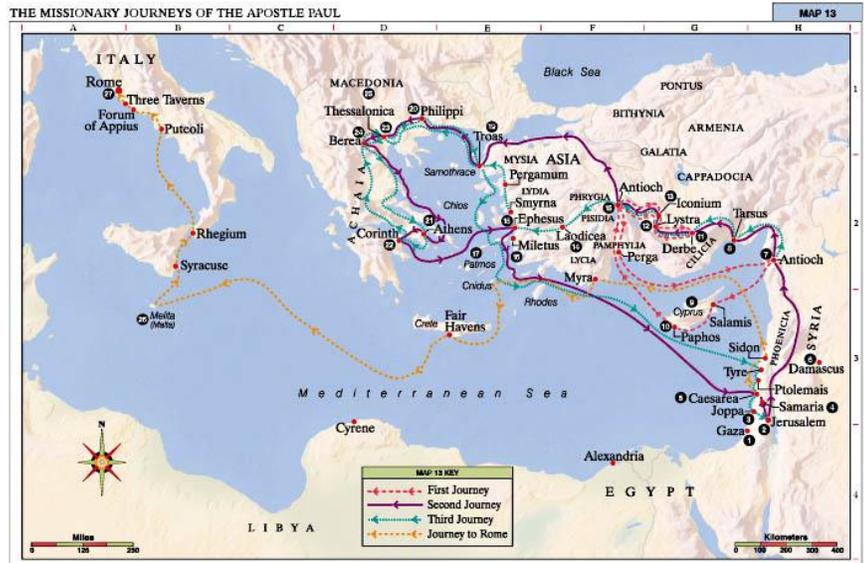




PAULINE EPISTLES



Chapter 7: 1 Thessalonians: Holiness and hope in a pagan world

1. Probably Paul's earliest surviving letter, and therefore the earliest New Testament document. Paul addresses the past effects of the Gospel, the present demands of Christianity, and the future promise for the faithful. He writes about eschatology and ethics.
2. Thessalonica was named for Alexander the Great's sister. It was a walled city, the capitol of the Roman province of Macedonia, and had been operating since 316 BC. It was a large, important port city. It was a "free" city, not a Roman colony (like Philippi) with its own independent government and Greek heritage; it maintained the imperial cult and cults to Egyptian gods. Mount Olympus was visible from Thessalonica.
3. According to Acts 17:1-9, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy founded the Catholic Church in Thessalonica on Paul's second missionary journey, following flogging and imprisonment in Philippi. Paul began in the synagogues but found the Gentiles more open to the Gospel. Paul preached Jesus, Crucified and Risen, which contradicted the emperor's decrees which declared Jesus another emperor. This led to mob action instigated by Jews in the marketplace and then official investigation. The Gospel was seen as an assault on religious, economic, and political status quo. Despite the persecution, Paul preached with conviction and "power" - perhaps miracles.

4. Paul was very fond of the Thessalonians. Persecutions against Christians continued after Paul left; some may have been martyred. Paul sent Timothy to check on the young church. The Christians were bearing up well under the persecutions such that they brought encouragement to Paul in his sufferings. Paul, unable to visit Thessalonica personally, wrote 1 THES while in Corinth to **strengthen** them with reassurance and instruction, to get them ready for the apocalypse by remaining “sound and blameless” at the **Second Coming**. This hope made the demands of holiness worthwhile. Paul weaves three strands together for the narrative of this letter: the Crucified and Risen Jesus, the cruciform life of the Apostles and the persecution of the Thessalonians, and the Second Coming. The letter is an outpouring of thanksgiving for the arrival and persistence of the Gospel in Thessalonica, followed by **parenesis** - instruction.
5. Opening of the letter identifies three authors, although Paul is the principal author. The church is “in” Christ and also “in” God the Father; the role of the Holy Spirit is prominent in the letter. The church at Thessalonica experienced the Trinity in the Gospel.
6. Thanksgiving goes on for three chapters. Paul rejoices in the conversion and perseverance in persecution in the church of Thessalonica. Paul thanks God for having brought the Gospel to Thessalonica and thanks the church there for their perseverance and authentic conversion. Paul’s message: (1) turn from idols; (2) serve the One True God; and (3) wait for God’s Son in His Second Coming. His message is apocalyptic and christocentric. Their conversion is the Pauline triad of the theological virtues, with the emphasis on “hope” in persecution and hope for the Second Coming. They love God the Father who chose them; God the Son (Jesus the Lord) who saved them; and God the Spirit who empowers both the preachers and the adherents of the Gospel.
7. Paul’s evangelization was authentic and selfless. He rebuffs the idea that they, like the Cynics, preached for material gain. He reminds the Thessalonians that he worked “night and day” to provide for himself while he preached the Gospel. He invokes three images to describe his missionary team: **paternal, maternal, and christological**. The suffering for the sake of the Gospel Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy endured in Philippi and in Thessalonica should debunk the idea of base motives, of status or financial gain. He reminds the young church how he “nursed them with the gentleness of a mother.” Paul’s team modeled themselves on Jesus, as every Christian is to do. Paul was then an example to the young church as to how they should comport themselves.
8. Paul refers to the suffering of the Jewish prophets, whose words often went unheeded and who were derided, punished, and ignored or hated - all experienced by Jesus and by Christian preachers and missionaries and their converts. **Suffering is the common bond of Christians**. Those who oppose God will not be delivered from the coming wrath.
9. Paul, although absent from Thessalonica, continues to care for them. He prays for them, writes to them, and sends Timothy to them. He wants to visit but has been prevented from doing so several times. Their authentic conversion and perseverance in persecution are Paul’s “crown” - his success story. Timothy returned from Thessalonica with encouraging news: their love and faith were undiminished, and they loved Paul. This encouraged him.
10. Main themes of these first three chapters:
 - a. Faith, hope, and love are a way of life between the Resurrection and the Parousia
 - b. Persecution and suffering are the expected lot of the followers of the Crucified
 - c. Ministry is to be done: with integrity; in the power of the Spirit; in conformity to Christ.
 - d. Christians strengthen and confirm one another in the faith; ministry is a two-way street.

11. Instructions in chapters 4 and 5 - serving God and waiting for the Son

- a. Conversion from idols and immorality
- b. Holiness = a life owed to and pleasing to God
- c. Sexual purity:- refrain from **porneia**, sexual impurity - be different from the Gentiles/pagans who do not know God. Forbidden to Christians, as to Jews: adultery, fornication, abortion, infanticide, homosexual relations. Have pure love and concern for the good of the other. Christians should marry Christians to build one another up.
- d. **Philadelphia** - brotherly love within the Christian community and love for all others, which entailed encouragement, exhortation, practical help, non-retaliation, and seeking to do good to all. The church's practical assistance should go to those who are truly needy. All others are to be self-sufficient so as not to be a burden to others. While waiting for the return of the Son, keep working.
- e. **Parakaleo** - encouragement, meaning "comfort" and "exhort" - the promises and demands of hope. Paul explained that while we wait for Jesus' return, some may die. This should shake the hope of other believers. The dead will be raised on the last day and will be the first to meet the Lord. He uses words which evoke the arrival of the true Emperor and Victor, Jesus. The final fate of all Christians is to be with the Lord forever.
- f. Watchfulness is the posture of Christians. Paul uses apocalyptic and political imagery and emphasizes faith, hope, and love. Paul mocks the Roman motto of **pax et securitas**. Only those who believe in the Lord and live accordingly will find the Day of the Lord one of peace and security - salvation rather than judgment. Paul separates the children of the light from those in darkness. Those who live in the light will not be surprised when the Day of the Lord comes - but they must remain watchful and sober and remember that Christ died to forgive our sins and to reorient our lives to be worthy of the children of light.
- g. Paul closes his letter with 17 exhortations; some are relational and some are liturgical.
 - i. Church leaders are to be esteemed.
 - ii. Peace
 - iii. Patience
 - iv. Non-retaliation
 - v. Doing good
 - vi. Help those who cannot contribute
 - vii. Exhort those who can contribute to do so
 - viii. Eight short exhortations were perhaps to be memorized (i.e. Always rejoice) and include joy, thanksgiving, prayer without ceasing.
 - ix. Abstain from every type of evil
 - x. Benediction closes the letter with the themes of holiness and hope
- h. Paul ends the letter with four elements:
 - i. Prayer for himself and for his ministerial team
 - ii. Exchange the holy kiss when this greeting of his is read
 - iii. According to his apostolic authority, this letter is to be read to all
 - iv. His apostolic blessing is to be given to all.
- i. Paul's use of apocalyptic language in Roman terminology indicates that the Lord would shatter the Roman peace and security, offering true peace and security

- j. Surprising how early (51 AD) the Trinity and the theological virtues were already common in Christianity
- k. By marrying present suffering with future peace and present holiness with future reward and by stressing the importance of the community building each other up while loving others, Pauline epistles formed the backbone for Negro spirituals.

2 Thessalonians: Cruciform faithfulness and goodness before the Parousia (pp 167-181)

1. A brief, strategic note to the Thessalonians with nuanced pastoral admonitions to conform themselves to Christ - to be faithful and good while we wait for the Second Coming. Knowing that the world will end is no excuse for not working. Thessalonians were eager for the Parousia and perhaps questioning the "delay."
2. Many similarities and differences to 1 THES which have led some to question the order of the two THES letters and the Pauline authorship. The situation in Thessalonica may have been worsening and this occasioned the second, more forceful letter. The combination of similarities and differences points to the same author relating to the same group in different circumstances.
3. 2 THES is less personal and more forceful than 1 THES and they differ in style, vocabulary, tone, and eschatological conviction. Some biblical scholars have overstressed Paul's apparently different approach to the Parousia. In 1 THES he seems to anticipate an imminent Parousia; in 2 THES, he elaborates on the unknown day and time of the Parousia. In 1 THES, he speaks of the Second Coming to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." In 2 THES, he reassures those who fear the Lord has already come and they have missed it.
4. In 2 THES, the persecution had intensified, but so has the Thessalonians' fidelity and endurance. Paul may have written to reassure them that their suffering was not in vain. Some Thessalonians have claimed with "apostolic authority" or "speaking in the Spirit" that the Parousia has already come; Paul reassures them that this is not the case.
 - a. Some were concerned that despite their suffering and fidelity, they had been "left behind."
 - b. Some were apathetic about working or doing good works because "why bother?" If the Day of the Lord had come and gone, there was no need to toil for the Kingdom.
 - c. Paul is upset by the erroneous eschatological announcements and the harm it did to faithful Christians who wondered why they were not with the Lord in glory; and he was irritated by the apathy of those who would not work.
 - d. 2 THES identifies Silvanus and Timothy as co-senders of the letter, which was sent not too long after 1 THES (most likely from Corinth in AD 51). Paul steers a middle path between the idleness of an "irrelevant" Parousia in the distant future and apathy about a Parousia which has already come and gone. He wanted to exhort the Thessalonians to continue their good works and their fidelity in persecution. The **three themes** of this letter are **Parousia (doctrinal), persecution (experiential), and idleness/work (ethical)**. Paul offers thanksgivings, benedictions, and prayers throughout the letter.
5. **Opening** (1.1 - 1.12) - (1) the meaning of persecution (fate of faithful Christians - put the present afflictions into a future perspective; persecutors will face Divine wrath); (2) thanksgiving for their endurance in faith and hope; (3) prayer for their continued fidelity through the power and grace of God.

6. **Persecution and the Parousia** (2:1 - 3:5) Paul deals with the deceit that the Parousia had come, yet the persecutions continue. Paul links their enduring under persecution with their future reward to share in Jesus' glory. He **warns** them against the error of believing the false teaching of an accomplished or realized eschatology. Paul **teaches** them that two things must happen before the Second Coming: the great apostasy and the arrival of the "man of lawlessness." This figure is the perpetrator of the desolating sacrilege, a false Messiah, the first beast of Revelation, the anti-Christ. He will have influence in the world whose evil is restrained at first; he will exalt himself above God; he is an agent of Satan who ensnares unbelievers and some believers as well; he will deceive people with miracles; he will be destroyed by the "breath of Jesus' mouth" - the Holy Spirit (?) when Jesus comes again. **Paul is anxious to reassure the Thessalonians that the Parousia has not yet come.** Paul **exhorts** the Thessalonians to continue to persevere in good works and fidelity to his teaching of the Gospel - to stand firm in **conviction and conduct**, and he **prays** in thanksgiving for them, reminding them to rely upon the grace of God the Father, the power of the Lord Jesus in His Spirit..He reminds the Thessalonians that God will comfort them in their afflictions and will strengthen them to practice goodness "in work and word."
7. **Error of Idleness** (3:6 - 15) - he who will not work should not eat - Paul sees the idle busybodies as malformed believers who fail in their cruciform love. They are a burden to the Christian community and a scandal which could lead others to sin. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he and his ministry team worked "day and night" to provide for themselves while they preached the Gospel - they took no free food, which they could have done on their apostolic authority. Their voluntary renunciation of this right echoes Jesus' self-giving, self-emptying humility and love. Those guilty of idleness - "getting out of work instead of into it," not keeping busy but minding the business of others" - should be shunned by the other Christians to shame the idle busybodies back into good behavior.
8. **Conclusion** - a three-part benediction for the peace, Presence, and grace of the Lord for the persecuted church. Paul writes something "in his own hand" to emphasize the legitimacy of this letter as opposed to the false teaching of those who had deceived Thessalonica about the Second Coming.
9. Summary - the time between the Incarnation (epiphany/first appearance) and the Parousia (Second Coming) of Jesus is **marked by the sign of the Cross**. There will be daily difficulties and challenges, the need to conform yourself to Christ, and various levels of persecution for Christians. The simple act of admitting the difficulties of a cruciform life is freeing and makes the Cross easier to bear, because it reminds us of the One Who bore it for us and with Whom we bear it now.