

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The Pauline Epistles III

1 Thessalonians

- a. **Overview:** In contrast to Paul's letters to the church at Corinth – a church that had serious struggles with morality, theological understanding, and church order – the church in Thessalonica was one of the most faithful churches we read about in Scripture. Paul's opening remarks indicate that the gospel came to them *"not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction"* (1:5). Paul commends them for becoming *"imitators of us and of the Lord,"* being *"an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia,"* having a faith that *"has gone forth everything, so that we need not say anything"* (1:6-9). However, while Paul teaches and encourages them in several ways, the second coming of Christ seems to dominate both letters. In fact, Jesus' return is mentioned in all five chapters of 1 Thessalonians.
- b. **Date:** Based on the book of Acts, Paul planted the church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey around AD 49-50 (Acts 17:1-9). After leaving the city and heading south, it's likely that Paul wrote both of these letters from Corinth in AD 50-51 (Beale, 326). Robert Cara notes that 1 Thessalonians is Paul's first or second canonical letter (Galatians is thought to be first by many) (Kruger, 321).
- c. **Audience:** The ancient city of Thessalonica was a large and thriving metropolis located on the western coast of the Aegean Sea in modern Greece. It was the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia. The city was named after the half-sister of Alexander the Great. Thessalonica prospered due to its location as a major seaport, along with being situated on the Via Egnatia, the most important east-west highway in the Roman Empire. Therefore, the city was filled with over 250,000 people from all over the world, making it a strategic place to evangelize and plant a church.



According to Acts 17, Paul preached there for three weeks, and a large number Gentiles/Greeks believed the gospel, along with some Jews. But then persecution broke out, and Paul fled to other cities.

- **Acts 17:1–10** – *“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.”*

d. **Situation:** A few years after planting the church, Paul spent a season in Athens. While there, he asked Timothy to check on the new congregation in Thessalonica. *“We sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions”* (3:1-2). Timothy reported that the church was spiritually healthy despite outside opposition, and they still supported Paul. However, Timothy relayed several questions the church had regarding the second coming of Christ (4:13-5:10), and he reported that some in the church were lazy, idle, and unwilling to work (4:11-12; 5:14). Given these issues, Paul wrote the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians to address these issues.

e. **Contents**

- **Encouragement:** Paul begins the letter by reminding the church of its calling, spiritual growth, and reputation. He specifically mentions how the gospel *“came...not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and will full conviction”* (1:4). He concludes by describing the impact of their worldwide witness: *“For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come”* (1:8-10).
- **Apostolic Defense:** It’s been suggested that some of Paul’s opponents accused him of preaching with selfish motives. Perhaps his quick departure from Thessalonica made some think that Paul was only there for financial gain, and when things got tough he left town. It wasn’t uncommon for wandering teachers to pass through cities for immoral and financial purposes. Therefore, Paul provides a thorough defense of his calling and ministry in 2:1-12.

For example, he states, “*For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or an attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts*” (2:3-4). Carson notes, “Paul’s extensive defense of his ministry...is probably directed against this general criticism that he must have known was circulating in the city” (Carson, 545).

- **The Second Coming:** As previously noted, all five chapters in 1 Thessalonians mention Jesus’ second coming (1:3, 10; 2:12; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:1-11). There are two main reasons for the frequency of this topic.
 - **Encouragement and Accountability:** Why should the people remain faithful despite persecution and suffering? Why should the church continue to follow Jesus in obedience? Jesus will soon return. In light of Christ’s return, the church should be “*blameless in holiness*” (3:13).
 - **Correction and Hope:** Timothy made Paul aware that some had major concerns about the state of believers who had experienced earthly death. Where are they? What happens if a believer dies before Christ returns? Are they at a disadvantage compared to those who will be raptured? Others thought that since the church had faced such difficult persecution, they were now in the Great Tribulation and had missed the rapture.

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 – “*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*”

2 Thessalonians

- a. **Overview:** While Paul praised the Thessalonians more than any other church in the New Testament, there were still some areas that needed improvement. The church seemed to have doubts due to persecution, confusion over eschatology, and some were idle and lethargic when it came to work. These were issues that came to Paul’s attention after writing his first letter.
- b. **Date:** Most believe this letter was written a few months after the first letter, AD 51-52.

c. Contents

- **Encouragement:** In Paul's second letter, he commends the church for its continued growth and faithfulness. He states, *"Your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing...therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring"* (1:3-4). Due to the difficulty of following Jesus during persecution, he wanted them to know that they were doing well.
- **Eschatology:** Regarding persecution, Paul reminds them that their enemies will one day face serious judgment at the second coming of Christ. In contrast to the first letter, where Jesus' return is meant to bless believers, he now describes the fate of those who are opposed to Christ and the gospel. Paul describes that Jesus will be *"revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus...they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed"* (1:7-10). He continues by describing how the antichrist ("man of lawlessness") must first appear before Christ returns. However, when Jesus appears, he will *"kill [him] with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming"* (2:2-7).
- **Laziness:** In Greek and Roman culture, some believed that work was beneath their dignity and should only be done by the lower class and slaves. Some in the church thought that since Christ was about to return, they could take an early retirement and not do anything. This false theology fed into their habits of laziness. However, Paul responds, *"If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living"* (3:10-12).