

PREFACE

It is no accident that so much of what we believe, so much of what we understand about the teachings of Christ, so much about how we are to conduct ourselves as believers comes to us through the medium of written correspondence.

Just this last week Linda began the process of clearing out the dresser in our guest bedroom filled with my mom's papers and mementos. It has been seven years now since she went home to be with the Lord (at the age of 90), so it was about time to sort through and discard things.

Mixed in with all the greeting cards, church bulletins, and hospital invoices were some letters from Linda and me to her, written over the decades since the early eighties. Reading through some of these, I was struck by their value as historical documents—as a window onto a point in time.

- In these letters I wrote to Mom I could tell where my priorities were at the time, my interests, my mood—what things were bringing me joy, and what things were a point of sorrow or agitation or frustration.
- I was reminded of the love I felt for Mom, my concern for her—especially since losing Dad in 1979.
- In these letters I would sometimes offer advice and counsel to Mom, which was something she both appreciated and needed.

In the letters that comprise most of the New Testament—two of which will be the subject of this study—we have much the same thing.

- In First and Second Thessalonians Paul makes clear his priorities for the church; from the content we can also discern his mood—what things were bringing him joy, what things were bringing sorrow or agitation or frustration.
- His love for the church is expressed, and his concern for her, as its members did battle with those who would lead them astray.
- In these two letters the apostle offers counsel and guidelines for the health and well-being of the church.

From all of this, we learn along with the Thessalonians, but we also learn about Paul himself; it is a window onto the life not just of a church, but of the man who loved them.

BACKGROUND

The apostle Paul made two trips to Thessalonica: the first during his second missionary journey, and (though it is not explicitly confirmed by name) his second visit during his third missionary journey, during which he revisited the churches in Macedonia. Shortly after his first visit to the city, and the founding of the church, he wrote the two letters we know as First and Second Thessalonians. By most accounts, only a matter of a few months separated the writing of the two letters.

First Thessalonians is the earliest *known* letter written to any church by Paul. [Others are hinted at, but this is the earliest included in the canon.] His second letter to the church was written probably just a few months after the first. Both were written while he was at Corinth, around AD 50.

Getting our Bearings

Writer and professor J. R. R. Tolkien was reported to have said that the first thing to do before telling a story is to draw a map. So let's get our bearings before we dig into what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. **[refer to map in handout]**

This map shows us the Mediterranean region, with Paul's first and second missionary journey's marked. It also gives us the geographical relationship between Israel and Macedonia, where Thessalonica was a major city. Let's pick up Paul's journey at Troas, the westernmost city of Asia Minor. On our map it is found in the upper left of the reddish area marked "Asia." Trace the route as we read the passages from Acts.

Read Acts 16:6-10.

Read Acts 16:11-12.

As we all know from Sunday School, while in Philippi Paul and Silas had a spot of trouble, and ended up in chains in the town jail. Upon declaring the following day that, as Roman citizens, they had been publicly mistreated, the magistrates begged them to get out of town forthwith.

Read Acts 17:1.

There was trouble in Thessalonica, as well. But before that he had some success. Paul spoke at the synagogue and his words bore fruit.

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. (Acts 17:4)

But then some other Jews took issue with what Paul was preaching—especially regarding Jesus as king. Some things never change, and these troublemakers, just as today, employed just a smidgen of hyperbole to make their accusation.

When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." (Acts 17:6-7)

"the world" = the whole inhabited earth

So, as we read in v10, "The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas" off to Berea, where they enjoyed a better reception, because the Bereans "were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica." Again, just as today, eventually outside agitators came into Berea—Jews from Thessalonica—and stirred things up against the apostle. So, once again, Paul had to leave town—this time to Athens.

What we can glean from this account is that Thessalonica was a mixed bag for Paul. There were three groups that responded favorably to Paul's teaching:

- Jews from the synagogue;
- God-fearing Greeks, and;
- a "number of the leading women."

But there was also much opposition from the Jewish community in the city—opposition sufficiently fertile and intense that it wasn't enough for them that they ran Paul out of their own town; they traveled to Berea to stir things up against him there.

Paul's Stay in Thessalonica

One more detail before we move on: A cursory reading of Acts 17 leaves the impression that Paul was in Thessalonica for only a few weeks before he was driven away to Berea. But that is unlikely when we add up the evidence.

- As we would say today, Paul was “bi-vocational” while in Thessalonica. He either set up shop, or found employment with someone else—probably something associated with his trade of tent-making.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9.

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10.

It would have been difficult to establish this, do the work, and describe it in this way if his visit had been for only for two or three weeks.

- As we will see, the evidence is that by the time he left Thessalonica the church there was strong and thriving—“not one still in throes of separation from the local synagogue” (Robert L. Thomas).
- Before he left, Paul had received two gifts of funds from Philippi, which was one hundred miles away.

Read Philippians 4:15-16.

When you add all this up, it seems likely that Paul remained in Thessalonica for at least several months.

Thessalonica was the principal city of Macedonia, situated as it was at the junction of two main trade routes, and had an excellent natural harbor. **[refer to map]** Its population was probably around 200,000—comprised mostly of Greeks, Romans, and Jews.

WHY STUDY THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS

Let's get right down to it, and ask the most fundamental question for any study: ***Why should we study the Thessalonian letters?*** That is, *What will this study contribute to our knowledge of Christ and/or Father God, and what will it contribute to our life, and walk of faith in Christ Jesus? What do we hope to gain?* Let's close with a brief survey of what Paul teaches in these two letters.

In the Thessalonian letters we learn

- what it means for a church (and of course, its individual members) to be spiritually healthy: **I,1:6-10**; but also
- how to become even healthier in holiness: **I,4:7**;
- the qualities and behavior of a righteous, loving leader: **I,2:10-12**;
- details found nowhere else regarding the end times, or *eschatology*: **II,2:1-4**; and, not least,
- how we should be living until that day arrives: **II,2:15**.

In addition, Paul addresses a number of theological, doctrinal topics:

- the inspiration and authority of Scripture: **I,2:13**,
- the doctrine of one true God existing in three Persons: **II,1:1-2;I,4:8**,
- the deity of Christ,
- salvation based on Christ's death: **I,5:9-10**,
- the believer's identification and unity with Christ: **I,5:5**,
- sanctification and personal purity: **I,4:3-5,7**,
- vocational diligence: **I,4:11-12**,

By example, he teaches them about prayer and discipling others:

- prayer: **II,1:11-12,**
- discipling others: **I,3:1-5.**

Over all of this we have in these two letters the picture and example of a faithful shepherd always concerned for his flock, constantly praying for them, constantly doing whatever he can to bring them closer to Christ their Savior and Lord.

