

THE THESSALONIAN LETTERS

Just to show how ‘mixed up’ is the order of letters in the New Testament, we now return to one of the first letters Paul ever wrote. He came to Thessalonica in the north of Greece on the Second Journey, and left the town in a hurry when his Jewish enemies stirred up the people against him. He was worried about his new converts, and sent Timothy to them. When Timothy and Silas came back with good news, he at once wrote the First Letter to the Thessalonians to encourage them to stand fast.

1 Thessalonians

Paul commends the brethren because they had not kept their new faith-lamp under a bed (to use Jesus’ expression), but had sounded it out to the whole surrounding area. They had suffered persecution from the Jews as a result. He wished he could come himself to support them, but Satan (literally ‘the adversary’, i.e. the Jewish opposition), had kept him out (1Thessalonians 2:18). Now he was relieved to hear from Timothy that their faith was strong, and they remembered him with affection.

He reminds them of the instructions he gave them – how they were to steer clear from sexual immorality, and love one another, and work for their living. Then in the fourth chapter he slips in an important summary of the Christian hope of life after death. It reads as though some of their members had died, and they had been mourning for them. Death is not the end for the believer, Paul says. When Jesus returns at the Second Coming, the very first thing he will do is to raise his dead friends, even before he greets the living believers. It will be like Mount Sinai, when God descended with a trumpet blast to call Moses and the elders of Israel up into the clouds on the mountain. So Jesus

will gather to him the faithful, including those who are asleep in the grave.

Every chapter of this short letter has mentioned the return of the Lord. Paul ends with a reminder that when Jesus does come, it will be like a burglar in the middle of the night. He warns them to keep awake and watch – words that still apply today.

2 Thessalonians

The second letter sends greetings from Paul, Silas and Timothy – the same trio found in the first epistle. It seems this letter followed swiftly on the heels of the first. The apostle is impressed by the steadfastness of the Thessalonians under persecution, which was still on-going, and he tells them God will reward them. When Jesus returns, he will bring a fiery judgment on all who have refused to hear the gospel, and peaceful rest to those who have suffered for its sake. However, he continues, they should not expect the Return immediately. There must first be the development of an apostasy (a falling away from the faith), in which a leader would set himself up as if he were God on earth, enthroned in God’s temple, the church (2 Thessalonians 2:3,4). This development would be encouraged by false signs and miracles which would deceive people (Jesus had warned the apostles about the coming Anti-Christ in the same terms). This system of false religion would then be swept away by Jesus at his coming.

The third chapter emphasizes again that believers are expected to earn their food and clothes by working, and not to sponge on others (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12). Paul had set them an example while he was with them, making tents to earn money, and preaching only in his spare time. He signs off the letter himself (it had probably been dictated) so that they would know it was

genuine, and prays the grace of Jesus would be with them.

© Copyright David Pearce, used with permission.