

# Notes on

## Paulus' 1st Letter to the Thessalonikans

### Authorship and Date

This is one of the undisputed letters of Paulus of Tarsus, and it is quite likely the earliest. The time is certainly before Gallio's appearance as proconsul (Ac 18), and certainly after Paulus' presence in Thessalonike (Ac 17). A time late in 51 CE or early in 52 CE is to be assigned. Tradition holds that Paulus wrote this letter from Korinth. He wrote this letter (before or after 2 Thess) shortly after meeting with the Thessalonikans, and since he mentions Athens in this letter, Timotheos may have joined him briefly in Athens with news from Thessalonike. Either that, or Paulus was in Korinth when writing this letter.

### Commentary

*Paulus and Silvanus and Timotheos  
To the Thessalonikan assembly in Father God and Lord Anointed Jesus.  
Hello and peace to you.*

A most traditional greeting.

*1:2 We always thank God about all of you, making a remembrance in our prayers, unceasingly remembering in the presence of our God and Father your deed of trust, and labor of love, and endurance of the hope of your Lord, Anointed Jesus.*

*Brothers beloved by God, we know your selection, because our message did not come to you in a message alone, but also in power and in holy breath and great confirmation, just as you know what we became among you on your account. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord by embracing the message in much affliction with joy and holy breath. And so, you became a type to all those who trust, in Makedonia and in Achaia.*

*For from you the Lord's message sounded forth not only in Makedonia and Achaia, but your trust toward God has gone out in every place. And so we have no need to say anything. For, regarding us, they are declaring what kind of introduction we had to you, and how you turned toward God from the idols, to be slaves to the living and true God and to endure for his son from the heavens, whom he raised from among the dead: Jesus, the one who is rescuing us from the coming anger.*

The first half of the letter (through the end of chapter three) is spent praising the strengths of the Thessalonikans and tracing out certain points of history for them -- in some cases reminding them. Paulus builds them up, so that what he has to say later will not be met with skepticism.

Here, he makes note of the fact that "holy breath" (miracles) provided "great confirmation" that God was with them. These miracles were not just displayed for them by Paulus and his associates; the Thessalonikans themselves received holy breath when they acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah. Paulus' praise for them here is that their example of trust was heard throughout the region.

His use of "the idols" here makes many commentators believe that he was addressing gentile converts. On the other hand, the Actions of the Envoys make it clear that he mainly visited the Jewish synagogues (17:1f.). Thus, those Greeks whom they converted were already proselytes to Judaism, and Lukas reports there that this caused the Jewish religious leaders to become jealous and angry toward Paulus.

So, the gentiles among his readers had turned not only to God but also to the Anointed One ("his son"). Had they wanted merely to avoid persecution from the local synagogue, they could have denounced Jesus and returned there. However, Paulus made a point of asserting that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead (because he was the Anointed One), and that only Messianic Judaism would survive the First Revolt (the "coming anger" that had been predicted by both Jesus and John the Baptizer).

Therefore, even this early in the letter, Paulus established for the readers that returning to the synagogues (in order to escape persecution) was no viable option.

*2:1 For you know, brothers that our introduction to you has not become worthless. On the contrary, after previously suffering and after being insulted, as you know, we gained the freedom of speech in our God to tell you the good message in much agony. For our advice was not from error, nor from uncleanness, nor in deceit, but just as we were tested by God to be entrusted with the good message, so we speak, not to be pleasing people but God who tests our hearts.*

This long section begins with a reminder, introduced by the familiar formula, "you know...." What did the readers know? They were aware that Paulus and his compatriots had been suffering on account of the message. They were aware that Paulus and his fellow authors genuinely believed that message...or why would they knowingly suffer? Thus, Paulus asserts that the message that they had received is clearly true.

*5 For we never came to you either with a message of flattery or with a cloaked greed. A divine one is witness! Neither did we seek glory from people, not from you nor from others. Since we are envoys of the Anointed One, we are empowered to be a burden, but we became babies in your midst. Since we longed for you, we were well pleased to pass on to you -- as a nursing mother cherishes her children -- not only God's good message but also our lives, because you have become beloved to us.*

What did Paulus have to gain from lying? They had given him no money, nor status, nor position. Instead, all he had received for his work (aside from their conversion) was persecution. Paulus described his role as harmless babies, and as nursing mothers, and he reminded the readers how obvious his affection was toward them.

*9 For, brothers, you remember our labor and hardship. Working night and day, so as not to burden any of you, we heralded God's good message to you. You and God are witnesses of how godly and justly and blamelessly we happened to be while we were with you, the trusting ones. And you know how we were advising and comforting you as a father does for his children, and we were testifying so that you would walk in a manner worthy of God, the one who is calling you into his kingdom and glory.*

They had offered him charity, but Paulus had refused. Instead, he and his friends had insisted on working. As he reminded them of that, they were to recall clearly what sort of friendly attitude he had shown among them -- and not only Paulus but his friends as well. Here, the messengers had been as comforting to the readers as a father would be toward beloved children. Thus, with three analogies Paulus has described the readers as being part of his family.

And just as a parent looks out for the well-being of his child, so also Paulus and his friends merely wanted the readers to follow God accurately. Therefore, in addition to the miracles that they had witnessed and performed, the readers also had the godly behavior of Paulus and his friends as a testimony that God had truly sent them to help the readers.

*13 And on this account also, we thank God unceasingly, because when you received God's message that you heard from us, you did not embrace it as a human message but just as it truly is -- a divine message, which is also working in you who trust.*

*For, brothers, you became imitators of those assemblies of God that are in Judea in Anointed Jesus, because you suffered the same things also from your own countrymen, just as they also suffered at the hands of the Judeans, the ones who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and persecuted us. Also, they are not pleasing to God and are in opposition to all people, forbidding us from speaking to the gentiles so that they would be saved, in order to always have their own sins filled up. But the anger has reached them in the end.*

Was it a surprise that there was such opposition among the Jewish religious leaders to the message about the Messiah? No. After again praising the readers for their receipt of what they themselves knew was a "divine message," he reminded them that the same sort of persecution was taking place in Judea. There, the Judean religious leaders had also persecuted the Messianic Christians. With this reminder, the authors add the detail that the Jewish leadership had tried to prevent them from teaching gentiles. Since quite a few of the readers are gentiles themselves, this would be taken personally.

*17 Now brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short season (physical presence, not heart), we tried more abundantly hard to see your faces, with much strong desire. And so, we wanted to come to you (indeed, I Paulus did) both once and also a second time, and the Enemy was hindering us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting in the face of our Lord Jesus in his presence? Isn't it indeed you? For you are our glory and joy.*

The authors now began to inform them of the things that had happened to them since they and the readers had been present together. Paulus interjects at this point how much he had wanted to see them again, but the Enemy prevented it. Here, the Enemy represents the opposition from the

Jewish leadership in Thessalonike. They were the enemy of the message. By comparison, the converted readers are the authors' hope, joy, and crown!

*3:1 So, when we could bear it no longer, we thought it good to be left alone in Athens. And we sent Timotheos, our brother and God's coworker in the good message of the Anointed One, to confirm you and to give advice on behalf of your trust, so that no one would be shaken during these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we were placed there for this reason.*

*For also, while we were going to you, we had previously told you that we were about to be afflicted, just as you also know it happened. On account of this, I also held out no longer and sent to know about your trust, lest somehow the tester might have tested you, and our labor might have become worthless.*

*But at the moment, Timotheos came to us from you and brought a good message to us about your trust and your love, and that you always have a good memory of us and long to see us, just as we also long for you. On account of this, brothers, we were comforted about you in all our affliction and agony, on account of your trust. So we are alive now because you are standing in the Lord.*

*For what gratitude are we able to give to God in return for all the joy which we are rejoicing in God's presence on account of you? Night and day we beg overabundantly to see your faces and to supply those things that are lacking in your trust. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way toward you, and may our Lord fill and make abundant your love for one another and for all, just as we also have for you. May these things happen to establish your hearts to be blameless in holiness in the face of our God and Father in the presence of our Lord Jesus with all of his holy ones. A-mein.*

Chapter three continues the historical detail. Paulus and his friends had fled to Athens, but even then, they were thinking of the Thessalonikans. As a result, Paulus sent his trusted friend, Timotheos, to visit with them.

Paulus interrupts the narrative to point out that the persecution factor was already known to them, for when he was in Thessalonike, he had told them that persecution was coming. Even about such matters, he had told them the truth.

The history continues. Timotheos returned to Paulus (in Athens?) with a good report about their progress. Paulus completes the section with numerous words of praise about his readers. The authors conclude the section with a blessing on the readers' behalf, hoping that God would complete their trust and their love -- for Trust and Love are the cornerstone of the message.

*4:1 Therefore brothers, this is what remains: we are begging you and advising you in Lord Jesus, so that you would be more abundant in walking as you received from us how it is necessary for you to walk. For you know what charges we gave you through the Lord Jesus, for this is what God wants: that you be made holy; that you abstain from sexual sin, with each of you knowing how to possess his vessel in holiness and honor, not in the passion of strong desire like the gentiles who do not know God do also; that no one surpass his brother and defraud him in a business matter, because Yahweh is an avenger regarding all of these things, just as we told you*

*before and fully testified. For God did not call us for uncleanness but in holiness. Consequently, the one who puts this aside is setting aside not a human being but God, the one who gave his holy breath to you.*

At this point, Paulus and his friends are ready to disclose their purpose for the letter. The readers, as we will see soon, had been hearing from the Jewish religious leaders that there was no reason to believe that the end of the Jewish state was near. There was no reason to believe anything Paulus had told them about Jesus being the Messiah. The religious leaders had introduced a great deal of doubt into the readers' minds, to the point that they appear to have been considering either joining the synagogue or abandoning Yahweh entirely.

First, Paulus addressed the problem that some of them might give up serving Yahweh. Reminding them that "Yahweh is an avenger," he notes that only those who "do not know God" live according to their own physical desires. Urging them not to return to such unclean practices, he reminded them that God, who had performed miracles through them, had called them to be holy -- devoted fully to him. They must trust God.

*But concerning brotherly love, you have no need for us to write to you. For you yourselves were taught by God to love one another. For also, you do this same thing to all those brothers in the whole of Makedonia. Now, brothers, we advise you rather to be more abundant in it and to strive ambitiously to be quiet and to practice your own matters and to work with your own hands, just as we charged you, so that to those who are outside you would be walking in an orderly manner and would have no need of anything.*

Rather than chastise them about abandoning the principle of Love, the authors realize that such a thing was not going to happen, for the readers had shown themselves to be very loving indeed. Therefore, Paulus and his companions urge the readers to continue even more in this, becoming outstanding examples for others to follow...even amidst persecution. "Be quiet," and "practice your own matters," and "work with your hands" are typical admonitions for this purpose. The readers need to simply go about their lives, knowing that judgment on their opponents would be coming soon.

*13 But brothers, we don't want you to be ignorant about those who have gone to sleep, so that you would not be sorrowful, like those remaining people who have no hope. For if we trust that Jesus died and rose, then we trust also that God will lead out with him those who fell asleep on account of Jesus. For we are telling you, in a statement of the Lord, that we who are living and who are left over until the Lord's presence will not reach more than those who have fallen asleep.*

*Because with a directive and with the voice of a chief messenger and with a trumpet, the Lord himself will descend from heaven, and those dead people who are in the Anointed One will be resurrected first. Afterwards, we who are living and who are left over will be snatched with them at the same time in clouds, into the air, to meet the Lord. And we will always be with the Lord in this way. And so, advise one another with these words.*

The Thessalonikans had expressed concern about the vindication of those who died prior to or during the First Revolt. Would things be better for them? Worse? Paulus' explanation is entirely allegorical. "Those who are left over...will not reach more than those who have fallen asleep." Simply put, it wouldn't be any better or worse to survive the war or to die in or before it. The symbolic explanation for this is that whether dead or alive, they would be with Jesus. Being "snatched...into the air" is symbolic of the good fortune to befall those who live. Having just indicated that the dead would be resurrected to be with God, Paulus could not then say that the living remain away from him. In their own way, the living would be with God, too. When would all of this happen (5:1)? Paulus does not know. But he knows the saying of Jesus, that the day was going to come suddenly. As Jesus also indicated, the faithful would not be caught unawares. When it happened, they would know it. Therefore, "we should be awake and sober." Just as Johannes, Jesus, and Peter urged people to be diligent, Paulus did also. Thus, there were two options. There was "anger" -- the destruction of Priestly Judaism (and access to God) which the readers' opponents were going to experience, and there was "salvation" -- continued access to God after the conclusion of the Revolt.

*5:1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to be written to. For you know yourselves accurately yourselves that as a thief comes in the night, so Yahweh's day is coming. When they say, "Here are peace and safety," then their sudden destruction will be standing, as labor pains come to the one who has a baby in her womb. And they will not escape.*

*But you, brothers, are not in darkness that the day should come upon you like a thief. So then, we should not sleep like those who remain. On the contrary, we should be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But we who belong to the day should be sober, armoring ourselves with the breastplate of trust and love and with our helmet being the hope of salvation. Because God did not set us here for wrath but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus, the one who died on our behalf, so that whether we are awake or sleeping, we would live together with him. So, advise one another and each one should build the other up, just as also you are doing.*

The Jewish leadership in Thessalonike had been telling them that no such devastation (of the temple in Jerusalem) was going to happen. Therefore, Paulus urged the readers to realize that the more they proclaim that such things were not going to happen, the closer the time was to their happening. The situation is likened to a pregnant woman complaining of her labor; as labor increases, the baby is closer to birth.

The readers would not be taken unawares but would realize that the destruction of the temple was coming. Therefore, they needed to continue in the principles taught by Jesus: the spiritual Torah of "trust and love," which Paulus described as armor -- protection from the coming anger. Given those two choices (anger or salvation), Paulus urged that the Thessalonikans take the obvious path: "awake or sleeping [alive or dead], we would live together with him." Therefore, since the Thessalonikans are doing so well spiritually (the preceding narrative), they should keep on doing what they have been doing: living for God.

*12 Now brothers, we beg you to get to know those who are laboring among you and who are outstanding examples to you in the Lord and who are admonishing you. And we beg you to regard them with overabundant love on account of their work.*

*Now brothers, we advise you to admonish those who are chaotic, to console those who are weak-souled, to support those who are weak, to be longsuffering toward all. Watch so that no one should repay a bad thing from anyone with a bad thing. On the contrary, always pursue the good thing, both for one another and for all.*

In order to assure that the Thessalonikan Christians would be strong enough to withstand persecution until after the Revolt, Paulus urged them to gravitate toward the outstanding examples among them. He had urged the readers to keep on working hard, and there were people among them who were already doing that. That work worked on the readers' behalf, and they should love those who were doing well. On the other hand, those who were endanger of leaving God -- the weak, the chaotic -- these people needed help. The authors urge the faithful readers to watch out for themselves and for one another, woking toward the principles of Love and Trust ("the good thing") and caring about one another.

*16 Always rejoice. Pray unceasingly. In everything give thanks, for this is what God wants for you in the Anointed One.*

The readers had been losing their focus. Thus, Paulus reminded them of several things that would help them retain that focus. Rejoice -- even when the situation looked grim. Why? They weren't to look at their own circumstances but needed to transcend their preoccupation with persecution. Pray and give thanks. Why? They needed to keep their direct link with God active.

*Do not quench the breath. Do not disregard prophecies, but examine all things. Cling to what is good; abstain from every kind of evil.*

*Now may the God of Peace himself make you wholly holy, and may your entirety -- the spirit and the soul and the body -- be preserved as blameless in the presence of our Lord, Anointed Jesus. The one who calls you is trustworthy; he will also do it.*

*Brothers, pray about us also. Greet all of the brothers with a holy kiss. I bind you by oath by the Lord to read the letter to all the holy brothers. The favor of our Lord, Anointed Jesus, be with you.*

The holy breath served as a sign from God that he was with them. Therefore, it was necessary for them to allow God to act through them. He was teaching them, and they needed to listen. When a prophecy came, they needed to examine it carefully, to see whether it was true. What was true and good needed to be regarded as the truth it was; what was wrong needed to be rejected.

Having said this, Paulus and his friends close the letter. A blessing on the readers indicates confidence that God would help the readers to stay focused on Jesus' teachings, rather than turning to Judaism or leaving God entirely. The letter was so important that Paulus urged that they read the letter, even as he also implored them to greet one another lovingly.

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