

Study 7: Thessalonians & Philippians

Thessalonians were almost certainly the first letters of the New Testament to be written. Philippians is included in this study because of the geographical location. The Philippian letter was one of Paul's "Prison Epistles" and written during his two-year house arrest in Rome.

Introduction

Thessalonians – Background

Thessalonians – The City

Thessalonians – Date and Occasion

1st Thessalonians – Brief Outline

2nd Thessalonians – Brief Outline

Philippians – Background

Philippians – The City

Philippians – Date and Occasion

Philippians – Style of the Letter

Philippians – Brief Outline

Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read the notes as a review of the study
- Imagine you were a Christian in Thessalonica:
 - How would you feel about Paul's treatment in the city?
 - How would you react when you received the letter?
 - (Remember, you've only been a Christian for a few weeks!)
- What kind of reputation did the Thessalonian church and the Philippian church have?
- Skim-read Galatians & Romans (& Corinthians if you have the time)
 - Who are the major players in these letters?
 - What are the major issues?

Notes for study 7: Thessalonians & Philippians

Introduction

The two letters to the church at Thessalonica were almost certainly the first letters of the New Testament to be written (although some people take an earlier date for James). Now that we have pieced together Paul's movements from the book of Acts, we can look at his letters. I have included Philippians in this study because Philippi is geographically located close to Thessalonica. The Philippian letter was one of Paul's "Prison Epistles" and written much later during his two-year house arrest in Rome.

Thessalonians – Background

After establishing the church in Thessalonica, Paul was forced to leave after staying for only a few weeks (probably about 12 weeks). His host family was arrested for treason, and he still had much to teach the new Christians, and they still had many questions.

Paul had travelled on to Berea where he left behind Silas and Timothy, and was then escorted to Athens. He sent a message for them to join him in Athens (Acts 17:13-15).

Timothy and Silas came and joined him whilst he was still in Athens, and Paul sent them both straight back to Thessalonica to see how the church was doing (1 Thess 3:1-2, 5). We do not know how long he stayed in Athens, but it is of the order of a few months.

By the time Silas and Timothy returned from Macedonia (18:5; specifically Thessalonica, but probably also Berea), with news from the churches, Paul had left Athens for Corinth (Acts 18:1), which was the leading city in Greece at that time, and greatly overshadowed Athens.

They returned with many questions which prompted Paul to write the first letter to the Thessalonian church (1 Thess 3:6), and sent it via Timothy again. It is likely that Timothy and Silas also brought some money for Paul's support from the churches in Macedonia (2 Cor 11:9), which allowed him to spend less time at his secular work, and "...*devote himself completely to the word...*". Upon Timothy's return with another report and many more questions, Paul immediately wrote the second letter, probably sending Timothy back again to deliver it.

Thessalonians – The City

Thessalonica was on the Egnatian Way, the Roman road that lead from Rome to Constantinople (then called Byzantium, and now Istanbul). With a sheltered harbour, it was the capital and a seaport for the second district and the whole Roman Province of Macedonia. However, unlike Philippi it was not a Roman Colony. Today, the modern city of Saloniki is built on the site.

The first century writer Strabo describes Thessalonica as the most populous town in Macedonia. Other writers describe it as the metropolis of Macedonia and a place of great magnitude. Prolific coinage suggests a high level of prosperity. The population included a large Roman element and a Jewish colony, with some estimates of a population of 200,000 at the time of Paul's visit.

Paul began his preaching in the Synagogue (Acts 17:2). Some of the Jews, and a large number of the Greek proselytes were converted. The Jews reacted by stirring up a rent-a-mob and accusing Paul of treason. They raided the house of his host (Jason) looking for Paul, and when they couldn't find him, took Jason into custody. They accused Paul of stirring up trouble by teaching that there is another King apart from Caesar (ie treason) in the person of Jesus (Acts 17:5-7).

Whilst Acts describes *the three sabbath days* that Paul taught in the Synagogue, his stay in the city was much longer, since the church at Philippi sent money for his support on several occasions (Php 4:15-16). The period in Thessalonica was probably more like 3 months, as during that period Paul also worked with his own hands to support himself (2 Thess 3:7-9).

The church is therefore made up of the Jewish, Greek proselytes, as well as Gentiles. The city culture is Macedonian, under Roman influence but as a “Free City” not Roman control.

Thessalonians – Date and Occasion

The brethren were “babes in Christ” and Paul is concerned for their welfare. Both letters were written almost together, during Paul’s stay in Corinth on the second journey, and are therefore the oldest letters (that we have or know about) of Paul’s writings, and probably the oldest writings that make up the New Testament. The occasion was to answer the questions that were raised concerning the resurrection (both letters), and they are both dated at AD 52, most likely late 52 AD, as Paul was in Corinth from 52 to 53 AD, covering a period of 18 months. Both letters were probably written early in the period.

1st Thessalonians – Brief Outline

The outlines are adapted from Fee & Stewart¹

1:1:1	Salutation
1:1:2-1:1:10	Thanksgiving for their conversion
1:2:1-12	Recalling Paul’s Ministry
1:2:13 - 16	Thanksgiving – and Thessalonians suffering – renewed
1:2:17 – 1:3:10	Paul, the Thessalonians, and Timothy
1:3:11 -13	Prayer report
1:4:1- 8	Sexual purity
1:4:9 - 12	Love, and working with one’s own hands
1:4:13-18	The future of Christians who have died
1:5:1- 11	The coming of Christ
1:5:12 - 22	Concluding exhortations
1:5:23 -28	Concluding prayer and greetings

Despite the fact that Paul had had to leave quickly and unexpectedly, he had not forgotten about the Thessalonians and *always thanked God for them all and continually remembered them in his prayers* (1:1:2). In like manner, he requests the Thessalonians to *pray for him* (1:5:25). They had their hearts alight for the Lord with their *work produced by faith, their labour prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope* (1:1:3). They needed to ensure that the flame was kept alight, and that they *did not put out the Spirit’s fire* (1:5:19). When Paul was there, he was an example to the brethren, and they knew *how he lived amongst them* (1:1:5) so much so, that *they became imitators of Paul* (1:1:6) and *a model to all believers* (1:1:7). They were evangelistic, since *the Lord’s message rang out from them and their faith was known everywhere* (1:1:8).

However, they needed to *show respect to those who were working amongst them* (1:5:12) and *hold them in the highest regard* (1:5:13). There was some concern for the state of those who had died in the Lord, but they need not worry since *the one who calls us is faithful* (1:5:24) and *we need to keep blameless at his coming* (1:5:23), as *we wait for His Son from heaven* (1:1:10). As confirmation of His power, *the gospel did not just come with words, but also with power with the Holy Spirit* (1:1:5) and the ultimate proof is *Jesus having been raised from the dead* (1:1:10). Therefore we are assured of our salvation and *Jesus rescuing us from the coming wrath* (1:1:10).

We cannot rest on our laurels, and just as Paul set an example among them, so they should *warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, and be patient with everyone* (1:5:14)

¹ Fee & Stewart, p.367

2nd Thessalonians – Brief Outline

There is a very strong similarity between the situation in the church in the first and the second letters. It has not changed substantially, and the second letter addresses issues that had been raised by Paul's writing in the first letter.

This outline of the letter is adapted from Fee & Stewart²

2:1:1 - 12	Salutation, thanksgiving, and prayer
2:2:1 - 12	Correction about the Second Coming
2:2:13 - 17	Application and prayer
2:3:1 - 5	Request for prayer
2:3:6 - 15	Concerning those who are idle and disruptive
2:3:16 -18	Concluding matters

Paul gives a rather long introduction (the whole of chapter 1) and a very short conclusion (2:3:16 – 18). He continually emphasis the divine and messianic nature of Jesus “...*the Lord Jesus Christ...*” (2:1:1; 2:1:2; 2:1:12; 2:3:18), and His relationship to God the Father (2:1:1; 2:1:2; 2:1:6; 2:1:8; 2:1:12).

The Thessalonians were continuing their growth as christians “...*your faith is growing more and more ... the love every one of you has for each other is increasing...*” (2:1:3). This is likely linked to “...*the persecutions and trials (they were) enduring...*” and their “...*perseverance and faith...*” in facing them (2:1:4). Whilst they “...*are suffering...*” (2:1:5), they can be assured that “...*God is just...*” and “...*He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you...*” (2:1:6). In the face of all this, “...*you will be found worthy...*” (2:1:5). The time of retribution is coming, “...*when the Lord Jesus (will be) revealed from heaven ... to punish those who do not know God...*” (2:1:8). However, the Thessalonians would be blessed, because they were “...*among all those who have believed...*” (2:1:10), and they will be found “...*worthy of His calling...*” (2:1:11). Because of these assurances, “...*the Lord of peace ... give(s) you peace...*” (2:3:16).

The theme of peace runs through the introduction and conclusion (2:1:2; 2:1:12; 2:3:16; 2:3:18)

A considerable portion of the letter (most of chapter 2, and quite a few allusions in chapter 1) deal further with the Second Coming of the Lord. The question about the dead in Christ was answered in the first letter, and is not dealt with again in the second letter. However, the question about the timing of the Lord's return must have raised further concerns, and Paul deals with it again, and in more detail than in the first letter. Apparently some had concluded that the Day of the Lord had already arrived, and were purporting that Paul was teaching this (2:2:2).

The idle people are still giving trouble, despite his call for correction in the first letter. It is time for them to be disciplined, and he spends quite a bit of time on the matter in the third chapter.

Philippians – Background

Philippians stands out amongst the New Testament letters, because of the way in which Paul opens up to the brethren. He gives great insight into the “inner Paul” and we can begin to see the things that are driving him onwards. The letter is written as a “friendship letter” where the two parties are “bound together” – but as Christians, they are also bound to Christ. And of course, the symbolism of that bondage is brought about by Paul's imprisonment.

Paul, Silas and Timothy came to Philippi on the second journey after visiting the Galatian churches, and being led to Troas where they were joined by Luke (Acts 16:6-12). Paul then made a second visit to Philippi in A.D. 55-56 on his third missionary journey (Ac 20:1-6), passing

² Fee & Stewart, p.371

through the city twice: on his outward trip toward Corinth and again on his return on the way to Jerusalem. Luke rejoined him at that time after having (apparently) spent 5 years in Philippi.

Philippians – The City

Philippi was “...a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia...” (Acts 16:12 NIV), located on the eastern side of the Macedonian plain, and importantly, on the *Egnation Way*.

Roman colonies enjoyed self-government, freedom of paying taxes to the Emperor, and the same rights as those who lived in Italy – Roman dress, language, coinage, and holidays. Citizenship was a great benefit to the Philippians and provided a sense of great pride (Phil 1:27; 3:20).

The area around Philippi “...encompassed an admirably fertile territory, a lake, rivers, dockyards, and productive gold mines...”³ It was strategically placed in the region adjacent to the Greek controlled Thrace, and the Romans would have used the area as a stronghold to enforce their control of the Empire. Philippi was a walled city, had a theatre that could seat about 50,000 people. Some archaeological work in the early 20th century has uncovered several pagan shrines, and other civic buildings such as grain shops and a library.³

There must have been only a small Jewish population, as there was no synagogue in Philippi. Some Jewish women were converted, most notably Lydia from Thyatira, and then the Philippian Jailer and the members of his house.

Paul and Silas were asked to leave the city by the magistrates who had illegally imprisoned them (Acts 16:39), and they moved on to Thessalonica. During this time, the very young church at Philippi “...sent time and again for my necessities...” (4:16). Clearly, the Philippians felt a great bond with Paul – one no doubt fostered by Luke.

Of the named people in the church at Philippi, three have Greek names (Lydia, Euodia, Syntyche) and one (Clement) has a Roman name. Epaphroditus has Greek origins, and he certainly is a Macedonian from Philippi. This gives us some useful insight into the make-up and culture of the Philippian church. It was strongly Gentile, although undoubtedly with some Jewish members.

Philippians – Date and Occasion

Conybeare & Howson note that “... It was written towards the conclusion of this first imprisonment, because (A) he expects the immediate decision of his cause; (B) Enough time had elapsed for the Philippians to hear of his imprisonment, send Epaphroditus to him, hear of Epaphroditus’s arrival and sickness, and send back word to Rome of their distress (2:26)...”. Also “...It was written *after* Colossians and Philemon; both for the preceding reason, and because Luke was no longer at Rome, as he was when those were written; otherwise he would have *saluted* a church in which he had laboured, and would have ‘cared in earnest for their concerns’ (2:20)...”⁴ This places the date of the letter in the second year of Paul’s Roman imprisonment in AD 62-63.

It is clearly one of Paul’s *Prison Epistles*. He talks throughout the letter of his *bondage* (1:7; 1:13; 2:17; 2:23). It is from the first Roman imprisonment that the letter is placed. Paul mentions the palace guard (literally the praetorian guard 1:13), and during his first Roman imprisonment he was in the custody of the Praetorian Prefect (Acts 28:16), and he sends greetings to the Philippians from “...those of Caesar’s household...” (4:22).

³ Conybeare & Howson p.725.

⁴ Conybeare & Howson p.725.

The occasion of the letter is Epaphroditus' return to Philippi. He was a Macedonian from Philippi, and is described by Paul as: *your messenger*; and *he was longing for you all* so clearly he had come from Philippi, and had been sent by the church there with a gift (certainly of a considerable sum of money) to Paul (4:18).

Philippians – Style of the Letter

Gordon Fee comments⁵ that the character / style of the book is a “friendship letter”. A strong bond existed between the Philippians and Paul, and the friendship was linked and forged like a contract. When someone attacked Paul, they immediately became the enemies of the Philippians and vice-versa. The Philippian letter is full of examples of this forged relationship and deep affection that goes with it.

Philippians – Brief Outline

The following outline is taken from Fee & Stuart⁶

- 1:1-11 *Salutation, Thanksgiving, and Prayer*
- 1:12-26 *Paul's Circumstances: Reflections on Imprisonment*
- 1:27-2:18 *The Philippian's Circumstances: Exhortation to Steadfastness and Unity*
- 2:19-30 *What's Next? Regarding Paul's and Their Circumstances*
- 3:1-4:3 *The Philippian's Circumstances Again: Warning and Appeal*
- 4:4-9 *Concluding Exhortations*
- 4:10-20 *Acknowledging Their Gift: Friendship and the Gospel*
- 4:21-23 *Closing Greetings*

After telling the Philippians about how things are with himself (1:12-26), he explains that his suffering in Rome has actually furthered the gospel (1:12). His life's direction is set by his relationship to Christ – “...to live or die means Christ...” (1:21). He is concerned for unity amongst the brethren, and sets out the attitudes to promote it (humility and putting others first) and those that destroy it (vain conceit and selfish ambition) (2:1-4). Christ is set forth as the ultimate example (2:5-11).

Paul is anxious to return to visit the Philippians again, and is sending Epaphroditus with the letter, but he hopes to send Timothy shortly, and is eager to know more about their welfare. (2:19-30).

Friendship means common enemies (the Philippian's enemies are Paul's enemies and vice-versa), and he warns them about the Jews, and tells them that Christians are the true Jews in God's sight (3:1-3). The Jews might boast about their heritage, but Paul can out-do all of them! (3:4-12). But all of that is nothing compared to our blessings and heritage in Christ (3:8-15), and he motivates the Philippians to follow his example (3:15-19). If we truly follow Christ, we will recognise the temporal nature of earthly things and that our citizenship is in heaven (3:19-4:3). Two sisters known for their love and their good works (that is what their names mean), need to learn to focus on heavenly things and get on with one another (4:2-4).

The final exhortations are shaped by the situation in Philippi and Paul's situation under house arrest in Rome. They needed to learn to be at peace with the situation and rejoice because of our salvation (4:4-13). In closing, Paul reminds them of how much they had sacrificed for him, and shows his indebtedness to them (4:14-19).

⁵ Fee Gordon D “Paul's Letter to the Philippians” The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, ISBN 0-8028-2511-7 ‘Philippians as a letter’

⁶ Fee & Stuart p. 356