

Introduction
1 Thessalonians

The Apostle Paul visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey in the early 50s A.D. According to Acts 16, Paul and Silas had just been released from imprisonment in Philippi after enduring a severe beating at the hands of an angry crowd. While in prison, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns. They were released when it was discovered they were Roman citizens who did not have a proper trial (Acts 16).

Having left Philippi they traveled 100 miles west to Thessalonica. It was their practice to go and preach in the local synagogues, which is what they did. According to Acts 17 they reasoned with them for three Sabbaths showing them from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah who had to suffer and rise again from the dead. His preaching led to a few Jewish converts but many Greeks came to believe. However, many of the Jews rejected what Paul was preaching and drove them out of the city. Paul and Silas left the city by night and traveled 70 miles west to Berea. The Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians because they listened to Paul and Silas then examined the Scriptures daily to see if what they were teaching was correct.

Why written?

Paul had left Thessalonica under duress and was probably writing this letter from Corinth where he had settled for approximately 18 months. He was concerned about them growing in their faith and was thus encouraging them to stand firm and continue to mature. Paul focuses in on three basic areas.

Sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:1—3)

Paul was not in Thessalonica very long but many became believers when Paul preached and he desired that they would become mature in Christ. He encouraged them to walk worthy of God in spite of being persecuted (2:12). He not only wrote letters to encourage them but he also sent Timothy to establish them in Christ (3:2). Timothy gave Paul good news that the Thessalonians were standing fast in the Lord (3:8). It was Paul's yearning that they might strive to perfect what was lacking in their faith (3:10).

Perseverance in suffering (Acts 17:5—8)

Many of the Thessalonians, especially the Greeks, received the words preached by Paul enthusiastically and were thus persecuted by unbelieving Jews (1:6; 2:2). Paul did warn them that they would experience tribulation just as he had at the hands of the Jews (3:1—4). As Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 1:4, they were patiently enduring and their faith was growing in spite of their persecutions and tribulations.

Instruction concerning their future hope (1 Thessalonians 4:14—18)

Since the formation of the Body of Christ was fairly recent (within the past 20-years or so), there was confusion between the future of Kingdom saints (those saved under the proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom) and the Grace saints (those saved under the proclamation of the Gospel of Grace). Paul uses this letter to contrast the differences between the Second Coming and the Rapture. Each chapter contains instructions and encouragement for the believers giving them assurance and confidence that they would eventually be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and be with Him for eternity. This promise should encourage them (and us) to strive for perfection in sanctification and give them the ability to bear up under trials.

Changes in God's dealing with mankind

It's important to understand how God changed His dealings with mankind approximately 20 years previous to Paul writing to the Thessalonians. It should be apparent when reading Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that God was dealing exclusively with Israel (Matthew 10:6) but His dealings would eventually be extended to the Gentiles. However, He was dealing with Israel and would be dealing with the Gentiles according to prophecy. Paul, on the other hand, was raised up to be the apostle to the

Gentiles and to him was revealed the Mystery concerning the Body of Christ. These two programs are separate and distinct as shown below.

Distinction 1

Israel's program was revealed throughout the Old Testament while the Body of Christ was a Mystery revealed through the Apostle Paul (Acts 3:21—24; Romans 16:25—27; Ephesians 3:3—9; Colossians 1:26—29).

Distinction 2

Prophecy relates to an earthly Kingdom with Christ physically sitting on the throne while the Body of Christ is a spiritual collection of believers with a heavenly destination with Christ as Head. (Compare Daniel 2:44; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15—16; Matthew 6:10 with 1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 1:19—23; 4:15—16; 2:6; Colossians 3:1—2;

Distinction 3

Israel is the subject of much prophecy throughout the Old Testament while the Church, the Body of Christ, was a Mystery until revealed through Paul. Israel was promised a particular land (Deuteronomy 30:1—6). They were promised a King and of course a Kingdom (2 Samuel 7:8—17; Isaiah 9:6—7). They were also promised to be a great nation (Genesis 12:2; Jeremiah 31:36; Ezekiel 37:22—28). They were promised blessings abundantly if they would follow the Lord (Isaiah 60). None of these things can be applied to the Church, the Body of Christ in this age. We are given the promise of heaven, not the promise of living on this earth (Philippians 3:20).

Distinction 4

The Jews will be in a special position over the Gentiles in the Millennial Kingdom while in the Body of Christ Jews and Gentiles are equal. (Compare Is. 49:22—23; 61:6 with Rom. 10:12; Eph. 2:11—17).

Space does not allow comparison of all differences between the two programs but even the few highlighted above should cause one to see that God was treating Israel in a much different manner than he is doing with the Body of Christ. Paul was introducing new doctrine concerning the Body of Christ, not expanding on Old doctrine concerning Israel.

Although Paul's writings set forth these differences between Israel's program and the program for the Church, many today ignore his teachings and try to merge these two programs into one. They do this by speaking of a progression in God's revelation making Paul's writings an extension of the Old Testament and the Gospels. While we see two distinct Gospel messages, the Gospel of the Kingdom to Israel and the Gospel of the Grace of God to the world, they see a progression in God's revelation of His redemptive plan. They merge these two programs by taking literal ideas and turning them into spiritual concepts. For instance instead of seeing a literal Millennial Kingdom that will be set up on the earth with Jesus Christ sitting on a literal throne they read that there is a kingdom of believers with Christ sitting on the throne of individual hearts. They remove the concept of a literal Rapture, Tribulation and Millennial Kingdom because by doing so their whole dispensational-less theology is destroyed. Instead of accepting a natural interpretation of Scripture they try to unify it making it say what they want it to say by spiritualizing the hard passages.

I believe Satan has use this to confound and distract the church. What better way to cause people to give up studying the Scripture than by confusing Israel's program with the Church's program and substituting spiritual ideas for literal truths. This confusion causes people to give up with studying the Bible because they feel it is too hard to comprehend. Isn't this exactly what would please Satan?

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