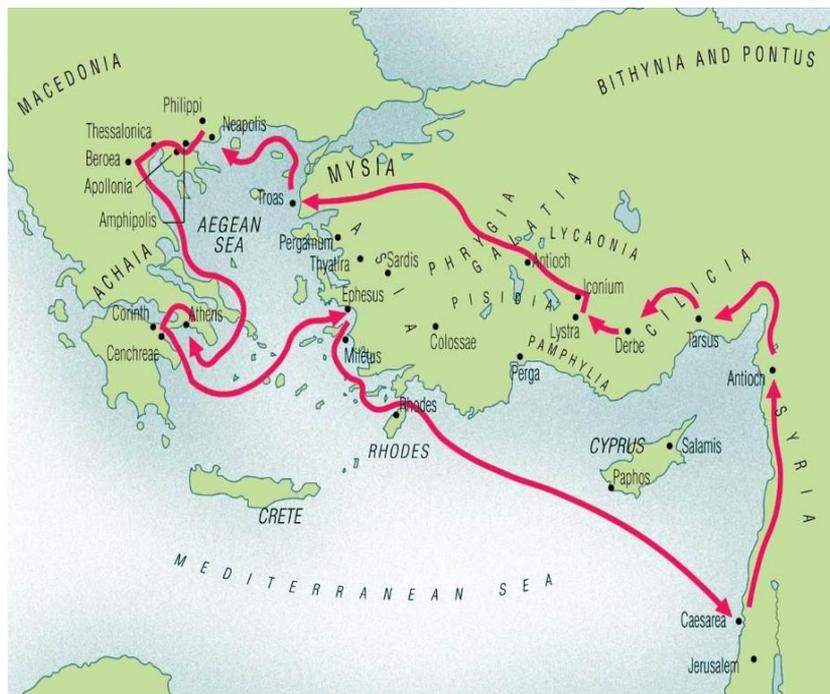


# THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS

## *A COMMENTARY*

### PAUL'S SECOND MISSION



By Walter Cates



# THE POWER OF THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS

A COMMENTARY BY WALTER A. CATES

## BACKGROUND

### GOD'S PLAN FOR PAUL

Paul was specifically picked out of all the people alive in the first century to carry the Gospel to the world by way of the Gentiles. So why did God allow Paul's life to be so tough. Everywhere Paul went there were troublemakers. Paul was beaten, stoned, prosecuted and run out of town. At one point it is likely that he was stoned to death, had an out of body experience and then was raised from the dead.

Then one day while studying, it struck me, **God had a plan!** Paul was God's messenger of the new covenant. This new covenant and the Gospel that defined it was the most radical thing to hit the universe since ADAM. Whether it be a closed-minded culture like Thessalonica or an open-minded culture such as Berea this new Gospel was sure to generate controversy. A pattern seems to have developed which points to an extremely clever motive for a repeating scenario. Clearly evident is this scenario in Paul's

first and second mission trips. Paul boldly enters the community and assertively broadcasts this new Gospel. Paul preaches and teaches vigorously and becomes the focal point of extreme feelings, good and bad. When things get to the breaking point Paul leaves. The object of all the hate and discontent is gone and the community calms down. And here is the beauty of the plan. Paul always leaves behind trusted disciples of Christ to continue teaching, instructing and guiding the new Church of Christ. In Philippi Luke stayed behind. Silas and Timothy stayed behind in Berea. In other cases, unnamed “Brothers” stayed behind. These trusted ‘Brothers in the faith’ could then continue in a much calmer environment. The focal point of the opposition, Paul, has been run out of town. All the malcontents were satisfied in the fact that they ran the bad guy, Paul, out of town. In most cases the malcontents were more concerned about the community Paul had gone to next and were oblivious to what was continuing to thrive and grow in their own community. Being the focal point of persecution, I believe, was the true thorn in Paul’s side.

## THE DAWN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Imagine for a moment. You are a first century Thessalonian. The year is 51 ad. You have grown up in a society that worshiped many idols and unknown gods. Most of these gods do not like you, but they control vital areas of your life. You are required to commit some very gross acts to please them. If they are not pleased, the men will be sterile the women will be barren, warring tribes will conquer you and the crops will not grow. Then, a few months ago, a man called Paul and some of his associates came to visit you. They brought a revolution, no, a revelation. They brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the wink of an eye, your spirit was melded with the Holy Spirit of the one true God. You have found a peace in life you could never have imagined.

Now it has been some time since Paul and company has departed. Your life has continued in the walk with Christ. But, false teachers and false ideas have crept into your fellowship. You are surrounded by images of the false gods and those who promote them and all you have is the memory of what Paul taught you. Fear not, God is in control. God has set a blaze of concern in

the heart of Paul. Just in time (That is Gods time) Paul sends Timothy and then a letter. The words and ideas of this letter reflect a love and caring that could only come from a loving and caring God. You have your first “Written Word”. You copy this letter and circulate it to all the Churches in Macedonia. Everyone who reads this letter is strengthened and inspired by its love, caring and truth.

This letter to the Thessalonians was the dawning of the NEW TESTAMENT. This letter will be followed by many more letters of love, hope and joy. This New Testament will grow into a complete definition of God’s love for His Creation.

Just for a moment let’s look at some numbers. It is estimated that the world population in 51ad was close to 180 million. (The Romans were zealous bean counters and left good records behind.) It is estimated that there were 970 thousand Gentile Christians in communities around the Mediterranean Sea. Living mostly in Jerusalem and Antioch were 30 thousand Jewish Christians.

## MACEDONIA'S FIRST SCRIPTURE

There is another observation we need to consider as we explore first and second Thessalonians. The Thessalonians letters were the first scripture the Macedonian Gentiles had for guidance. (*The letter of James had been written by this time but was considered to be a letter to the Jews. Galatians was written earlier but there is no evidence it was circulated out-side of Galatia in the first century.*) With the arrival of the Thessalonian letters, for the first time the *ekklesia* did not have to rely on a memory of Paul's words. They had it in writing. Also keep in mind how significant a written letter was in the first century. Paper and ink were expensive. There was no post office or letter carriers. We need to recognize the impact of a written letter in the first century. For someone to be out the expense and the effort to write and deliver a letter would definitely lend credibility to their intent, sincerity and purpose.

As Paul planted churches and moved on, the new Christians quite often would debate what Paul and the brothers had taught them. Understandably individuals had different recollections of Paul's words. These differences

were the reason Paul wrote first and second Thessalonians (51AD). When Paul sent these two letters to Thessalonica he instructed the reading of the letters throughout Macedonia (Thessalonica, Berea, Apollonia, Amphipolis, Neapolis and Philippi). These early Gentile believers would have treasured these letters. There is evidence that these letters of Paul were copied and circulated among the first and second century churches. We must remember Paul has been spreading the Word of Christ for twelve years by the time he reaches Thessalonica. He has seen every kind of resistance and spiritual conflict to his gospel. His teachings would have been very detailed, clear and concise. We need to look at these first two letters as follow up or clarifications of teachings already presented and not as an all-inclusive teaching. Not until Romans does Paul attempt to put together a comprehensive *guide to being a Christian*.

The first of the Gospels, Luke, would not be written for another 8 years (59AD). Between A.D. 48 and A.D. 57 Paul had written what I feel is the core of Christian belief; Galatians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Corinthians and Romans. If you study these six letters in that order you will

see a progressive refinement and definition of the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. The progression, I believe, reaches perfection in Romans. It would be a little over 300 years before the New Testament would be set and official.

#### PAUL IN THESSALONICA

When you read Paul's letters to the Thessalonians you find it obvious that Paul had deep feelings for the Thessalonian Christians. I pondered this one morning as I studied and wondered why and how this happened.

It is clear from the passion and emotion Paul puts in 1 and 2 Thessalonians that he has deep and strong feelings for this church. Paul's love for the Thessalonians was agape love. Agape love is defined as selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love, the highest of the four types of love in the Bible. It is a spiritually binding love. For the mortal human agape love is the Everest of emotional bindings, it is slow to grow and requires passing through all of the lower forms of love and affection.

Here is where the conflict in my mind erupts. Some church tradition says that Paul was in Thessalonica for only two to three weeks. I accept that Paul was the most spiritually gifted

common man who ever lived. But! He was still human and mortal. His mind and heart were still controlled by human nature. To get to the emotional level he was with the Thessalonians meant he would have to know them deeply. He would have to understand, individually and personally, who they were and how they got to that point in their lives. It seems unlikely this could happen in two to three weeks.

So, let us examine the evidence of a two to three-week tenure in Thessalonica. There is the,, well of course it says,,,,, then again there was,,,?? Bottom line there is no evidence of two or three-week mission in Thessalonica. There is one obscure statement, Acts 17:2 “*As his custom was, Paul went to the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures...*” This is where the casual observer of the scriptures leaps upon the three-week view. True this could suggest a time span of three weeks, but some celebration weeks have 4 and 5 Sabbath days. Let’s take the Passover celebration. Each of the six days before the day of Passover is a Sabbath. The feast of tabernacles has 3 Sabbaths, Festival of Weeks has 2. The day before and the day of any ritual day of sacrifice

are Sabbath days. So, three Sabbath days equals three weeks holds little water.

Now let's look at who in Thessalonica he was writing to. Scripture says (Acts 17:4) a large number of Greek men and women and a few Jews heard and believed Paul's Gospel. Where did this large number of Greek men and women come from? It is safe to say they did not hear Paul speak at the synagogue on the Sabbath. They would not have been allowed into the synagogue on a **Sabbath** day. No, I believe he did what he did everywhere else his mission took him. He went first to the Jew then he went to the Gentiles and built an ekklesia (Church). If you look closely at what Paul has to say in the two letters you will find it is all about the new covenant with Christ, nothing of Jewish tradition.

An interesting clue is found in Philippians. In Philippians 4:14-16 Paul gives thanks to the Philippian church for their support throughout his mission work. In particular he notes that they sent him aid while he was in Thessalonica, "again, and again". In the original Greek style of writing the "again" would mean at least twice the second "again" would indicate at least 3 times and perhaps 4 times. It is a young man's 12 to 14 day

walk from the town of Philippi to Thessalonica. With the time restraints of travel and communication of that age, using the minimum of 3 occurrences of aid from Philippi I would put Paul's tenure in Thessalonica at minimum, 3 months. Time line studies would allow for as much as 9 months. The scholars that study New Testament history and time lines give the length of Paul's second missionary journey from 2 years 9 months to 3 years 6 months. That is in the time frame of 49AD to 52AD. The time line discrepancies alone allow for as long as a 9 month stay in Thessalonica. The study of the aid sent from Philippi suggests a minimum of 3 months. At 3 months I could understand the level of connection between Paul and the Thessalonians.

Ray C. Stedman in his commentary "1 Thessalonians: Hope for a Hopeless World" [December 3 1967] makes the statement; "There is some evidence that Paul's stay in Thessalonica may have been as long as three months."

## **THE FIRST LETTER**

About half way through Paul's second missionary journey he established a church in Thessalonica. Acts 17:1-10 relates the events of Paul's visit to Thessalonica. The Thessalonians were quickly recognized as a dedicated, Christ centered fellowship. Paul, Silas and Timothy leave Thessalonica and goes to Berea. After establishing a church in Berea Silas and Timothy remain there and Paul continues on the Athens. In the course of time Paul asked Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens. As soon as they arrived in Athens Timothy was sent on a short mission to observe and guide the fellowship at Thessalonica. Timothy returned to Paul from the factfinding trip with an overwhelmingly optimistic report with just a few issues that needed to be addressed. Paul's response to Timothy's report is a letter we call First Thessalonians.

It may be helpful, as you continue reading this document, to read a section of the commentary and then read the scripture it covers. Each section is designated by an all-caps heading. The NIV translation is highly recommended for any in-depth study of scripture. A paraphrased

bible makes for comfortable reading, but sometimes the Spirit has been written out.

## 1 THESSALONIANS 1:

Paul starts his letter in the typical Greek protocol, from, to and salutation. In chapter one verses 2 through 10 Paul takes on the persona of the coach before the big game. He pumps them up telling them they are always on his mind and in his prayers. Note the special treatment he gives faith, love and hope. Only here and in Col 1:4-5 are they presented in this order. The normal order is faith, hope and love. I believed Paul is making a statement of the progression of salvation; With faith through God's love we gain the hope of salvation.

In our translation of v4 we see the phrase 'brothers and sisters'. This is not an attempt to be politically correct through translation. The word Paul used and we translate as 'Brothers and Sisters' has a much deeper meaning. The word he used was *adelphoi*. This word refers to all members of a group (ekklesia) regardless of age, gender, class or race and implies an equal value to all members of the group.

In all his teaching and in this letter (v5-6), Paul continues to plant the seed that the power of the Gospel comes from the Holy Spirit. This seed will be nurtured in the following letters and mature in Romans. This power from the Holy Spirit is what enables them to live the life of faith and love demonstrated by Paul and the brothers while they were with them. Keep in mind what Paul means when he speaks of “his” Gospel. His Gospel is the narrative of Christ’s **mission** on earth, Christ’s **love** for all creation and finally his **sacrifice** for the salvation of all mankind. Furthermore (v7-8) through the power of the Holy Spirit, in such a short time, the Thessalonian *ekklesia* has become a model to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The time from when Paul first entered Thessalonica to when he wrote 1 Thessalonians is believed to be from 9 to 11 months. Yet in this short time the Thessalonians have become a model of Faith, Love and Hope.

*As a side note the original Greek text for v2-10 is the longest single sentence in the New Testament.*

## 1 THESSALONIANS 2:

In chapter 2 Paul encourages the Thessalonians to carefully and honestly call to mind the behavior and methods of Paul and his companions while they were with them. Most commentaries treat 2:1 to 12 as some sort of rebuttal of charges brought against Paul and the brothers. I do not read that into Paul's words nor can I find any real support for that idea. My inner voice tells me this is lesson in discernment. By this time in his second mission journey Paul is well aware of the False Apostles who shadowed him. Here Paul is simply instructing them, recall to who's glory did he preach. To who's comfort did he attend. To who was he a burden. He wants them to compare his and his companion's behavior with those who will come. Paul has already confirmed the power of the Holy Spirit they possess (1:5-7). Now he is encouraging them to tap that power to stay in the true word.

The next section of chapter 2, verses 13 to 16, is a powerful amalgamation of prayer, validation and condemnation. Paul thanks God for their conversion and continuing faith. Then he flows smoothly into the validation of his gospel as the word of God not the word of Paul. Then he

presents a scathing inditement of the Judaizers who intent to force the law upon them. Paul then softens the mood and closes chapter 2 with words of hope, love and Joy.

### 1 THESSALONIANS 3

Building on the closing statements of the previous chapter, chapter 3 is a ‘why and what’ declaration. Why did he send Timothy and what did he have to say on his return?

Why? Paul was deeply concerned about their spiritual strength in the face of strong persecution and temptations (v. 1-5).

What? Paul is overjoyed with the report on Timothy’s return. He expresses his feelings as if he had attained new life. In verses 9 to 11 is his prayer of thanks and hope. Then in two verses, 12 and 13 he closes chapter 3 with one of the simplest, kindest and loving prayers.

Throughout this entire chapter Paul chooses his words very carefully. He clearly intends to project joy and strength. He wants the readers of this letter to feel good about their spiritual accomplishments.

## 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-11

Now Paul appears to be getting into the feedback from Timothy's fact-finding trip. We do not have a copy of Timothy's trip report but, we can surmise from Paul's comments and from our knowledge of the culture of Thessalonica most of what it would have said. The culture was driven by belief in many, many gods. One of the most prominent was a god that promoted lustful pleasure. Paul puts this on the top of the list of unacceptable behaviors (v. 1-8). He makes it clear that a rejection of God's call for us to live "holy and honorable" lives is a rejection of the Holy Spirit (v. 8). We know from other scripture, that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is the unpardonable sin.

As Paul so often does, he follows rather stern statements with a bit of caring, support and instruction. He commends them for their loving relationships and encourages them to be even more diligent in these relationships. Do not be recalcitrant, mind to your own business and be fruitful. Remember you claim to be a **Christian** and the world is watching.

## 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13 through 5:11.

These verses contained the earliest (51AD) recorded quotes of Christ's comments on the resurrection in the end times (4:15). It will not be until 71AD that Matthew will quote Christ on end times resurrection in chapter 24. John will also in 6:35-40 in 80AD. Paul's letters will have been in circulation for 20 years plus.

It is believed that Timothy brought back word from the Thessalonians of concern for status of believers who have died. It is a puzzle to me, that for the last one thousand nine hundred and fifty-seven years (this is being written in 2018) alleged scholars have debated the timing and occurrences of the end times.

Paul clearly states; **1**, By witness, Jesus died, rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. **2**, By word of Jesus, He will return with the dead in Christ. **3**, By word of Jesus, the dead in Christ will not be preceded by those living in Christ. **4**, By word of Jesus, He will return with the dead in Christ and the those living in Christ will be "caught up" to the clouds. **5** By word of Jesus, we will dwell with the lord forever. These are the truths we have. There will be further clarifications in second Thessalonians and other

scripture. **But**, remember these five truths will not be altered! Critics of Paul's letters say he "evolved" his gospel as he progressed from First Thessalonians to Second Timothy. I cannot find any support for that thought in scripture. The 5 basic truths of his Gospel of salvation through Christ do not waver.

We can speculate about 'will I have wings, will I play a harp sitting on a cloud, will the streets really be paved with gold or will the house the Lord provides for me have a pool', but is this really **wise**?

By the way did you know that the phrase **CAUGHT UP** in the Old Latin is raptura (N) or raptus (V). From about 320AD to the mid 1300 all Bibles used in the Western Church were written in Latin. So, rapture certainly is in the Bible. The Eastern Orthodox and the Coptic orthodox churches used a Greek translation.

Any further break down of the words of Paul in this section I will leave to your own discernment. As for me it seems that Paul covers each point of contention simply and clearly. The Thessalonians had concerns and Paul through the actions, life and words of Christ, absolutely reconciled their concerns.

## 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

Paul moves on to other concerns. Timothy must have observed or was informed about improper regards toward the leaders of the fellowship. Paul cleverly asserts that care and correction is the assigned and accepted ordinance of the leaders and all should respect their tasking. “Live in peace with each other” is followed (v5:14 – 22) with a point by point discussion of the proper do’s and don’ts of a Christian fellowship.

Paul has now set the templet for most of his following letters. He finishes with prayer for the recipients of the letter, a request for prayer himself and fellow workers in Christ and a benediction.

***“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”***

## **THE SECOND LETTER**

No one knows whether by prophetic gift or a later report on the Thessalonian Church, but Paul concluded a second letter to Thessalonica was needed. The primary issue was confusion about the second coming of Christ. Some secondary issues which were side effects of the confusion of the second coming also needed to be addressed. The precise timing of the second letter is not clearly defined in scripture or church tradition. The consensus of opinion is that it followed the first letter by 3 weeks to several months. It should be noted that Paul continues his, loving, kind and fatherly approach in this letter to the friends in Christ at Thessalonica.

If you are, or have ever been, stressed by the moral decay of our culture then second Thessalonians was written for you. In a society that focuses on pleasure and property it reminds us of our true goal. Paul wrote this letter to the Christians facing persecution and temptations of a degenerate society. Can you relate to that? The Thessalonians were trying to cope with a brutish culture. The local community was “here after” all they could experience and possess. The Christian community was trying to pursue the “here after”.

This letter, 2 Thessalonians, parallels the first letter's three main topics, Suffering, end times and works. Paul wrote this letter to correct some improper reaction to the first letter and dispel some ideas promoted by some false teachings. There are those who say the second letter is Paul is back peddling and changing his gospel. In my mind this a totally ridiculous idea. In the first letter Paul focuses on the promise, to those of faith, in the end times and the glory they will be part of. In the second letter Paul addresses what will happen to Satan, his agents and those without faith.

## 2 THESSALONIANS 1

Paul opens chapter one in typical form with *to, from* and *a blessing*. He goes on to acclaim their faith and love. He then uses these facts to support the reality of Holy Spirit in their lives. In the face of extraordinary hardships and persecution their faith and love continue to stand firm. Only the strength that comes with the Holy Spirit can explain this phenomenon. We have only two choices. 1, With Christ, dwell forever with our Father in heaven. 2, With-out Christ, an eternity devoid of God.

Chapter 1 closes with a declaration of two constant prayers on Paul's lips. He prays for their walk with Christ and for the Churches' evangelical mission to promote the word of Christ.

## 2 THESSALONIANS 2

It will be very beneficial for you to clear your mind before you read verses 1 to 12. Try to forget you have ever read Daniel and Revelations. The NIV translation is the closest literal word for word translation. Once again, I would not recommend a paraphrased bible for any in-depth study of scripture.

These twelve verses explain the actions of a lawless person who comes with a secret agenda. He will be a clandestine servant of Satan and will bring about the end time confrontation with Christ. Many rather "unique" ideas and messages have been attributed to these words. The truth of what Paul is saying is; he will be cunning, it will be bad, if you are not prepared you will suffer spiritual and literal death.

In verse 5 Paul reflects back and indicates that he taught in detail about this subject when he was with them. He asks them to remember what he told them.

Verses 6 and 7 are a bit cryptic. There are many views on who is holding back the lawless one. When I consider that the holding back has been going on for almost 2000 years then I must reason that the Holy Spirit must be involved. Let us explore for a moment the Holy Spirit's interaction with mankind throughout history. All through the old testament it is written of instances of God's Holy Spirit interacting with mankind. These interactions have always been situational. A situation arises where man needs the intervention of the Holy Spirit and He obliges, interacts and then returns to the Father. There was no continual, committed presence of the Holy Spirit. All of that changed on the day of the "feast of weeks" (Pentecost) following the crucifixion of Christ. On that day the Holy Spirit came to dwell on earth in the *ekklesia*, in the very being of each believer. Think of that, the Spirit **in you** is holding back the lawless one. **YOU** by your faith, are holding back the lawless one. When the "Church" is raptured the one holding back the lawless one will be removed. Thus, setting loose the lawless one to fulfill the end time prophesy. Take some time just to ponder this.....

## 2 THESSALONIANS 3

Paul is coming to a close in this letter. At the time he is writing this letter he is experiencing some difficulties in Corinth and asks for prayer support from the Thessalonian fellowship.

Then, almost as an afterthought, Paul brings up another issue. Remember, paper and ink are expensive so Paul will not wad up the paper and start again. Somehow it had come to his attention that there were some disorderly lazy people who were taking advantage of the fellowship. These people were leaching on the benevolence of the ekklesia. Paul issues a stern rebuke of this practice. He goes on to instruct the faithful to “take special note of him”. Make it clear to the disorderly that their behavior is improper. But, Paul reminds them to admonish with love.

Again, almost as an afterthought, right in the middle of his closing benediction Paul makes a parenthetical statement. **HEY, LOOK AT MY WRITING AND SIGNATURE!** Know that it is I, Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles who writes this letter.

## SUMMATION

Knowing the background and understanding the culture of the time adds tremendously to the understanding of the writings of Paul. Not until I looked at and understood the time and the people of that time did I realize the power and importance of the Thessalonian letters to the Christians of the first century. Paul will go on to write many more letters which will make up a majority of the New Testament.

These are the letters of Paul and the order they were written:

GALATIANS	49 AD
1 & 2 THESSALONIANS	51 AD
1 CORINTHIANS	55 AD
2 CORINTHIANS	56 AD
ROMANS	57 AD
EPHESIANS	60 AD
PHILIPPIANS	61 AD
PHILEMON	61 AD
COLOSSIANS	62 AD
1 TIMOTHY	63 AD
TITUS	64 AD
2 TIMOTHY	67 AD

