

FIRST EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONICANS

Approximate date: 50-52 C.E.

Time period: season of severe difficulty for a young assembly of Believers, with misunderstandings about the end-times

Author: the Apostle Paul

Location of author: Corinth

Target audience and their location: Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Thessalonica

People:

Paul, Timothy, Silas

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah

Places:

Thessalonica, Macedonia, Achaia, Philippi, Judea, Athens

Key Themes:

commendations to the Thessalonians for their faith and service / trials faced by Paul in his ministry service / instructions on how to please God and live a holy life / teaching on the resurrection and Second Coming

Key Scriptures: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 / **Greeting** (1:1); **Prayer of Thanksgiving** (1:2-10); **Paul's Mission Work in Thessalonica** (2:1-16); **Paul's Present Relationship to the Thessalonians** (2:17-3:13); **Practical Exhortations** (4:1-12); **The Parousia** (4:13-5:11); **Further Practical Exhortations** (5:12-22); **Conclusion** (5:23-28)¹

Theological Summary: The authorship of 1 Thessalonians is most certainly Pauline, indicated by the personal characteristics we see interspersed throughout the letter,² and comparison with other passages (3:1-2, 8-11; cf. Acts 15:36; 2 Corinthians 11:28). Pauline authorship of 1 Thessalonians is not severely challenged, even by many liberal examiners. Silvanus and Timothy are listed as co-senders of 1 Thessalonians (1:1), which has lent some

¹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 603-604.

² Cf. F.W. Beare, "Thessalonians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 4:621.

support to them being either co-writers or closely involved with the letter's composition.³ Sometimes, 1 Thessalonians is regarded to be the first extant Pauline letter written,⁴ although if it is not, 1 Thessalonians was still one of Paul's earliest extant letters. The historical data that appears in 1 Thessalonians is associated with Paul's visit to Thessalonica seen in Acts 17:5-14. The Thessalonian congregation was founded by Paul on his Second Missionary Journey.

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia, in the Roman period. Thessalonica was a seaport city located at the head of the Thermaic Gulf (now the Gulf of Salonika), serving as the chief seaport in Macedonia. The city was an important trade center on the road leading north to the Danube, and many goods coming and going to Rome went through Thessalonica.⁵

Paul began his early ministry in Thessalonica at the synagogue (Acts 17:1-9), after he had to leave Phillipi (Acts 16:6-40). There was a Jewish presence in the city, but later the group of new Messiah followers became predominantly non-Jewish (Acts 17:4),⁶ indicated by Paul's words, "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Many of the Thessalonian Believers came out of Greco-Roman paganism, quite recently as indicated by Paul's greeting. A large sector of his audience also included a number of "devout Greeks" (*IDB*),⁷ as the first major group to receive the new faith in Yeshua appear to have been either Greek God-fearers or proselytes to Judaism.⁸

Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica abruptly, due to hostility from the local Jewish community over his preaching the gospel (Acts 17:5-10). The assembly of Thessalonian Believers that had been put together was relatively young and unestablished, only a few months or so, when Paul had to write to them. Paul had sent Timothy to them to find out about their development (3:1-2), and so this letter was composed as a response to Timothy's report. Paul wrote the Thessalonians, mostly new Believers who were to various degrees still maturing in their Messianic faith, about the persecution that they were facing (3:3-5). Paul's letter deals with some practical instructions for proper living (4:1-12), and he wanted to clarify for them some misconceptions regarding the Messiah's return (4:13-18).

It is often agreed that Paul composed his letter from Corinth, the last place he visited on his Second Missionary Journey, and confirmable from internal evidence (1:1; 2:18). The dating of 1 Thessalonians is often tied to the ascension of Gallio into power,⁹ as Paul had to go before him to answer charges (Acts 18:12-17). "An inscription discovered in Delphi in 1909 contains a letter from Claudius to Gallio, before whom Paul was arraigned in Corinth; it dates

³ Carson and Moo, pp 534-535.

⁴ Beare, "Thessalonians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 4:621; Edgar M. Krentz, "Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the," in *ABD*, 6:515, 517; cf. Merrill C. Tenney, "Thessalonians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 4:832.

⁵ Cf. Krentz, "Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the," in *ABD*, 6:516; J.W. Simpson, Jr., "Thessalonians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 933-934; Robert K. Jewett, "1 and 2 Thessalonians," in *ECB*, 1413.

⁶ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 585-586; Simpson, "Thessalonians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 934.

⁷ Beare, "Thessalonians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 4:622.

⁸ Tenney, "Thessalonians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 4:832.

⁹ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 587-588.

the proconsulship of Gallio to the twelfth year of Claudius's tribunicial power and before the latter's twenty-seventh acclamation in August, A.D. 52...Just when Paul appeared before him is not stated, but Acts 18:12-18 implies that Gallio's succession took place near the end of Paul's eighteen-month stay in Corinth" (Tenney, *ISBE*).¹⁰

Contrary to what some in the Messianic community today might want to believe, no Hebrew or Aramaic origin for 1 Thessalonians has ever been suggested by any reputable New Testament scholar. All are in agreement that Paul wrote this letter in Greek.

"Far and away the largest theological contribution of the Epistles [1&2 Thessalonians] lies in what they say about eschatology" (Thomas, *EXP*).¹¹ Teachings regarding the Last Days appear in every chapter of this letter (1:9-10; 2:19-20; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:23-24), and are dominate from 4:13-5:11. 1&2 Thessalonians, along with Yeshua's Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) and the Book of Revelation, form the main sector of end-time teachings within the Apostolic Scriptures. Secondary issues in 1 Thessalonians regard proper sexuality and being aware of the conditions and circumstances in which one is living.

The persecution that the Thessalonians were facing is often attributed to the hostility that the Jewish leadership at the local synagogue had toward Paul (Acts 17:5-9). This hostility may have been because the Greek God-fearers and proselytes in their midst were eager recipients of the good news of Yeshua. The synagogue leaders may have cherished this group of people, and were greatly upset that they left their tutelage.¹² In spite of this, however, the main persecution of the Thessalonian Believers that developed, appears to be of pagan Thessalonian, and not Jewish origin (3:3-4), even though it did possibly come as a result of Jewish influence over local leaders. The initial charge against Paul that the Jews brought was that he was inciting rebellion against Caesar (Acts 17:7).

In general Christian evaluation, 1 Thessalonians is approached as a letter demonstrating some of the early social and spiritual issues faced as the good news spread abroad. Sinful behaviors of paganism were to be a thing of the past for the new Believers. The Messiah is going to return to judge the Earth and sinners, and as such "The hope of Christ's return was a powerful incentive to holiness" (Tenney, *ISBE*).¹³ While there are various themes encountered in 1 Thessalonians viewed as being a bit general by many layreaders, it is important to be aware of how "In the last decade or so [1990s into the 2000s] these two small letters have become some of the most hotly debated documents in the NT...[T]hey reflect the earliest accessible stage of Paul's pastoral and missionary endeavors and provide our earliest glimpse into a nascent Pauline congregation" (Jewett, *ECB*).¹⁴ There are points of disagreement among conservative and liberal examiners of 1 Thessalonians, as to how true Paul's letter and the record in Acts 17:1-15 correspond to one another.¹⁵

¹⁰ Tenney, "Thessalonians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 4:833.

¹¹ Robert L. Thomas, "1 Thessalonians," in *EXP*, 11:223; cf. Carson and Moo, 549.

¹² Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 586.

¹³ Tenney, "Thessalonians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 4:834.

¹⁴ Jewett, "1 and 2 Thessalonians," in *ECB*, 1413.

¹⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 589-591; Carson and Moo, pp 532-533, 542-543.

“1 Thessalonians is designed primarily as a treatment of the issue of the moment rather than as a general theological treatise” (Tenney, *ISBE*),¹⁶ with the content “fitted to the [assembly] he addresses” (*ABD*).¹⁷ There are questions about Paul’s words about the Jews in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, but this may have far more to do with the local people of Judea and/or a widespread disdain witnessed in the Jewish religious leadership to the gospel, not the Jewish people in general.¹⁸ When evaluating the issues of eschatology and the resurrection (4:13-18), one has to wonder if the Thessalonians were utterly confused over Paul’s emphases on realized eschatology versus future realities yet to be manifested.¹⁹ Paul’s theological orientation that born again Believers were a part of the age to come, may have caused some confusion when various Thessalonian Believers died, for example.²⁰ It can be legitimately suggested that in Paul’s short time with the Thessalonians, he had been unable to give them a fully developed picture of the doctrine of resurrection.²¹

If there are any challenges that exist in 1 Thessalonians for today’s Messianic community, they do not really relate to the validity of the Torah or aspects of the Messianic lifestyle, but instead relate to the infamous pre- versus post-tribulation rapture debate. While much of contemporary Christianity today leans heavily toward the pre-trib viewpoint, and there is often not an even balance between pre- and post-trib Christians,²² there is a more even balance between pre- and post-tribulationists in the Messianic community. There is certainly room for improvement in our collective Messianic engagement level with the Epistle of 1 Thessalonians. Understanding some of the early challenges of the Believers, in terms of their relationship with the Jewish Synagogue, and their fervor for the return of the Messiah, certainly contain valuable lessons for our emerging Messianic movement today to reflect upon and consider.

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¹⁶ Tenney, “Thessalonians, First Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 4:833.

¹⁷ Krentz, “Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the,” in *ABD*, 6:517.

¹⁸ Cf. Krentz, “Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the,” in *ABD*, 6:516; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Thessalonians, First Letter to the,” in *EDB*, 1299.

¹⁹ Simpson, “Thessalonians, Letters to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 934-935.

²⁰ Cf. Jewett, “1 and 2 Thessalonians,” in *ECB*, 1414.

²¹ Carson and Moo, 546.

²² It is useful to peruse some of the perspectives witnessed in Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Paul D. Feinberg, Douglas J. Moo, Richard R. Reiter, *Three Views on the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 1 THESSALONIANS:

1. Do you think it is significant that most of Paul's letter is spent encouraging the Thessalonians? Why or why not?

2. What does Paul say about the resurrection and coming of the Lord? Do you have an opinion about it?

3. What aspects of 1 Thessalonians do you think need some further investigation and reflection on your part?

REFLECTION ON 1 THESSALONIANS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians: