

## Paul's Thessalonian Letters

Paul, Silas, and Timothy visited the city of Thessalonica on their church-planting mission (Acts 17:1-9). After what appears to be a relatively short time people responded, and the Faith began to take hold. Immediately, jealous opposition rose up (v. 5) violently, forcing a nighttime escape. Soon after, Paul wrote two letters back to the newly-formed and persecuted church in that city.

It is common to assume that the sequence of Paul's letters is the order we see in our New Testaments (First Thessalonians, then Second Thessalonians). This may be the case. It may not be. Second Thessalonians (2Thess) may have been the first letter that Paul wrote, followed not long after by First Thessalonians (1Thess).

One may ask, "Why even raise the question?" They are both accepted as part of the canon. Both are recognized as written by the Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Both letters are God's Word. What difference does the order make?

At some level, it doesn't. We can study one or both of Paul's Thessalonian letters in any order, or we can study selected portions of one letter or the other. God's Word is valuable no matter how we read and study and learn from it. Better to ignore all questions of the order the letters were written rather than let that question become any hindrance to our study.

However, if our goal is to understand as much as we possibly can, we want to follow J.A. Bengel's comprehensive exhortation to "**Read nothing into the Scriptures, but draw everything from them, and suffer nothing to remain hidden that is really in them.**" The more we can understand about the context and the circumstances of any part of Scripture the better we will understand the content of what is written. The sequence of letters (or emails) we send to other people often matters. When I send follow-up correspondence to someone, I assume they received any previous letters, and that affects what I say in the new letter. On a few occasions I have read my incoming emails in the "Most Recent First" order. Sometimes that has caused confusion until I scroll down to an earlier email that I had not yet seen. The order of some correspondence may not be critical, but it certainly may affect the understanding of what is being discussed. What the writer meant and how the letters are understood by the recipients can depend on the sequence of the letters.

In the case of Paul's Thessalonian letters, the order has been considered by various scholars from both perspectives: 1Thess, then 2Thess; OR 2Thess, then 1Thess. Arguments and support can be made for each perspective by respected New Testament experts on both sides of the debate.

There is nothing unequivocal in either letter to confirm the order – Paul didn't write "First Thessalonians" at the top of the page as we see in our Bibles. F.F. Bruce says, "[T]he canonical sequence of the Pauline letters was generally determined on the basis of length rather than any critical considerations about historical sequence."<sup>1</sup> The only available clues we have are contained in the letters themselves. There are several points which I believe suggest that 2Thess was Paul's first letter to the church he and his companions had planted. Remember, none of these is indisputable, iron-clad proof of the precedence of 2Thess. But neither are there such proofs for the precedence of 1Thess. The goal is to see if the content of the letters help us to understand their order, which, in turn, might help us understand more of Paul's meaning in both letters.

1. We know from Acts 17 that the beginning church was already under violent opposition when Paul left. The persecution was so intense, and the persecutors so intent, that they followed Paul about

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*; The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 38.

forty miles (not an insignificant journey on foot!) to continue their persecution in Berea. 2Thess appears to be addressing ongoing, continuing persecution consistently using the present tense:

- a. “we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you **endure** [present tense, lit., ‘you are enduring’]” (2Thess 1:4).
  - b. “*This is* a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you **are suffering**” (2Thess 1:5).
  - c. “For after all it is *only* just for God to repay with affliction those who **afflict** [‘are afflicting’] you (2Thess 1:6).
  - d. “and *to give* relief to you who **are afflicted** [‘are being afflicted’]” (2Thess 1:7).
2. When 1Thess mentions suffering, Paul describes it in the past (aorist) tense at least twice:
- a. “You also **became** imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, <sup>7</sup>so that you **became** an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (1Thess 1:6-7)
  - b. “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also **endured** the same sufferings...” (1Thess 2:14).

Paul’s grammar (using the present tense) in 2Thess consistently expresses the current persecution and suffering he knows the church is facing as he writes. In 1Thess he looks back to the trials they faced (past tense) and then affirms and rejoices in their faithfulness through the trials.

Perhaps Paul wrote 2Thess (from Athens? Acts 17:16) shortly after his hasty departure from Thessalonica when the violent attacks on the church were foremost in his concerns. A short time later (perhaps after a report back from Timothy, see below), he wrote another letter (1Thess) after at least some of the persecution had diminished, and he commended the church for their successful endurance through it.

3. Paul shares a mutual encouragement with the church in both letters: he is encouraged by their “perseverance and faith” (2Thess 1:4) and their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father” (1Thess 1:3). Sharing how they encouraged him was meant to encourage them in turn. Paul did not limit that encouragement to himself but eagerly shared it with others using the young Thessalonian church as an example of a commendable response to suffering for the Faith. Note that there is a subtle difference in his sharing their story between the two letters:
- a. “we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure” (2Thess 1:4).
  - b. “you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. <sup>8</sup>For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. <sup>9</sup>For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1Thess 1:7-9)

As Paul is writing his first letter (our 2Thess), he wants them to know how he and Silas and Timothy are telling their story to others. By the time he writes again (1Thess), their reputation has spread even beyond Paul’s message. Others have heard of their reception of the gospel and continuing faithfulness in abandoning idols in favor of following God.

4. In 1Thess Paul recounts how he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica because of his deep concern for their safety during the persecution (1Thess 3:1-5). Timothy may have carried a letter expressing Paul's concerns and encouragement to them (our 2Thess letter). When Timothy returned with the good report of the church's faithfulness (1Thess 6-8), Paul wrote to them again (the letter we have as 1Thess) expressing his relief and his joy in them (2:19-20).
5. If 2Thess was Paul's first letter to encourage them through the initial persecution, some of his words may have raised more questions for the Thessalonian church. He wanted to reassure them that this was not the end, that the Day of the Lord had not already happened, and that there were still events that had to occur first (2:2-3). But that might cause concern among the church: If the Lord's coming is delayed, what about our believing friends and relatives who die (or who have already died) before the Lord comes? Timothy could have brought this question (and others) back to Paul, prompting the Apostle to write back to the church (in 1Thess) explaining in more detail the status of "those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (4:14, cf. vs. 13, 15) and the grief-relieving reassurance that they would actually rise to the Lord first at His coming.
  - a. Paul's mention of "a letter from us" in 2Thess (2:2) is taken by some to refer to 1Thess. This would be an indication that the sequence of the letters is the same order as in our Bibles, 1Thess, then 2Thess. But this is an unlikely inference for at least two reasons.
    - i. First, the phrase in 2Thess 2:2 is "a letter as if from us" (NASB), "a letter seeming to be from us" (ESV), "allegedly from us" (NIV) (ἐπιστολῆς ὡς δι' ἡμῶν). Paul wanted to guard against panic or fear inspired by forgeries or teaching attributed to him by those wanting to damage the church. This concern is indicated by the inclusion of his personal handwriting in 2Thess 3:17 as well as in Galatians 6:11 as a way of authenticating his letters from counterfeits.
    - ii. Second, it is difficult to see how the 2Thess denial that the Day of the Lord had already passed could be inferred from anything Paul said in 1Thess (if 1Thess was indeed the first letter).
6. Paul's elaboration on their questions about the end times continues in 1Thess 5:1, "Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you." They already had his first letter (2Thess) where he had written extensively about the events that would precede the Day of the Lord. Since no one knew for certain when those events would happen, the Thessalonians themselves already "know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night" (1Thess 5:2).
7. Even in the midst of the violent persecution described in Acts 17 and addressed by Paul in 2Thess 1:4) he gave them other very practical instructions in 2Thess 3:10-15, "For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies." (v. 11). During difficult times it is easy to neglect normal responsibilities. Paul had addressed this tendency during his presence: "For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either" (v.10). In 2Thess he is reminding them, knowing that affliction can lead to irresponsible behavior that would further undermine the stability of the church. Paul address this theme again in 1Thess 4:9-12. His brief comment in 2Thess about not allowing slackers to eat may have been over-applied, and his clarification in 1Thess was an emphasis on a loving response to the brothers.
  - a. This section (beginning at 1Thess 5:1 begins with the phrase, "Now as to..." or "Now concerning" (Περὶ δὲ), probably referring back to issues previously addressed that need more clarity. The phrase also appears at 1Thess 5:1 when Paul continues his explanation

of the Day of the Lord. Both of these instances could be pointing back to topics raised in 2Thess and questions the church had in response. (Interestingly, the phrase Περὶ δὲ is not used at all in 2Thess.)

Once again, none of these arguments is conclusive, and none of them should affect our confidence in Scripture and our desire to study and learn and apply the truth of Scripture to our lives and in our relationships with others. But the weight of the available internal evidence suggests that reading and studying 2Thess as the immediate sequel to Paul's experience in Acts 17 will be profitable. Then 1Thess can be read and understood as the continuing story of Paul's affectionate care for that church.

As you read the letters, be alert to any other suggestions that might shed light on the order in which Paul wrote them. And certainly review the comparisons of passages mentioned above. If the inferences drawn in this essay are incorrect, how would the passages relate to each other? What are the connections between related topics if 1Thess was Paul's first letter, followed later by 2Thess?

In what order did Paul write his letters to the church at Thessalonica? Use this unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) question to stimulate you to deeper and more fruitful study of God's word regardless of what conclusion you draw.

### *For Further Reading:*

Many commentaries on 1 & 2 Thessalonians discuss the question of the sequence of Paul's writing (although some briefer, more devotionally oriented commentaries do not).

For example, the case for the precedence of 1Thess is developed in:

Robert L. Thomas, Ralph Earle & D. Edmond Hiebert, *1, 2 Thessalonians – 1, 2 Timothy – Titus; The Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 77,ff.

Support for the precedence of 2Thess is discussed in:

Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians; The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 38, ff.