15, 3:6). Some would argue that the problems of a realized eschatology (2:1-2) and of disorder in the church (3:6-15) reflect the problems of the later church,

perhaps an early form of Gnosticism. Finally, it is argued that the writer of 2 Thessalonians does not "encourage;" rather, he "commands" (3:6, 10, 12). The pastoral Paul of 1 Thessalonians has given way to the authoritarian voice of his 2 Thessalonian imitator.<sup>15</sup>

In support of Pauline authorship it is argued that the language and style of the letter are thoroughly Pauline, even in the two-thirds of 2 Thessalonians that does not parallel the first epistle. The similarities are easily accounted for if Paul wrote the two in close proximity.<sup>16</sup> The patristic evidence unanimously favors Pauline authorship; no early canonical list of Paul's epistles omits 2 Thessalonians or questions Paul's having written it. Perhaps the key issue is the occasion for the epistle, especially the controversial eschatological section (2:1-12). When the later church fought eschatological enthusiasm or Gnosticism, it never seems to have incorporated the sort of apocalyptic schematic that one finds in these verses. They are more easily accounted for on the assumption of Pauline authorship than otherwise.

### *The Occasion for the Epistles*

The occasion for 1 Thessalonians has already been treated for the most part under the earlier discussion of 1 Thessalonians 1-3. Paul sent Timothy from Athens as his personal envoy to Thessalonica. Timothy had returned to Paul, perhaps still at Athens, with a good report about the loyalty and steadfastness of the Thessalonians (3:1-10). Joyful at the good news, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians, probably sending it back by Timothy. Timothy brought him fresh news about the situation in the church. The church was still experiencing persecution, and Paul

sought to encourage and fortify them. Also, Timothy may have reported about problems within the fellowship of a sexual nature, and Paul addressed that issue as well (4:3-8). It is possible that the Thessalonians had sent Paul a letter by way of Timothy. In three places (4:9, 4:13, 5:1) Paul used a set phrase “now concerning” (Greek, *peri de*) which may indicate points at which he was picking up questions they had raised. Two of the questions concerned the return of Christ (4:13, 5:1). Evidently, some members of the congregation had died, and there was concern about their involvement in the Lord’s return. Paul dealt with the issue at some length, assuring them that the dead and the living would both participate fully in the Parousia and encouraging them to be alert and prepared for that event (4:13-5:11).

There is considerably more divergence of opinion about the occasion for 2 Thessalonians. Even those who believe in Pauline authorship disagree on the reason for its composition. A number of scholars maintain that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians *before* 1 Thessalonians. They base this on several observations. First, it is argued that the note of persecution is much stronger in 2 Thessalonians (cf. 1:4-10) while the persecution seems to be past in 1 Thessalonians. Second, it is noted that Paul seemed to be learning about the problems of idleness for the first time in 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12, whereas they are not treated as something new in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. A final argument claims that the eschatology in 2 Thessalonians is closer to Jewish apocalyptic and hence more primitive than that of 1 Thessalonians.<sup>17</sup> Others would explain the differing eschatological treatment of the epistles on the basis of Paul’s having written the two letters to two different groups.

On this theory, they would have been written at the same time, with 2 Thessalonians going to another Christian group than the main Thessalonian congregation—to a Jewish minority at Thessalonica (Harnack), or to the church of Berea (Goguel), or to Philippi (E. Schweizer).<sup>18</sup>

There is no canonical reason why 2 Thessalonians could not have been the earlier epistle. Writings were arranged in the canon according to length and not according to chronological considerations. There *are*, however, good reasons for seeing 2 Thessalonians as coming *after* 1 Thessalonians. Second Thessalonians 2:15 refers to a letter Paul had previously written the Thessalonians. The most natural assumption is that the letter was 1 Thessalonians. It is also easier to account for the austerity, the tone, and the different eschatological emphasis of 2 Thessalonians on the assumption it was subsequent to 1 Thessalonians. Paul’s treatment of the Parousia in 1 Thessalonians led some in the church to conclude that the Parousia had already come. Along with the eschatological excitement the tendency increased for some to be indolent and generally disruptive. The fervor of the apocalyptic group may have heightened the uneasiness of outsiders about the Christians and led to stronger persecution. Learning of these new developments, Paul, now located in Corinth, wrote 2 Thessalonians. He assured the suffering Thessalonians by reminding them that God would vindicate them over their persecutors (1:5-10). He introduced an apocalyptic program about the events of the end time that had *not yet occurred* in an effort to counter those who argued that it had already arrived (2:1-12).<sup>19</sup> Realizing the severity of the problems created by the indolent and disruptive members, he

urged the others to shun them if they failed to contribute their fair share (3:6-15). It was probably a matter of months, perhaps only weeks after the writing of the first letter, sometime around the end of A.D. 50 or beginning of A.D. 51. We do not know what effect the letter had on the Thessalonians. We *do* know that the church continued to be supportive of Paul's mission. Two Thessalonians accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with his later collection for the saints, Secundus and Aristarchus (Acts 20:4). Aristarchus was with Paul when the apostle departed on his voyage to Rome to appear before Caesar (Acts 27:2).

### ***The Genre of the Thessalonian Epistles***

Recent literary analyses have looked at the Thessalonian epistles from two different perspectives with much the same results. Some have analyzed them by the canons of ancient rhetoric. There is a general consensus that 1 Thessalonians fits the *epideictic* category of rhetoric with its emphasis on example and praise. Wanamaker outlines the epistle according to the divisions of formal rhetoric, just as Betz did for Galatians. In 2 Thessalonians Paul made less of an attempt to hold himself up as an example. He devoted less space to praise of the Thessalonians, and he was far more directive in seeking to change their behavior. Accordingly, Wanamaker places 2 Thessalonians in the category of deliberative rhetoric and outlines it accordingly.<sup>20</sup>

Others have categorized 1 Thessalonians according to its *epistolary* genre. Meeks and Malherbe describe it as a *paraenetic* letter, a basically hortatory letter which sought to aid the Thessalonians in their process of community building.<sup>21</sup>

Paul sought to teach them by his own personal example. He used the language of friendship throughout the letter, and even his exhortations to follow a Christian lifestyle were marked by a strong note of encouragement and consolation. Some have noted the setting of the epistle in the community's experience of being persecuted. They would categorize the letter as one of *consolation*, with its strong emphasis on following Paul's example in remaining steadfast through persecution.<sup>22</sup>

It is probably wise to avoid rigid categorization of Paul's epistles. Examination of his letters through the lenses of ancient rhetorical devices and epistolary conventions has helped us focus on them in a new light. Paul adapted his epistles to fit the specific occasions he was addressing. This was certainly true of both Thessalonian epistles. Both were aimed at formation of the new Christians, consoling and encouraging them. Though the tone of the two is quite different, ultimately both were occupied with primarily pastoral concerns.

## **1 Thessalonians**

### ***Study Outline of 1 Thessalonians***

#### *I. Opening of the Letter 1:1-10*

- A. Salutation 1:1
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#### *II. Paul's Relationship with the Thessalonians 2:1-3:13*

- A. Paul's Initial Ministry in Thessalonica 2:1-16
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### **Highlights of 1 Thessalonians** ***Opening of the Letter (1:1-10)***

In both Thessalonian letters Paul listed Silas and Timothy as cosenders. This was appropriate, since both had worked with Paul when the church was first established. Timothy had continued to be Paul's personal representative with the church. Paul usually began his letters with the "grace and peace" benediction. In 1 Thessalonians "peace" also occurs at the end of the letter (5:23), thus bracketing Paul's concern throughout the letter for the peace and consolation of the persecuted Christian community.<sup>23</sup>

As is often the case, Paul's opening thanksgiving introduces themes that are prominent in the body of the letter. The triad of faith, love, and hope (v. 3) occurs again toward the letter's end (5:8), forming a bracket for the entire epistle, just like

"peace." Paul lists "hope" last in both places, probably for emphasis, since the Thessalonian assurance in the Christian hope was one of the primary concerns of the letter. In verse 5 Paul speaks of how the Thessalonians had "imitated" him. Serving as a model for the young Christians is an emphasis Paul continues, especially in 2:1-12. The Thessalonians, of course, imitated Paul in their suffering for Christ (vv. 4-6), and Paul will return to that theme later in the epistle (2:14-16, 3:3-4).<sup>24</sup> Likewise, he has occasion to mention again the Thessalonian participation in the Christian mission in their own province and throughout the world (vv. 7-8, cf. 4:10). Finally, in verse 10, as Paul summarizes his initial preaching to them, he concludes with a reference to Christ's return and the coming judgment, which becomes the *central emphasis* of the entire letter (4:13-5:11).

### ***Paul's Initial Ministry in Thessalonica (2:1-16)***

Paul's reference to the style of his ministering among the Thessalonians in 2:1-12 has often been seen as the apostle's reply to his critics. For example, Schmidthals saw Paul responding in these verses to charges of his Gnostic opponents that he was weak and lacking in personal presence. It is more likely that Paul was holding himself up as an example, urging that the Thessalonians follow him in their own selflessness and devotion to others. Paul's use of family terms throughout this passage was also a means of solidifying his friendship with them. The passage is not a response to opponents but a good example of epideictic rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> Paul was also perhaps distancing himself from the type of popular philosopher of the day who preyed on the unsuspecting and gullible.<sup>26</sup>

In 2:9 Paul refers to his example of honest work. He toiled “night and day” so as not to burden anyone. His tentmaking would have been considered demeaning to the upper classes in his day. As a Roman citizen Paul probably shared more of an upper than lower class perspective himself. He probably saw his work as demeaning (cf. 2 Cor 11:7). But he also shared the philosopher’s ideal that it was better to earn one’s keep in degrading work than to be dependent on anyone.<sup>27</sup> He must keep himself free to preach the gospel with no strings attached (1 Cor 9:15-18). The fact that Paul resorted to self-support at Thessalonica indicates that he spent some time there. It is also quite possible that his workshop was a place of witness for him. Philosophers like Socrates were known to have carried on discussions in the context of the workshop. Paul may well have engaged in active witness as he worked at his tents.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Paul’s Continued Concern for the Thessalonians (2:17-3:13)***

With the exception of Romans, 1 Thessalonians has the longest section devoted to Paul’s personal affairs of all his epistles.<sup>29</sup> In the lengthy treatment of his personal circumstances in Romans 15 Paul sought to introduce himself to the church. In 1 Thessalonians he was concerned with strengthening the Thessalonian commitment to Christ and with solidifying his own relationship with them. He sent Timothy as his own personal envoy, an extension of himself.<sup>30</sup> He wanted to return to Thessalonica, but “Satan” had hindered him (2:18). The best commentary on this whole section is the account of Paul’s forced departure from Thessalonica in Acts 17:5-9. Paul left Thessalonica abruptly because of the threat of the mob

and whatever terms the politarchs had laid down in connection with the bond paid by Jason. The latter may well have been the “Satanic hindrance” to which Paul was alluding; it may be that he *could not* himself return to Thessalonica. Paul knew that the Christians left behind in Thessalonica would continue to experience local hostility. He was concerned for both their safety and their stability in the faith. He longed to hear from them. Unable to go himself, he sent Timothy as an extension of himself. Timothy returned to Paul with the best possible news: the Thessalonians continued firm in their commitment to Christ and their devotion to Paul.

### ***Paul’s Pastoral Advice: Purity (4:1-8)***

The whole of 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:22 is “paraenetic,” that is, advice about the living of the Christian life. Paraenesis was a traditional form of Greek moral teaching and was often quite general in nature. In 1 Thessalonians Paul’s paraenesis is mostly quite specific, closely related to actual circumstances in the life of the Thessalonian church. The sources for Paul’s information were certainly Timothy and possibly a letter from the Thessalonians. The first two verses of chapter four introduce the whole paraenetic section. Note the encouraging pastoral manner with which Paul broaches the subject. He reminds them of how he instructed them in Christian living when with them and he *commended* them for their having heeded his teachings (4:1-2).

The first subject Paul addresses was sexual purity (4:3-8). Pagan and Biblical morality were miles apart in the area of sexuality, and Paul frequently had to deal with matters of sexual behavior when addressing Gentile converts. There are

several obscurities in the Greek of this passage, particularly the word translated in verse 4 as “body” by the NIV. As the NIV footnote indicates, the word can also be translated “wife.” The Greek word behind these translations literally means “a vessel.” If translated “wife,” it would tie in with the reference to taking advantage of one’s brother in verse 6. The meaning would be that one is to honor his own marriage and not covet the wife of his brother. The more likely meaning of “vessel,” however, is “body,” and in particular the male sex organ. Some of the pagan cults of Thessalonica made extensive use of the phallus in their symbolism. This was true of the Cabirus cult and of the worship of Dionysus to whom a temple was dedicated in Thessalonica.<sup>31</sup> Paul may have deliberately alluded specifically to the male member to remind the Thessalonians that for Christians its proper place was not in the excesses of the pagan cults but only within the sanctity of a solid Christian marital commitment.

#### ***Paul’s Pastoral Advice: Living the Quiet Life (4:9-12)***

In verse 9 Paul used the phrase “now about” (Greek, *peri de*), which may indicate that he was addressing an issue raised by the Thessalonians, perhaps through a letter or through Timothy. The question concerned “brotherly love” and may have specifically applied to the area of financial assistance. Paul spoke of how they already loved their fellow Christians throughout Macedonia (v. 10). This probably referred to monetary support. Paul urged them to continue in this worthy endeavor, but in verses 11-12 he “adjusted” his advice somewhat. Christian benevolence did not mean the support of those who were unwilling to work

with their own hands. No able person was to be dependent on others.

A majority of the Thessalonians may have come from the impoverished working classes. (In 2 Corinthians 8:2, Paul spoke of the “extreme poverty” of the Macedonians.) During the imperial period, Rome often provided a grain dole to maintain peace among the masses, and some of the Thessalonians may have once benefited from the Roman welfare system. Very possibly the Thessalonian Christians lived in a close-knit community. They may have regularly shared a common table. The community may have depended especially on the largesse of wealthier members like Jason. But, such benefactors were unable to support the entire community. They may have been the ones who raised the question with Paul. They wanted to know the limits of this “brotherly love.” Paul’s answer is that there is no limit to Christian compassion but there is also no place for Christian parasites. Everyone was to bear their own share. His urging them to lead the “quiet life” and to “win the respect of outsiders” may indicate that some of those who were *not* doing their fair share had become socially disruptive in their indolence. Their disorderliness may have raised concern in the non-Christian community about whether this new group might not be a threat to the peace and security of the city.

#### ***Paul’s Pastoral Encouragement: The Dead in Christ (4:13-18)***

At 4:13 Paul begins a long treatment of the return of the Lord, which extends to 5:11. Paul dealt with two separate aspects of the Parousia—the place of dead Christians in it (4:13-18), and its timing (5:1-11). Paul seems again to be responding to a question raised by the Thessalonians:

“now concerning (*peri de*) those who fall asleep.” Apparently there was concern that those who had died would in some regard miss out on the Parousia of Jesus. It is not clear what prompted this concern. Scholars differ widely on the question. Some have suggested that a group of Gnostics or “charismatics” at Thessalonica were teaching a thoroughly realized eschatology which left no place for a resurrection. This perturbed the Thessalonians who had heard Paul speak of the resurrection of the dead. Paul thus wrote these words to reassure them of the reality of resurrection.<sup>32</sup> The problem with this view is that Paul did not polemicize against a realized eschatology in 1 Thessalonians. He addressed not an erroneous eschatology but a *deficient* eschatology. The easiest explanation for the Thessalonian misunderstanding is that Paul had not dealt with the place of dead Christians when he first preached in Thessalonica. Some have argued that Paul was so caught up in his own expectation of the Lord’s imminent return that he had not even considered the possibility that some Christians might die before the Parousia.<sup>33</sup> It is more likely that Paul had not dealt at any length with the issue. He had stressed the Lord’s return; he *did* expect it soon. But some Christians had died after Paul’s departure, and it raised a real concern with the Thessalonians about the place of the dead in the events of the end time. They may not have questioned the reality of an eventual resurrection. They may simply have worried that those who died might be left out of the immediate events surrounding Christ’s return. Paul gave no details as to what those events might involve. His concern in 1 Thessalonians was not to provide instruction in eschatology but comfort for bereaving Christians.

Paul begins by assuring the Thessalonians of the reality of the resurrection (vv. 13-14). Christians are not hopeless like pagans. The resurrection of Christ is the precursor of the resurrection of those who are in Christ. Paul described the dead as those who “fall asleep.” This is a euphemism for death and not Paul’s discussion of the condition of believers between death and resurrection.<sup>34</sup> Paul does not discuss that issue here. In verse 16 he described the dead simply as “the dead in Christ.” What did Paul mean when he stated that God would “bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him” (v. 14)? Probably he meant the same thing as in 2 Corinthians 4:14, where he spoke of God raising the dead with Christ and presenting them in his presence.<sup>35</sup>

Paul expresses his main concern in verse 15. He assures the Thessalonians that the living will have no precedence over the dead at the coming of the Lord. He describes this as a word from the Lord. Exactly what he had in mind is uncertain. There is no saying in the Gospels to this effect. Some have argued that Paul is referring to a revelation which he had personally received from the risen Lord. It is more likely he was referring to an actual teaching of Jesus, either one that is lost, or a tradition like John 11:25-26.<sup>36</sup>

In verses 16-17 Paul summarizes the events that would occur at the Parousia. Christ would descend from heaven, accompanied by a “loud command,” “the voice of the archangel,” and “the trumpet call of God.” In apocalyptic literature a divine command is often associated with theophanies and with the coming day of the Lord. The voice of an archangel likewise is connected to theophanies.<sup>37</sup> Paul does not specify the identity of the archangel. Michael has been suggested, the

only archangel denoted by name as an archangel in the New Testament (Jude 9). Trumpets are a major item in apocalyptic literature. One need only recall the seven trumpets of Revelation 8-11. At the blast of the seventh trumpet, God sits down on his throne for his eternal reign (Rev 11:15). In 1 Corinthians 15:52 Paul spoke of the blowing of this “last trumpet” as preceding the resurrection. Here also the dead are depicted as rising at the trumpet’s sound. They rise “first.” Then only do the living rise. Note that Paul included himself among the living—“we who are still alive” (v. 17). He expected the Parousia to occur during his own lifetime. Apparently, he saw the dead as being transformed when they rise from the grave (cf. 1 Cor 15:51-52). One would assume that the living are likewise transformed as they rise in the clouds to meet the Lord.<sup>38</sup> An interesting detail is that the clouds are connected with the *ascent* of believers into heaven rather than with the Lord’s *descent*. The significant matter is that believers will meet the Lord in the air “and so will be with the Lord forever.” Interpreters differ as to whether the believers should be seen as “meeting” the Lord in the air and then escorting him to earth, or whether they are to be seen as joined by the Lord in their own ascent into heaven.<sup>39</sup> Paul gives no details. He was not interested in detailing the apocalyptic drama but only in comforting the Thessalonians. Hence, his last statement about the Parousia was that *all*, both the living and the resurrected, will meet the Lord at his coming and would “be with him forever.” Paul emphasizes the assurance of the believer’s eternal existence in the presence of the Lord. He urges the Thessalonians to comfort one another with the same assurance (4:18).

### ***Paul’s Pastoral Advice: Ready for the Lord’s Coming (5:1-11)***

If 4:13-18 emphasizes the aspect of comfort for the believer in the Lord’s return, 5:1-11 focuses on the aspect of judgment. For Paul Christ’s Parousia and the day of the Lord were one and the same event, and a major aspect of the day of the Lord is the divine judgment of mankind.<sup>40</sup> Much like the Old Testament prophets, Paul warns that for those who were unprepared the day of the Lord would be darkness and not light. Evidently the Thessalonians had inquired about the *time* of the Parousia. Paul does not provide any time table for them but simply repeats what he evidently had already taught them: the Lord’s return would be sudden and unexpected, like a thief breaking into a house during the middle of the night. The image is a familiar one. Jesus used it in his “Parousia parables” to warn of the sudden return of the Master (Luke 12:39, Matt 24:43). The image became a standard description in early Christianity for the unexpectedness with which the Parousia would take place and the need to stay alert (cf. 2 Pet 3:10).

Paul has unbelievers in mind when he warns against a false sense of security. Destruction would come suddenly like labor pains in childbirth. The language is that of the Old Testament prophets. Jeremiah admonished Israel about its false sense of security (Jer 6:14), warning them of the destruction facing them as God meted out his judgment. It would be sudden and painful like a woman in childbirth (Jer 6:24, cf. Isa 13:8). Jesus used the same image to depict the “Messianic woes” of the final times (Mark 13:8, Matt 24:8), but in Thessalonians the emphasis is on the suddenness and unexpectedness of the coming judgment. It is much like

the parables of Jesus that warn of the need to be prepared for the master's return (Luke 12:42-46) and to be watchful while the bridegroom delays (Matt 25:1-13). One wonders if Paul's warning might have had a specific group in mind (e.g., the Thessalonians depended on Rome for peace and security). In the light of the coming judgment it was a false security, a claim for peace which ultimately was no peace at all.<sup>41</sup>

In verses 4-8 Paul assured the Thessalonians that they need not fear the coming of the Lord, because they are children of the light and not of the darkness. The image of the thief at night probably led him to this vivid contrast between those who belonged to the darkness and those who walked in the light. It was a common and widespread religious metaphor. For example, the Essenes of Qumran claimed to be the "sons of light," describing their enemies as "the sons of darkness." Paul employed a paraenetic complex which he used in other places as well. He spoke of belonging to the light (v. 5), staying alert and awake (v. 6), avoiding drunkenness and revelry (v. 7), and putting on the armor that befits the children of light (v. 8). Exactly this same group of motifs occurs in Romans 13:11-14. The same complex is found in Ephesians, where it is fully developed: the children of the light contrasted with children of darkness (Eph 5:8-13), an appeal to wake from sleep to the light of Christ (Eph 5:14), the need to avoid drunkenness (Eph 5:18), and a call to put on the whole armor of God (Eph 6:10-20). The image of the divine armor is found in Isaiah 59:17 and in a more developed form in the Wisdom of Solomon 5:17-20. Paul developed it most fully in Ephesians. In Thessalonians he used the armor imagery to emphasize the three essential Christian

virtues of faith, love, and hope. The triad also appears—in the same order—in 1:3. In 3:6 Paul spoke of how Timothy had brought him a report on the faith and love of the Thessalonian Christians. *Hope* was missing. Perhaps it was not omitted by accident. The Thessalonians were unsure about some aspects of the Christian hope. Now, having dealt with the Christian hope extensively in the epistle, Paul may have trusted that their armor was complete with the full Christian triad.

Verses 9-11 are Paul's final words of encouragement with regard to the Lord's coming. The Thessalonians were chosen for salvation (cf. 1:4); they need not fear the coming judgment (v. 9). Verses 10 and 11 round off Paul's discussion of the Parousia. Verse 10 harks back to the reference to those who are "asleep" in the Lord (4:13) and Paul's assurance that whether dead or alive at the Lord's return, all Christians would join him and be with him forever. Verse 11 parallels 4:18: Paul's purpose had been the same in both sections of his discussion about the Lord's return—to encourage the Thessalonians about the Christian hope. The form may have been that of traditional ethical teaching. The purpose was to comfort and strengthen the Thessalonians. It was a thoroughly pastoral concern.

*Living in Peace with One Another,  
General Admonitions, Epistolary  
Conclusion (5:12-28)*

The whole section 5:11-15 may relate to the problem of the "idle" addressed in verse 14. The word translated "idle" literally means "disorderly" and could refer to some in the church who, though dependent on the church, were doing their "own thing," neither following the leadership of the church nor bearing their own share

in providing for the church's common life. The problem seems to have exacerbated by the time Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, and Paul addressed it in more severe terms there (2 Thess 3:6-15).

Verses 16-22 are the sort of general paraenesis one often finds at the end of Paul's letters. The assorted sayings were probably not directed to any specific problems in the church. First Thessalonians has two benedictions, Paul's customary concluding "grace benediction" of verse 28 and the "peace benediction" of verse 23. Paul's praying that the Thessalonians would experience God's peace may link up with 5:3. The world has its many false promises of peace; only God brings true peace. Only God can "sanctify." To be sanctified means to be set apart. God had set the Thessalonians apart in Christ; he chose them (1:4). And, he would remain true to his calling them; he would keep them as his own, blameless until the coming of Christ. Paul thus ends with a final assurance that they will share in Christ's Parousia.

## 2 Thessalonians

### *Study Outline of 2 Thessalonians*

#### *I. Introduction 1:1-12*

- A. Salutation 1:1-2
- B. Thanksgiving and Prayer 1:3-12
  - 1. Thanksgiving for Thessalonian steadfastness 1:3-4
  - 2. God's judgment on their persecutors 1:5-10
  - 3. Prayer that God will be glorified in the community 1:11-12

#### *II. Appeal Not to Be Shaken by False*

##### *Reports 2:1-3:5*

- A. False Reports That the Day of the Lord Has Come 2:1-2
- B. End-Time Events Which Have *Not*

Come 2:3-12

- C. Thanksgiving for their Election and Prayer to Stand Firm 2:13-17
- D. Prayer for Mutual Empowerment 3:1-5

#### *III. Appeal to Shun the Disorderly 3:6-15*

- A. Shun the disorderly 3:6, 3:14-15
- B. Follow Paul's Example 3:7-9
- C. Earn One's Own Keep 3:10-13

#### *IV. Conclusion to the Epistle 3:16-18*

- A. Prayer for God's Peace 3:16
- B. Paul's Autograph 3:17
- C. Grace Benefiction 3:18

## Highlights of 2 Thessalonians

### *Introduction (1:1-12)*

Paul's second letter to Thessalonica begins very much like the first. The first verse of the two epistles is identical except for the addition of the word "our" to "Father" in 2 Thessalonians. In the thanksgiving of 2 Thessalonians Paul again commends the Thessalonians for their faith and love for referred to their experiencing persecution. The unique element in the thanksgiving of 2 Thessalonians is Paul's detailed treatment of God's judgment. The emphasis is on God's vindicating the Thessalonians by punishing their persecutors. Both the length and intensity with which Paul depicts the divine judgment would indicate that the persecution of the Thessalonians had intensified. The closest corresponding passage in 1 Thessalonians is 2:13-16, where Paul spoke of God's wrath upon the Jews who had persecuted Christians. Paul's prayer for the church was a regular feature in many of his epistles, and he included one at 1:11-12. There is no corresponding prayer in 1 Thessalonians. The second epistle is certainly no "slavish imitation" of the first, as some have claimed who question Paul's

being its author.

### ***Appeal Not to be Shaken by False Reports (2:1-3:5)***

Paul's words about the Parousia in his first letter seem to have been distorted by some. They were proclaiming that "the day of the Lord has already come" (2:2). Paul urges the Thessalonians not to be unsettled by such a teaching, even if its proclaimers claimed a basis in prophecy or in a letter supposed to have come from Paul himself. It is not clear who this group was or what was the basis of their teaching. They may have possibly been some millenarians who were claiming that the end of the world was at the door. They may have been "super-spiritualists" who maintained that they were already perfected in the Spirit, had already "arrived," and had nothing further to await in the future. Whatever their teaching, they seem to have claimed Paul's backing for their views. The most likely explanation for Paul's reference to a letter purported to have come from him (v. 2) is that they were claiming that Paul's treatment of the Parousia in 1 Thessalonians supported their viewpoint. Paul replies that he said no such thing, either by word of mouth or by letter. He then proceeds to set forth the proof that the day of the Lord had indeed not yet arrived.

Paul counters the false eschatology by presenting a mini-apocalypse of events which would precede the Lord's return. There would be a period of great "rebellion," and this would accompany the coming of the "man of lawlessness" (v. 3). Paul says that this lawless one was now being held back by a "restraining power" (vv. 6-7), but eventually the restraint would be removed, giving him full room to do his lawless work (v. 8). The "lawless one" will

set himself up in God's temple and claim to be God himself (v. 4). He will parade as God, working all sorts of miraculous deeds but would actually be the incarnation of Satan himself (v. 9). He will lead many astray who had not followed the truth, and God would confirm them in their mass delusion. They would suffer condemnation for their wickedness (vv. 10-12). The lawless one will not prevail. He will be utterly destroyed by Christ at his coming (v. 8).

Paul's purpose in employing this apocalyptic language is clear. He wanted to assure the Thessalonians in the face of an unsettling eschatological teaching. He reminds them (v. 5) that certain events will take place before the return of Christ. Since these had obviously *not* yet occurred, the claim that the day of the Lord had arrived was patently false. In particular, Paul employs the figure of the Anti-Christ, a feature found both in Jewish apocalyptic thought and elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul never used the term "Anti-Christ." In fact, the term is found in the New Testament only in the Johannine epistles (1 John 2:18, 2:22, 4:3; 2 John 7). There it refers to false teachers who were denying the incarnation of Christ. The idea of the Anti-Christ is also found in Revelation in the figure of the arrogant beast that sets itself up as God, performing many apparent miracles and leading the masses astray (Rev 11:7, chapters 13 and 17). The basic concept is that the Anti-Christ is the antithesis of Christ, the incarnation of Satan. He is a figure of the last days who will delude the masses, pretending to be God, leading them in a mass rebellion against all religion and authority.

The figure of the Anti-Christ has roots in the Old Testament—in the king of

Babylon, who aspired to be above God (Isa 14:12-14), in the arrogance of the prince of Tyre who called himself God (Ezek 28:2). It seems to have fully developed during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, who in 167 B.C. sought to stamp out the worship of God and install the cult of Zeus in the Jerusalem temple (Dan 11:31, 36-37; 1 Macc 1:54; 2 Macc 6:2). Antiochus's attempt to replace the worship of God with his own cult in the Holy Place of God's temple came to be designated as the "desolating sacrilege" or "abomination of desolation." Jesus used this image in his teaching on the events of the end time (Mark 13:14). In the same discourse he warned of false Messiahs who would employ signs and wonders to lead people astray (Mark 13:22). Scarcely a decade before Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, the Anti-Christ concept had experienced a fresh stimulus in the attempt of the emperor Caligula in A.D. 40 to set up his image in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem, an attempt thwarted only by his timely assassination (Josephus, *War*, ii, 184-203; *Ant.*, xviii, 261-309).<sup>42</sup> Paul had taught the Thessalonians previously about this coming incarnation of evil and the mass rebellion he would organize (v. 5). Obviously, these events had not yet occurred, and Christ would not return until they *had* taken place; the day of the Lord had *not* yet arrived.

Paul also reminds the Thessalonians that they knew what was holding the man of lawlessness back (vv. 6-7). The Thessalonians may have known what Paul meant by this "restraining power" (v. 6) or "restraining person" (v. 7). Unfortunately, we do not. Obviously Paul was speaking of something or someone that was holding the "lawless one" back, keeping him in check and thus also delaying

the events of the final times. The early church fathers suggested that the "restraining power" was the Roman presence, particularly the law and order that it maintained. This understanding was very much in keeping with Paul's teaching about the purpose of government in Romans 13:1-5. Paul may have kept the reference to Rome veiled so as not to raise the suspicions of the authorities by his reference to its eventually being "taken out of the way" (v. 7). A less common view, also traceable to the church fathers, suggests that *Paul's mission* was the restraining power. God would hold back the events of the end until the full number of the nations had been reached with the gospel.<sup>43</sup> This is an attractive possibility. Its main problem is that Paul expected to be alive at the Parousia (1 Thess 4:17); he surely did not expect to be "taken out of the way" before Christ returned. Some have suggested that the restraining power might be Satan,<sup>44</sup> or God himself. Paul would probably have agreed with the latter. What or whoever the restrainer might be, God himself ultimately is in control of all history.

Second Thessalonians has no section corresponding to 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10, where Paul detailed his personal relationship with the church. It does, however, have a second thanksgiving (2:13-15), corresponding to 1 Thessalonians 2:13. Paul urged the Thessalonians to stand firm, holding to the teachings which he had brought them by "word of mouth" (when with them) and "by letter" (1 Thessalonians). The teaching he was most concerned with was that about the Lord's return. If the Thessalonians held to Paul's teaching on that subject, they would realize that the Parousia could not yet have come. Just as in the first epistle,

Paul concludes this initial portion of the body of the letter with a benediction (2:16-17, cf. 1 Thess 3:11-13). It is perhaps not by accident that Paul did not mention the Lord's return in the benediction of 2 Thessalonians as he had in the first epistle (1 Thess 3:13). There was enough eschatological fervor in the church already without adding fuel to the fire.

### *Appeal to Shun the Disorderly* (3:6-15)

In addition to the confusion over the Lord's return, the problem of disorderliness seems to have escalated at Thessalonica. In all probability the two were related. The disorderly group were likely the same as those who were claiming that the day of the Lord had arrived. Paul describes them with a word that literally means "disorderly" (Greek, *ataktos*; 3:6, 3:7, 3:11, cf. 1 Thess 5:14). The NIV translates the word as "idle," and idleness was surely part of their problem. Paul accuses them of not doing their share in community support (vv. 7-10), of not abiding by his teachings (v. 6), and of being general "busybodies" (v. 11). Throughout Christian history, groups that emphasize the imminent return of the Lord have been known to abandon their livelihood and cease normal human activity. This could have happened in Thessalonica. Just exactly what their full agenda was we do not know. We *do* know that they were generally disruptive to community life. They had become a burden to the larger fellowship. They presented a bad image of the Christian community to outsiders (1 Thess 4:11-12). They also probably were the eschatological enthusiasts whose speculations were unsettling the church.

It has been recently suggested that the disrupters came largely from the unem-

ployed urban poor, who were dependent on the wealthier members of the congregation to provide for them.<sup>45</sup> This may well have been the pattern of household churches like that of Lydia and perhaps Jason, where the heads of the households served as patrons or benefactors for the church that met in their homes. Robert Jewett has suggested another possible organization for the congregational life of the working class. He postulates that they may have met in the urban *insulae*, the apartment complexes of the inner city where shops were located on the street level with crowded living spaces on the upper floors. He sees them as perhaps renting their own meeting space and gathering together daily to partake of their meals. This makes sense of Paul's instructions that those who did not work should not be permitted to eat (v. 10). Such a rule implies that the church had community control over such matters. It also implies that it was a shared enterprise, with all doing their part in support of the community life.<sup>46</sup> Paul perhaps worked in a shop below their meeting place. They would all have been familiar with his personal example of doing his part in the material support of himself and the community (vv. 7-9).

The problem obviously reached serious proportions as is indicated by Paul's bidding the rest of the congregation to shun the disorderly members (vv. 6, 14). In 2 John 10, the Elder advised the members of his churches to avoid those who denied the incarnation. In Thessalonica the problems seem to have been more social than theological, but probably involved both dimensions. In any event, Paul's advice not to associate with them was primarily intended to shake them back to their senses and return them to the truth (vv.

14-15).

Like 1 Thessalonians, the second epistle has two concluding benedictions, a grace benediction (v. 18) and a "peace" benediction (v.16). Also like 1 Thessalonians, Paul concluded the letter with his own personal autograph. In 1 Thessalonians he urged the congregation to pray for him, exchange a "holy kiss," and see that everyone heard the letter (5:25-27). In 2 Thessalonians Paul insisted that he was writing the final greeting in his "own hand," probably to authenticate its contents against those who were claiming he had said or written things which he had not (2:2).

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Reprinted with slight adaptation from chapter ten of John Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999). All rights reserved. Used by permission.
- <sup>2</sup> R. Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 337-341.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul, a Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 114-116.
- <sup>4</sup> G. H. R. Horsley, "The Politarchs," in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, Vol. 2: *Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 419-431.
- <sup>5</sup> A. J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians. The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 5-33.
- <sup>6</sup> God is at the center of Paul's teaching in 1 Thessalonians. See R. F. Collins, "The Theology of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians," *Louvain Studies* 6 (1977) 315-337.
- <sup>7</sup> W. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 173-174.
- <sup>8</sup> Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians*, 34-60.
- <sup>9</sup> R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).
- <sup>10</sup> K. P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985) 336-356.
- <sup>11</sup> Murphy-O'Connor, 110-111.
- <sup>12</sup> B. Pearson, "1 Thessalonians 2:13-16: A Deutero-Pauline Interpolation," *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971) 79-94. For the argument that the grammatical structure of 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 does not accord with the remainder of the epistle, see D. Schmidt, "1 Thess. 2:13-16: Linguistic Evidence for an Interpolation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983) 269-279.
- <sup>13</sup> K. P. Donfried, "Paul and Judaism: 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 as a Test Case," *Interpretation* 38 (1984) 242-253. For further arguments against an interpolation see J. W. Simpson, "The Problems Posed by 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16 and a Solution," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 12 (1990) 42-72.
- <sup>14</sup> W. Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics*, trans. J. E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 123-218.
- <sup>15</sup> J. C. Beker, *Heirs of Paul: Paul's Legacy in the New Testament and in the Church Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 72-74. See also J. A. Bailey, "Who Wrote II Thessalonians?" *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979) 131-145.
- <sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the authorship debate and a thorough defense of Pauline authorship, see C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 17-28.

- <sup>17</sup>R. W. Thurston, "The Relationship Between the Thessalonian Epistles," *Expository Times* 85 (1973) 52-56.
- <sup>18</sup>Bailey, 140-141.
- <sup>19</sup>Jewett argues that the millenarian enthusiasts were responsible for the "realized eschatology" at Thessalonica, "A Matrix of Grace: The Theology of 2 Thessalonians as a Pauline Letter," in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. I: *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 63-70. See also in the same volume the article by E. Krentz, who maintains the pseudonymity of 2 Thessalonians, arguing that its main theme is apocalyptic judgment, written to assure Christians who were experiencing severe persecution ("Through a Lens: Theology and Fidelity in 2 Thessalonians," 52-62).
- <sup>20</sup>Wanamaker, 49-51. See also S. Walton, "What Has Aristotle to Do with Paul? Rhetorical Criticism and 1 Thessalonians," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (1995) 229-250.
- <sup>21</sup>W. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Library of Early Christianity; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 125-130; A. J. Malherbe, "Exhortation in 1 Thessalonians," *Novum Testamentum* 25 (1983) 238-256.
- <sup>22</sup>J. Chapa, "Is First Thessalonians a Letter of Consolation?" *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994) 150-160.
- <sup>23</sup>J. M. Bassler, "Peace in All Ways: Theology in the Thessalonian Letters," in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. I, 71-85.
- <sup>24</sup>J. L. Sumney, "Paul's 'Weakness': An Integral Part of His Conception of Apostleship," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 52 (1993) 71-91.
- <sup>25</sup>G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (SBL Dissertation Series, 73; Atlanta: Scholars, 1985) 177-221.
- <sup>26</sup>A. J. Malherbe, "'Gentle as a Nurse': The Cynic Background of I Thess. ii," *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970) 203-217.
- <sup>27</sup>R. F. Hock, "Paul's Tentmaking and the Problem of His Social Class," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978) 555-564.
- <sup>28</sup>R. F. Hock, "The Workshop as a Social Setting for Paul's Missionary Preaching," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979) 438-450.
- <sup>29</sup>I. H. Marshall, "Pauline Theology in the Thessalonian Correspondence," in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett*, ed. Hooker and Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982) 179.
- <sup>30</sup>M. M. Mitchell, "New Testament Envoys in the Context of Greco-Roman Diplomatic and Epistolary Conventions: The Example of Timothy and Titus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992) 641-662.
- <sup>31</sup>Riesner, 373-375.
- <sup>32</sup>C. L. Mearns, "Early Eschatological Development in Paul: The Evidence of I and II Thessalonians," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981) 137-157.
- <sup>33</sup>G. Luedemann, *Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles: Studies in Chronology*, trans. F. S. Jones (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 201-238.
- <sup>34</sup>Paul never deals clearly with this issue, and it has been the basis of much discussion. Some argue that Paul believed in a *disembodied* "intermediate state" between death and resurrection: e.g., B. Lindars, "The Sound of the Trumpet: Paul and Eschatology," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 67 (1985) 766-782. Others argue for an *embodied* intermediate state: D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 233-273. Still others maintain that Paul had no view of an intermediate state but saw believers as rising immediately at death to be with the Lord: H. M. Shires, *The Eschatology of St. Paul in the Light of Modern Scholarship* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 77-102. Many would argue for a development in Paul's eschatology from the concept of resurrection at the Parousia in 1 Thessalonians to that of immediate transformation at death in 2 Corinthians: e.g., F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 300-313.
- <sup>35</sup>For a thorough exegesis of the passage, see J. Plevnik, *Paul and the Parousia: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997) 65-98.
- <sup>36</sup>R. H. Gundry, "The Hellenization of Dominical Tradition and Christianization of Jewish Tradition in the Eschatology of 1-2 Thessalonians," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987) 161-178.
- <sup>37</sup>This whole section draws from Jewish apocalyptic. In apocalypses such as 4 Ezra, the resurrection of the dead and the rising of the living are simultaneous, as in 1 Thessalonians. See A. F. J. Klijn, "1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and its Background in Apocalyptic Literature," in *Paul and Paulinism*, 67-73.
- <sup>38</sup>J. Gillman, "Signals of Transforma-

tion in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985) 263-281.

<sup>39</sup>W. D. Davies maintains that "being with the Lord forever" implies one has reached the final abode (*Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* [London: SPCK, 1958] 296).

<sup>40</sup>T. L. Howard, "The Literary Unity of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11," *Grace Theological Journal* 9 (1988) 163-190.

<sup>41</sup>D. Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology*, trans. D. E. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 25-31.

<sup>42</sup>For a full discussion of the Anti-Christ, see F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 178-188.

<sup>43</sup>J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959) 36-52.

<sup>44</sup>P. S. Dixon, "The Evil Restraint in 2 Thess. 2:6," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33/34 (1990) 445-449.

<sup>45</sup>R. Russell, "The Idle in 2 Thess. 3.6-12: An Eschatological or a Social Problem?" *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988) 105-119.

<sup>46</sup>R. Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10," *Biblical Research* 38 (1993) 23-43.

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