

Paul's First Letter to the **Thessalonians**

Background & Introduction

Paul's second missionary journey began about 49 AD. A disagreement with Barnabas over whether to take John Mark with them resulted in two missionary trips, instead of one (Acts 15:37-40). Paul took Silas on this trip and their travels took them to Asia Minor, then to the European cities of Philippi (16:11-40), Thessalonica (17:1-9), Berea (17:10-15), Athens (17:16-34) and Corinth (18:1-17). Timothy joined them at Lystra (16:1-3) and was with Paul in Thessalonica. The trip ended about 52 AD when Paul returned to Antioch (18:22). See Acts 15:36-18:11.

Paul's stay in Thessalonica was brief, probably only a few months. He first went into the synagogue and "reasoned with them from the Scriptures." But opposition forced him out of town, to Berea. Later, when Paul arrived in Athens, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage the new believers, check on their progress and inform them about Paul's situation (I Thess. 3:1-3). When he returned to Paul at Corinth, Timothy reported that the faith of the brethren in Thessalonica was strong. Overjoyed with that news, Paul wrote this letter from Corinth in early 51, making this letter one of the earliest documents in the New Testament.

Paul's brief stay in Thessalonica was not because he desired to leave, but because of circumstances beyond his control (2:17ff.). After he left, he was concerned about whether they would receive the kind of instruction that would enable them to endure the persecution they were going to face, and so he wrote to encourage these new converts. He also wrote to comfort them about the status of those who had died in Christ.

That Paul is pleased with the church in Thessalonica is clear (the letter is similar in tone to Philippians), even though some were questioning his motives (2:1-12).



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Paul visited Thessalonica during his second journey

BY FERRELL JENKINS

Paul came to Thessalonica on his second journey (A.D. 50-53; Acts 17). Paul describes the reception the Thessalonians gave to the gospel in these words:

For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

(1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 NASB)

The church of the Thessalonians had many questions about the second coming of Christ. Paul addressed these questions in the two letters he wrote to the church from Corinth.

We know little of individuals associated with the church. Jason seems to be one of the earliest converts in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9). Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica accompanied Paul on the voyage to Rome (Acts 27:2). He was one of the messengers who went with Paul on the return from the third journey (Acts 20:4). When Demas forsook Paul he went to Thessalonica (2 Timothy 4:10).



The photo below shows ruins of the Roman Forum in Thessaloniki, the second largest city of Greece. This area of the city was destroyed by a fire in 1917. During preparations for constructing new buildings these ruins were discovered. They date to the second and third century A.D. (See Fant



and Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey*, 137). Perhaps there are older ruins below these. Notice how the modern city is built around the ancient ruins on a higher level. Can you imagine what might be underneath all of those buildings?

Chronology of the New Testament

- 37 B.C.–4 B.C. - The reign of Herod I, a Roman client king of Israel
- 27 B.C.-14 A.D. - The reign of Caesar Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire
- c. 6 B.C. - The birth of Jesus
- 26-36 A.D. - Pontius Pilate the Prefect of the Roman Empire's Judaea Province
- c. 30 - The death and resurrection of Jesus
- c. 35 - The conversion of Paul
- 40s or 50s - the Book of James
- c. 45-49 - Paul's first missionary journey
- Sometime between 48 and 58 - Paul writes Galatians
- c. 50-53 - Paul's second missionary journey
- 50s - Paul writes Titus
- c. 50 - Mark written
- 50s or 60s - Matthew written
- 51 - Paul writes 1 and 2 Thessalonians
- c. 53-57 - Paul's third missionary journey
- Spring of 55 - Paul writes 1 Corinthians
- 56 - Paul writes 2 Corinthians
- c. 56-57 - Paul writes Romans
- c. 60 - 61 Paul writes Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians probably while in prison in Rome
- Early 60s - Luke written
- c. 62 - Paul is free
- c. 62-64 - Luke writes Acts
- c. 62-64 - Paul writes 1 Timothy
- July 18-19, 64 - The Great Fire of Rome. Emperor Nero blamed the Christians, and a great persecution ensued.
- Mid 60s - 1 Peter written
- c. 64-68 - Paul writes 2 Timothy from prison
- c. 67-68 - 2 Peter
- c. 68 - Hebrews is written
- June 9, 68 - The death of Nero. Sometime between the Great Fire of Rome and the death of Nero, both Peter and Paul were martyred.
- c. 69 - Jude
- 70 - The siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple
- c. 90 - John written
- c.. 90-96 - 1, 2, and 3 John
- c. 95-96 - John writes Revelation

Assignment 1

Please read Acts 17:1-9



Get the Facts

1. On what days did Paul teach in the synagogue?
2. Who was his audience?
3. What did he teach?
4. Describe those who believed.
5. What happened afterwards? Who instigated it?
6. What individual was targeted? Do we know anything about him?
7. What were the charges leveled against Paul and his companions?
8. How did the Christians obtain their release?

Observation

1. Describe the importance of the synagogue to the Jews in a city.
2. Paul argued that Jesus is “the Christ.” Why would that be a significant (and upsetting) message to the Jews?
3. Luke (the author of Acts) says some of the Jews were “persuaded.” What does it mean to be persuaded? Compare Acts 26:24-29.
4. What does the writer mean by “leading women” (v. 4; cf. v. 12).
5. What motivated the unbelieving Jews’ response? Why?
6. Why do you suppose the Jews said that the men had acted “contrary to the decrees of Caesar” – why would they care about that? Or did they? What did they hope to accomplish by making the charge? Did they succeed?

Thought Questions

1. Compare Paul’s preaching approach in Thessalonica with that in Athens. What’s the difference?
2. Paul “reasoned” with them “from the Scriptures.” What does that mean? How does it compare with some methods used by preachers today?
3. Acts 17:11 is often quoted: “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (NIV). Who is Luke referring to that the Bereans more noble than? What is the message for us?
4. Personal application: (1) These men “upset the world” with their teaching. What does that say to us if we are more interested in avoiding confrontation and rejection, and are afraid of alienating people? (2) Having said that, what was the specific teaching that “upset the world”? If people get upset with us, what should it be about?

Assignment 2

Please read I Thessalonians 1



Get the Facts

1. Who are the men mentioned in verse 1 (Paul, Silvanus, Timothy)?
2. What did Paul “constantly” give thanks to God for?
3. Where is Macedonia and Achaia?
4. What is an “idol”?

Observation

1. How often is “always” (v. 2)?
2. Where else in the NT are faith, love and hope mentioned together?
3. Explain “before our God and Father” (v. 3).
4. In what sense did God choose the Thessalonians (v. 4)?
5. What does v. 5 suggest about accusations made against Paul and his companions?
6. In what or for what does Paul commend the Thessalonians?
7. How did they receive the word?
8. How would you describe Paul’s purpose in chapter 1?

Thought Questions

1. Literally, v. 2 reads, “at the prayers of us.” Is there anything unbiblical about the phrase, “please say a prayer for us”? How about “would you please say grace”?
2. Is v. 4, taken with Acts 13:43, an argument for unconditional election? Why or why not?
3. Read 2 Cor. 2:17 and Phil. 1:15-17 with I Th. 1:5. What motivates some to preach? How can you tell if a person is preaching “with conviction”?
4. Paul defends his motives for preaching the gospel. At what point should preachers or elders defend their motives, if they are questioned? Or should they just “grin and bear it” (or “turn the other cheek”)?
5. Is “joy of the Holy Spirit” the joy the Holy Spirit gives or the joy of *having* the Holy Spirit? Explain your answer and the application of it to us today.
6. In what sense might we receive the word “in much tribulation”?
7. Describe some 21st century idols that men and women need to “turn from” (cf. 1:9).

Assignment 3

Please read I Thessalonians 2



Get the Facts

1. Describe the suffering Paul and his companions faced in Philippi (v. 2a).
2. Describe the opposition they faced in Thessalonica (v. 2b).
3. What is “flattering speech”?
4. Who was Paul’s most vigorous opponents?
5. What kind of “work” is v. 9 referring to?
6. What is “kingdom and glory” (v. 12)
7. Where is Judea? What churches were there?
8. Who killed Jesus and the prophets? When did they kill the prophets?

Observation

1. 2:1 starts with “For”; what is Paul referring back to?
2. Why could Paul say that his coming to Thessalonica was “not in vain”?
3. What image(s) does Paul employ, especially in 7-11, to describe his attitude among the Thessalonians?
4. What terms does Paul use in the chapter to describe the manner of his preaching?
6. What does Paul mean by a “walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you...” (v. 12)? In what other letter(s) does Paul use a similar figure?
7. How could Satan stop Paul from going back to Thessalonica?

Thought Question

This chapter is about (a) the attitude of Paul and the others toward the Thessalonians; (b) the attitude of the Thessalonians toward the preaching of the gospel; (c) the attitude of the Jews in Thessalonica toward the preachers and the gospel.

Each of these attitudes resulted in a certain action. Describe the attitude and the action that followed in the space below.

Assignment 4

Please read I Thessalonians 3



Get the Facts

1. When did Paul stay behind in Athens? Where do you read about it? (v. 3:1).
2. Who did Paul send to Thessalonica from Athens?
3. What news did Timothy bring about the Thessalonians?
4. For whom did Paul encourage the Thessalonians to “abound in love”?

Observation

1. Paul said he could “bear it no longer” (v. 1). What could Paul not bear any longer?
2. Why did Paul send Timothy back to Thessalonica? What did he want to know and what was he concerned about?
3. What text(s) in Acts say that Paul would be destined for afflictions in his preaching of the gospel?
4. What do you suppose was “lacking” in the Thessalonians’ faith? (v. 10)
5. In verses 11-13, God and Jesus are said to be the cause of what kinds of things in the life of Paul and the Thessalonians?
6. For what ultimate purpose were the Thessalonian’s hearts to be established?

Thought Questions

1. What personal experience or deep concern most closely parallels that of Paul demonstrated in his statement, “I couldn’t stand it any longer!” Was it about spiritual or physical things? What did you do about it? What did Paul do about it?
2. Do you think all Christians are “destined” to suffer for the gospel? See II Tim. 3:12; Jn. 16:33. How does that work out in a land of such freedom as we enjoy?
3. What is “gospel”? Verse 6 says that the faith and love of the Thessalonians was “gospel.” Explain.
4. In verse 8, Paul says “we live, if...” If what? How is your life affected by whether or not others are “standing firm in the Lord”? Should it be?
5. To whom should we extend our love? Is there any priority? Describe this “love”?
6. V. 13 says that Jesus is going to come “with all His saints.” What does that mean?

Assignment 5

Please read I Thessalonians 4



Get the Facts

1. By whose authority did Paul instruct the Thessalonians to walk in a way that pleases God?
2. What is “sanctification”? What application does Paul make of it in 4:3-8?
3. What is the “matter,” referred to in 4:6, that one is not to defraud his brother in?
4. To what has God called us?
5. Who are “those who are asleep”? (v. 13)

Observation

1. Paul told the Thessalonians how to live (v. 1). What gave him the right to do that?
2. Does “sanctification” (v. 3) refer only to refraining from sexual immorality? Why does Paul focus on that aspect?
3. What is Paul saying about “brotherly love” (*philadelphias*)? How were the Thessalonians “taught by God”?
4. What kind of life does Paul urge the Thessalonians to seek?
5. What does Paul say to those who are mourning the loss of faithful loved ones who have died?
6. Describe the “last day” from 4:13-18.

Thought Questions

1. At what point in our Christian walk do we “arrive”? When can we ever relax and retire from that walk?
2. If we know God – if we’re *sanctified* – we’ll abstain from all forms of sexual immorality. Does this affect the way we talk, dress and what we watch, as well as actual sexual practice? Should we be concerned with what non-Christians think about what we are doing in this regard?
3. What is Paul’s rationale for living a quiet life, minding our own business and working with our hands?
4. Is there anything in chapter 4 that suggests that the Lord will come to earth to establish an earthly kingdom?
5. What is the point of Paul’s teaching about the second coming?

Assignment 6

Please read I Thessalonians 5



Get the Facts

1. What are the “times and seasons” Paul refers to in verse 1?
2. What terms does he use to contrast those who are sanctified with those who are not?
3. In what other letter does Paul mention articles of armor?
4. What were the Thessalonians to do in light of the fact that Jesus would come again?
5. Who are those who “diligently labor among you” (v. 12).
6. List the admonitions and commands from v. 12 on.

Observation

1. Why should the Thessalonians “know full well” the day of the Lord was coming as a thief in the night?
2. Describe the point of the analogies of the thief and the woman in labor.
3. Why must we be alert at all times?
4. What is the difference in the terms “sleep” (“asleep”) in verses 6-7 and 10?
5. What does it mean to “build up one another” (v. 11).
6. Describe the three classes of individuals Paul mentions in v. 14.
7. How is it possible to “pray without ceasing”?
8. How is it possible to “quench the Spirit”?
9. Explain v. 22.

Thought Questions

1. As a practical matter, what does it mean to “walk in light” and be “sons of light”? Where do we find that light?
2. Describe an important purpose of the church according to 5:1-11?
3. How can we show our respect and esteem of those who “diligently labor among you” (v. 12)?
4. How do we identify an individual as being in one of the classes mentioned in v. 14?
5. Is “abstain from every form of evil” (v. 22) a blanket statement to avoid all that might be perceived by others as evil? If not, what?
6. What is your responsibility in fulfilling each of the commands in 5:12-28?

Applying I Thessalonians 5

Checklist for Encouragers

The command to “encourage” others is found throughout the Bible. In 5:11 - 23, Paul gives many specific examples of how we can encourage others.

Reference	Example	Suggested application
1 Thess 5:11	Build each other up.	Point out to someone a quality you appreciate in him or her.
1 Thess 5:12	Respect leaders.	Look for ways to cooperate.
1 Thess 5:13	Hold leaders in highest regard.	Hold back your next critical comment about those in positions of responsibility. Say “thank you” to your leaders for their efforts.
1 Thess 5:13	Live in peace.	Search for ways to get along with others.
1 Thess 5:14	Warn the idle.	Challenge someone to join you in a project.
1 Thess 5:14	Encourage the timid.	Encourage those who are timid by reminding them of God’s promises.
1 Thess 5:14	Help the weak.	Support those who are weak by loving them and praying for them.
1 Thess 5:14	Be patient.	Think of a situation that tries your patience and plan ahead of time how you can stay calm.
1 Thess 5:15	Resist revenge.	Instead of planning to get even with those who mistreat you, do good to them.
1 Thess 5:16	Be joyful	Remember that even in the midst of turmoil, God is in control.
1 Thess 5:17	Pray continually.	God is always with you - talk to him.
1 Thess 5:18	Give thanks.	Make a list of all the gifts God has given you, giving thanks to God for each one.
1 Thess 5:19	Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.	Cooperate with the Spirit the next time he prompts you to participate in a Christian meeting.
1 Thess 5:20	Do not treat prophecies with contempt.	Receive God’s word from those who speak for him.
1 Thess 5:22	Avoid every kind of evil.	Avoid situations where you will be drawn into temptation.
1 Thess 5:23	Count on God’s constant help.	Realize that the Christian life is to be lived not in our own strength but through God’s power.