



Introduction to 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Explanation of Paul's Church Epistles

You will find Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians tucked away near the back of your New Testament. They are the last of his "church epistles" as you read through your Bible. (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon are letters written to individuals, not churches.) Since the letters to the Thessalonians were likely the very first letters Paul wrote, you may wonder why they were not placed first in the Bible.

Let's start at the beginning. The New Testament begins with four gospels, each of which gives an account of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Next comes the Book of Acts, a history of the early church and a record of the acts of the Holy Spirit through Christ's twelve apostles after His resurrection. Finally there are twenty-two epistles (or letters) which represent the correspondence of the apostles and other early church leaders with new and struggling Christians, both fledgling churches and individuals. The first nine of these epistles were written by the apostle Paul to various Christian churches. The letters are not presented in the order in which they were written but, by looking with prayer and care, the reason for the order becomes clear.

The gospel of Christ is centered at the cross where our salvation begins. The cross is essential to Christian doctrine, for without the cross there would be no salvation. Paul's first four church epistles in the New Testament (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians) emphasize Christ and the cross. In these letters, Paul exhorts his readers to look to the cross to understand Christ's sacrifice and what it means and to be strengthened in their faith. He stresses one's personal relationship with Christ through the cross, which is basic Christian doctrine every believer should be familiar with.

The next three church epistles as they appear in the Bible are Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. These all place an emphasis upon Christ and the "church". Christ is the reconciler of all men to God, giving us peace and access to the Father, and bringing us into His universal church. Christ is the head of the church, the body of believers. Thus, these three epistles stress not only an individual's personal relationship to Christ but also his or her relationship to others in the body of Christ, the church. It is through the fellowship of the church that believers may be strengthened in their faith.

The final two church epistles are 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The dominant emphasis in these letters is Christ's

return, the blessed hope of every believer. When He comes, He will take us to Himself as the perfecter of our salvation (see Hebrews 12:2). "In these two Thessalonian letters the doctrine of the Cross and of the Church is presented very simply; but the wonderful prospect of the Lord's return is elucidated in relation to His church as nowhere else in the New Testament" (Explore the Book, J. Sidlow Baxter). It is the hope of His return that strengthens our faith as we wait for Him.

So you see that the order in which the church epistles were placed in our Bibles is with sound reason and for the benefit of those who pick up God's Book to read and study. First we are introduced to the doctrine of the cross, then to the fellowship of the church, and lastly to the consummation at Christ's coming -- a very inspired order indeed!

Invitation to Study 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Throughout history, a popular form of literature compiles letters of people who have died or retired from public life. How better to get to know the heart and mind of any person than to read his or her letters? One of the most inspirational books this writer remembers reading is Deitrich Bonhoeffer's, Letters & Papers from Prison, written in the months prior to his execution by the Gestapo in 1945. Letters like these, containing deep Christian thought and emotion, leave a lasting impression. Most letters contain personal thoughts that are often profound and otherwise unexpressed. Personal letters from loved ones are a treasure. Some letters stir emotions which wrench the heart, such as those from soldiers risking their lives in battles thousands of miles from home.

The apostle Paul's letters are filled with emotion as he shares his heart with those to whom he had preached, ministered, and poured out his life. God has richly blessed us by preserving Paul's thoughts, words, and concerns so we can study and learn from them two thousand years after they were written.

Both letters to the Thessalonians were written by the apostle Paul to the members of the church he founded in Thessalonica. They are filled with joy, remembrance, satisfaction, concern, exhortation, Christian doctrine, and encouragement. They must have been a welcome gift to the Thessalonians from their evangelist, teacher, and friend who had been forced to leave them under adverse circumstances and in great haste. What meaning the letters must have held for them. Surely they clung to every word.

But these letters are not just from Paul, nor were they written solely for the Thessalonians. They were penned by the power of the Holy Spirit for those who are believers today. (See 2 Timothy 3:16-17.) They are for our comfort, encouragement, instruction, and exhortation. They are a precious gift. Will you accept and open this treasure to find what God has for you inside? The letters are short, but filled with knowledge of Christ and His church. Even more, they are filled with hope for His coming again. Please join in this study to refresh your mind in Christ and renew your hope in His promised return.

Background Information

Scholars agree that the apostle Paul wrote both 1 and 2 Thessalonians. There is also ample information in the Bible to determine where and when Paul wrote his epistles. For help in understanding these letters, it will be good to consider some background information.

How Paul came to know the Thessalonians

In Acts Chapter 17, the writer Luke records Paul's visit to Thessalonica. His reason for travelling there is revealed in Acts 16. Shortly after starting his second missionary journey, Paul received a call to go to Macedonia. Acts 16:9 records, *And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."* Immediately Paul gathered his traveling companions and they set out for Macedonia.

They went to Philippi, a leading city of Macedonia and a Roman colony. Paul's usual custom was to go first to the synagogue to preach the gospel, but since there was no synagogue in Philippi, he went outside the city to the riverside on the Sabbath day. There he found a group of women assembled in prayer. As Paul spoke to the women, God quickened the heart of a business woman named Lydia and she became Paul's first Christian convert in Europe.

Unfortunately, Paul's visit to Philippi was cut short by an incident that occurred several days later. A slave girl began following Paul and Silas, loudly proclaiming that they were "*servants of the Most High God*". When she persisted and refused to leave them alone, Paul sensed that she was plagued by an evil spirit and cast it out of her. The girl had served her masters as a fortune teller, bringing them a good income and they were infuriated when they realized their source of profit was gone. They dragged Paul and Silas before the city magistrates and stirred up the crowds against them. The result was that Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison. But God brought good from a bad experience, for by the witness of Paul and Silas, the Philippian jailer and his family committed their lives to Christ!

Paul and Silas were released from prison the next day but the city magistrates, who feared further trouble, begged Paul to leave. From Philippi, the missionaries traveled on to Thessalonica.

Paul's time in Thessalonica

For Paul, the gospel was to be taken to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16). So upon arrival in Thessalonica, he again went first to the synagogue. Acts 17:2-3 gives an account of Paul's preaching in Thessalonica and proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, *Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ."*

The result of Paul's preaching Christ is that *some of them were persuaded* (Acts 17:4), including some God-fearing Gentiles and leading women of the city. However, some Jews became envious of Paul and rounded up a mob of *evil men* (Acts 17:5) to attack the house where Paul and Silas were staying. Not finding the missionaries there, the mob dragged their host, Jason, (probably one of the Jews who had been persuaded by Paul's teaching) before the civil authorities. Jason was charged with harboring those who had *turned the world upside down by acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus* (Acts 17:6). They accused Paul and his missionary team of causing havoc throughout the Roman Empire, preaching a treasonous message against Caesar, and threatening the religious, political, and economic freedom of the city of Thessalonica. Jason was released after posting a bond, but Paul and Silas could no longer stay in Thessalonica. They left by night and went south to Berea.

It is unknown how long Paul was in Thessalonica before he was forced to leave, but it must have been well beyond the three weeks he preached in the synagogue. This will become evident as we study his letters, read about his ministry to the Thessalonians, and discover the depth of his love and commitment to them.

In Berea, the people searched the Scriptures to confirm the word of Paul's preaching and then *received the word with all readiness* (Acts 17:11). However, the jealous Jews from Thessalonica followed Paul to Berea, forcing him to leave there as well. Paul left Silas and Timothy in Berea and traveled on to Athens. Silas and Timothy soon rejoined Paul in Athens, but the new converts in Thessalonica were a constant concern to him. Before long he sent his missionary companions back to bring him news of what was happening in Macedonia. Paul was left alone in Athens.

About the city of Thessalonica

Thessalonica was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was situated on the Via Egnatia, the major Roman trade route that had been built in the second century B.C. The Via Egnatia was almost seven hundred miles long, stretching from Dyrrachium (in present day Albania) on the Aegean Sea to Byzantium which is modern day Istanbul. Due to its strategic location, fertile farmland, mining industry, and access to rivers and the sea, Thessalonica was a very wealthy and cosmopolitan city. With a population of possibly two hundred thousand people, it was one of the largest cities in the Roman world. Thessalonica was also a free city, meaning they were free of occupying Roman troops and Roman intervention (as long as no trouble arose). Thessalonica had its own political structure, a citizen assembly and upper level “politarchs” who were responsible for governing. The politarchs were held accountable to the Roman Empire and as long as peace prevailed in the city, Rome did not interfere in the local government.

Thessalonica was large enough to have a Jewish synagogue, but the predominate religion was the imperial cult which promoted the worship of Roman emperors, both living and dead. Various pagan gods were also honored. Thessalonica was located just fifty miles from Mount Olympus, home to the pantheon of Greek gods. Many pagan worshipers traveled through Thessalonica contributing to the wealth and cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city.

Paul’s reasons for writing 1 Thessalonians

Surely the new Thessalonian believers were constantly on Paul’s mind as he took refuge in Athens. He had left Thessalonica in the midst of a significant disturbance and the new believers were sure to be facing persecution and perhaps severe suffering for their faith in Christ. Everyone living in the Roman Empire was not only expected to honor the emperor but to worship him as a god. The Christians could honor the authority of the Roman emperor in the political and economic realm, but now Jesus was their king and their worship was to be for Him alone.

How would these baby believers respond in such a difficult situation? Would they stand strong in the Lord or would they give in and return to Judaism or pagan ways? Paul had warned them while he was with them that tribulations and suffering were to be expected. But would they be able to encourage one another to stand firm in their faith? Would they persevere as Christians? Or would they seek refuge in the peace and security of the Roman Empire?

Finally, Paul could stand it no longer. He sent Timothy to *strengthen and encourage* them in their faith (1 Thessalonians 3:1). Timothy’s task was to remind the Thessalonian believers of Paul’s teaching and encourage them in their afflictions.

By the time Timothy returned from Thessalonica, Paul had traveled from Athens to Corinth. He was elated to be reunited with both Silas and Timothy, but he was even more comforted with the good news of the Thessalonians’ faith, love, and fond remembrances of him. He joyously wrote to encourage them to *stand firm* (1 Thessalonians 3:8).

Paul’s reason for writing 2 Thessalonians

Within a few months of his first letter, Paul took up his pen to write another. 2 Thessalonians gives further encouragement, confronts problems, answers new questions, and gives firm exhortation concerning the believers’ daily walk with the Lord. The Day of the Lord is a pervasive theme throughout Paul’s second letter.

Dating of Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians

It is very probable that 1 Thessalonians was the first of Paul’s letters written to the churches. Most scholars date it around A.D. 50, within two decades of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

2 Thessalonians was written within a few months of Paul’s first letter. For a discussion of the timing of Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, see [Word Biblical Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians](#) by F. F. Bruce.

Key Themes in 1 and 2 Thessalonians

In response to Paul’s concerns (as described above) for the new Thessalonian believers, his first letter emphasized faith and love in view of the blessed hope of Christ’s return. After pouring out his love for them and reminding them of their joyous faith-filled times together, Paul exhorted and comforted the Thessalonians with instruction concerning how they *ought to walk and please God* (1 Thessalonians 4:1) as they waited for the Lord’s return from heaven.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul clarifies his teaching about the Day of the Lord. 1 Thessalonians Chapters 4 and 5 and 2 Thessalonians are the central passages in Paul’s epistles concerning Christ’s return. Paul wrote on this subject to give believers in Christ comfort, encouragement, and hope while waiting for this glorious event.

Outline of 1 Thessalonians

- I. Remember How You Were Saved - Chapters 1-3
- II. Reminders of How to Live - Chapters 4-5

Outline of 2 Thessalonians

- I. The Hope of Christ's Return - Chapter 1
- II. Waiting for Christ's Return - Chapter 2
- III. Working until Christ's Return - Chapter 3

Challenge

The Roman Empire was suffused with religion. There were over forty gods in the Roman pantheon; the three most important being Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. There was also the imperial cult, which deified the emperor. Emperor worship was instituted during the reign of Augustus (27 B.C. to A.D. 14) and became the official state religion during the first century. "In Latin, 'religio' means 'something that binds,' and for Romans, religion was a force that bound together families, bound subjects to their ruler, and bound men to the gods" (The Roman Empire in the First Century, www.pbs.org). There were ample opportunities for religious and civic binding in the pagan realm.

Judaism also had its place in the Roman Empire. Jews were spread throughout the Roman provinces and there were synagogues in most large cities. The Jews were expelled from the city of Rome during the mid-first century by the emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2), but this ban was later relaxed.

Those who became Christians as a result of Paul's missionary work formed a small minority and existed in the midst of paganism, emperor worship, and Judaism that was often hostile to them. It was not easy to be a Christian during the first century. Following Christ meant sharing in His sufferings (1 Peter 4:13), denying oneself, taking up one's cross to follow Him (Matthew 16:24), and living in a world filled with tribulation (John 16:33).

It is not so different today. Perhaps Christians are not surrounded with those who worship pagan gods, nor called upon to worship an emperor, but Christians around the world suffer tribulations every day. "Some estimates show that over forty million Christians were killed in the twentieth century because of their faith" (1 & 2 Thessalonians, The Hope of Salvation, James H Grant Jr.).

We who live in the United States seem to be largely sheltered from the atrocities that face many of our fellow believers. But we have challenges also. Our society no longer honors God and His word nor observes His commandments. Humanism and secularism exalt man and ignore God. The apostle Paul wrote about this very thing in Romans 1:19-22. It is not a new problem.

In such an atmosphere, faith is not easy. It never has been. But the Bible calls us to *live by faith* (Romans 1:17), *abound in faith* (2 Corinthians 8:7), *continue in faith* (1 Timothy 2:15), and *be steadfast in the faith* (1 Peter 5:9). As Christians, we are not our own. We were bought with a price, *the precious blood of Christ* (1 Peter 1:19).

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians call and encourage us to stand for Christ, to speak for Him, and to live for what is all important in life regardless of the trials and tribulations. What changes will you make in your life to clear time for committed study of God's Word? What marginal pursuits will you remove from your life so that you may commit the next six weeks to studying God's Word in obedience and faith?

QUESTIONS

Questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

DAY ONE: Read all lesson notes and references.

1. What did you learn about the Thessalonians that made you want to know more about them?

2. What interested you most about the apostle Paul?

3. How will you make time to read your Bible and work on your lesson daily?

DAY TWO: Read 1 Thessalonians Chapters 1 through 3.

4. a. To whom was this letter written? Who sent it?

b. From the following Scripture passages, what do you learn about those who sent the letter?
Romans 1:1; Ephesians 1:1

Acts 15:22; 1 Peter 5:12

Acts 16:1-3; Philippians 2:19-22

5. a. Why was there reason to give thanks for the Thessalonians? Give verses from Chapter 1.

b. In Chapter 2, what reason is given for thanking God? Give verse.

c. From Chapter 3, why did Paul send Timothy to the Thessalonians? Give verse.

DAY THREE: Read 1 Thessalonians Chapters 4 and 5.

6. From Chapter 4, verses 1-12, what instructions from Paul could you apply to your own life?

7. What statement in Chapter 4:13-18 did you find most encouraging?

8. a. What is Paul's subject in Chapter 5:1-11?

b. How is this day described in the following passages?

Joel 1:15

Malachi 4:5

Acts 2:20

2 Peter 3:10

9. Which verse in Chapter 5 was most meaningful to you? Why?

DAY FOUR: Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4.

10. a. With what blessing did Paul greet the Thessalonians?

b. Where do these blessings come from?

c. ♥(Heart Question) Are you experiencing these two blessings in your life? In what ways?

11. a. When Paul and his companions prayed for the Thessalonians, what did they “*always*” do?

b. What do you learn from this?

12. a. What did Paul remember when he thanked God for the Thessalonians? List three things.

b. ? (Thought Question) What do you think Paul meant by each of these three things? Use the following Scriptures for help: John 6:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; Ephesians 6:16; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10; Hebrews 6:18-19.

13. a. What did Paul “*know*” about the Thessalonians?

b. From the following Scripture passages, what is the meaning of “*election by God*”?
Ephesians 1:4-5

John 6:44

1 Peter 1:2

2 Thessalonians 2:13

- c. ? (Thought Question) How would you connect the Thessalonians' election with their faith, love, and hope?

DAY FIVE: Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6.

14. a. What does the word "*gospel*" mean? Use a dictionary if you like.
- b. Why might Paul have used the personal pronoun "*our*" in referring to the gospel?
- c. How did the gospel message come to the Thessalonians? Give three points.
15. Upon receiving the gospel message, who did the Thessalonians follow?
16. From verse 6, what else do you learn about the Thessalonians' reception of the word?

DAY SIX: Read 1 Thessalonians 7-10.

17. a. Using verses 6-8, in what ways were the Thessalonians examples for other believers?
- b. In what ways is your life an example to others?
18. a. What three things had the Thessalonians done (or begun to do) after receiving the gospel message from Paul? See verses 9 and 10.
- b. ♥ (Heart Question) How could you apply this to your own response to receiving the gospel?
19. What do you learn about Jesus in this passage?