

Journeys With God

2 Thessalonians

Introduction

The Road Upward:

Revisiting the Future

2 Thessalonians



The City of Thessalonica

The city of Thessalonica (today it is called Salonica or Thessaloniki) is located on the coast of Macedonia (northern Greece). The city was originally built beside a large natural harbor (called the Thermaic Gulf) on the Aegean Sea. At the time it was given the name of Therma, because of the many hot springs nearby. In 315 B.C. it was renamed Thessalonica after the half-sister of Alexander the Great.

When Rome conquered Macedonia in 168 B.C., the city was made capital of the province of Macedonia. At the same time it was given the status of a “free city,” allowing it to be ruled by its own citizens, instead of the Roman Empire. By the first century A.D. it had a population of about 200,000 people. With its large, well-protected harbor, and the fact that it was a key city on the Via Egnatia (the main east-west highway of the Roman Empire), Thessalonica became a center for political and economic activity. It also became a trade-port for goods from all over the Roman Empire. As a result, it became known as “the mother of all Macedonia.”

The city was inhabited by a combination of Greeks, Romans, and Jews. The people of Thessalonica worshipped many gods, but a particular favorite was Jupiter, the father of Hercules, the alleged founder of Therma’s ancient royal family. It had a celebrated amphitheater, where gladiatorial contests were put on for the amusement of the citizens, and a circus for public games.

Historical Background

When Paul initially arrived in Thessalonica he went to the Jewish synagogue, witnessing to them for three Sabbaths that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, for whom all Jewish believers had been waiting. As a result of Paul’s persuasive testimony, some of the Jews converted to Christianity along with a large number of Greeks who had previously become believers in the Jewish religion, as well as quite a few of the leading women of the city. This mass conversion caused some of the devout Jews to become angry and they accused the Christians of supporting another king beside Caesar.

As a result of the uproar that was caused, Paul and Silvanus were secretly escorted out of town by night and they headed to Berea, some ten miles or so to the south. Once again Paul headed to the local synagogue and witnessed that Jesus is the Christ. And, just like in Thessalonica, many of the Jews, Greeks, and prominent women believed. But when the Jews of Thessalonica heard that Paul was gaining converts in Berea, they stirred up trouble in Berea, so Paul headed to Athens while Silvanus and Timothy remained in Berea.

After Paul arrived in Athens, he sent word to Silvanus and Timothy that they should join him there, which they apparently did a short time later. Then Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica to encourage and comfort the church there and Silvanus was sent to Philippi, while Paul travelled to Corinth, about forty-five miles west of Athens. It was after Timothy and Silvanus rejoined Paul in Corinth that he wrote 1 Thessalonians in response to Timothy's good report of the church.

As noted elsewhere in this introduction, Silvanus and Timothy were both companions of Paul only during his stay in Corinth. It is likely, therefore, that this second letter was written from Corinth shortly after the first one was written.

Who Wrote This Letter?

As in his first letter to Thessalonica, Paul twice in the letter identifies himself as the author (**2 Thessalonians 1:1** and **2 Thessalonians 3:17**). Paul's two co-workers, Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy were with him when he wrote this letter. The style, vocabulary, and doctrinal content strongly support Paul as the author. The external evidence of this being written by the Apostle Paul is even stronger than with 1 Thessalonians. Early in the life of the church he was cited as the author by Polycarp, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Irenaeus. There are no indications in the writings of the early church that there was any dispute of Paul's authorship of this letter.

From Where Was This Letter Written?

There are some, based on the questionable post-script of the letter, who believe this was written from Athens. However, historical evidence suggests that Paul left Athens and moved on to Corinth where the first letter to the Thessalonians was written. There is no evidence to suggest that Paul returned to Athens except to travel through. Also, external evidence suggests that Paul was accompanied by both Silvanus and Timothy for a short time and only in Corinth. Since 1 Thessalonians was most certainly written from Corinth, it is highly unlikely that this letter was written from Athens. It is more likely that it was written from Corinth soon after the first letter was written.

When Was This Letter Written?

The content of this letter addresses nearly the same issues as in the first letter, persecution, eager anticipation of the soon return of our Lord, and members neglecting their duties and responsibilities. Also, Paul includes Silvanus and Timothy as his fellow workers in the introductory salutation, indicating that little had changed either in Thessalonica or Corinth. Because of this it appears that this letter was written soon after the first, perhaps three to six months later. It is possible that the person who delivered the first letter had returned with news that the issues addressed in the first letter had not been corrected, prompting Paul to write this second letter.

Why Was This Letter Written?

One of the main subjects of Paul's first letter to the Christians at Thessalonica was regarding the soon coming of the Lord. Apparently, some in the church had interpreted this to mean that the event was so near that further attention to earthly matters was unnecessary. There is also evidence, based on **2 Thessalonians 2:2**, that a forged letter supposedly sent by Paul had been received by the Thessalonians proclaiming that the Day of the Lord had already arrived, that the Savior was about to appear, and that the end of the world was at hand. As a result, this letter was written to correct such false beliefs.

Nowhere in his first letter had Paul described events that must take place before the rapture would occur. In this letter he is very specific about things which must happen before the Day of the Lord could occur, including: the rapture must occur first, the restrainer must be removed, and the man of sin must be revealed. As a result, Paul makes it very clear that there is a definite distinction between the rapture, the Day of the Lord, and the return of Christ to reign in glory.

The outline of this letter can be broken down into roughly four subjects:

- Commendation toward the Thessalonian Christians for their progress in Christian faith and encouragement for them to continue to persevere under the present persecution (2 Thessalonians 1:3-12)
- Correction of doctrinal error regarding the rapture and the Day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12)
- Thanksgiving and prayer for the saints (2 Thessalonians 2:13-17)
- Exhortations for continued growth and discipline within the church (2 Thessalonians 3:1-15)