1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

Author - Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin and a Pharisee, who learned under the teaching of Gamaliel. He was converted by Christ on the road to Damascus and made an Apostle by direct appointment of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was further instructed by direct revelation of Christ Himself (Gal 1:12). Paul is the author of 13 New Testament books.

Background – Thessalonica was a large and busy city with a population of over 200,000 people. It was a seaport located at the crossroads of a major trade route leading north, the Egnatian Way. Being the largest city in Macedonia, its people were quite diverse and included both Greeks and Romans, as well as many transient types such as sailors and travelers and various types of trades people.

From a religious perspective, having many diverse peoples, there was a pluralistic (the co-existence of many religions) religious environment. Having both Greeks and Romans, there would have been many Gods and pagan deities that were worshipped. This was indicated by Paul’s statement in 1 Thess 1:9 that the Christian believers had “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.” Archeological and in-scriptural evidence also reveals the popularity of various mystery religions dedicated to such Greco-Roman and Egyptian deities as Dionysus, Serapis, Isis, Aphrodite, Demeter, Zeus, and Asclepius. The most important deity in Thessalonica, however was Cabirus, the patron god of the city. This Cabirus figure was a martyred hero, murdered by his two brothers and expected to return to help the oppressed poor in general, and the citizens of Thessalonica in particular.

There was also a significant Jewish population as the city it had its own synagogue. The size and influence of this synagogue is also indicated in the book of Acts 17:4…

Acts 17:4 - 4 “And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.”

A “God-fearing Greek” was typically a Gentile convert to Judaism that was uncircumcised.

Because there were a great number of these, the influence of this synagogue was obviously pervasive. It was this synagogue that Paul entered upon his arrival in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey. The book of Acts chapter 17 records Paul’s visit to Thessalonica, and the planting of the church there.

Acts 17:1-4 - 17 Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.” 4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

And so the first Thessalonian converts were evangelized and discipled for a very short period of time by Paul. Most scholars believe they actually spent more than three weeks there, but that they only spent three weeks reasoning in the synagogue. Regardless, the church was born and was very young when Paul met with his expected opposition. With false accusations and jealous brutality, the angry Jews sought for Paul but couldn’t find him.

Acts 17:5-9 - But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and coming upon the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. 6 And when they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; 7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” 8 And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard
And these things. 9 And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. NASB

And so Paul and Silas fled the city and went on their way to the next God ordained destination to preach the Gospel. After being forced to leave Thessalonica, they traveled to Berea where in just a short time the angry Jews from Thessalonica pursued them all the way to Berea to seek them out and cause them trouble.

Acts 17:10-15 - 10 And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea; and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so. 12 Many of them therefore believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. 13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there likewise, agitating and stirring up the crowds. 14 And then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 Now those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. NASB

And so Paul was forced again to move on to yet another destination and wound up in Athens. It was there of course where he preached his famous sermon on Mars Hill.

Now as a result of this Jewish opposition to Paul, Silas and the new Christians at Thessalonica, the fledgling church found themselves as the object of much persecution in Thessalonica. Nevertheless, God’s elect people were called out of the dark idolatry of this pagan city, and the very young and holy church was left to prosper in the face of no small opposition, upheld by keeping power of God and shepherded by the Lord Jesus Christ. It was because of Paul’s separation from the young church that he left with such great concern for them. Such is the occasion of Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians.

Purpose and Themes present in 1 Thessalonians: The content of things covered in 1 & 2 Thessalonians is really quite remarkable. Because Paul had spent such little time with them, he writes to give both instruction and encouragement to them. Therefore his writing is uniquely suited for their difficult situation being such a young church and facing the difficult task of growing and learning with few mature leaders and persecution from other hostile religious peoples. Therefore Paul’s general purpose was one of encouragement and instruction, but he writes with several themes and topics in view in order to address important matters needed in their theological development. His topics include;

- Joy, Thanksgiving and Encouragement for a healthy new church
- Responsibilities of a Healthy Church
- Instructions for Godly Living
- Eschatological Topics of grave importance

Joy, Thanksgiving and Encouragement for a healthy new church

Paul spends the entire first chapter of the letter thanking God and commending the Thessalonians for their great faith.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 - 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, NASB

He was sure they were God’s very elect and chosen people because of the fruits of their lives. Paul was greatly endeared and encouraged by the Thessalonians, especially the way in which they enthusiastically received the Gospel and the Word of God.

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5 - 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. NASB

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