

The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the THESSALONIANS

Author: The author of this epistle identifies himself as the apostle Paul (1:1; 2:8). The authenticity of 1 Thessalonians has occasionally been challenged but with notable lack of success.

The contributions of Silas and Timothy to the substance of the Thessalonian letters cannot be detected with any certainty. It remains possible that certain peculiarities of the letters, in companion with the rest of Paul's writings are due to the influence of either of the close associates of Paul.

Date and Occasion: Paul wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians almost certainly from Corinth, where Silas, and Timothy, senders with him of the letters, were reunited with him (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor. 2:19). The letter was most likely written in A.D. 50 or 51, with 2 Thessalonians following shortly. Therefore, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are among the earliest letters we have from the hand of Paul, with only Galatians having any reasonable claim to be earlier.

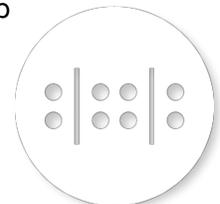
Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians after receiving a report from Timothy regarding the state of the Thessalonian congregation (3:6, 7). Paul writes with joy and relief that the Thessalonians were continuing firm in the faith despite the premature departure of Paul and his coworkers, and despite the harassment they still suffered from hostile factions.

The city of Thessalonica was named for Alexander the Great's half sister. It was founded about 315 B.C. by her husband, King Cassander of Macedonia. In Roman times, Thessalonica was a provincial capital with over 200,000 inhabitants.

On his second missionary tour, Paul and his companions Silas and Timothy had come to Thessalonica by road from Philippi, where they had been "spitefully treated" (2:2). Acts 17:2 records that Paul preached and debated in the synagogues for three successive Sabbaths.

The congregation was predominately Gentile. This indicates that a successful ministry among Gentiles continued after Paul's access to the synagogue was cut off. During their stay in Thessalonica, which cannot have lasted more than a few months, the missionaries apparently received more than one contribution for their support from the congregation at Philippi (Phil. 4:15, 16). This, combined with earning from their own labors (2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7, 8), meant that they were able to support themselves without depending on the Thessalonians. Their example of humble, industrious behavior was a rebuke to the minority in the church who wanted to refrain from working for a living.

Eventually, members of the Jewish community enlisted unscrupulous men to stir up animosity against the Christians. A riot ensued, and a number of Christians including a Jewish convert named Jason were dragged before the authorities. Jason and the others were forced to post security money to guarantee that the church would not cause trouble. Paul, Silas, and Timothy were whisked away by the believers under cover of night and soon found themselves in Berea to the



west (Acts 17:5-10).¹

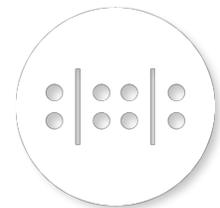
Overview/Outline: The letter begins with the typical salutation (1:1-3), which mentions Paul, Silas, and Timothy as the senders of the letter. Paul then gives thanks for the Thessalonians and for their wholehearted commitment to the message of the apostles preached to them (1:4-10). The body of the letter falls into two obvious sections, with the former, 2:1-3:13, focusing on Paul's interactions with the Thessalonians and the second, 4:1-5:11, on Paul's exhortations on to the Thessalonians. Paul begins by rehearsing the circumstances of his ministry in Thessalonica (2:1-12). He then turns from the way he preached the gospel to the way the Thessalonians received it, giving thanks for their reception of the word and reminding them that their very suffering is proof of their commitment and divine approval (2:14-16). This same persecution forced Paul to cut short his stay in the city and aroused his fears about the Thessalonians' fortitude (2:17-3:5). But Timothy has arrived to report that all is well (3:6-13).

Paul begins his exhortations by reminding the Thessalonians of three critical ways the need "to live in order to please God" (4:1): by avoiding sexual immorality, by loving each other, and by working hard with their own hands (4:3-12). He then turns to an issue that was causing great distress among the Thessalonians: the death of some of their number. He emphasizes the advantages that the dead in Christ will have when the Lord returns (4:13-18) and encourages them to lead exemplary lives in light of the coming day of the Lord (5:1-11). The letter closes in a typical way, with final brief exhortations, a wish-prayer, a request for prayer and greetings (5:12-28).²

Characteristics and Themes: A rich vein of teaching about the last days runs through the Thessalonian letters. Paul's preaching at Athens, recorded in Acts 17, confirms that his strategy among non-Jewish audiences at this time was to stress the coming judgement (4:6) that God has placed in the hands of the risen Christ.

The return of Christ would occur on what Paul calls the "day of the Lord," (5:2; Thess. 2:1). On this day there will be a resurrection of the just to inherit salvation in the Lord's presence (4:16; 5:10), and of the unjust (presupposed by Paul though never explicitly stated) to be eternally separated from Christ (2 Thess. 1:9). The end will be preceded by a widespread apostasy and the appearance of a diabolical "man of sin" (2 Thess. 2:3). Since this person had not yet appear, those in the congregation who were saying that the "day of the Lord" had already arrived were wrong and should be silenced.

Another notable characteristic of the two letters is Paul's affirmation that Christ is divine, the more striking because of the early date of the letters and the spontaneous and unguarded nature of the references. Several times Christ and God the Father are linked together as the common source of divine blessings and as the object of prayer (1:1; 3:11; 2 Thess. 1:1, 2, 12; 2:16; 3:5). In Paul's use of the Old Testament expression "day of the Lord," in which "the Lord" is now revealed to be the Lord Jesus Christ (5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2), there is a similar assignment of the prerogatives (*rites/privileges*) of deity to Jesus Christ. The united work of the three Persons of the Trinity is mentioned in 2 Thess. 2:13, 14.³



¹ These sections, *Author & Date and Occasion*, are directly quoted from *The Reformation Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson Publishers), p. 1893.

² This section, *Overview/Outline*, is directly quoted from *An Introduction to the New Testament* by Carson and Moo (Zondervan Publishers), p. 533-34.

³ This section, *Characteristics and Themes*, is directly quoted from *The Reformation Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson Publishers), p. 1893.