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1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonica is Paul's earliest surviving letter and the oldest preserved document in Christianity. Scholars trace it to about 50 or 51 C.E. In it, Paul reminds the Thessalonian believers of the past effects, present demands, and future promises of the gospel. It is suggested that Paul wrote it from Corinth 20 years or so after the resurrection of Christ (Talor). According to Acts (c. 17), Paul, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy had established a Christian community in Thessalonian in Macedonia (Northern Greece) on his second missionary journey with great success winning some Jews and many Gentiles. But, before he and his colleagues could satisfactorily finish their foundational work, they were restrained and opposed by both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 17:5-9). The reason for this is because some Jews viewed Paul's Christocentric gospel as an affront to Judaism, and in like manner Gentiles as a competition against the existing pagan religions resulting in their expulsion from the city (Talor). The sudden departure from Thessalonica weighed heavily on Paul's heart and he was uneasy about his mission there. So, he sent Timothy to investigate if what they have worked so hard for "night and day" (1 Thess. 2:9) has come to naught, and to strengthen converts in their faithfulness and moral life exhorting them to stand firm despite their sufferings. In response to Timothy's report, he writes this letter to address eschatological and ethical manners, but more importantly, the witness of holiness living and hope in a pagan world.

Thessalonian is the second-largest city and the capital of Macedonia, Greece. It is named after Alexander the Great half-sister, Thessaloniki. It was a port city- the only major one on the Via Egnatia- of considerable size, economic, and political importance (Cartwright). During Paul's ministry, Thessalonica was a free city (not a Roman province) that had an autonomous government and maintain its Greek heritage. Like many Greco-Roman cities, Thessalonica was religiously pluralistic. It was the center of imperial cult (where emperors were viewed as gods and worshipped), and the site to many temples of a plethora of gods such as; Isis, Osiris, Dionysus, and Cabirus- a god of fertility and protection at sea (Gorman). In sum, everyone in Thessalonica was an idol and emperor worshipper before Paul and his companions arrived there to announce and teach the Gospel of Christ (1 Thess. 1:9).

The Apostle's central message was to encourage the Thessalonians for growing in their faith (1:1-8), and from turning away from idols to follow Jesus as they anxiously wait for his return (1:9-10). But more importantly, to strengthen them by reminding them of his initial proclamation and by reinforcing the exhortation he had given them on the founding visit (4:1-2). Understanding the historical, cultural, and spiritual context of the letter shed light on the significance of the goddess Dionysus and Cabirus for understanding Paul's' discussion of sexual morality (4:1-9) and likewise, civic cults for understanding the eschatology in 4:13-18 and the present tribulation there. It gave me a grand scheme to understand the content of the letter.

Works Cited

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