

The New Testament book of 1st Thessalonians

Introduction

The most prominent theme in 1 Thessalonians is the second coming of Jesus. It is mentioned in every chapter of the book. At Jesus' future coming, the dead in Christ will rise and will be caught up along with the living to meet the Lord in the air. Unbelievers will be subject to his wrath, but Christians will be delivered from this, inheriting salvation instead. Those who are destined to participate as saints (literally, "holy ones") in the second coming must be holy and blameless, and God, who is faithful, will produce holiness in the lives of those whom he calls.

Thessalonica was the proud capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and had a population of over 100,000. Its natural harbor and placement on the busy east-west Egnatian Way as well as key north-south trade routes meant that it was a flourishing center of trade and philosophy. It was a free city and was governed by local officials called "politarchs". Religiously, the city was committed to the Greco-Roman pantheon and the imperial cult; Egyptian cults were also prominent. There was a sizable population of Jews in Thessalonica.

Paul, Timothy, and Silas preached in the Thessalonian synagogue over three Sabbaths, and a number of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles believed. First Thessalonians 1:9–10 suggests that Paul subsequently spent some weeks ministering fruitfully to pagan Gentiles. However, rioters instigated by Jewish opponents dragged Jason (Paul's host) and some other Christians before the politarchs and charged them with sedition against Caesar, forcing the missionaries to leave Thessalonica prematurely. Paul was concerned for the new Christians, and therefore a few months later he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. Catching up with Paul in Corinth, Timothy updated him on the Thessalonian church.

Timothy reported that generally the church community was doing well. However, not everything at Thessalonica was rosy. Some members of the church had died, and because they were not fully informed about what would happen to deceased Christians at Christ's return, some apparently thought that those who had died would miss out on the second coming, and they had plunged into hopeless grieving for them.

In addition, Timothy related to Paul a Thessalonian question about the timing of the day of the Lord. A number of scholars believe that the query reflected restless impatience or a false sense of security, but this view is countered by Paul's repeated assurances in 5:4–5, 9, along with the lack of threat or warning in 5:1–11. Paul reassures the Thessalonians that they are destined not for wrath but for salvation on the day of the Lord. Some think that the Thessalonians were concerned that they would be unprepared for Jesus' return, but 4:3–8 suggests that they were not concerned enough about holy living. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that these new Christians were questioning their own final salvation in view of the recent unexpected deaths. They may even have wondered whether the deaths were an expression of divine disapproval.

Whatever the specifics, clearly the Thessalonians needed reassurance about those who had died and about their own destiny at the second coming.

The Thessalonians seem to have been vulnerable in other ways too. They had not expected the initial persecution to continue unabated for so long. Moreover, they missed Paul, apparently disappointed that he himself had not yet returned to see them.

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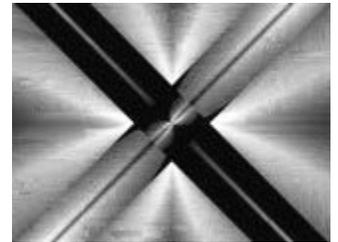
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Yet another problem in Thessalonica demanded Paul's attention: some Christians were bringing the church into disrepute by depending on wealthier Christians to provide for them rather than earning their own living. It is possible that this problem was a result of the Thessalonians' erroneous thinking about the future. However, it may simply be that some church members were selfishly and lazily exploiting the charity of wealthier members to avoid having to work.

When Paul heard Timothy's generally positive report, he was filled with joyful relief and was eager to encourage the embattled and discouraged Christians and to answer their questions. So he immediately began composing 1 Thessalonians. Paul's main purpose was to repair the hope of the Thessalonian Christians in the wake of the unexpected deaths of people in their congregation and to reassure them that both the dead and the living were destined to be saved at the second coming. Related to this was his desire to reassure the Thessalonians that they were among those elected by God for salvation.

Paul also wished to underline the missionaries' authenticity as preachers of the gospel of God in the face of real or potential questions relating to his lengthy absence, the unrelenting persecution, and the unexpected deaths. Paul also sought to encourage the Thessalonians by explaining that persecution is normal for the Christian. In addition, Paul is calling the recently converted, predominantly pagan community to sexual holiness and the idle members of the community to gainful employment.

It also seems that Paul is seeking to undo their heavy dependence on him by urging the church to respect and defer to its own ministers. This can be seen in his forbidding the despising of prophesying, his emphasizing Timothy's credentials, and his presenting the missionaries as a team (hence the use of the first person plural through much of the letter).



Unless the Lord builds the house...

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