

1 Thessalonians

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Author Paul, Silas, and Timothy. 1:1. Paul was the main writer (shown by the use of the term “I”) and sometimes all three were involved (shown by the term “we”).

Written to The church of the Thessalonians. 1:1.

Thessalonica was one of the Roman capitals of Macedonia and was situated on the Egnatian Way – the main route from Italy and Greece to the East. Paul founded a church at Thessalonica on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-4). This made the local Jews jealous and they started a riot. They claimed that Paul was guilty of defying Caesar’s decrees because he was teaching about a King called Jesus. That night Paul slipped out of town and made his way to Berea (Acts 17:5-10). The Thessalonian Jews followed him there and again stirred up the crowds against him (Acts 17:11-13.).



In all, Paul may have only spent a few weeks in Thessalonica.

In later centuries Thessalonica became one of the major strongholds of Christianity.

Date About 50 AD, possibly a year after Paul’s visit to Thessalonica. This makes 1 Thessalonians one of the earliest of the New Testament letters.

Place Probably written in Corinth in the early part of Paul’s 18 month stay there.

Type Letter to a church. Paul wrote two letters to the church in Thessalonica. These letters give us important insights into the life of the early Gentile churches.

Theme Christian leadership. Effective leadership comes from the character qualities of righteousness, selflessness, endurance, discipline and love.

Purposes

- To encourage the new Christians in Thessalonica as they were facing persecution for their faith. Paul encourages them to be steadfast in their love for the Lord, to continue to grow in their faith, and to live in a pure and honourable way before the Lord.
- To clarify what happens when Christians die and what will happen when Jesus comes again.

Key verses

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. 3:12,13.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. 4:16-18.

Outline

Greeting (1:1)

Paul, Silas and Timothy send their greetings to the church of the Thessalonians *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. The fact that Christians are “in Christ” is a central part of all Paul’s teachings so by starting the letter this way Paul is recognizing the special relationship he had with the Thessalonians, because they were all brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians faith in Christ. (1:2-10)

Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians, remembering especially:

- their *work produced by faith*
- their *labour prompted by love*
- their *endurance inspired by hope*
- how they imitated him, regardless of the suffering this caused
- their welcoming of the message of the gospel, *with joy given by the Holy Spirit*
- how they became a *model* for other believers
- how the Lord’s message *rang out* from them to others *everywhere*
- how they *turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*
- how they are waiting for Jesus’ return *from heaven*.

The qualities listed here are very impressive! The Thessalonians were obviously strong, healthy Christians, even though the culture they were living in was hostile to the gospel and strongly pagan.

We also live in an anti-Christian environment. Could the same set of qualities demonstrated by the Thessalonians be used to describe you and your church?

Paul’s defense of his ministry in Thessalonica. (2:1-12)

Paul had obviously had a very effective ministry among the Thessalonians and they were now strong Gentile Christians. False accusations had been made about him so Paul found it necessary to defend his ministry. He had *previously suffered and been insulted* in Philippi and met *strong opposition*. But his gospel does *not spring from error or impure motives*. He is *approved by God* and just wants please Him.

Paul then lists some of the qualities he demonstrated before them:

- He didn’t use flattery and wasn’t greedy
- He wasn’t looking for praise from men.
- He wasn’t a burden to them.
- He was *gentle, like a mother caring for her children*.
- He loved them and they became dear to him.
- He didn’t just share the gospel with them, but shared his life as well.
- He worked hard so he wouldn’t be a burden to them.
- He was *holy, righteous and blameless* among them.
- He dealt with them as a father deals with his children.
- He encouraged and comforted them and urged them *to live lives worthy of God*.

Would that every Christian leader modeled these same qualities as they serve the people in their churches! Pastors would do well to evaluate their ministries against the way that Paul ministered to the Thessalonians.

Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ acceptance of the gospel. (2:13-16)

Paul thanks God because the Thessalonians had accepted the gospel as the *word of God* and had become like other churches in suffering at the hands of their own people, the Jews. The Jews had driven Paul out of Thessalonica and were hostile to all in their efforts to stop Paul *speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved*. See Acts 17:5-9. They were heaping up their sins and God’s wrath was upon them.

Paul’s longing to see the Thessalonians. (2:17-3:5)

Paul had now been separated from the Thessalonians for a while and very much wanted to come back to them, *but Satan stopped* him. (This may refer to the incident where Jason had to promise that Paul would leave the city and not return. See Acts 17:9). In any case, the Thessalonians were his hope, his joy and his crown of glory *in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ when He comes*.

Paul was willing to be left alone in Athens (see Acts 17:16-34) but sent Timothy to *strengthen and encourage* them in their faith, and so they wouldn’t be unsettled by the trials and persecutions they were experiencing. Christians can expect to be persecuted but Paul could *stand it no longer* and sent Timothy to find out about their faith in case they had been tempted away from the Lord, and his efforts *might have been useless*.

Good news from Timothy. (3:6-10)

Paul continued to have *distress and persecution* but was encouraged because Timothy had *brought good news* about the Thessalonians *faith and love*. Now he could *live* because they were *standing firm in the Lord*. Paul got much joy from this and thanked God for them praying *most earnestly* that he could *see them again* and strengthen them in the Lord.

Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians. (3:11-13)

Paul's then gives a wonderful pastoral prayer asking God:

- to enable him to see them again
- to make their love increase and overflow to each other and everyone else
- to strengthen their hearts
- to make them blameless and holy before God when Jesus returns.

Living to please God. (4:1-12)

Paul had already instructed them in how to live to *please God*. Now he urges them in the Lord Jesus to do this *more and more*. These instructions come *by the authority of the Lord Jesus* and to reject them is to reject God

Pleasing God includes:

- being sanctified (set apart for God's pleasure and service)
- avoiding sexual immorality
- being self-controlled
- not being impure, but being holy and honourable
- not living in passionate lust *like the heathen who do not know God*
- not wronging or taking advantage of our brothers and sisters in Christ
- having much brotherly love
- leading a quiet life
- minding your own business
- working with your hands
- earning the respect of outsiders
- not being dependent on others.

This set of qualities is a bit different to the ones given earlier in the letter. Those ones were qualities required of Christian leaders, while this set applies to all Christians (including leaders).

Pleasing God means that we will live quite different lives to those who don't know God.

Being ready for the coming of the Lord (4:13-5:11)

The Thessalonians may have written to Paul asking what will happen when we die, or what will happen when Jesus returns. Paul did not want them to be ignorant or grieve like those outside of Christ who *have no hope*. *Jesus died and rose again* and so will we. When Jesus returns He will bring with Him those who have died (*fallen asleep in Him*). *The dead in Christ will rise first* and those who are still alive will be *caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*. This means that all those in Christ (i.e. those who have died and those who are alive at His return) will *be with the Lord forever*. With that assurance they can *encourage each other*.



The Thessalonians should not be surprised if this day comes. They are *all children of the light and the day*, and don't *belong to the night or the darkness*. They still need to be *alert and self-controlled*, though and not get complacent. They should be ready at all times, so that, *waking or sleeping*, they may *live together with Him*.

The amazing event when the dead in Christ rise at Jesus' second coming is often called "the rapture". We don't know when this will take place but it will come *like a thief in the night* when people are not expecting it. Everyone needs to make sure they are ready for Jesus' return by being in right relationship with the Lord.

When *Jesus comes down from heaven* there will be a *loud command, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet call of God*. *The dead in Christ will rise first*. *After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*.

Being ready for the coming of the Lord involves:

- staying alert
- being self-controlled
- choosing to live in the light, not in the darkness
- *putting on faith and love as a breastplate* (to guide our hearts)
- having the hope of salvation as a helmet (to protect our minds).

Final instructions (5:12-22)

In the last section of the letter Paul gives a variety of instructions. The Thessalonians are to:

- respect their leaders and hold them in high regard
- live in peace with each other
- warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone
- never pay back wrong for wrong
- try to be kind to each other and to everyone else
- be joyful always
- pray continually
- give thanks in all circumstances (for this is God's will)
- don't put out (or quench) the Holy Spirit's fire
- don't hold prophecies in contempt, but test everything
- hold on to good and avoid every kind of evil.

Paul then prays that the Lord would *sanctify* (set them apart for Himself), *through and through*. *May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful and He will do it.*

Putting spirit, soul and body in this order reflects the relative importance of spiritual things in the culture of the day. Today we seem to have the order reversed with material things apparently much more important than matters of the mind, heart and spirit.

Conclusion (5:23-28)

Paul finishes the letter by asking the Thessalonians to *pray for us*. He sends greetings to them and asks them to read the letter to all the brothers and sisters.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Discussion questions

Why did Paul write 1 Thessalonians?

How was the situation of the church in Thessalonica similar to and different from the situation facing the church today? How is the message of 1 Thessalonians relevant for the church today?

In 1 Thessalonians Paul gives quite a few lists of qualities that are required for Christians and their church leaders? Identify each one of these qualities and reflect on:

- how well you demonstrate that quality
- how well your leaders demonstrate that quality
- what happens when you demonstrate/don't demonstrate that quality in your relationships with others.

What qualities does Paul demonstrate in this letter? How do these qualities affect the way that the letter would have been received by the Thessalonians, and by Christians today?

What happens when Christians die? What happens when Jesus returns? How does the teaching on these matters fit in with teaching in other parts of the Bible?

What have you learned from your study of 1 Thessalonians? How will you apply this in the future?