

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

EXPLORING PAUL'S EARLIEST WRITINGS

The Structure of Paul's Letters

Paul's letters share many of the features that we would associate with any modern letter but there are also features drawn from Greek, Roman and Jewish letters of his own time that give a typical shape and structure to each of his letters.

- INTRODUCTION AND GREETING
- THANKSGIVING
- MESSAGE
- CONCLUSION AND FINAL GREETING

The **introduction and greeting** usually takes the form of: 'From Paul and [names of co-writers] to the Church in [name of community]' and goes to wish the community *grace and peace* from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the **thanksgiving** section, Paul offers praise and thanksgiving for the recipient community as well as offering prayers for their welfare. Paul modifies the thanksgiving according to his attitude toward the particular church he is addressing. 1 Thessalonians and Philippians, for example, begin with effusive outpourings of affection and praise, whereas when Paul writes to the Galatians he is furious and includes no warm or approving salutation.

The central section of the letter deals with the **message** Paul wishes to impart. Following the example of early Christian preaching which often joined ethics and doctrine, this section is usually divided into two - one presenting the **truths** of the Christian message and the other giving **instruction** for Christian behaviour.

The **final greeting and conclusion** often contains personal news or specific advice for individuals and ends with a blessing.

Why did St Paul write letters?

The answer is quite simple: Paul wrote letters because he could not be everywhere at once! He consciously uses letters as a substitute for his own presence when problems arise in the communities he has founded. Although his letters offer insights on a wide variety of matters, his primary objective is to correct the community's beliefs, to discipline their behaviour and encourage them to remain faithful to the gospel.

It is useful to keep certain characteristics of Paul's letters in mind as you read them.

- Paul's letters are *occasional* and *circumstantial*: that is to say, they were written as a response to particular situations and crises that the communities faced. The more we understand the situation to which the letters are addressed [though this is often difficult to know with certainty what these were] the more likely we are to understand what Paul says and why he says it.
- Paul's interest is primarily *pastoral*, meaning that his main concern is to guide the faith and belief of the community. Whilst it is true that he develops theology in many of his letters he does so primarily to support the advice or counsel he gives the community.
- Paul wrote his letters entirely for the people and the circumstances of his own time.
- Because Paul's letters were written over a period of time, each to a very different situation, it is only natural to find that Paul's thought and understanding develops and evolves from one letter to another. It would be unfair to expect otherwise.
- Paul's letters [with the exception of Romans] are directed to communities Paul knew personally, communities he himself had preached to. This helps to explain, in part at least, why Paul's letters speak so little of the life and teachings of Jesus. Paul's interest was in writing *letters* not *gospels*. The letters are addressed to communities that already had been instructed about Christ. In his letters Paul's concern therefore is not so much on what Jesus had done in the *past* but rather on drawing the community into the *present* life of the glorified Lord. The elements that allow for this; namely the cross, death and resurrection of Jesus, are therefore the elements on which he focuses his attention.
- Paul clearly expected his letters to be read publicly in the communities and to be received as authoritative [1 Thess 5:27].
- As was customary in correspondence of the time, Paul apparently dictates his letters to a scribe or secretary, occasionally adding a signature or a few words in his own hand [Rom 16:22; 1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11].

The First Letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians.

The Importance of First Thessalonians

Scholars agree that 1 Thessalonians is Paul's earliest surviving letter and thus is the earliest of the New Testament writings. Probably written around 50CE, a mere twenty years after the crucifixion and at least ten to fifteen years before the first gospel [Mark] was written, it offers a fascinating insight into how central elements of our Christian faith had already taken shape by this time: for example, the close identification of God the Father, Jesus and the Spirit (1:3-5; 1:6-8; 4:6-8; 5:18-19), the linking of the virtues of faith, hope and love (1:3, 5:8) and the clearly articulated belief that Christ "died for us" (5:10). Moreover, on five different occasions in the letter, Paul uses the title "Lord Jesus Christ" which summarised

the early church's central creed; *Jesus* was the *Christ* [anointed one] expected by Judaism and equally he was the risen and glorified *Lord* of all humankind.



In the time of St. Paul Thessalonica [modern day Salonica in northern Greece] was an important port city situated on the Via Egnatia, the main Roman road linking Greece and the Black Sea. Its location on such an important trade route meant it was almost certainly home to a large multi-cultural community

The occasion and purpose of First Thessalonians

Fortunately, 1 Thessalonians offers valuable clues as to its background and purpose. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy had founded the church in Thessalonica (2:9) which appears to have been made up of mostly Gentile converts (1:9 “turned from your idols”). The letter does not say why the apostles left Thessalonica but given the letter’s focus on “affliction” (1:6, 3:3-7) it probably had to do with some form of local opposition. In other words, Paul and his fellow missionaries probably left before they wanted to. Paul was naturally anxious about the welfare of this fledgling community and so Timothy returned to “find out about their faith” (3:5). The news Timothy brought back obviously delighted Paul who set about writing this letter of thanksgiving and encouragement while also addressing concerns and issues that Timothy reported back to him. Most notable among these was the community’s concern as to whether believers who had died before the coming of Christ [the **Parousia**] would miss out in the resurrection of the dead.



READ 1 THESSALONIANS NOW

The great temptation in any set of biblical notes is that we end up reading the notes instead of the actual biblical text. Respecting Paul means taking seriously what he himself writes in his letters and not just what others say about what he writes. Before reading any further in these notes therefore, take time to read the First Letter to the Thessalonians. It won't take long! Where possible, read it aloud with others and at a single sitting, just as Paul originally intended. Paul's letters are meant to be listened to rather than to be simply read and their emotional quality and tone can be better appreciated by the ear than the eye. There is no substitute for listening to the letters themselves if we want to truly understand the mind of Paul.

Name some of the feelings you experienced as you heard this letter read to you?

What struck you as significant in the letter?

What do you take away from your own listening of First Thessalonians?

Only after taking time to listen to and reflect on what St Paul says in First Thessalonians should you read the following notes which are offered as a resource to help your own reflection.

NOTES

In the early part of the letter, Paul recalls his work among the Thessalonians and expresses his joy that in spite of persecution (1:6, 2:14, 3:6-8) their faith has not only survived but has flourished since their departure. One of Paul's reasons for writing this letter is precisely to encourage the community in the face of such persecution. Paul offers a defence of the apostles' work in Thessalonica and draws a sharp distinction between their way of working and that of other preachers of the time [both philosophical and religious] who travelled from place to place making money from their converts.

Paul's obvious affection for the Thessalonians shines through in his imagery where he compares himself to a "nursing mother cherishing her children" (2:7) and a "father exhorting and encouraging his children" (2:11). Such is the depth of his affection for them that he feels "orphaned" (2:17) since his separation from them and more than once he had sought to revisit them but "Satan prevented me" (2:18). It is difficult to know what Paul means by this enigmatic phrase: Is he referring to the local hostility in Thessalonica that prevented him returning? Or should it be read simply as circumstances or events [such as illness perhaps] that prevented Paul from fulfilling this hope and which he interpreted as Satan frustrating his plans?

Thanksgiving eventually gives way to exhortation. The Thessalonians have already made great progress in living to please God but Paul urges them to do even better, becoming "holy," living "quietly" and showing "love to all" (4:1-12). In particular Paul urges them to avoid sexual misconduct and fornication. To understand why Paul so often warns against sexual misconduct it is important to understand the context in which he was writing.

Whereas the Jews had a strict moral code regarding sexual behaviour, many pagans of the time had a very permissive attitude towards sexual relations. Sacred prostitution was in fact a common feature encouraged by many pagan cults. The fact the Thessalonians appear to have been mainly Gentile converts may help to partly explain Paul's emphasis on sexual behaviour.

The Parousia

Paul's central concern in First Thessalonians

In 1 Thess 4:13- 5:11 Paul addresses the central concern of the letter: namely, the question of Christ's coming [the Parousia], a theme already mentioned several times in the letter (1:10; 2:19; 3:13). Apparently some of the community seem to believe that Christ's coming is imminent as indeed does Paul who, at this stage of his ministry, seems confident that it will occur within his own lifetime ["we who are still alive" 4:14]. If this is so, what then is to be the fate of those believers who die before Christ's return?

Paul encourages the community to take comfort from the fact that, like Jesus, those who have died will be raised from death when Jesus returns. All believers, both living and dead, will be with the Lord forever. Whilst Paul himself clearly expects Christ to return soon he discourages speculation concerning "dates and times" (5:1) insisting that this day will come unexpectedly like "a thief in the night" (5:2). There is no need to fear: God desires for all believers to be saved and so they should prepare themselves for that day by remaining vigilant and adhering to the various exhortations he lists before concluding his letter with a blessing.

1 Thess 2:13-16 FOUR PROBLEMATIC VERSES

Some scholars question whether the sweeping and harsh condemnation of the Jews in these verses comes from Paul's own hand or was added in the light of subsequent hostilities between the Christians and the Jews a generation later. They suggest that 2:17 seems to naturally follow on 2:13 and that the 'wrath of God' which has "finally begun to come upon them [the Jews]" is a clear reference to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, which didn't occur until twenty years after Paul wrote his original letter. They argue that nowhere else in any of his letters does Paul hold the Jews responsible for Jesus' death [1 Cor 2:8 refers only to "the rulers of this world"] and that even in his last letter he still speaks of himself proudly as "an Israelite" (Rom 11:1). Within such a viewpoint scholars attribute the harshness of these verses to the bitter hostilities between Christians and Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem.

Other scholars however regard these verses as authentic and interpret Paul's harsh condemnation as an expression of his understandable anger at the harsh treatment he had received in some synagogues: in 2 Cor 11:24 for example, Paul mentions his five times receiving thirty nine lashes from the Jews.

Whether we take these verses to be authentically Pauline or a later addition, there can and must be no room for anti-Semitism in our reading of the scriptures. Even if we allow that *some* Jews were involved in Christ's death and that *some* synagogue communities persecuted Paul, it is still completely unjust to judge or condemn *all* Jews because of the actions of *some*. Even at the end of his life,

Paul still longs for the Jews to accept the gospel (Rom 9:1-3, 10:1) and insisted that “the call and gifts of God” to Israel “were irrevocable” (Rom 11:29).

The Second Letter to the Thessalonians

Who wrote the Second Letter to the Thessalonians?

In recent times, most scholars question whether 2 Thessalonians was in fact written by Paul the apostle. If Paul composed it, why does he repeat - often word for word - so much of what he had already written in 1 Thessalonians, something he does not do in any of his other letters? More significantly, why do the author's views on “the coming of the Lord” differ so sharply from that given in the earlier letter? In 1 Thessalonians, the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night at an unknown date and time [a position consistent with Paul's views in Rom 13:11-12 and 1Cor 7:29] but in 2 Thessalonians, there appears to be a calendar of apocalyptic signs that will herald its imminent arrival. In 1 Thessalonians the day of the Lord seems imminent; in 2 Thessalonians it seems more distant.

2 Thessalonians moreover lacks much of the affection that characterises Paul's letters in general. That he would write to the community in Thessalonica during a time of persecution and would not express personal affection for them seems unthinkable in light of what we know of Paul's depth of affection for this particular community.

If we accept that 2 Thessalonians was written by someone other than Paul who used Paul's name to give his writing authority, this should not be interpreted as fraudulent or deception in the way we would judge it if it were to happen today. In the ancient world it was a common and perfectly acceptable practice to attribute your writing to a respected figure as a way of acknowledging that you were writing in their tradition and also as a way of gaining authority for your message.

Scholars who believe that this letter was composed by a Christian author other than Paul speculate that this author most likely had a copy of 1 Thessalonians available to him and drew on it to provide a context for offering his own advice regarding the coming of the Lord and the end of time in the light of new challenges and difficulties faced by his audience.

On the other hand, scholars who regard 2 Thessalonians as genuinely Pauline suggest it was written shortly after the first letter to correct misconceptions that may have occurred arising out of Paul's emphasis on the imminence of Christ's return in his earlier letter to the community.

Ultimately it is impossible to prove the issue one way or the other. What we do know is that this letter *is* part of our sacred scripture. Our interest therefore must go beyond historical curiosity and seek out its spiritual and theological message. What does this letter, which has been carefully preserved and handed on to us through the generations; say to us about God, faith and life?

The circumstances of the letter's composition.

It is clear that this letter intended to guide believers about the coming of the Lord Jesus (2:1) in a context of persecution and affliction (1:4) and to warn them against claims that “the day of the Lord” had already arrived (2:2). After the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE, confusion and speculation about the end of time was rife. The Book of Revelation (Rev 13:7) moreover suggests that, during the reign of Diocletian [81-96 CE], Christians in Asia Minor suffered severe persecution which led many to apostasy [falling away from the faith] and this may well be related to the reference to apostasy [also translated as rebellion] in 2 Thess 2:3. If so, the letter is written to a community under threat and seeks to encourage them to remain faithful in the face of persecution by assuring them that God will vindicate them and not allow the forces of evil to prevail. It is easy to imagine how powerful such a message of hope would have been in such a context.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE: SEEING BEYOND THE STRANGE IMAGES AND SYMBOLS.

Apocalyptic literature refers to a branch of prophetic writing that flourished in Judaism from 200 BCE to 140 CE and greatly influenced early Christian writers. Derived from the Greek term *apokalypsis* which means “to unveil,” it is a revelation or vision of dimensions or events ordinarily closed to human view, such as the invisible realm of heaven or the future of history. Apocalyptic literature typically is concerned with **eschatology** - speculation about the “last things” such as death, the ultimate fate of individuals, the “day of the Lord” and final judgment.

Apocalyptic writings are marked by the use of cryptic language and symbolic imagery that can seem fantastical to us but whose meaning was readily available to those who first heard them. Apocalyptic writings like the Book of Daniel [~140 BCE] and the Book of Revelation [~90 CE] were often composed in times of persecution and were intended to encourage their respective audiences to remain faithful to God. Because of this, most apocalyptic literature deliberately contains obscure images and language that veils as well as expresses the author's meaning. The terms and images they use would be understandable to their intended audience but bewilder outsiders. Unfortunately this means that they often leave us bewildered today!

Much of apocalyptic literature is marked by the expectation of a future cosmic struggle in which the forces of good triumph over the forces of evil leading to the establishment of God's rule and a transformed universe. As such, apocalypse assured the faithful [especially those suffering persecution] that in spite of how things might appear at the present moment, God was ultimately in charge, that God would triumph over evil and would reward all those who remained faithful.

READ 2 THESSALONIANS NOW

Bearing in mind what we have said about the nature and purpose of apocalyptic literature, listen to the Second Letter to the Thessalonians again as you read it aloud. Take note of what strikes you as significant or new.

Notes:

The early part of this letter repeats much of the greeting and thanksgiving sections of 1 Thessalonians [although the thanksgiving here is considerably shorter and less effusive] before the author comes to the heart of the matter: “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling with him” (2:1). At least some of the community appear to believe that this day has already come either (a) because they have been deceived into believing so (2:2); (b) because of the intense persecution they are facing (1:4, 1:7) which may appear like the end of the world to them, or (c) because they have misinterpreted Paul’s repeated emphasis on the imminence of Christ’s return in his earlier letter to the community at Thessalonica (1 Thess 1:10; 2:19; 4:15-5:11).

The author’s response to such a notion is to insist that the day of the Lord has most definitely not yet arrived (2:1-12) and that those believers who are lazily awaiting the end must work to support themselves as Paul himself has done while he was with them (3:6-12).

To support his conviction that the day of the Lord has not yet come, the author draws on apocalyptic terms and images [which are notoriously difficult to decipher] in listing a series of specific events or signs that he insisted must occur before the “day of the Lord.” Ultimately however, even in the face of this future challenge from “the lawless one,” (2:3) the one who opposes God and seeks to take the place of God (2:4) there is no need for alarm because God’s victory is assured over “the one whose coming springs from the power of Satan” (2:8-9). Having dampened expectation that the day of Christ’s return has already come or is immediately imminent, the author urges everyone in the community to pay due attention to their earthly obligations and discourages idleness and sponging off the community (3:6-12).

For personal reflection:

Behind the strange apocalyptic images and symbols, what message do you think the author wishes to convey to his audience?

What, if anything, has 2 Thessalonians to say to us today?

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