

## The Purple Letter and First Thessalonians

John Kotre (August 3, 2014)

I must have been 15 or 16, and we were cleaning out Grandma's house. My mom, my dad, my two sisters, and me. Grandma had been living alone and her dementia had become incapacitating. There wasn't room for her in our apartment--I was already sleeping in the dining room--so my dad had to place her in a state home. Now we were cleaning out her house, which was a mess.

I was in a bedroom working my way down a chest of drawers. When I opened the very bottom drawer, I found a crisp, new \$10 bill. Tucked away further back was a letter, folded as I recall in quarters. No envelope. I opened the letter and found this beautiful handwriting in purple ink. It was in a language I didn't know.

I was 15, maybe 16. I kept the \$10 bill and threw the letter out.

I look back today and think, what did I do? That letter would have been by far the oldest personal document in my family's possession. There is nothing like it from my grandparents' generation or even my parents' generation. What did the letter contain by way of names and places that I could be researching today? What did it say about life back then, about my grandmother, the only grandparent I ever knew? Was there a story in the letter? Why did she save it? I will never know.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is like that purple letter, only no teenager threw it out. Compared to other New Testament letters, it's on the short side. It was clearly written by Paul. Scholars tell us that some of Paul's letters were written by him, some by others in his name. They agree that Paul is the author of First Thessalonians.

They also agree that First Thessalonians is the oldest document in the Christian collection. It was written in the year 50 or 51, roughly 20 years after the death of Jesus, roughly 20 years before the first Gospel (Mark). We have nothing that Jesus wrote, so Paul provides our earliest window on Christianity. If you were to arrange the writings of the New Testament chronologically, it would begin, not with Matthew, but with Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. It would begin with the very words we heard this morning.

I've read the letter a number of times now and gone through several commentaries, seeing what the scholars have to say. I want to treat Paul's letter, however, as if I had found it in a drawer. What does it tell us about life back then? Was there a story in the letter? Why did people save it? What do we see in this earliest snapshot of Christianity?

### A Little Background

First, a little background. Paul wrote this letter about 15 years after his conversion. He was in his early 40s and very involved with the leaders of the new Jesus movement. After a major controversy they had agreed that he was the one to bring the gospel to non-Jews, to Gentiles. Now he has a vision. A Macedonian appears to him at night and says, "Come across to Macedonia and help us." (Acts 16:9).

So Paul and several companions cross the Aegean Sea and land in Macedonia—this is northern Greece—which makes them the first Christians that we know of to enter Europe. They stop at Phillipi and then proceed 100 miles west along the Via Egnatia, the great Roman road. Paul is probably carrying all that he owns in a sack. The little group comes to a city founded three and a half centuries before by a general of Alexander the Great and named after his wife, Thessalonica. In Paul's time Thessalonica was a thriving port city, the capital of a Roman province. There were pagan cults there. There was a Roman civic cult. There was at least one synagogue.

It's summer when they arrive. They get jobs—slaving night and day, says Paul. Paul preaches. A number of Thessalonians, both Jews and Gentiles, convert and become a little community, maybe about the size of ours. But others, both Jews and Gentiles, drum up so much opposition to Paul that after a month or two he and his companions have to escape by night. They end up that winter farther south in Corinth.

There Paul worries about his little community back in Thessalonica. His companion Timothy has visited them and brought back good news. But he has also brought back news of hardship, persecution, internal difficulties. They need help. Paul wants to encourage them.

You can picture him now, in a room in Corinth, writing them a letter. Or maybe he's dictating it. As the words come out I wonder, does Paul have any idea that what he is composing will become part of a collection bound into a single book and called the Word of God? Any idea that Christianity will become an organized world religion with maybe 20,000 variants. There's no indication that he does. It's just a letter. It will be read aloud to a little community in Thessalonica.

### Core Beliefs

So what does he say? What's in this first picture of Christianity? Amazingly, in the first ten lines of the letter (all of what we now call Chapter 1), we have all the basic creedal elements of Christianity:

**1**Paul, Silas<sup>a</sup> and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in **God the Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ: **Grace and peace** to you. **2**We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. **3**We remember before our God and Father **your work produced by faith**, your labor prompted by **love**, and your endurance inspired by **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.

**4**For we know, brothers and sisters<sup>b</sup> loved by God, that he has chosen you, **5**because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the **Holy Spirit** and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. **6**You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. **7**And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. **8**The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, **9**for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, **10**and **to wait** for his **Son** from heaven, **whom he raised from the dead—Jesus**, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (NIV)

The scholar Raymond Brown (p. 465) calls this "a remarkable testimony to how quickly ideas that became standard in Christianity were already in place." Core beliefs seem to have been settled on. Theological detail—and with it controversy, heresies, schisms—came later.

## Power

There's something else about these opening lines, a single word. Power. Paul writes: "our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power."

Remember that Paul did not become a follower of Jesus from knowing him personally, or from knowing his disciples. If you had asked why we should believe you, Paul, when you speak about Jesus, he would have said, "because I didn't know his followers." In his letter to the Galatians (1:12 NJB) he writes, "It was not from any human being that I received [the gospel], and I was not taught it."

Why, then, were we to believe Paul? Because he had had a powerful experience of Jesus, his conversion experience. It took place a few years (3-6) after Jesus' death, when Paul was in his late 20s. Imagine: You're blinded by a light. You fall to the ground. You hear a voice saying: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." You get to your feet but you are still blind, and you remain so for days. That's what happened to Paul and that's what was happening all over the early church. Visions of Jesus were coming not only to Paul, but also to Peter, to James, to the twelve, to 500 at once (1 Cor 15: 5-8).

Powerful experiences like that change you for life. They explain why Paul did what he did, suffered what he suffered. When you heard him speak, you didn't say, "Oh yeah, that's logical, that makes sense, I'll think about it." No, you were knocked to the ground, at least on the inside. You were overwhelmed. That's what was going on in the early church.

## Anti-Semitism

I come to page 2 of the letter, what we now call Chapter 2, and . . . what's this? Paul is talking about—quote—"the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit." End quote. (2:15-16)

That was the NIV translation. The New Jerusalem translation offers something stronger. Speaking of the Jews—quote: "Their conduct does not please God, and **makes them the enemies of the whole human race**. Thus, all the time they are reaching the full measure of their iniquity."<sup>i</sup>

In a book called Constantine's Sword, James Carroll, a former Catholic priest, wrote a long history of Christian anti-Semitism—in particular, Catholic anti-Semitism—and traced it all the way back to the Gospel of John. Now I see that it goes back farther, to the earliest Christian document we have. And I wonder: if Paul had known what would become of his letter, how some would hear these words as God Himself speaking, would he have said that?

I understand where Paul was coming from. Jews had persecuted the followers of Jesus. They had persecuted him. Paul writes in 2nd Corinthians (11:24-25): "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones." Paul has reason to be angry. He has reason for his outburst. Still, he doesn't write "some Jews" or "those Jews" but "the Jews." The Jews are the enemies of humanity. It's not the way he spoke of his fellow Jews in other letters. (Rom 9-11, e.g.)

A few scholars have argued that Paul didn't write those words, that others inserted them into the text. But most hold that the words are indeed Paul's. A few translators have tried to water the words down.<sup>ii</sup> But there they are.

Holding Paul's letter, I have to acknowledge that the words are there, in the very beginning my Christian tradition. I know that words like these are in other traditions as well. I remind myself to do what Jesus said: see the log in your own eye first, see the log in your own tradition, before you worry about the speck in someone else's.

### The Return of Jesus

I read on. Paul explains why he hasn't been able to visit the Thessalonians and why he sent Timothy in his place. He offers moral instruction: avoid sexual immorality, live quietly, live in brotherly love. There's none of the theology we find in later letters--no doctrine of justification by faith, for example. There's a lot of affection. Paul says he has been like a nursing mother to the Thessalonians, like a loving father. Some scholars have called the letter an example of "immediate" literature as opposed to "permanent" literature (Brown 409). It's easy to see why this is so. You wouldn't be writing "permanent" literature if Jesus was about to return and end it all. And this belief permeates the letter, from beginning to end. Paul is telling the Thessalonians, Jesus will return in your lifetime and you will be my crown of honor when he comes.

The Thessalonians had a particular worry. Some of their number had died. They were in their graves. Were they going to miss out on the return of Jesus? Paul's answer was reassuring: no, deceased believers will rise and meet Jesus in the sky before the rest of us do.

There were other problems. Some Thessalonians had quit working because of Jesus's imminent return. I mean, why work if it's all going to end? In a second letter Paul speaks bluntly: if someone doesn't work, don't let them eat. Others were saying that the end was already here. Paul says no, there has to be an apostasy first. A lawless one has to appear. However it works out, Jesus will return and you will be saved. And those persecuting you will get what's coming to them.

The scholars say such ideas were prevalent in Paul's time. I read between the lines of the letter and realize that he was trying to console the Thessalonians, trying to say their hardship would end, trying to say that help was on the way. But I really can't wrap my head around the belief in Jesus' imminent return. I know many people believe in it today. I know the Left Behind series of novels has sold over 50 million copies. But do these believers really believe, in a way that changes everything they do from morning till night. If I'm going to understand the earliest church, I know I have to understand that—even as I acknowledge that Paul got it wrong. Jesus did not return during the lifetime of the Thessalonians.

### A Return Letter

There's a lot to think about in Paul's letter. I wonder . . . if I could answer it, 2000 years later, what would I say? What would you?

I think I'd start by telling Paul what became of the letter. "There's this book called the Bible, Paul, and you're in it." I'd tell him how I'm in awe of the power he experienced. How I wish he had thought about certain words before using them. How Jesus still hasn't returned.

Then I'd say, you know, when all is said and done, you were really looking out for them. You wanted to be with them. You wanted to encourage them. They were crying, "Help!" and you were saying, "Help is on the way, help is on the way! Hang in there. Hold firm. Jesus is coming."

I'd get personal. I'd say that whether Jesus comes back tomorrow, or a year from now, or a hundred years from now, or never, I'd still live the same way today. I'd say that for me Jesus comes back all the time. Any time I'm struggling like the Thessalonians, any time I'm in one of those moments that Laura talked about a couple of weeks ago--moments when I am seeing very dimly--all I have to do is say "Help!" And help is on the way. I don't have to wait until tomorrow, or until a year from now, or until the end of time. Help arrives in seconds. Instant 911.

As soon as I am mindful of the God who dwells within, as soon as I surrender to that God, Jesus returns. The Holy Spirit does. A higher power does. There are even times when Jesus returns unbidden, "like a thief in the night." I simply have to be vigilant.

I'd sign the letter and put it in the mail. Maybe I'd send along a copy of the Bible. Then I'd take Paul's letter, fold it up, and this time put it in a safe place. I'd still keep the \$10 bill.

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<sup>i</sup> The Greek in question is *enantion pasin anthropois*: "being contrary to all men." The word *enantion* is also used of contrary winds. The King James versions translate this passage "and they please not God, and are contrary to all men."

<sup>ii</sup> In the International Standard Version of the Bible we read about the Jews "who please neither God nor any group of people." That's it. "Do not please a group of people" is a long way from "enemies of the whole human race."