

THE STORY OF THE NEW
TESTAMENT

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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**Published May 1916
Second Impression October 1916
Third Impression February 1918
Fourth Impression March 1918
Fifth Impression October 1919
Sixth Impression June 1921**

**Composed and Printed By
The University of Chicago Press
Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.**

INTRODUCTION

It must always be remembered that Christianity did not spring from the New Testament but the New Testament from Christianity. Christianity did not begin as a religion of books but as a religion of spirit. There was neither time nor need to write books when the Lord Jesus was at the very doors. Still less was there need of authoritative books to guide men whose dominant conviction was that they had the Mind of Christ, the very Spirit of God, guiding them constantly from within.

But the ancient Christians did write. Situations arose that drew letters from them—letters of acknowledgment, thanks, criticism, recommendation, instruction, or advice. These letters, like our modern letters, were written to serve an immediate and pressing need. Situations arose which even drew forth books from these early Christians—books to save people from perplexities or mistakes, or to comfort them in anxiety or peril; but always books to serve some fairly definite circle, in a particular condition of stress or doubt. This practical and occasional character of the books of the New Testament can hardly be overemphasized, for it is only in the light of the situations that called them forth that these books can be really understood. Only when we put ourselves into the situation of those

for whom a given book of the New Testament was written do we begin to feel our oneness with them and to find the living worth in the book.

It may be helpful to conceive the writings of the New Testament as grouped about four notable events or movements: the Greek mission, that is, the evangelization of the gentile world; the fall of Jerusalem; the persecution of Domitian; and the rise of the early sects. The New Testament shows us the church first deep in its missionary enterprise, then seeking a religious explanation of contemporary history, then bracing itself in the midst of persecution, then plunged into controversy over its own beliefs.

The New Testament contains the bulk of that extraordinary literature precipitated by the Christian movement in the most interesting period of its development. Christianity began its world-career as a hope of Jesus' messianic return; it very soon became a permanent and organized church. The books of the New Testament show us those first eschatological expectations gradually accommodating themselves to conditions of permanent existence.

The historical study of the New Testament seeks to trace this movement of life and thought that lies back of the several books, and to relate the books to this development. It has yielded certain very definite positive results which are both inter-

esting and helpful. Through it these old books recover something of the power of speech, and begin to come to us with the accent and intonation which they had for the readers for whom they were originally written.

The short chapters of this book are designed to present vividly and unconventionally the situations which called forth the several books or letters, and the way in which each book or letter sought to meet the special situation to which it was addressed. These chapters naturally owe much to scholars like Burton, Bacon, Scott, McGiffert, Moffatt, and Harnack, who have done so much for the historical understanding of the New Testament. But it is hoped that a brief constructive presentation of the background of each book without technicality or elaboration may bring back particularly to intelligent laymen and young people the individuality and vital interest of the writings of the New Testament.

The purpose of this work is threefold: (1) The book may be used as a basis for definite study of the New Testament individually or in classes. The Suggestions for Study are prepared for this purpose. General and special bibliographies for further reading will be found at the end of the book. The student is advised not to attempt a detailed investigation of specific parts of the various books, but to seek to get the large general aim

which controlled each individual writer. (2) It may be read as a continuous narrative, without regard to the Suggestions for Study at the close of each chapter. It will then afford exactly what its name implies, the story of the New Testament. The references to which the occasional superior numerals relate will be found at the beginning of the Suggestions for Study which follow each chapter. (3) After each chapter the corresponding book of the New Testament may be read, preferably at one sitting, and thus each piece of literature may make its own appeal on the basis of the introductory interpretation.

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CHICAGO

November 1, 1915

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CHAPTER I

THE LETTERS TO THE THESSALONIANS

About the middle of the first century, in the Greek city of Corinth, a man sat down and wrote a letter. He had just received some very cheering news from friends of his, away in the north, about whom he had been very anxious, and he wrote to tell them of his relief at this news. As he wrote or dictated, his feelings led him to review his whole acquaintance with them, to tell them about his anxiety and how it had been relieved, and to try to help them in some of their perplexities, and before he closed he had written what we should call a long letter. And this is how our New Testament, and indeed all Christian literature, began. For the writer was Paul, and his friends were the people at Thessalonica whom he had interested in his doctrine that Jesus of Nazareth, who had been put to death in Jerusalem twenty years before, was the divine Messiah, and was to come again to judge the world.

Paul himself had believed this for a long time, and five or six years before he had set out to travel westward through the Roman Empire with this teaching. At first he had worked in Cyprus and Asia Minor, and it was only a few months before

that he with two friends had crossed from Asia to Europe and reached the soil of Greece. Paul was a whole-hearted, loyal friend, and he doubtless made friends everywhere for himself and his teaching; but he never made quite such friends as those who had gathered around him in these first months in Greece. At Philippi, where he stopped first and tried to interest people in his gospel, his friends made him come and live with them; and they thought so much of him that then and for years afterward they sent him money so that he might not have to work at his trade all the time but might have more opportunity to teach and spread his message.¹ The Thessalonians too had become staunch friends of Paul's. Some of them had risked their lives for him when they had known him only a few weeks, and others were to stand by him all through his life and to go with him long afterward, when he was taken, as a prisoner, from Caesarea to Rome. That was the kind of people in whom Paul had become so interested, and to whom he now wrote his letter. He had been welcomed by them when he first came to Thessalonica, and his very success among them had awakened jealousy and distrust on the part of others. At last Paul had been obliged to leave the city to prevent violence to himself and his friends. He had gone on westward along the Roman road to Beroea and later had turned south to Athens, but all the

time he had been anxious about his friends at Thessalonica. What had happened to them? Had the opposition of their neighbors made them forget him and give up what he had taught them, or were they still loyal to him and his gospel? To go back and find out would have been perilous to him and probably to them also. So Paul had decided to send his young friend Timothy to seek them out and learn how matters stood. At the same time Paul's other companion, Silvanus, an older, more experienced man, had been sent on a similar errand to the more distant city of Philippi, and Paul, left all alone, had waited anxiously, first at Athens and then at Corinth, for news to come.

When at last it came, it was good news.² The Thessalonians had not forgotten Paul. They still stood by him and his gospel, in spite of all that their neighbors were saying against him. They still held their faith in Jesus as the divine Messiah and were eagerly waiting for his return from heaven, to reward and avenge them; and they were eager to see Paul again. So Paul came to write his letter to them. He wanted to tell them of his relief and delight at their faithfulness and loyalty, which filled his heart with gratitude. He wished also to refute some charges against his own work and character which people whom he had antagonized in Thessalonica had been making against him.³ Then too Paul wished to tell his friends how much he

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had hoped to reach them, and how when this had proved impossible he had sent one of his two companions to them to find out all that he wished to know, and to give them encouragement and instruction; how he had waited for his messenger's return, and how he had at last come with his welcome news. But this was not all. Paul saw his opportunity to help his Thessalonian friends with their problems. Some of them were troubled at the death of friends, who would, they feared, thus miss the joy and glory of meeting the Lord Jesus on his return to the earth. Others were perplexed about the time of Jesus' return, and needed to be told not to trouble about it, but to live in constant readiness for it. Others were falling into idleness and dependence because of their confidence that the time was close at hand. Some needed to be reminded of the Christian insistence on purity and unselfishness of life. To all these people Paul sent messages of comfort, counsel, or encouragement, as their needs required. He was already deep in his new work at Corinth, in some respects the most absorbing and exacting he had ever done.⁴ Yet he found time to keep in mind his Thessalonian friends and their problems, and to look out for them amid all his distractions at Corinth. Paul did it all, too, with a personal and affectionate tone, which shows how wholly he gave his affection to those with whom he worked.

We can imagine how eagerly the brethren at Thessalonica looked for Paul's letter and read and reread it when it came. They evidently put it away among their treasures, for that is probably how it came to be preserved to us. They certainly pondered over and discussed its contents; for before many weeks had passed Paul had to write them again more definitely about some of these things. Something Paul had said or written to them, or something they had read in the Old Testament, had made some of them think that the Day of the Lord had already come. Some of them had given up work, and were content to live in religious contemplation while their richer or more industrious brethren supported them. In their idleness some of them fell into unworthy ways of life and became a nuisance and a scandal to the church.

Paul was greatly stirred by this. He saw that it threatened the good name and the very existence of the church, and he at once wrote them another letter, our Second Thessalonians. It was a popular Jewish idea that in the last days the forces of evil would find embodiment in an individual of the tribe of Dan, who would make an impious attack upon God and his people but would fail and be destroyed by the Messiah. Paul in his letter appeals to this idea and points out that this great enemy has not yet appeared and so the Day of the

Lord cannot have come.⁵ There is therefore no excuse for giving up the ordinary industry of life. He reminds them of a precept he has given them before: If anyone will not work, give him nothing to eat. Those who refuse to obey this ultimatum are to be practically dropped from the Christian fellowship.

With these two short letters Paul began Christian literature. Before he ceased to teach the churches he wrote more than one-fourth of what is now included in the New Testament. But in these first letters we see the difficulties that already were besetting the small new groups of Christians, and the patience, skill, and boldness with which their founder looked after their development.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. *References:* ¹Phil. 4:15; ²I Thess. 3:6-8; ³I Thess. 2:1-12; ⁴Acts 18:1, 5; ⁵II Thess. 2:1-3.

2. For an account of the founding of the church at Thessalonica read Acts 17:1-15.

3. Note the occasion of I Thess., 3:6-8, and the progress already made by the gospel, 1:7, 8; 2:1.

4. Picture the receipt of I Thessalonians by the Thessalonian Christians, and read it aloud as they must have done in a meeting of the church.

5. Note Paul's review of his success among them, 1:2-2:1; his vigorous defense of his methods and motives as a missionary, 2:1-12; his account of his feelings and movements after leaving them, 2:17-3:10; his moral teachings, so necessary for gentile converts, 4:1-10; 5:8-23; his

commendation of labor and self-support, 4:10-12; the comfort he gives them about the Thessalonian dead, 4:13-18, and his reminder of the unexpectedness of the return of Jesus, 5:1-6.

6. Observe the prayerful and nobly moral tone of the letter, the intense personal affection Paul shows for his converts, 2:7-12, 17; 3:6-10, and the sanity of his practical advice, 4:11, 12; 5:12-14.

7. What facts about Jesus and what expectations about him does the letter reveal? 1:10; 2:15, 19; 4:14-17; 5:9, 10, 23.

8. Read II Thessalonians, noting its marked resemblance to I Thessalonians in many particulars: I Thess. 2:9 and II Thess. 3:8; I Thess. 3:11-13 and II Thess. 2:16, 17; I Thess. 1:1-7 and II Thess. 1:1-4; the sterner attitude toward the idlers, 3:6-15; the very Jewish argument in 2:1-10 that the Lawless One is not yet openly at work and therefore the Day of the Lord cannot have arrived; and the salutation written by Paul's own hand at the close, 3:17, 18.

CHAPTER II

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

Upon returning to the shores of Syria after his long residence in Corinth, Paul had news that greatly disturbed him. An enemy had appeared in his rear. Among the people who had accepted his teaching about Jesus were many in the towns of central Asia Minor—Iconium, Derbe, Lystra, and Antioch. These places lay in what the Romans called Galatia, though that name included also an additional district lying farther north. They were in the region that has only recently been traversed by the new railway through Asia Minor. Their people had welcomed Paul as an apostle of Christ and had gladly accepted his message of faith, hope, and love.

But there had now come among them Christian teachers of Jewish birth, who looked upon the Christianity Paul presented as spurious and dangerous. Who these men were we have no way of knowing, but their idea of Christianity can easily be made out. They believed Jesus to be the completer of the agreement or covenant God had made with Abraham. In order to benefit by his gospel one must be an heir of Abraham, they held, and thus of God's agreement with him; that is, one

must be born a Jew or become one by accepting the rite of circumcision and being adopted into the Jewish people.¹

There was certainly some reasonableness in this view. The men who held it were indignant that the Galatians should call themselves Christians without having first been circumcised and having thus acknowledged their adoption into the Jewish nation; and they considered Paul a wholly unauthorized person and no apostle at all, since he was not one of the twelve whom Jesus had called about him in Galilee twenty years before, nor even a representative of theirs. It was evidently the feeling of these new arrivals that the twelve apostles were the sole genuine authorities on Christianity and what might be taught under its name. This claim also seemed reasonable, and it made the Galatian believers wonder what Paul's relation was to these authorized leaders of the church, and why he had given them so imperfect an idea of the gospel. They admitted the justice of the claims of the new missionaries and set about conforming to their demands in order that they might be as good Christians as they knew how to be.

Where Paul first learned of this change in the beliefs of the Galatians is not certain, but very probably it was at Antioch in Syria, to which he returned from Corinth. He wished to proceed as soon as possible to Galatia to straighten matters