

Introduction To Thessalonians

“Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace ...”

With these words Paul began his letter to the Thessalonians and his work of composing at least 13 of New Testament books and very likely a 14th — Hebrews.

By means of courtesy Paul often included some of his companions in his introductory remarks: Timothy and Silas in these two letters to the Thessalonian church; Sosthenes in his first letter to Corinth (1 Cor. 1:1); Timothy alone in his second Corinthian letter (2 Cor. 1:1) and to the Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon (Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Phile. 1). Of his 13 acknowledged epistles, his claim to apostleship is made in nine of them; only his two letters to the Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon make no such a claim for him.

First and Second Thessalonians were both written about A.D. 51-53; just a few months separated the two in composition. There is a possibility that his letter to the Galatians may have been written somewhat earlier, but that possibility is disputed by many scholars. They place the date of that book four or five years later. Yet, while there is uncertainty both as to the date Galatians was written and its originating place, no such uncertainty clouds the Thessalonian letters. They were written by Paul on his second journey from Corinth about A.D. 51-53.

Paul had begun his second journey, just as he had the first, from the city of Antioch in Syria. After a (surely) painful separation from Barnabas (Acts 15:40), he left Antioch, taking Silas with him, as well as the good will of the Antiochan brethren (Acts 15:40). They first traveled among churches Paul had helped form with Barnabas on their first journey, coming to Debre and Lystra (Acts 16:1). It was at Lystra that he finds Timothy, who joins him and Silas and who is destined to become Paul's trusted messenger, companion, and son through the remaining busy years of Paul's life. The three travel together through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia, and being forbidden by the Spirit to speak the word in Asia (Acts 16:6-7), they arrive in Troas where a vision of a man from Macedonia beckons them, saying, “Come over into Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). The travelers conclude from this their next point of preaching and immediately set sail from Troas to Philippi via Samothrace and Neapolis (Acts 16:11). Their number has increased by one: the writer of the book (Luke) is now in their company (the beginning of the “we” passages, Acts 16:10), and now Acts is not simply a history of the apostles; it is an autobiography as well: Luke is writing of his labors, as well as the labors of Paul.

At Philippi the company finds a group of women by a riverside on the Sabbath, preaches to them, finding a ready believer in Lydia, who with her whole household, are baptized. Others soon are converted and this church becomes one of Paul's most faithful supporters. False accusations and a brief imprisonment against Paul compelled him and Silas to depart the city, while apparently Luke remained behind to nurture the infant church (Acts 16:40-17:1). Nothing in the record reveals whether Timothy

remained behind in Philippi with Luke, or traveled on with Paul and Silas. They came to Thessalonica, preached there for three Sabbath days, made many converts, and developed some fierce antagonists. The Jews, who rejected the gospel, were militant in opposing Paul, not only in Thessalonica but even following him as he traveled further to Berea (Acts 17:3). Paul left Berea for Athens but left Silas and Timothy behind (Acts 17:14). He sent word back for the two to join him in Athens and apparently at least Timothy did (1 Thess. 3:1f). But anxiousness and concern for the Thessalonians prompted Paul to send Timothy back to the Thessalonians to comfort and establish them and he traveled alone to Corinth. How long he was alone in Corinth before Silas and Timothy arrived is not known: what is known is that their arrival both encouraged and stirred him to greater efforts there (Acts 18:5), and, because of the report Timothy brought from the Thessalonians, provoked him to compose this first letter to them, expressing his joy that they were still abiding faithful but also to warn them of further dangers ahead.

Paul's letter to them was preserved by the Holy Spirit and was the beginning of the impact his words would have, not only upon his generation but upon all generations to come.

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