

1 Thessalonians-1 Corinthians: Paul's Doctrine of Last Things



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I. Introduction

After writing the epistle to the Galatians, in chronological order the next letters written according to the most probable reconstruction of the New Testament chronology, are Paul's two epistles to the Thessalonians. We recall from our survey of the book of Acts that Paul had evangelized Thessalonica as part of his second missionary journey not long before he proceeded to the town of Corinth where Gallio was in power. And because of cross-references from other history of the time, we can date this time of Paul in Corinth to approximately the years 50, 51, or 52 A.D., and therefore the ministry in Thessalonica to just before this period of time. Paul seems to have written the letters during his period in Corinth, so that we can date the letters to that same period and his ministry in Thessalonica to relatively recently before he writes these two epistles.

II. Books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians

The townspeople of Thessalonica were considerably more urban, and urbanized, than those of the various cities in the rural plateau country of southern Galatia, but still we are a far cry in Thessalonica from the culture and history that surrounded cities such as Athens or Rome. We mentioned that one way of reading Acts 17, admittedly not the only one, is that the several Sabbaths that Paul spent reasoning with Jews in Thessalonica before they eventually ran him out of town may reflect a relatively short, perhaps barely a month-long, period of ministry there.

And if that supposition is right, then 1 Thessalonians in particular is significant because of the considerable praise, particularly in the opening three chapters, that Paul lavishes on the Thessalonians. In fact, it seems that there is little detailed theology or corrections to behavior and practice that Paul wishes to make, certainly nothing looming as large as the problem of Judaizing

1 Thess. 1:13

*We continually remember
before our God and Father
your work produced by faith,
your labor prompted by love,
and your endurance inspired
by hope in our Lord Jesus
Christ.*

that we saw in the epistle to the Galatians. But by the time he arrives at the more exhortational section of his letter, in chapters 4 and 5, there is one prominent theological topic that occupies Paul's attention, and in fact it is one to which he returns again in 2 Thessalonians.

A. Eschatological Issues

And that is the topic of eschatology—Christian teaching about the “end times,” about the circumstances that would immediately precede Christ's return, and what all that return involved would look like. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and on in through chapter 5, apparently there has been some concern, perhaps because one or more Thessalonian Christians has recently died, that somehow they would be at a disadvantage by not being able to live until the parousia, that is, the second coming of Christ. Paul's concern, then, in the exhortational portion of 1 Thessalonians is to calm these fears. Just because Jesus said that He was coming back soon does not mean that we can predict the exact timing. Indeed, there may be many who die before His return. In fact, it may be that these Thessalonians, like other Christians that we read about elsewhere in the New Testament, were concerned that somehow Jesus' teaching about His soon return was being falsified.

Now, nearly 2,000 years removed from that period, that concern seems almost laughable. But one has to reckon very seriously with a twenty-year interval between Christ's death, in perhaps 30 A.D., and the Thessalonian correspondence in 50 or 51, and realize that if indeed some first Christians thought that Jesus would return within weeks, months, or even a few years of His ascension that the problem of His delay would be very understandable. If one wants to summarize the theological message of Paul concerning eschatology in 1 Thessalonians, then, one could do well to simply say, “He is still coming soon.”

Interestingly, and before we turn to the actual contents of the letter, if one compares that emphasis in 1 Thessalonians with the emphasis in 2 Thessalonians, one sees balancing, and to a certain degree contrasting, themes. In 2 Thessalonians 2:2, Paul has to encourage the Thessalonians that they should not be quickly disturbed by a letter or a report, news of some kind, perhaps even

1 Thess. 4:13

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

Parousia



1 Thessalonians:

Christ will return soon!

2 Thessalonians:

But not THAT soon!



How soon?

1 Thess. 1:2

We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.

1 Thess. 1:7-8

And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia - your faith in God has become known everywhere.

purportedly with coming from Paul and company—that says that the return of the Lord has come, that the Day of the Lord has passed. There may well be—perhaps on analogy with certain Greek and even Gnostic lines of thinking—there may well have been thought that Christ's second coming was some kind of invisible return, and that those people who were true believers were aware of this and somehow others may have missed it.

There are several other possible ways to understand the Thessalonians' concern, but the main point of Paul's response in 2 Thessalonians is in essence to say, "I told you once He was still coming soon, but don't exaggerate how soon that has to be. He's not coming that soon." And in fact the theological heart of 2 Thessalonians, the middle chapter, chapter 2 of the three in this short epistle, deals with signs that still must take place before Christ can return.

B. Contents

We will come back and make some contemporary applications of that twin concern concerning eschatology after we survey the contents of the two letters. But let us turn to specifically 1 Thessalonians, which has been called an exhortational letter. As we mentioned, there are no great ethical problems that Paul has to address. In fact, the first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians are the single longest section of sustained praise, uninterrupted by any significant criticism, for any of the churches for which we have apostolic letters preserved—high tribute to a fledgling Christian community who may not have had the advantage of direct Pauline evangelism and ministry for more than a few weeks.

A verse that well depicts Paul's favor and pleasure with the Thessalonians involves the evangelistic effect of their young ministry: 1:7 says, ". . . you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Verse 8 continues, "The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere." He goes on to say that he does not need to tell other people about the Thessalonians' exemplary faith: others, presumably even including non-Christians, are coming and bringing up the topic with him—a beautiful

1 Thess. 2:13

And we also thank God continually because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

Outline of 1 Thessalonians:

- I. Introduction (1:1-10)
- II. Paul's Ministry (2:1-16)
- III. Paul's Feelings (2:17-3:13)
- IV. Paul's Exhortations and Final Greetings (4:1-5:28)



example of the kind of faith to which all Christians, young or old, should aspire.

How were they able to respond so quickly and so successfully? A verse which points out the key answer to this question comes in 2:13, when Paul writes, “We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.” Recognizing the Gospel message as the very inspired Word of God proves crucial in responding properly to that message.

C. Outline of 1 Thessalonians

A thumbnail outline, then, of the entire epistle to the Thessalonians, the first of the two that Paul wrote, begins with the conventional introduction and the thanksgiving, which Galatians had omitted, in 1:1-10; proceeds to describe Paul's ministry in Thessalonica, in 2:1-16; moves on to describe Paul's feelings since leaving Thessalonica, 2:17-3:13; and then, having completed the body of the informational part of the letter, proceeds to the concluding exhortations—particularly, though not exclusively, surrounding this theme of eschatology, 4:1-5:28, including the final greetings.

D. Theology of 1 Thessalonians

Going back to the beginning of the body of the letter, then, with chapter 2, we may comment on the model that Paul describes of his ministry in Thessalonica. He uses language in verses 7 and 11 that is parental in nature, comparing himself both to a nursing mother and an affectionate father, concerned for this fledgling congregation the way parents are concerned for their children. It is arguable that unless one has this intimate and familial compassion for those one is working with in a ministry, one will soon burn out or give it up because of the demanding challenges that ministry also poses. As we return to the exhortational section of the letter, skipping over what are largely chapters of information about Paul's longing for the Thessalonians and the travels and comings and goings of Timothy as his emissary, we come then to the one section of the letter that is particularly controversial.

The Rapture



1 Thess. 4:17

After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

What, in fact, does Paul teach about the end times? It is from 1 Thessalonians 4, and it is from this passage only in all of Scripture that the term “the Rapture” is derived—although various scholars believe that it is taught about in various other places. As Paul explains the events that will surround Christ’s return and that place those who are alive when He comes back, along with those who have died in Christ, on completely equal footing, he gives this statement in 4:17. “We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” Historically, there are three different schemes of understanding the relationship of this Rapture, a term coming from the Latin *raptus*, meaning “caught up,” and translating that expression, being “caught up with Christ in the air.” Some have seen this as a quite separate event from Christ’s public return, what is often called His second coming. Others have seen it as the same event, viewed from a different perspective. And yet a third group, though the smallest minority of the three, have seen it as an intermediate event in between the beginning of the Tribulation, that other prophetic passages in Scripture describe, and Christ’s coming.

You may have heard such expressions as pretribulational, midtribulational, or posttribulational views of the Rapture, and that is what those terms are describing. In fairness to Paul, however, we must point out that this passage says nothing explicitly about any tribulation, and therefore any attempt to relate this text to that theme requires the cross-referencing and integration of other passages in Scripture in ways that ultimately all are speculative to one degree or another. But it is interesting, at least, to point out that there is another key term in this passage; namely the meeting that takes place with the Lord in the air, that frequently in the Greek language was used for a meeting or a rendezvous, or a reunion, or a celebration party with visiting, returning kings or generals returning home to their cities in triumph. This kind of a meeting, then, would be very appropriate to use metaphorically when Christ, in fact, is returning from heaven to earth. The “being caught up to meet the Lord in the air” is not, on this view then, to take Christians up into heaven, during some seven-year period of tribulation, for example, only to return with Christ after that period, but rather much like the analogy of a welcoming party that leaves the town to go out and

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1 Thess. 4:18

Therefore encourage each other with these words.

IMMINENT

Return of the Lord

vs.

IMMEDIATE

Return of the Lord

Outline of 2 Thessalonians:

- I. Introduction (1:1-12)
- II. Signs Still to Come (2:1-17)
- III. Exhortations and Final Greetings (3:1-18)

meet its returning general or king in triumph and escort him back home in celebration and in victory.

If this language and this metaphor and these parallels are what Paul had in mind, then it may well be that the posttribulational understanding of the Rapture is the best understanding of Paul's words here. But whichever view one takes, this should not be allowed to divide the church of Jesus Christ. After all, the very next verse, with which chapter 4 concludes, is "Therefore encourage each other with these words." Chapter 5 then goes on to warn the Thessalonians, or to encourage them—to be alert so that they are not surprised. They may not be able to calculate the timing of Christ's return, but they can at least be ever watching and ever vigilant so that they are not surprised like a thief surprises a householder in the night.

E. Outline of 2 Thessalonians

As we mentioned before, the reason why Paul had to pen 2 Thessalonians so quickly after 1 Thessalonians may have to do, paradoxically, with the success of his first epistle. If indeed he was stressing that the Lord was still coming soon, some may have took that theme and run with it and exaggerated it too much, so that the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ, the belief that Christ could come back at any time, was actually replaced with belief in the immediacy of the return of Christ, that He had to come back within a very short, specific period of time. And to counteract that perspective the theological heart of 2 Thessalonians involves pointing out some signs that have yet to take place. A thumbnail outline of 2 Thessalonians involves simply three sections, one per chapter. The opening chapter includes, again, the conventional introduction and thanksgiving; the informational heart of the letter comes in 2:1-12—the signs which are still to come before the end; and the more exhortational part, complete with concluding greetings, occupies 3:1-18.

F. Theology of 2 Thessalonians

Once again, it is the eschatological teaching in this short letter that has fueled the greatest number of interpretive controversies. As Paul debunks the notion in chapter 2 that the Day of the Lord has already come, he does

2 Thess. 2:3

Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.

| The Antichrist



2 Thess. 2:7

For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.

2 Thess. 3:10

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

so by describing the certain signs that are yet to take place. The first of these, found in verse 3, is that the day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. These are apparent allusions to a Jewish doctrine, well-known already in the first century, that immediately prior to the full arrival of the Messianic age, there would arise a great world ruler who would be the chief antagonist and hostilely oppose God and all His purposes.

John will later appeal to this same background, and coin the term "antichrist" to refer to such an individual. The other sign that follows in verses 5 and 6 is that someone or something is currently holding this antichrist back, preventing this man of lawlessness from being revealed, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. And verse 7 of chapter 2 goes on to say, "For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so until he is taken out of the way." This "restraining" power or person, as it is often referred to in some translations, has been again identified with many different entities: God Himself, God through the Holy Spirit, God through the church, and so forth. These are controversial and difficult statements, but they are reminders that there will be a climax and culmination of the power and hostility of evil influences in the world immediately preceding Christ's return. Nevertheless, they are not described in specific enough language for us to ever say that our world is so good that these events could not begin to unfold very quickly and very dramatically, leading up to the end.

Chapter 3 also includes some very interesting statements by Paul, building on hints that he had dropped in his first epistle about Christians in Thessalonica who are not working. We must admonish the idle. And in 3:10 of 2 Thessalonians, those who are not willing to work (not those who are not able to find work but those who are not willing to work) should not even eat. Historically, Christians have often thought that this problem had something to do with the Thessalonian problems with eschatology: perhaps they thought the return of Christ was so imminent that they could quit their jobs and simply wait for the end to come. In more recent years, a more sociological explanation has been added to this possible theological explanation,



Post-tribulation and Pretribulation Errors

Corinth



in which one has discovered evidence from archaeology at Thessalonica that large sections of the poorer parts of town lived in joint facilities that today we might call tenement buildings. It is quite probable that Christians there continued to celebrate the daily communal meals, in conjunction with perhaps the Lord's Supper; and it may well have been the more sociological issue of whether all Christians were willing to work, and therefore be able to chip in to these fellowship meals, love feasts of sharing, that is involved in Paul's admonitions.

If we balance this in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, then, off against each other, we have an excellent handle on the appropriate Christian response to all the complex and uncertain issues surrounding His return. He may be apparently delayed; He may be coming back sooner than is expected. We simply cannot know. We dare not live our lives as if we know we have years yet to live. Nor dare we live as if we know that we don't. We must avoid the siege mentality of some posttribulationists who think we must live through the very worst and we must stockpile and prepare ourselves to expect attacks from all non-Christians from outside who want what we have. We must likewise avoid the defeatism of some pretribulation speculation that sees the world simply as a sinking ship, so that we try to save as many souls as possible but are not concerned more holistically for people's needs in body and in spirit. If we balance 1 and 2 Thessalonians out against one another, we will have a very good eschatological balance and avoid errors that have plagued both the ancient and the modern churches.

III. Introduction to First Epistle to the Corinthians

After penning 1 and 2 Thessalonians, from Corinth, Paul continues his travels; and the next epistle that he writes—a much longer one than both of the Thessalonian letters put together—is the first epistle to the Corinthians. We will recall that these readers came from one of the most immoral cities in the ancient Roman Empire. Even though Paul had spent nearly a year and a half there, they were still one of the most immature churches to which any apostolic author has to address. Paul is in Ephesus, we learn from 16:3, apparently nearing the end of his three-year stay there, when he pens this epistle. And so we may date 1 Corinthians roughly to the year 55 A.D.

Outline of 1 Corinthians:

I. Introduction (1:1-9)

II. News from Chloe (1:10-6:20)

- A. Divisions (1:10-4:21)
- B. Incest (5:1-13)
- C. Lawsuits (6:1-11)
- D. Sexual Immorality (6:12-20)

III. Paul's Response to the Letter from Corinth

1 Cor. 1:10

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.



A. Response to Questions

His outline is very easy to discern, perhaps more so than in any of the apostolic letters. He is responding to questions that have been posed him by the Christian church in Corinth. The first six chapters refer and reply to questions that were brought in person by some messengers who came from Corinth to Ephesus in the household of Chloe. We learn about this in chapter 1. At the beginning of chapter 7, Paul, however, turns to matters about which the Corinthian Christians wrote. From this we infer that they sent, and had delivered, a written letter to Paul as well.

B. Theology of 1 Corinthians

Beyond that, the outline of 1 Corinthians proceeds simply as a checklist of Paul's answers to these many problems. There's an important question, though, if any particular ideology or theology or theological error unifies all of these various questions. Clearly there are factions in the church; chapters 1-4 address these directly, but they are behind all of the issues that follow throughout the letter. But there is also a spirit of Hellenistic philosophy here, a dualism similar to what we saw in our survey of Gnosticism, but more endemic in Greek philosophy than just Gnostics—that dualism that saw the material world as inherently evil and therefore led most people in this philosophical system to an ascetic or world-denying form of lifestyle, but a significant minority to a hedonistic or more indulgent lifestyle. If one reads down the checklist of problems that Paul has to address throughout this letter, most of them can be associated with one or the other of these wings of an aberrant Greek philosophy. One may also speak of the Corinthian church being unified in its many errors by a triumphalistic spirit—a spirit of misguided maturity. They think they have arrived, spiritually speaking, when in fact Paul sadly has to remind them of so many ways in which they fall short.

The first issue that Paul addresses, then, in chapters 1-4, again after the conventional introduction and thanksgiving, is to respond to this issue of factions—those who are saying, "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Peter," or Paul, or of Christ. We are not sure exactly what each of these factions stood for. Historically, people have often

“I am of Apollos”

“I am of Peter”

“I am of Paul”

“I am of Christ”



assumed that there was a theological division, perhaps much like the Judaizing problem that troubled Galatia and Antioch, so that Peter maybe stood for a Judaizing faction, Paul for a more law-free form of Christianity, Apollos for the wisdom or speculative philosophy that he was known for according to our thumbnail sketch of his background in Acts 18. But we cannot be sure of this, and again, as we saw with the church in Thessalonica, there may be a sociological explanation as well. It may be that some of these churches were richer or poorer, that people aligned themselves with different power mongers in the church. There is a lot of evidence that a number of the problems associated with the letter to the Corinthians involve only those in positions of power or wealth could have been enabled to perpetrate. At any rate, Paul's main point in chapters 1-4, in reply to this issue of divisions, is to point people to the foolishness of the cross.

In 2:2 he, with some hyper-exaggeration, says he “resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Clearly from this letter he describes many other things that he does teach about, but this verse is clearly showing that the foundational issue that he wants to draw the Corinthian squabblers back to again and again is what he calls the foolishness of the cross. The crucified Messiah, who was a stumbling block to Jews, who believed that He was cursed by God, and foolishness to Greeks because their gods did not die, is nevertheless the heart of the message that He is the ultimate leveler of all people. The ground truly is level at the foot of the cross.