

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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1 Thessalonians

As recent converts to Christianity, the Thessalonian church lacked a full understanding of the faith and suffered severe persecution. Could the fledgling believers withstand the antagonistic social climate? First Thessalonians reminds us that faithful leaders, good teaching, and obedience help believers remain firm in their faith. The letter presents a clear vision of God as powerfully active in the lives of those he has called through the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Setting

Thessalonica, a major city of Macedonia, enjoyed the good will of Rome and the Roman citizens who settled there. The city was not subject to Roman taxation, could mint its own coins, and was not obliged to garrison Roman troops within the city walls. It prospered as a political and commercial center whose influence extended throughout the province of Macedonia and beyond.

The mixed population of Thessalonica included Macedonians, Romans, Jews, and other peoples who traveled through the city. Many of the Romans who settled there became wealthy benefactors in the town. The Jewish population was large enough to have a synagogue ([Acts 17:1](#)).

Luke reported the evangelization of Thessalonica in [Acts 17:1-9](#). When Paul preached in the synagogue, some Jews converted to Christ. Most of the converts in Thessalonica, however, were Gentiles who abandoned idolatry to follow Christ ([1 Thes 1:9](#)).

The Jews who did not accept the Good News started a riot against the apostles and accused Paul and Silas of causing civil disturbance ([Acts 17:4-7](#)). The accusation was calculated to generate maximum opposition by taking advantage of the Romans' intolerance of social unrest. As a consequence, Paul and his companions were forced to leave the city after a short time.

Paul left a church that was very young in the faith, and it was already experiencing persecution ([1 Thes 1:6](#); [2:14](#); [3:3-4](#)). The Christians in Thessalonica had not received all the teaching they needed, nor did they have mature leadership to oversee the church. As Paul traveled on to Berea, Athens, and finally Corinth ([Acts 17:10-18:1](#)), he was deeply concerned about the welfare of the Thessalonian church. His repeated attempts to return to the city were blocked by severe circumstances that he attributed to Satan ([1 Thes 2:17-18](#)).

While in Athens, Paul could no longer bear his anxiety over the church. He sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to strengthen the believers and to be sure that they had not abandoned their faith ([3:1-2, 5](#)). While Paul was in Corinth, Timothy returned from Thessalonica with the good news that the Thessalonian believers had continued in faith and love and were standing firm despite the opposition they faced ([3:6-8](#)). First Thessalonians explodes

with the joy Paul experienced upon hearing this report. It expresses his thankfulness to God for their faithfulness and his prayer that he might return to see them again and establish them more fully in the faith ([3:9-11](#)).

Summary

First Thessalonians is a letter full of thanksgiving to God for the faith, love, and hope of the young Thessalonian church ([1:2-3](#); [2:13](#); [3:9](#)). Paul, however, also presents some of his concerns. In the ancient world there were many traveling orators who only sought money and fame. In [2:1-3:13](#), Paul defends his motives and ministry—he had not come looking for fame or fortune. He sincerely cared for the Thessalonian believers. He longed to see the church and had tried unsuccessfully to “come back” ([2:17-20](#)). Paul also affirms his care by reminding them that he had sent Timothy back to strengthen them and to find out about their welfare ([3:1-5](#)). Paul recounts how greatly comforted he was by the report Timothy brought ([3:6-8](#)), and he tells the church about his thanksgiving to God for them and his prayer that he might see them again ([3:9-13](#)).

Some in the congregation had ignored Paul’s teaching about sexual morality. In response, Paul emphasizes God’s will for them to be holy ([4:1-8](#)). In addition, certain individuals within the church were refusing to work, ignoring the teaching and example of the apostles in this regard ([4:11-12](#); [5:14](#); see [2 Thes 3:6-15](#)).

The Thessalonians also had some questions for Paul. First, what happens to believers who die before Christ’s return? Paul answers that such people will be the first to be raised from the dead and will be caught up with the living to meet the Lord at the time of his appearing ([1 Thes 4:13-18](#)). Second, when will Christ return and bring about the final consummation? Paul replies that the day will come at an unexpected moment, like a thief in the night ([5:1-11](#)), so they should be prepared by living in faith, love, and hope.

The letter closes with several exhortations on living a life that pleases God. Paul reminds the church to honor its emerging leaders ([5:12-13](#)). In addition, Paul instructs the Thessalonians that they should not reject prophecies but evaluate them ([5:19-22](#)). The letter concludes with a blessing that expresses Paul’s absolute confidence in God’s faithfulness and work in their lives ([5:23-24](#)).

Author

The names of Silas and Timothy, cofounders of the church in Thessalonica, are listed in [\(1:1\)](#) alongside the name of Paul. The letter is mostly written in the first person plural (“we”), indicating that Silas and Timothy might have had a real part in the letter’s composition. Paul only occasionally steps out individually to express his particular concerns ([2:18](#); [3:5](#); [5:27](#)). Joint composition of letters was known in the ancient world. For example, in his letter *Ad Atticum*, Cicero refers to “letters—both that which you wrote in conjunction with others and the one you wrote in your own name.” However, the final command in [5:27](#) suggests that Paul had the major hand in writing, whatever the role of his companions may have been.

Date and Occasion of Writing

Paul wrote this epistle from Corinth during his second missionary journey ([Acts 15:36–18:22](#)) after Timothy returned from visiting the Thessalonian church ([1 Thes 3:6](#); [Acts 18:5](#)). Gallio was named as proconsul of the Roman province of Achaia in AD 51, during Paul's stay in Corinth ([Acts 18:11–12](#)). Therefore, Paul probably wrote this letter during the latter part of AD 50. First Thessalonians is one of Paul's earliest epistles, second only to Galatians.

Meaning and Message

First Thessalonians provides a look into the life and struggles of a new congregation of believers. These new converts were greatly disadvantaged because the founders of their church were only present for a short time. The new believers were experiencing great hostility from their own countrymen because of their faith (1:6; 2:14; 3:3-4). Paul believed they were under attack by Satan, the tempter (3:5), who had also hindered him from visiting them again (2:18). When Timothy returned from visiting them, Paul was overjoyed to discover that the Thessalonians were exhibiting the character of people truly converted to Christ. Their lives were marked by faith, love, and hope (1:3; 3:6; 5:8). They even helped to spread the Good News throughout the surrounding regions (1:8) and became examples for other believers of true faith in the midst of suffering (1:6-7).

What enabled the Thessalonians to stand firm in faith in the face of great adversity? Some might attribute such perseverance to simple resolve, good upbringing, or just “blind faith.” But Paul emphasizes that believers are chosen by God (1:4) and that the Good News is the divine message and witness of God’s power (1:5). When people receive this message, it continues to work powerfully in them (2:13). Genuine conversion means turning to the true God in repentance and serving him while awaiting the return of his Son from heaven (1:9-10). Although the Christians in Thessalonica were young in the faith, separated from their church founders, and suffering for their conversion to Christ, God was at work in them. Such strength of faith is the work of Christ (3:8, 13).

Still, these new Christians needed to grow in moral character and theological understanding. Paul had warned the Thessalonians about sexual immorality, but some dismissed his teaching (4:3-8). They also did not understand that their belief in Christ’s resurrection was their source of hope in the face of the bitter reality of death (4:13-18). They were confused about when Christ would return (5:1-11). Some in the church did not heed Paul’s teaching about work (4:11; 5:14), and others were not properly respecting the emerging leaders in the church (5:12-13). Finally, some Thessalonians were repressing prophecy in the church (5:19-22).

Although correction may seem distasteful, we need it for proper moral and theological growth. Paul, as

a wise pastor, writes this letter to help the Thessalonian believers with these issues. His hope is that the letter will address these problems until he is able to return (3:10). In the end, every leader should entrust believers to God’s work in their lives (5:23) since he is faithful (5:24).