

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF

1 Thessalonians

What? The thirteenth book of the New Testament (after Colossians), it is a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Thessalonica.

When? During Paul's second missionary journey (about A.D. 50), just 20 years after the death and resurrection of Christ. With Galatians, this is one of the earliest of Paul's letters.

Where? Thessalonica — a city of Macedonia, in northern Greece. In modern times it is called Salonika.

Under what circumstances? After hearing the Macedonian call (Acts 16:9, 10), Paul went to Philippi and planted the first Christian church in Europe. Then he came to Thessalonica and boldly planted another church there (Acts 17:1-9). In this city he experienced severe affliction from enemies of the gospel and striking assistance from God (1:5-7; 2:1, 2). When his foes from the synagogue stirred up trouble, Paul abruptly left Thessalonica for Berea, where the Jews gave the message a fair hearing (2:17; Acts 17:10). Longing to see the new church again, Paul sent Timothy to revisit Thessalonica and bring him news (2:17-20; 3:1-6). Timothy's report prompted thanks, joy, and prayer (3:7-13). Then, in Corinth, Paul wrote this letter of encouragement and assurance concerning his teachings.

First Thessalonians combines the zeal of an evangelist, the gentleness of a pastor, and the conviction of a prophet.

Mission helpers: Silas and Timothy were Paul's companions in labor (1:1). Also, the Holy Spirit assisted the preaching and the hearing (1:5-7).

Mission results: Initially, the Thessalonians turned from pagan idols to the true God, waiting for Jesus to deliver them (1:9, 10). Over the long term, they spread to surrounding regions the same word they had believed (1:7, 8).

Mission method: as pastor, Paul served the Thessalonians . . .

- with boldness, amid conflict (2:2)
- without dirt or deception (2:3)
- without flattery or greed (2:5)
- by pleasing God, not men (2:4, 6)
- by his own work, to be no burden (2:9)
- with affectionate desire (2:8, 17)
- with devotion and justice (2:10)
- with gentleness, like a nursing mother (2:7)
- with counsel and comfort, like a teaching father (2:11)
- with constant thanksgiving (2:13)

Mission opposition:

- Believers were afflicted (1:6; 2:14).
- The evangelist was hindered (2:2, 15, 16, 18; 3:7).
- Trouble came to all (3:3, 4).
- Comfort came through steadfast faith (3:7, 8).

Mission attitude: the great heart of the apostle shines through. Spiritual welfare and progress of others were matters of life-and-death importance (2:8; 3:8).

A missionary letter

Mission: to evangelize Macedonia and Achaia with the gospel of Christ

Missionary: Paul, an apostle, evangelist, and pastor

Mission strategy: As evangelist, Paul began in a large city of the region and visited its synagogue. From those who believed in Jesus, he developed a church to reach the rest of the city and the surrounding area.

Mission message: Paul preached the gospel of God, the Word of the Lord (1:5,

8; 2:2, 4, 8, 9, 13; 3:2). This "good news"

- begins and ends with grace (1:1; 5:28)
- emphasizes faith, hope, love (1:3; 3:6, 10, 12; 4:9, 10, 13; 5:8)
- promises deliverance from the wrath to come (1:10; 5:3, 4)
- comes not from men, but from God; and it works! (2:13)
- instructs in sanctification (4:1ff)
- comforts concerning those who've died (4:13, 18; 5:11)
- gives salvation and life through Christ who died and rose again (4:14; 5:9, 10)
- establishes and preserves until the coming of the Lord (3:13; 5:23)

1 Thessalonians in a sentence:

Having received a good report about the young church in Thessalonica, Paul reminds the believers of his ministry there, encourages them in their tribulation, exhorts them regarding love and holiness, and enlightens them concerning the righteous dead and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Holiness or sanctification (3:13ff)

Three equivalent expressions introduce the topic:

- "how you ought to walk and to please God" (4:1)
- "commandments given through the Lord Jesus" (4:2)
- "the will of God, your sanctification" (4:3)

Three aspects of the topic are addressed:

- Sexual morality, because chastity and marital fidelity were rare in that pagan culture: Possess your vessel in honor, not in the passion of lust; don't defraud a brother or sister (4:3-6).
- Self-reliant industry, because some were evidently content to live off their fellows: Lead a quiet life; mind your own business; work with your own hands; maintain a good reputation (4:11, 12).
- Duties to church leaders, because tension may have been present in the congregation: Recognize them; honor them; live peaceably (5:12, 13).

The topic ends with these short sermons:

Never . . .

- repay evil for evil (5:15)
- stop praying (5:17)
- quench the Spirit (5:19)
- despise prophecy (5:20)

Always . . .

- be patient (5:14)
- pursue good (5:15)
- rejoice (5:16)
- give thanks (5:18)
- test things, hold to the good (5:21)
- abstain from evil (5:22)

Are some . . .

- unruly? Warn them (5:14).
- fainthearted? Comfort them (5:14).
- weak? Uphold them (5:14).

Eschatology: study of last things

Paul earnestly expected the day of the Lord and the resurrection of the dead. Because they thought it would be soon, Thessalonian believers were concerned that some of their numbers had died before the Lord came to take them to Himself. This is what Paul taught about the end:

Concerning the coming of the Lord

- We wait for Jesus to come from heaven (1:10).
- Believers will be in His presence with joy and honor (2:19).
- We may be established and holy when He comes with His saints (3:13).
- He will come with a shout, an angel's voice, and a trumpet blast (4:16).
- He'll be met in the air by all the righteous — dead or alive (4:17).
- We may be completely blameless at His coming (5:23).

Concerning the dead

- They are asleep, but our sorrow is not hopeless (4:13).
- If Jesus died and rose again, so will those who sleep (4:14).
- God will "bring those who sleep in Jesus" with Him (4:14).
- They will not be inferior to the living when Jesus comes (4:15).
- They will rise first from the dead to meet the Lord (4:16, 17).
- This is our comfort regarding the righteous dead (4:18).

Concerning signs of the times

- The day of the Lord will come unexpected and unannounced (5:2, 3).
- Those who live in denial and darkness shall not escape it (5:3, 4).
- Believers know this already and are children of that day (5:1, 2, 4).
- Believers should be awake and alert, not drowsy or drunk (5:5-8).
- Faith, hope, and love = salvation and life in Jesus Christ (5:8-10).
- This is our comfort and strength regarding the last great day (5:11).

After receiving this letter, some Christians may have given up all other pursuits in life to wait for the end. Hearing about this, Paul then wrote 2 Thessalonians to instruct them toward a more patient waiting for the Lord's return.

Big three: Faith, hope, and love (1:3; 5:8)

- Faith: describes the positive response of those who heard the gospel message (1:8; 2:13; 3:2, 5, 7, 10).

Continued faith comforts the messenger (3:7).

- Hope: focuses on the return of Christ. Each chapter ends with hope (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13-17; 5:1-10; 5:23), comforting the readers (4:18; 5:11).
- Love: affirms what they already possess and something in which they may greatly increase (3:12; 4:9, 10).

Difficult words: 2:14-16 contains Paul's strongest statements anywhere against his fellow countrymen. The Jews had been particularly resistant to the gospel Paul preached in Thessalonica (Acts 17:10, 11). If this were all we had on this topic from Paul's pen, we might think that the apostle to the Gentiles was fully anti-Semitic. These harsh words must be balanced, however, by expressions elsewhere. In several other texts, Paul demonstrates great compassion, concern, and sacrificial service toward his brethren in the flesh (Romans 1:16; 3:1, 2; 9:1-5; 10:1; 11:1-5; 1 Corinthians 9:19, 20). "There is a time to tear, and a time to sew" (Ecclesiastes 3:7).