



[1 Thessalonians 5:3](#)

"Peace and Security"

Name of the author: Paul the Apostle

Date: 50 CE

Place: Corinth

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: The First Letter to the Thessalonians

Reference:

5:3

Commentary:

This short passage from Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Christians has been the subject of some debate among scholars attempting to ascertain what might lie behind Paul's quotation of the phrase "Peace and security." It is worth briefly considering the status and character of the city of Thessalonica in order to assess the suggestions which will be discussed below. A harbour city in the Aegean which was something of a Greek metropolis, Thessalonica was the largest city in Macedonia, and an important commercial centre (Strabo, *Geography* VII.21 speaks of its importance). It was granted the status of a "free city" enjoying a decent amount of self-government after choosing the right side in the Roman civil wars. Inscriptions from the city indicate that the Thessalonians had a rather positive attitude to the Roman emperors, and there is evidence that the imperial cult was significant there (see Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 13-14). On the imperial cult in the city, see Holland L. Hendrix, "Archaeology and Eschatology," p. 112-118 and Christoph vom Brocke, *Thessaloniki*, p. 167-185. A variety of religious cults were present, including those of Heracles, Apollo, Aphrodite, and some Egyptian gods. The Christian community which Paul had founded in Thessalonica, therefore, was a small group in a relatively diverse religious environment and a city which valued its ties with Rome.

One of the most popular interpretations is that Paul picks up a slogan here that was used to describe the *Pax Romana*, a term first used by Seneca, a contemporary of Paul (see *On Mercy* I.4.1-2) in a celebration of the emperor. "Peace and Security" was used to express the political stability and other benefits brought by Roman rule (see, for instance, Tacitus, *Histories* II.12 – "securitate pacis"; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIV.160 – "?????????... ??? ??????"), and so for scholars such as Klaus Wengst (*Pax Romana*, p. 73-78), Paul's quotation of this slogan in this verse indicates his negative view of Roman authority (a system which has flogged and imprisoned him; see, for instance, Acts 21:27-40; 22:22-29; 25:13-22). Paul therefore claims that the phrase is something said by non-Christians who are happy with the status quo, without realising that the *Pax Romana* will ultimately fall, and the security enjoyed by those under it will be destroyed. In addition, it has been noted that Paul is likely influenced by the language of the Hebrew Bible. Jeremiah 6:14 states "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace" (NRSV). Of course, there is no reason why Paul cannot be understanding what he believes to be the false claims of security under the Roman imperial system in light of the similar sentiment of the Jewish Scriptures.

An alternative suggestion has been that Paul uses the term ????????? ("security") in this verse because it was a popular Epicurean term, and Paul has previously utilised Epicurean ideology in order to describe the ideal behaviour of Christian believers in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, for example: "And to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you." This term was used by Epicureans to describe the security resulting from a peaceful life away from the world, which is found through friends in the present life. In contrast, after death there is no security (see Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* XIV; XXVIII). Paul, then, could be criticising this ideology which to him is completely false, as Christian belief relies very heavily on security after death through the hope of resurrection. Christians needed to think beyond the simple here and now to their eschatological fate (see Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, p. 304). While this remains a feasible explanation, it seems more likely given that the Thessalonian Christians lived in a city where reminders of



and praise for imperial rule (especially the positive outcomes of the Roman domination) was all around, that Paul has imperial ideology in mind here. This is also the view of both Victor Furnish (*1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians*, p. 108) and Peter Oakes (“Re-mapping the Universe,” p. 317-318), the latter of whom concludes that Paul foresees the eventual destruction of all those who put their trust in Rome’s political strength rather than in God’s saving power.

Keywords in the original language:

- [??????](#)
- [????????](#)
- [????????](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [imperial ideology](#)
- [Pax Romana](#)
- [peace](#)
- [Roman decline](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [security](#)

Bibliographical references: Furnish, Victor Paul, [1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians](#) (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007)

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