

Introduction to 1st and 2nd Thessalonians

Thessaloniki is a Greek port city on the Aegean Sea with a population of approximately 340,000 people in the city and 1.1 million in the metropolitan area of the city. It is the second largest city in Greece. Even in Paul's day, it was a large city, with an estimated population of 200,000. During the time of Paul, it was a major center of commerce and the provincial capital of Macedonia.

Paul traveled to Thessaloniki in about 49 or 50 CE. He went with the intention of establishing the Jesus Movement in this large city and center of East-West trade. It seems that he was quite successful in bringing both Jews and Gentiles to the movement. But wherever Paul traveled, he seems to have caused a disturbance among the local population by his preaching. This was no different in Thessaloniki. Some of the local people were unhappy with Paul's teaching and stirred up a riot against him. According to the Book of Acts, the mob could not find Paul and Silas, so they dragged some of the converts before the city council saying, "Paul and Silas have caused trouble all over the world, and now they are here disturbing our city, too." The city was reported to be in a great turmoil.

Understandably, Paul and Silas decided to leave town that night under cover of darkness.

Paul went on to Athens and Corinth, and it is probably from one of these cities that he wrote the 1st Epistle to the Thessalonians. He had sent Timothy back to Thessaloniki from Athens to encourage the Jesus Movement people there and Timothy had returned to Paul with a good report on how they were doing. The 1st Epistle to the Thessalonians is Paul's happy response to the report of Timothy, though it is probably most known today for the misinterpretation of Chapter Four as evidence of the coming "rapture."

First Thessalonians is also the first book of the chronological New Testament. It is the first book written in our New Testament canon. Though the Gospels are the first books in the list of New Testament writings, they were written years after 1st Thessalonians. Mark, the first Gospel, was written approximately twenty years after 1st Thessalonians. So, in reading this book, we witness one of the first known recorded works of Christianity, and the very first of our biblical canon.

The authorship of the 2nd Epistle to the Thessalonians remains a matter of dispute. Most mainline Christian scholars conclude that it is not an authentic work of Paul, but of someone attempting to duplicate his writing style. They date it to some thirty to forty years after the death of Paul. Other scholars, mostly Evangelical, believe it is the writing of Paul. For our purposes, this dispute is irrelevant. We study it for the value it can provide to our Christian formation, regardless of whether Paul was the author or not. It addresses two main issues: "Where is Jesus?/Why has he not returned?"; and "What is the church to do about people who join only to get free food and services?"