

BASIC NEW TESTAMENTLESSON 11--THE APOSTOLIC AGE AND BOOK OF ACTS: PART II;  
I-II THESSALONIANS

The Book of Acts, Chapter 15, tells of a trip that Paul and Barnabas took to Jerusalem. Here Peter, James, and John gave them the right hand of fellowship. The conference with these leaders was followed by a hard-fought debate over certain doctrines and practices emphasized by the Jerusalem leaders. The following issues were discussed: Were the Gentile Christians to be compelled to follow the demands of the Jewish Law? What were the obligations of the Jewish Christians to their inherited law? What were to be the mutual obligations of each when Jewish and Gentile Christians ate and associated together?

The conference was a stormy one, but a compromise was reached by which Paul and his co-workers were to go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel, free of all limitations. The Twelve were to continue to work among their own people, and to require that their converts should observe the demands of the Jewish Law.

This conference is described in Acts 15:1-35, and in Paul's own words in Galatians 2:1-10. The basic issue was whether one had to first become a Jew, before becoming a Christian. This was done through the rite of circumcision, followed by a strict adherence to the 613 laws of the Old Testament. According to Acts 15:20, the only restrictions placed upon Gentile Christians was for them to avoid eating food sacrificed to idols (which was considered idolatrous), and to avoid fornication (which Paul forbade anyway), eating animals that had been strangled, and eating animals from which the blood had not been drained.

The People of the Way were first called Christians in Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Paul's missionary work is too extensive to be given here in detail. There are records of journeys to Cyprus, Galatia, Ephesus, Athens, and Philippi, where he founded Christian centers. In most instances, Paul organized Christian churches, and local leaders and members carried on a definite work. According to the New Testament, he made three definite missionary journeys. During these journeys, Paul not only established centers, but strengthened them by return visits from himself or his co-workers.

Paul had planned to visit Rome, where the Christian movement had already gained a foothold. He postponed his trip in order to personally take an offering, which he had collected from his own churches, to the needy Christians in Jerusalem. He faithfully delivered this offering to Jerusalem. Also, he attempted to placate the Jewish authorities by submitting to the seven days of purification (Acts 21:16-17), another Jewish procedure. However, his adversaries saw him in the Temple. After stirring up the crowd, they laid hands upon him with intent to kill. His life was saved only by the appearance of a Roman captain and his soldiers. Paul was charged with teaching the people to despise the Law, and with taking a Gentile into the Temple.

Being granted permission to speak to the public, Paul gave the stirring address found in Acts 22:1-21. In this speech, he described his experience on the road to Damascus. He emphasized his conviction that he had, at that time, received a divine command to go to the Gentiles.

The crowd of hostile Jews refused to listen to Paul. Sensing that his life was still in danger, Paul gained a respite by reminding the Roman authorities that he was a Roman citizen. Taken before the Sanhedrin the following day, Paul met the same bitter antagonism. In view of the hopelessness of the situation, Paul started a discussion between the Pharisees and the Sadducees by bringing up the often debated question of resurrection from the dead. The confusion which this subject aroused enabled Paul to escape. Since the Romans received word of a conspiracy against Paul's life, it seemed wise to send him to Caesarea to await trial. (Acts 24:12-35)

Paul spent two years in Caesarea, although a bribe given to Felix the governor might have freed him. (Acts 24:26) After Festus replaced Felix as Governor, Festus heard his case. Paul then appealed to the Emperor. (Acts 25:11) "Then Festus, after he had conferred with his council, replied, 'You have appealed to the emperor; to the emperor you will go.'" (Acts 25:12) His defense before Festus and King Agrippa--who had superior legal authority even over Festus--was most eloquent, and it almost won his freedom. (Acts 26:1-29) "Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor.'" (Acts 26:32)

His sea voyage to Rome is recorded in Acts, Chapter 27. The journey was interrupted by a shipwreck, followed by a three-month stay on the Island of Malta. According to Acts, Chapter 28, Paul lived in Rome for two years in rented quarters, but guarded by a soldier. (Acts 28:16) The Book ends with the following statement: "He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." (Acts 28:30-31)

The Book of Acts, then, leaves unanswered the question of whether Paul was acquitted or condemned by the Emperor or his designee. Since there was no substance to the charges against Paul, it is likely that he was acquitted. If so, traditions regarding his further journeys to what are now Spain, France, and England may have a basis in fact. Assuming that he was released, however, he was apparently taken prisoner a second time, and subsequently executed.

### PAUL'S CONTRIBUTION TO CHRISTIANITY

Scholars have asked: Who is the real founder of Christianity, Jesus or Paul? This is a valid question, since Christian theology has traditionally been based more upon the letters of Paul--reinterpreted, it is true--than upon the teachings of Jesus. Divine Science, by contrast, give primary emphasis to the teachings of Jesus and how they may be applied effectively in terms of contemporary life. In this New Testament course, also, we will interpret Paul in terms of Jesus' frame of reference, rather than interpreting Jesus in terms of Paul's concepts.

Paul's beliefs were influenced both by his Jewish training, and by the Greek influences of his early life. The comparative weight to be given to each remains a basic issue in the field of Pauline Studies. The Dead Sea Scrolls, however, have required a reexamination of many of Paul's statements formerly thought to reflect a Hellenistic influence.

In any case, Paul was well qualified to lead a basic transition: from the prevailing legalism of Pharisaic Judaism, to the new and living way based on the action of God's grace in and through the individual. He was not bound by the Jewish ceremonial law, but claimed the promises made to the patriarchs. In Galatians, he asserts that these promises had been given not only to the biological descendants of Abraham, but to all, both Jew and Gentile, who shared the Indwelling Christ.

Paul's influence was instrumental in taking Christianity beyond narrow Jewish confines, as he established a chain of flourishing centers far and wide in the Roman Empire. Although not the first Christian missionary, he did a vital work in promoting the great missionary movement of the First Century A.D.

He also had a major influence in producing what would later become the New Testament. Though he had no idea that he was writing Scripture at the time, ten of the letters attributed to him are probably genuine, and even those erroneously attributed to him would not have made it into the canon without his apostolic authority. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are twin volumes by (or at least attributed to) Luke, the Greek physician who traveled with Paul and assisted him in his work. Thus, 15 or 16 books of the 27 in the New Testament--Hebrews does not claim that Paul wrote it--are directly or indirectly due to Paul and his activity.

### PAUL THE WRITER

Paul's letters are situational. That is to say, he composed letters (dictated to a scribe) as a means of communicating with various churches. As already mentioned, he did not seek to compose Scripture. Rather, he addressed himself to specific local issues pertaining to a single church or to churches in a given district. Personal visits were sometimes ruled out because of the difficulties of travel in the ancient world and, at times, because of personal confinement.

In addition, Paul used writing as a subconscious--but for that no less real--means by which he promoted his own spiritual growth. He was not, as sometimes supposed, a kind of glorified messenger boy who came to deliver a body of doctrine "once delivered to the saints." Some of his letters may be lost; one of them, an earlier letter to the Corinthians, definitely existed at one time. Nevertheless, we have enough of Paul's letters to trace steps in his unfoldment that are related to his literary efforts. Gabriele Rico, who is most knowledgeable on the subject of creative writing, observes:

"The record of our self-definition takes on permanence only when we write it down, a potent tool in the process of growth, insight, and self-awareness. In so doing, we begin to express our own unique perception of our world."<sup>1</sup>

## I THESSALONIANS

Paul wrote this letter in or near the year 50 A.D. Brevard Childs correctly calls it “the emergence of a highly creative experiment in a new form of Christian writing.”<sup>2</sup>

At the time, Paul was in the Greek city of Corinth and wrote to the Christian group in Thessalonica. Paul had organized a center there. He had interested the group in the teaching that Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified in Jerusalem about 20 years earlier, was the Divine Messiah and would come again to judge the world.

Paul had been well received in Thessalonica, and his work had been successful from the beginning. However, jealousy and resentment among other religious leaders and their followers had made it expedient for Paul to leave the city. He had sent his younger colleague, Timothy, to visit the Thessalonians and find out just how matters stood. A good report from Timothy inspired this first epistle.

Paul was happy to learn that the Thessalonians remained loyal to him and his teachings. Though he could not visit them at this time, he was eager to help them with some problems that were troubling them.

These people were greatly concerned about the Second Coming of Jesus. Some were troubled at the death of friends whom they feared would miss the joy of meeting Jesus when he returned to earth. Paul not only sends messages of assurance and comfort to these anxious souls. He also counsels them to keep working, and to live according to the Christian precepts which he had taught them.

Paul, at the time, did not understand the true nature of the Second Coming, and believed that Jesus would personally appear to compel people to accept a new reign of universal peace and justice. His later works show that he outgrew this concept, finally rejecting it; but in 50 A.D. he would not have understood the Second Coming as taught by Divine Science:

“The second appearing or coming is seeing omnipresent life, love, intelligence, and substance. As soon as at-one-ment is seen and accepted there is no longer a sense of separation but the Presence is known as all. When man discovers that he is the Truth, God manifest in the flesh, he knows he is the Christ, and Christ has come the second time.”<sup>3</sup>

I Thessalonians, Chapters 1-3 - In this section, Paul reviews his work with the Thessalonians. He first praises them, giving thanks for their faithfulness and loyalty to him and his teachings. Then he reminds them of the sincerity of his work and of his affection for them. His heart overflows with love for them, as he prays that they may abound in love toward each other and toward all people.

I Thessalonians, Chapters 4-5 - Paul gives various exhortations to Christian living. Also, he discusses the question of what would become of those who died before Jesus’ new appearance on earth. In so doing, he makes a declaration that he never repeats in any later letter:

“Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” (14:14-16)

In 5:23, Paul gives a blessing that shows the nucleus of potential expansion of consciousness on his part, affirming the threefold nature of every individual: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit [pneuma] and soul [psyche] and body [soma] be kept sound and blameless at the coming [en te parousia] of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is important to note that while the Greek term parousia can be translated “coming,” its primary meaning is “presence.” Thus, on a deeper level, Spirit is declaring through Paul: The wholeness being referred to is realized in the conscious presence of the Indwelling Christ, which is one with the Omnipresence of God.

## II THESSALONIANS

New Testament scholars have debated at length whether or not Paul wrote II Thessalonians; and if so, which letter he actually wrote first, I Thess. or II Thess. Nevertheless, it still appears likely that Paul first wrote I Thess., and then sent another letter to the same group of Christians (II Thess.) a few months later. Many of his readers had understandably gotten the idea--from the first letter--that the "Day of the Lord" was about to come. Also, II Thess. 2:2 implies that they had received yet another (and forged) letter, alleged to be from Paul, which claimed that the Day of the Lord had already come.

Also, some would have taken literally Paul's advice in I Thess. 5:17 to "Pray without ceasing," while overlooking his words about tending to business and working with their hands. They thought: "I had better prepare myself now for the parousia, while there is still time. Also, the former duties of life and work are at an end." Paul, wishing to correct these views, would have ample reasons for writing another letter. If he had somewhat modified his views in the interim, remember that Paul had the human capacity to change his mind.

In II Thess., Paul stated that the Day of the Lord had not yet occurred. Rather, the Antichrist must come first, and then Jesus would return. It was a popular Jewish idea that in the last days, the forces of evil would be embodied in a member of the Tribe of Dan, who would attack God and his people, but would fail and then be destroyed by the Messiah. Paul here appeals to this idea, pointing out that the Antichrist had not yet appeared. Therefore, the Lord could not yet have returned.

It should be noted that nowhere else does Paul refer to "The Antichrist," so this too is a concept that he later abandoned.

Paul did more than remind them that the conditions for the Day of the Lord had not been fulfilled. He also held up before them his own example and teaching, i.e., that he worked day and night at his trade. Those who had become idlers and busybodies must return to work. In II Thess. 3:10, he declares: “For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”

NOTES

1. Rico, Gabriel Lusser; Writing the Natural Way; Los Angeles, J. P. Tarcher, 1983, p. 27
2. The New Testament as Canon; op cit, p. 356
3. Divine Science, Its Principle and Practice; pp. 154-155

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY MENTIONED IN LESSON 11

Writing the Natural Way - Gabriel Lusser Rico

REQUIRED BIBLE READINGS

Read I & II Thessalonians.

QUESTIONS

1. What was Paul's contribution to the development of Christianity?
2. Why did Paul write letters?
3. Interpret I Thessalonians 5:23.
4. Assuming that Paul wrote II Thessalonians, why did he do so?