Thessalonians 1 & 2

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1 Thessalonians

Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians is a "first" in many ways. Written only two decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, this is the first of Paul's several epistles. As such, it is also the first book in the collection of writings that would later become known as the New Testament. Indeed, if the 27 books of the New Testament were arranged in chronological order, readers today would open to page 1 only to find themselves looking not at the opening words of the Gospel of Matthew, but rather at the salutation, "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians."

Inasmuch as the seeds of the apostle's rich theology for his faith communities is already present in 1 Thessalonians, it may also be said that this is the first encounter with specifically Pauline concepts such as the triad of faith, love, and hope, the saving grace of God in Jesus, the importance of Christian unity, and the consummation of our desire to see and live with Christ.

This epistle is a first in another crucial way: It sets out on paper the epistolary form—a template—that would be copied and expanded in all of Paul's subsequent letters. The Pauline template provides us with one broad way of outlining this and the other epistles:

1:1	Salutation
1:2–3:13	Thanksgiving (and reasons for thanksgiving or concern)
4:1–5:11	Body of letter: Specific reasons for Paul's writing
5:12-28	Closing admonitions and greetings

In this fourfold formula, we see the influence of both Hebrew and Greco-Roman letter-writing styles, but with some specifically Pauline touches. For instance, the salutation in any letter, modern or ancient, tells readers something about the relationship of the two parties involved, the writer and the recipient of the letter. "Dear Chuck" assumes a different relational context than "To whom it may concern," or even "Dear Dr. Robertson." Opening a letter with "My

darling" or "To my true love" represents a still more intimate connection. We can even recognize a difference in relationship based on punctuation: Does the salutation close with a comma or a colon ("Dear Chuck," versus "Dear Dr. Robertson:"). Salutations are, thus, not "throwaway lines"; they give us relational data.

Salutations in Paul's time similarly conveyed information, and with even greater detail. A salutation would not only tell you the identity of the recipient—"To Peter"—but also of the writer—"From Andrew"—and would usually offer a traditional greeting, perhaps in Greek—"Greetings to you"—or in Hebrew—"Peace be with you." Consider how Paul takes this form and tells us something about himself, his readers, and his faith. First of all, contrary to some modern notions of the apostle as an angry loner, Paul signs this, and his subsequent letters, as part of a team: "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy." Paul is clear that he is not alone in his mission; he is part of something larger.

So, too, are his readers: "To the church (*ekklesia*) of the Thessalonians." We are so

use to the word "church," *ekklesia*, that we may fail to comprehend that this Pauline definition for the Christian community was not originally a religious term. In fact, it was a political designation for the gathering of citizens, of peers who could vote and thereby have their voices heard. In many ways, because there were so many who could not gain the privilege of citizenship, the term began its life as something exclusive. By using *ekklesia* to define the Christian community, Paul made it a sign of inclusivity, bringing together Jew and Greek, male and female, free and slave. That which joins such disparate peoples is none other than their unity "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The term *ekklesia* would stick, and Christian communities, despite their own efforts through the centuries to be exclusive, would forever be known by Paul's creatively inclusive term.

Still, this was the inclusive gathering of believers in Christ in a specific place, Thessalonica, a city founded more than three centuries earlier by one of Alexander the Great's generals at the head of the Thermaic Gulf (now the Gulf of Salonika).

This was an important military and commercial port and was named, first, as the capital of one of the four administrative districts in 168 B.C., and two decades later as capital of the unified province of Macedonia, at the same time the Via Egnatia, connecting Asia Minor with the Adriatic Sea, was put through. In return for its support of Octavian and Antony, Thessalonica was proclaimed a free city in 42 B.C., a crucial urban center to which Paul brought the gospel of Christ (as described by Luke in Acts 17). Although the details of the Lukan account are at points difficult to reconcile with Paul's own words in 1 Thessalonians, we do see correspondences, such as Paul's words about the struggles he faced in Philippi prior to coming to Thessalonica (2:2), and the conflicts in Thessalonica itself (2:14).

Paul went one step farther in his brief salutation by merging Greek and Hebrew forms of greeting, changing the Greek "greeting" ever so slightly to become "grace" (*charis*) and joining to it the Hebrew "peace" (*ereinei*, Gk. for *shalom*) to give an ethnically all-inclusive welcome to his readers, "Grace to you and peace."

So would all his epistles begin, thereby consistently reminding Christians throughout the known world of what truly joins them together: not ethnicity or gender or socioeconomic standing, but God in Christ.

In what can be called the thanksgiving portion of this letter (1:2–3:13), we see the deeply emotional bond between Paul and the Thessalonian believers expounded in greater detail, always described in plural, not singular form, to include Paul's fellow letter writers: "*We* give thanks to God always for all of you" (1:2). [As an aside, "give thanks" or *eucharistoumen* is the root for our word "eucharist."] With the notable exception of Galatians, all of Paul's ensuing letters contain similar thanksgiving passages, but few as intimate and none as lengthy. Here, the apostle expresses deep affection for this church he founded, like "a nurse tenderly caring for her children" (2:7), or "a father with his children" (2:11). We also see paternal pride in the development and faithfulness of his charges, as Paul notes how the Thessalonians had become "imitators of us" (1:6) and "an example

to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia" (1:7).

In the first of many references in his letters to the "triad of virtues," the apostle praises the disciples in Thessalonica for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope" (1:3). Take note that here—unlike the 1 Corinthians 13 version of the three virtues with which we are more familiar—the order is faith, love, hope. This means that Paul's virtues culminate with "hope," that sense of expectation that, to use Julian of Norwich's terms, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Hope for the future was an *apropos* subject for the Christians in Thessalonica, for in a city where the so-called Cabirus cult focused on an eschatological redeemer, and where persecutions combined with natural causes bring about the demise of many of the believers, the people were beginning to question the faith they had received from Paul. After all, did he not once tell them that Jesus would return to take the faithful to glory? Were Paul's promises to be believed? In his long thanksgiving

passage, Paul drops hints of the problems that occasioned the body of his letter.

In approaching the main part of this or any of Paul's epistles, it is important to recognize that, by definition, his letters present one side of a larger conversation. Unlike the gospels, Paul's letters are described as occasional writings, much like a medical prescription that deals with a particular condition at a particular time. What, then, is the condition, the problem, facing the Thessalonians? The answer is multi-faceted. One problem that is intimated in Paul's thanksgiving section is the question in the minds of some members regarding the apostle's own character; he reminds them that he did not live off of their welfare, but worked with his hands (2:3, 9), and in doing so, set an example for them (4:10-12). In the body of the letter, Paul challenges the believers to live in sexual purity and avoid imitating the excesses of their surrounding culture (4:1-8), urging them instead to be exemplars of communal love and personal integrity (4:9-12). In essence, he calls them to be different from the rest of society, to be "holy" (4:7), a message that

finds its way into his other later letters, most notably his messages to the Corinthian church.

More than this, however, Paul spends considerable time focusing on a misunderstanding on the part of the Thessalonians of his own earlier message to them. In this city that placed a high priority on eschatological things, Paul apparently had spoken in early days of the imminent coming of Christ—who, of course, did not come as quickly as some expected. The sad reality was that some of the Christians in Thessalonica were dying—whether by sickness, old age, accidents, or persecution is largely irrelevant—and Christ had not yet returned. When he did, would those who had already "fallen asleep" fail to partake of the benefits of his return? Again, Paul would later wrestle in his first letter to the Corinthians with similar queries regarding what happens to the body after one has died. Both there and here, Paul is obviously confronting issues that emerged as a result of his own preaching. People then, as now, do not necessarily hear with clarity the message being proclaimed. In 1 Thes. 4:13-18, the apostle

assures the worried Thessalonians that those who have fallen asleep in Christ will not be left behind; indeed, they will be raised first, followed by the still living. He emphasizes that church members are to "encourage one another with these words" (4:18).

In the next part of the body of the letter (5:1-11), in words that would catch the ear of any modern scout, the believers are urged by Paul to be prepared—"awake and sober" (5:6)—so that the day of the Lord's return would not catch them unawares, "like a thief in the night" (5:2). As children of the light, they are to encourage and build up one another.

The admonitions that conclude the epistle (5:12-28) build on Paul's general call to holiness and encouragement. Even as Paul and his team during their earlier time in Thessalonica exhibited "toil and labor" so as not to be a burden on the believers (2:9), so in 5:12-13, church members are challenged to recognize the labor of those in authority in the church over them. Furthermore, as members of the one community, all are called not only to encourage, but also to challenge one

another (5:14-15). In what can be called another Pauline triad, believers are charged to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances" (5:16-18). After all, this is "the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Further directions are offered (5:19-22), along with the declaration that it is ultimately God who sanctifies (5:23), and God indeed is faithful (5:24). In words that once more remind modern readers that this is a letter and not simply a treatise or sermon, the apostle asks the members to pray for him and his team (5:25), to greet one another with "a holy kiss" (5:26), and to read the letter aloud, most likely during a worship gathering (5:27). In his closing words (5:28), Paul utters a benediction that has lasted through the ages: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

2 Thessalonians

If 1 Thessalonians is much like a *template* from which we can view the subsequent letters of Paul, then 2 Thessalonians is more like a *wrench* that jams the machinery! Indeed, the second epistle is a puzzler for scholars and preachers alike. It initially appears to bear great resemblance to the first letter, both in its order (consider the lengthy thanksgiving section of 1:3-12 that focuses on the Thessalonians' faith and love in the midst of persecution) and, at times, in its wording (one example is the "toil and labor" of 3:8 sounding very much like 1 Thes. 2:9). Predictably, the outline follows the pattern of 1 Thessalonians:

1:1-2	Salutation
1:3-12	Thanksgiving
2:1–3:15	Body (the "day of the Lord" and ethical instruction)
3:16-18	Closing prayer

In fact, where there are similarities, they almost seem forced, as if *intended* to sound

like Paul's first letter. However, the differences between the two letters are far greater and more striking. The close relationship between apostle and church conveyed in 1 Thessalonians appears to be totally absent in 2 Thessalonians, as does the concern for the community of believers and its holiness ethic. And although there is certainly an eschatological focus here as in the first letter—indeed, it takes up a major portion of 2 Thessalonians—the actual content of concern is almost 180 degrees different from 1 Thessalonians. Whereas the first letter looks forward to the coming of Christ in the near future "like a thief in the night," the second epistle warns against people who claim that the "day of the Lord" has already arrived and goes on to counter such claims with a predicted catalog of signs that must first accompany Jesus' return. In short, there are questions among many scholars about whether Paul even wrote 2 Thessalonians.

What is raised here is the complex issue of pseudepigraphy, a wonderfully long word that describes the practice of a later disciple(s) writing in the name of a

revered past teacher, both as a sign of deep respect and as a way of asking how that same teacher of the past would likely address issues of concern in the present. The closest analogy today might well be the trend among Christians who wonder what Jesus might do regarding modern dilemmas in work, recreation, and relationships that were not even known in the first century, much less discussed in the gospels. From this perspective, we could consider the author(s) of 2 Thessalonians addressing his readers and their struggles by saying, "If Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy were here now, this is what they would say about such-and-such."

Although it is important to acknowledge the difficulties surrounding the background of 2 Thessalonians, it is far more crucial that we not miss possible lessons from the epistle by spending too much time poring over conundrums about authorship. One needs to approach this letter on its own terms and not simply as a bookend or sequel to 1 Thessalonians.

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