

Yale Bible Study

1 and 2 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonian 1: Greetings and Thanksgiving

The Salutation

The salutation names three authors of the letter, Paul, Silvanus, also known by his nickname Silas, and Timothy. Both of Paul's fellow workers played important roles in the development of his missionary activity. According to Acts 15:22, Silas was part of the delegation sent to Antioch to announce the results of the "apostolic council" in Jerusalem. Paul chose him as a companion in his missionary activity in Syria and Cilicia, his "first missionary journey" (Acts 15:40). It was during that journey, in Derbe and Lystra, where Paul encountered Timothy, son of a Jewish mother and Greek father (Acts 16:1), whom he recruited to his missionary team. Silas continued with Paul and was with him in prison in Philippi (Acts 16:19–40), and he was with Paul when the apostle initially worked in Thessalonica (Acts 17:4-9) and Beroea (Acts 17:10).

Timothy apparently was part of the team as well, since he remained with Silas in Beroea when Paul was sent off (Acts 17:14). Silas and Timothy reunited with Paul in Athens (Acts 18:5), which was probably the location from which Paul sent Timothy on the mission to Thessalonica, a mission to which he refers later in 1 Thess 3:2. If the account in Acts is correct, Silas accompanied Timothy on the trip; and the two rejoined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5), providing the occasion for writing the letter. The presence of Silas and Timothy with Paul in Corinth when he first preached there is confirmed by Paul's reminiscence of the start of his mission there in 2 Corinthians 1:19. After Acts' mention of the presence of Silas in Corinth, he disappears from the pages of Acts. He

serves as co-author with Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:19, and he is listed as co-author of 2 Thessalonians (1:1).

After Timothy joined Paul on his first missionary journey, he continued to play a significant role in Paul's missionary and pastoral activity. His work of keeping Paul in touch with the Thessalonians was apparently one for which he was particularly well suited and his skill would come in handy later in Paul's career. Paul wrote his correspondence with the church in Corinth on his "third missionary journey," during much of which Ephesus served as his headquarters. During that time, his relationship with Corinth experienced periods of stress; and Timothy worked as an intermediary between the apostle and his restive congregation (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10). Paul also hoped to send Timothy to the Philippians along with the local leader Epaphroditus to keep his relationship with that congregation on an even keel (Philippians 2:22).

Acts 19:22 mentions that Paul in Ephesus, the headquarters of his third period of missionary activity, sent Timothy accompanied by a companion named Erastus to Macedonia, probably to prepare for his own return. Timothy probably visited all the congregations that Paul had founded in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea. Paul subsequently himself visited the area (Acts 20:1) and moved on "to Greece," probably to Corinth, accompanied by Timothy and representatives of all the Macedonian communities (Acts 20:4). In addition to the Thessalonian correspondence, Timothy appears as Paul's co-author in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and Philemon. He continued his collaboration with Paul as he wrote Romans (16:21). He was also known to the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 13:23). The pastoral epistles which bear his name (1, 2 Timothy) may in fact be products of this close companion of Paul. Indeed, it may be due

to Timothy's initiative that we have the collection of Paul's letters. In any case, the names in the salutation remind us of the collaborative nature of Paul's work as an apostle.

The Thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 1:2–10)

Prayers of thanksgiving are a common feature of Paul's own letters and the letters of his school (Romans 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Philippians 1:3; Colossians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:3), although the language of "blessing" can also be used (2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3). Such prayers of thanks mirror a convention of ordinary letter writing, attested in numerous personal letters on papyrus surviving from antiquity, in which the writer would offer a brief prayer of thanks to the divine for good health, safe travels, or good fortune. Paul's use of the convention does more than fulfill a common epistolary expectation. In his prayerful way Paul usually introduces the themes and issues that his letter will pursue and that strategy is certainly in evidence here.

For now, we shall focus on the thanksgiving paragraph that constitutes chapter 1. As we shall see, Paul picks up the theme of thanksgiving again at 2:13 and may mean for both chapters to be part of one larger prayer.

Paul initially focuses on the Thessalonians themselves and expresses gratitude for many things about them (1:2–7). He then reminds the Thessalonians that they are part of a larger enterprise of spreading faith in God (1:8), in which they already have had some success. He highlights two elements of that faith (1:9–10), which neatly encapsulate what the letter is about.

The Thessalonians (1:1–7)

Paul's first word of thanks "for you," is certainly what an ancient orator would call a *captatio benevolentiae*, an effort to secure the good will of an audience. But Paul is not engaged in a cynical rhetorical ploy, however effective his rhetoric may be. Pastoral apostle that he is, he endeavors throughout the letter to reinforce ties of love that bind him to his congregation. In fact, much of Paul's correspondence has the same practical effect, of reinforcing or, in some cases, restoring relationships with his converts.

In claiming that he recalls who and what they are, Paul uses a famous triad, "the work of *faith*, the labor of *love* and the steadfastness of *hope*." He will recall that triad late in the letter (5:8) using military imagery to make his point. His most famous use of the triad appears in his paean to love in 1 Corinthians 13:13. Other early Christian authors, such as the homilist who wrote Hebrews, will also find use for the triad as a way of organizing Christian life (Heb 10:22–24). What came to be called the "theological virtues" thus play an important role as organizing principles of much of Paul's preaching.

Paul goes on to be thankful for the fact that the Thessalonians have been "chosen" (v 4), a theme which will reappear in 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Here Paul echoes the Old Testament's language of "election," although it is now not the traditional people of Israel who are chosen, but those Gentiles who have responded to the Gospel message. The language thus recognizes the divine initiative in the process of salvation, something on which Paul will insist in all his letters, as he argues that it is not by what people do that they are God's people but by God's grace. Paul does not here reflect any further on the idea of election, as he will in Romans 11, when he confronts the problem that his fellow Jews have not accepted his gospel, while gentiles have.

Paul further reflects on the way in which God's gracious choice of the Thessalonians took place "in power and in the Holy Spirit" (v 5). Paul will use similar language in talking to the Corinthians about how the gospel came to them (1 Corinthians 2:4). Paul adds another phrase to describe the effect of his initial missionary activity. The NRSV translates it "full conviction," a meaning that the word will come to have in later Christian writings. Here, however, it may have a more objective sense, referring not to the inner state of those who came to faith, but to the way in which the gospel was presented, something like "with complete success." Paul's preaching, in any case, had a dramatic impact; and he reminds the Thessalonians of that experience.

Since he has invoked his own action, he reminds the Thessalonians that they took him as a model and they "became imitators" of him (v 6). Imitation of Paul's behavior is something that he encouraged (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9), as did most ancient teachers of ethics and morality. The imitation here seems to focus not on virtue in general, but on the endurance of persecution, the kind of resistance to his message that Acts 17:1-9 recounts. The example that the Thessalonians set in Macedonia no doubt refers to the reception of Paul and his message in Beroea (Acts 17:10-15). Achaea would refer to both Athens and Corinth, the next stops on Paul's mission (Acts 17:16-18:17).

The Faith of the Thessalonians (1:9-10)

Paul now shifts slightly from his prayerful thanks for what the Thessalonians have been. Within that thanksgiving, in the reference to faith, hope, and love, there are also seeds of some of his coming exhortation. He now hints at a topic that has caused distress

in the congregation at Thessalonica, and that forms the thread through the two Thessalonian epistles, the eschatological hope that Paul and his new Christians share.

Paul frames his articulation of the theme in two subtle moves. The first is to say that the good reputation that the Thessalonians have includes a reference to their beliefs. In other words, he is not introducing something new, but simply continuing his thanks to God for what the Thessalonians already know. The second step is to point to something that is certainly true and probably not a matter of any controversy. The Thessalonians have “turned to God from idols.” They were, in other words, Gentiles, who may have had some attraction to Judaism (Acts 17:4); but, inspired by Paul’s preaching, they became devotees of the “living and true God” of Israel. If they had been attracted to Judaism, its monotheistic faith and its admirable code of ethics, what kept them from joining the community was the requirement of circumcision. Paul believed in vision of Isaiah (55:5; 66:18–21), that in the end time, when God set things right, Gentile and Jew would worship together. Such an ingathering was now happening, made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ, which inaugurated that time when God’s promises would be fulfilled.

Paul’s conviction that the expected end time was underway made possible his outreach to Gentiles that elicited such a positive response at Thessalonica. But intrinsic to the turn to the “living and true God” was an eschatological hope, a call “to wait for His (God’s) Son from heaven.” That Son, the instrument of God’s final, powerful restoration of the world to justice and order was the agent of the coming “wrath” or judgment on sinners as well the one who “rescues us.” Eschatological hope is the foundation of Paul’s

Gospel and the presenting issue in the concern that the Thessalonians have, and Paul will address that concern in due course.

Further Reading:

Richard S. Ascough, “Redescribing the Thessalonians’ Mission in Light of Greco-Roman Associations,” *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014) 61–82.

Jane F. M. Heath, “Absent Presences of Paul and Christ: *Enargeia* in 1 Thessalonians 1–3,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (2009) 3–38.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What conventions do you use when addressing people either in person, by letter or by some modern electronic system of communication? How do you attend to the emotional impact of what you say? Do you see Paul working in any analogous way with his Thessalonian congregation?
2. Are there people in your life to whom you look as models of either behavior or faith? Are there ways in which you try to serve as a model for others to imitate?
3. Do you have a sense that as members of a Christian congregation you have been “chosen” or “elect”? What are the implications of that belief?