

I THESSALONIANS: LESSONS IN FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

Historical Setting

THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH: Acts 16-18, especially Acts 17:1-9

Paul, Silas, and Timothy ministered on their second missionary journey in Philippi and left after their imprisonment and miraculous release (Acts 16:11-40). When Paul and Silas arrived in Thessalonica they proclaimed Jesus as Messiah in the synagogue for three weeks. The Lord saved many Jews, devout Greeks (God-Fearers, who were Greek converts to Judaism), and leading woman, but this provoked jealousy in the Jews to the point that the new disciples were severely persecuted before the authorities (Acts 17:1-9). Their trip to Macedonia was in response to a vision Paul had at night of a Macedonian saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:6-10). This letter gives us some insight into what Paul preached on his missionary journeys. It is interesting that he not only focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus but also includes His return in the Gospel. We see this also in his preaching in Acts 17:22-34 (Peter did as well, cf. Acts 3:11-26).

Another interesting fact about this letter is that Paul merely clarifies previous teachings and does not use his normal pattern in writing. Paul's normal pattern is to present **doctrine** and then **duty**. He always presents proper **belief** as the foundation for proper **behavior**. He teaches **truth** as the basis for **transformation**. Paul usually states our **position** in Christ and then uses this as a basis for our **practice**. For instance in Ephesians chapters 1-3 he explains about God's grace in our salvation, our position in Christ, and the unity God created between Jews and Gentiles in the Church. There is not a single command given until chapter 4. Chapters 4-6 go on to explain how to live out the doctrine/teaching he explained in 1-3. The same pattern is found in Colossians (1-2 is doctrine, 3-4 is duty). Paul spends 2 chapters explaining that Jesus is God in the flesh, the Creator, Savior, King, Redeemer, and Reconciler as well as His glorious work in forming the Church, how we are united with Christ, and identified with Him in His death and resurrection. He explains all of this before sharing about Christian living in Colossians 3-4. In Romans, Paul spends ELEVEN chapters expounding theology, the Gospel, truth, depravity (sin of mankind), the work of Christ for our forgiveness, justification, sanctification, and so on. It isn't until chapter 12 that he gives a command or writes how to live out who we are in Christ. He wants our motive for living to be for God's glory and our lives to be built on the foundation of the work of God in Christ as we continue by His grace. In Galatians, Paul shares for 4 chapters on the glories of the Gospel before he gives any instructions on Christian living in Galatians 5 and 6. **This is because Christian living is rooted in God's work in us - His grace that enable us, and the truth about who He is and who we are in Him. Our response to God must always be based on our knowledge of who He is and what He has done for us in Christ for His glory** (see Rom. 12:1-2; Titus 2:11-14; 1 Tim. 1:11-17; 2 Tim. 1; 2 Pet. 3:18; 1 Cor. 15). The Psalms are also a great example of how David responded to God's attributes and ways in His prayer, praise, and proclamation.

THE HISTORY OF THESSALONICA: In 315 BC Cassander, the son-in-law of Philip of Macedon (who fathered Alexander the Great) gathered and organized the area villages into a new metropolis, Thessalonica. He gave the city its name in honor of his wife, the half-sister of Alexander. Thessalonica remained in Greek hands until 168 BC, when the Romans took possession after winning the battle of Pydna. The Roman proconsul, the governor of Macedonia, had his residence in Thessalonica, but because it was a "free city" he did not control

its internal affairs. No Roman garrison was stationed there, and in spirit and atmosphere it was a Greek rather than a Roman city. Enjoying local autonomy, the city was apparently governed by a board of magistrates.

Thessalonica was the largest city of Macedonia. It has been estimated that during Paul's time its population may have been as high as 200,000. The majority of the inhabitants were Greeks, but there was also a mixture of other ethnic groups, including Jews. The city also enjoyed the advantages of a strategic location. The famous Via Egnatia (Egnatian Way), spanning Macedonia from east to west, passed through the walls of the city. This important Roman highway facilitated brisk travel and commerce and put Thessalonica into ready contact with the important inland districts on either side of it. It was the principal artery of communication between Rome and her eastern provinces. It was also the chief seaport into Macedonia. Paul always planted churches in urban centers, knowing that the Gospel would spread through ports and roads to other cities and countries, and that the established city churches could then evangelize the more distant rural areas.

Due to its location, Thessalonica might well be called "the key to the whole of Macedonia." The saying of Meletius concerning it was, "So long as nature does not change, Thessalonica will remain wealthy and fortunate." One of its native poets proudly called it the "mother of all Macedon." As to their moral standards, the Thessalonians were hardly any different from the citizens of any other large Greek city. Sexual immorality was a part of pagan worship (hence Paul's insistence in 1 Thess 4). Presumably, most were idolaters (though there was and still is a large Jewish population there). Since there was no separation between religion and politics, these people worshipped many gods including the Emperor and saw Christians as atheists because they did not use idols. Because they were monotheists (Jesus is Lord) and did not bow to Caesar, any calamity was thought to be the Christian's fault. The Greeks feared that the wrath of the gods would be upon the city because the Christians would not worship the gods – hence they were severely persecuted. Apparently Meletius was right, for his statement has proven true. Thessalonica, today known as Salonica (or Thessaloniki), is still a thriving city with almost 300,000 inhabitants.

Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, around 50-51 A.D. It is one of the earliest New Testament documents. Probably only Galatians and James were written before this.

The Thessalonians had many questions because Paul's visit with them was cut short.

1. Were Paul's words true?
2. If they were from God, why are the believers being hindered so much by persecution?
3. Now what should they do?
4. What about our loved ones who died – when will we see them?

Paul's opponents attacked Paul's integrity and message. The opponents attacked Paul on three grounds: (1) the Thessalonians' conversion was not genuine – hence, Paul's message could not be from God; (2) Paul was a peddler for profit (or if he was a real divinely appointed messenger then why didn't he accept pay for his service). Paul was in a "no-win" situation; and (3) the proof that Paul was not interested in the Thessalonians is that he has not even bothered to visit them again. To these charges Paul responds in the first three chapters of the Letter.

Purposes of 1 Thessalonians - The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write in order to:

1. express his joy and thanks to God for the healthy spiritual condition of the church (1:2-10).
2. argue against the false accusations against him and his associates (2:1-3:13).
3. explain to the Thessalonians why he had not returned to visit them (2:17-18).
4. express his love and affection for the Thessalonians and his desire to be with them (3:10).
5. correct some errors in living (morality, relationships, theology) which the Thessalonians had adopted (4:1-12; 5:12-18).
6. teach them more about faith, hope, love, and perseverance through suffering for the Gospel and glory of God (2:14-20; 3:3-4).
7. correct some misunderstanding about eschatology (Rapture and the Day of the Lord) both because Paul's message on that topic was cut short and, in the meantime, some of the Thessalonians had died (leaving nagging questions as to when they would be reunited with living believers). **Notice that every chapter ends with a reference to Jesus' coming/return and how this affects our daily life in every aspect!**
8. teach them more about the work of Christ in their salvation and spiritual growth (1:10; 3:11-13; 4:1-18; 5:23-24, 28).
9. teach them more about Christian leadership, obedience, and structure (5:12-15).
10. teach them about **balance** as well as not being lazy in light of Jesus' return (5:16-22; 4:9-12).

Outline:

I. Salutation (1:1)

II. Introductory Themes: Faith, Hope and Love (1:2-10)

- A. Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers. (1:2-10)
 1. He thanks God for their work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and steadfastness inspired by hope in Christ's return. (1:3)
 2. These are all done in Christ and in the Father's presence.
 3. Paul thanks God for His choice of the Thessalonians. (1:4)
 - a. The proof of His election is seen in the Gospel coming to them in word and in the Holy Spirit's power. (1:5)
 - b. Further proof is seen in their assurance and conviction of the truth when believing the Gospel.
 4. Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the integrity and character of the ministry. (1:5b-6)
 5. Evidence of their election is seen in how they became imitators of the ministers and of the Lord in spite of persecution with joy from the Spirit. (1:6)
 6. They also became examples to all the believers in surrounding regions. (1:7-8)
 7. Those who heard the Gospel in Macedonia and Achaia from this missionary focused Church report about the great conversion of the Thessalonians (1:9-10)
 - a. They turned from dead idols to serve the living God.
 - b. They are waiting for the return of His Son, Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

III. Defense of Paul's Apostleship and the Thessalonians' Conversion (2:1-3:13)

A. Paul's defense of their ministry – *Paul's work of faith* (2:1-6)

1. Paul (and others) preached the Gospel even after persecution in Philippi. (2:1-2)
2. Paul preached the true Gospel with pure motives, seeking to please God and not man. (2:3-4)
3. Paul did not come with flattery or with greed or seeking glory from men. (2:5-6)

B. Further defense: Their ministry was like parenthood – *Paul's labor of love* (2:7-12)

1. Though as Apostles they could have asserted their authority they proved to minister with the love and care of a nursing mother. (2:7)
2. The Apostles not only imparted the Gospel, but also their own lives because the Thessalonians were beloved to them. (2:8)
3. They proved their authenticity by how they labored and suffered, working night and day so as to offer their ministry for free. (2:9)
4. The Thessalonians and God are witnesses as to how devoutly, uprightly, and blamelessly they behaved towards the believers. (2:10)
5. The Apostles exhorted, encouraged, and urged each believer as a father would his own children with the purpose that they would all walk in a manner worthy of God and for His glory. (2:11-12)

C. The Thessalonians' reception of the Gospel – *The Thessalonians' steadfastness of hope* (2:13-14a)

1. The Thessalonians received the Word not as the word of men. (2:13a)
2. They received it as it truly was and is – the Word of God (2:13b)

D. Their opponents' rejection of the Gospel (2:14-16)

E. Paul's desire to visit (2:17–3:10)

1. The hindrance of Satan – *Paul's steadfastness of hope* (2:17-20)
2. The sending of Timothy – *Paul's labor of love* (3:1-5)
 - a. Paul sent Timothy to see how the Thessalonians faith was in the midst of persecution, because of his concern and to prove the Apostle's care, concerns, and authenticity. (3:1-4)
 - b. Paul feared that the enemy tempted them to reject the Gospel. (3:5)
3. The news from Timothy – *The Thessalonians' work of faith & labor of love* (3:6-10)
 - a. Timothy reported that the Thessalonians were strong in their faith (obeying moral instruction, doctrine, sanctification, trust in God, their daily walk) and in their love for believers and the Apostles. (3:6-7)
 - b. Paul encourages them to continue to stand firm, which will bring him great joy as he continues to pray that they can be reunited so that he can complete the teaching and ministry among them. (3:8-10)

F. Transitional prayer (3:11-13)

1. Paul prays that God will send the Apostles back to the Thessalonians, and that Jesus may cause them to love one another, as well as all people.
2. He prays this so that they will be blameless in holiness in the presence of God at the return of Jesus Christ.

IV. The Lord's Grace and Return as a Motive for Sanctification (4:1-5:24)

A. Proper relationships within the Body (4:1-12)

1. Paul strongly encourages the believers to be pleasing God and to obey His commandments. (4:1-2)
2. Specific commands – This is God's will for you: (4:3-12)
 - a. Negative: Do not be sexually immoral or you will bring God's discipline and grieve the Spirit since you are hurting someone in the Body of Christ (defrauding a brother by committing adultery with his sister or wife, etc.). (4:3-8)
 - b. Positive: Edification (love and financial support, see 2 Cor. 8-9) and work ethic – excel and do not be lazy, work with your own hands. (4:9-12, see 2 Thess. 3)

B. The Imminent return of the Lord (4:13-5:11)

1. The Rapture and resurrection (4:13-18)
 - a. No cause for grief - your departed loved ones will be at the Rapture. (4:13)
 - b. The resurrection and rapture are (virtually) simultaneous for those who remain living before the Rapture. (4:14-18)
 - i. First evidence: The Resurrection of Christ (4:14)
 - ii. Second evidence: New revelation given to Paul (4:15a)
 - iii. Resurrection precedes Rapture and we will forever be with Jesus Christ therefore *encourage* one another (4:15b-18)

C. Deliverance from God's wrath (5:1-11)

1. The suddenness of the Lord's return (2nd Coming, not rapture here) (5:1-3)
2. The vigilance of the saints – be alert, sober, faithful, loving, and full of assurance (hope) since we are Sons of Light by God's grace and power. (5:4-8)
3. The Promise of God – He has destined or appointed us to salvation and not wrath through Jesus Christ so that we can live together with Him forever (5:9-10)
4. **Conclusion:** same as before – *encourage* one another and build up one another. (5:11) **Lesson: The motivations for our work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and steadfastness inspired by hope are the Rapture and the Return of Christ.**

D. Proper hierarchical relations within the Body (5:12-22)

1. Recognition and regard for leaders – esteem and love them (5:12-13)
2. Recognition of leaders' office (5:12)
3. Regard for leaders' work (5:13)

4. Respect one another by living in peace with each other (5:13)
5. Responsible action toward “imperfect” saints (5:14-15)
 - a. Admonish or warn the unruly (or lazy/undisciplined).
 - b. Encourage the fainthearted (discouraged, persecuted or those who lost loved ones, etc. who want to give up)
 - c. Help the weak (the rich and socially powerful were to help the poor and oppressed)
 - d. Be patient with **everyone** (ouch! This means being longsuffering and understanding of anyone regardless of his or her spiritual or social status. This calls for a Biblical tolerance in the church when it comes to preferences [styles of praise music] or being loving towards new struggling believers, etc. and love towards outsiders. Being charitable and patient with anyone in any situation or problem takes God’s grace.)
 - e. Do not pay back evil with evil, but seek for the good of all people (5:15)

E. God’s will – obey His commands (5:16-22)

1. Rejoice always because of God and His goodness and grace (unmerited favor). In light of Jesus’ return, the hope and joy we have in Him, and knowing our eternity is sealed in Him we should be happy though there is a time to grieve. (5:16)
2. Pray constantly (attitude of prayer, living all of life in God’s presence and dependence upon Christ by the Spirit, i.e. I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken [Psalm 16:8].) (5:17)
3. Give thanks in everything because v. 16-18 is God’s will for our lives (5:18)
4. Do not quench the Spirit (don’t put out the Spirit’s fire, probably referring to the work of the Spirit in the Church, specifically prophecy.) (5:19)
5. Do not look down upon prophecy (notice in the context of Thess. that prophecy was not just about “the future” but also for strength, encouragement and comfort among the Body) (5:20)
6. Examine everything, including the prophecies, holding fast to what is good, and abstaining from what is evil (this includes false prophecies). (5:21-22)

F. Paul prays for the believers’ sanctification because God is faithful who saves (calls) and brings our salvation and sanctification to completion. (5:23-24)

V. Concluding Remarks (5:25-28)

- A. Family of God: pray for us. (5:25)
- B. Greet all the family with a holy kiss (like American handshake, shows a sign of acceptance and fellowship). (5:26-27)
- C. Read this letter to everyone. (5:27)**
- D. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. (5:28)

