

An Introduction to the First Epistle to the Thessalonians

INTRODUCTION

The Background of the Book

The City of Thessalonica.

Acts 17:1-15 introduces its readers to the town of Thessalonica, as also the entrance into it of Paul, Timothy and Silas. They had come from Philippi to preach the gospel in this capital city of Macedonia. Macedonia had once been a kingdom independent of the Greek states, but had at one stage absorbed the Greek states into its kingdom. These had been liberated by the Romans, and Macedonia had been confined to itself, as a kingdom. Later the Romans had annexed it, built a fine military highway to it-the 'Via Egnatia'-and made it a base for Roman military advance. It was made a colony of Rome which meant that all born there were 'free-born', i.e. were given Roman citizenship and rights.

The city was named Thessalonica by Cassander who founded a new city near the original city which had the name of Therma, because of the hot springs situated in it. 'Thessalonica' was his wife's name, and she was half-sister to Alexander the Great. It seems that old Therma and new Thessalonica grew and merged into the one city Today it is called Salonika and has quite a large population.

The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica

Acts 16:6-10 describes Paul and his companions as they sought to know God's will for them. They were on the second missionary journey, and had been forbidden to preach the gospel in Asia. They were prevented from going into Bithynia. One night Paul had a vision of a Macedonian beckoning him to come over into Macedonia. He took this to be guidance and the team crossed into Macedonia to the city of Philippi. Here they had a mixture of success and persecution, and were finally freed from the gaol where they had been imprisoned for exorcising the spirit of divination from a slave girl.

Paul and his companions had had a rich ministry at Philippi, bringing Lydia to the gospel, and also the gaoler of their prison. He and his whole household were baptized, believing in Christ. A church was established to which Paul was later to write his famous letter.

On being freed they made their way to Thessalonica where Paul made his apostolic proclamation. He reasoned from the Scriptures that the true Messiah was to suffer, and to rise from the dead. Having done that, he showed that Jesus was the Messiah because of these things. A number of devout Greeks and some of the leading women accepted Paul's message and joined themselves to the new teachers.

This precipitated a crisis of jealousy with the Jews who caused an uproar, attacking the house of Jason where the apostolic team was sheltered. The new teachers were accused of preaching

another king (other than Caesar) namely, Jesus. Jason and others were bound over to keep the peace, and this-called for the hasty exit of Paul and Silas, who then went on to Berea where the word was received 'with all eagerness' and the Jews searched the Scriptures daily to verify what Paul had said. Even so the angry Jews of Thessalonica came to disturb this work. Paul left quickly on the advice of the new Christian brethren, making his way to Athens whilst Silas and Timothy remained behind. Paul urged them to follow him as soon as possible. He, himself, seems to have envisaged a quick return (see I Thess. 2:15-16) but was prevented from doing so (I Thess. 2:18).

When we read I Thessalonians 1:2-2:20 we are able to enlarge our information of the apostolic visit and ministry

The Book of the Acts was partly designed to be apologia, i.e. to show that the Christians were not insurrectionists: they did not deliberately stir up trouble. The Jews at Thessalonica would deeply resent any numbers being withdrawn from their group. Paul's reasoning was in order since he showed what Messiah would be, and what Jesus was, and that the two were identical. For the Jews in their jealousy to be 'taking some wicked fellows of the rabble' and gathering a crowd was really professional rioting. Luke, in writing Acts, is determined to show the Christians as a peaceful group, which they were.

Paul's first letter shows that the new church sprang out of the gospel, which itself was preached with great power, in the Holy Spirit. It had evoked a warm response from Gentiles' who had 'turned from idols to serve the living God, and to wait for His Son from heaven.' It seems Paul only had a few weeks, but he had used the short time well. For their part the Thessalonians had sounded out the gospel without Paul's aid, and the commendations of their faith, hope and love in both letters shows they grew quickly into spiritual maturity. Indeed the value of studying the letters is to see what happens when the gospel is proclaimed faithfully

We need also to note that Paul had sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to aid the new believers. It seems that Silas also must have been with Timothy, so that the new church would have had a useful strengthening from these two men.

The Time of the Writing of the Epistle

There are two possibilities: (a) that Timothy and Silas had joined him in Athens after the affair in the Areopagus and he had sent a letter back to Thessalonica when he sent Timothy there, or (b) that he had written the letter in Corinth after Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia (Acts 18:5), in which case the letter was probably written about A.D. 50. Only the Galatian letter-of all the Pauline letters-could have been written prior to it, and possibly I Thessalonians is the first letter Paul wrote.

The Purpose of the Letter

The purpose of the letter can be worked out from the letter itself. There is enough of Paul's personal affection shown in the first two chapters of the letter to show what pastoral concern he had for them.

The church would have had to live with the ignominy of their founder having to leave town. Paul acknowledges that they received the gospel in the midst of this affliction so he wishes to both praise and encourage them. He reminds them of the fact that, no matter what his critics

may say, he and his companions had been honourable in everything. They had not used men-pleasing modes to entice listeners to the gospel. Indeed, he himself had been like a nurse to the new converts, and had shared himself with them. See 2:1-12.

He also shows that the persecution which they were suffering at Thessalonica was not confined to that city. In Judea the Christians had suffered at the hands of their fellow-Jews. So the Macedonians were suffering at the hands of their fellow countrymen. See 2:14ff.

As in other letters to former pagans Paul wishes to stress the matter of holiness. Moral and ethical values especially in sexual matters-were not always easily and quickly seen. Paul had some clear prescriptions to give, and he gave them. See 4:1-8.

It seems, too, that teaching concerning the last things (eschatological doctrine) was somewhat confused. In 1:10 Paul says they are waiting for the appearing of God's Son. In 4:13-17 Paul shows that those who have died will not lose out in the parousia, i.e. Christ's appearing. Indeed the dead in Christ will rise first, and then the living will be caught up with them. Far from being a cause of fear the coming of Christ should be a source of present comfort (4:18). There may be other reasons also for the injunctions given in 5:12-21; they may have been written to correct deficient practice. It is difficult to say, but generally speaking the letter was written as pastoral encouragement and ethical exhortation. The note of love and exhortation to love, as well as the commendation of their love, means the epistle must have been of great benefit and help to the church at Thessalonica.