

First Thessalonian

In Acts 17 we find the account of Paul's pioneering efforts at Thessalonica. In a very short period of time he had managed to win a large number of people to Christ. These included Jews from the local synagogue, God-fearing Greeks and a number of leading women. He had just finished doing his version of 'jail-house rock' at Philippi (Acts 16:26) where he had also pioneered a church.

First Thessalonians was one of Paul's first letters which he wrote (apart from Galatians), was written about 50-51 AD., shortly after his time there. From Thessalonica he went to Berea, where some trouble-makers from Thessalonica arose and caused him to go to Athens by himself. When he was rejoined by Timothy and Silas they went to Corinth. Paul's concern about the Thessalonians manifested with him sending Timothy back there to see how they were getting on. When Timothy returned with good news about their walk with the Lord, Paul wrote to them this letter of encouragement, exhortation and teaching. Timothy had found that they had remained steadfast but were grieving over those in their fellowship who had died and were going to miss out on Christ's second coming.

Thessalonica (modern Salonica) lies near the ancient site of Therma on the Thermaic Gulf at the northern reaches of the Aegean Sea. This city became the capital of Macedonia (ca. 168 B.C.) and enjoyed the status of a "free city" which was ruled by its own citizenry ([Acts 17:6](#)) under the Roman Empire. Because it was located on the main east-west highway, Via Egnatia, Thessalonica served as the hub of political and commercial activity in Macedonia, and became known as "the mother of all Macedonia." The population in Paul's day reached 200,000 people.

Because of their effective ministry, the Jews had Paul's team evicted from the city ([Acts 17:5-9](#)), so they went south to evangelize Berea ([Acts 17:10](#)). There Paul had a similar experience to Thessalonica with conversions followed by hostility, so the believers sent Paul away. He headed for Athens, while Silvanus and Timothy remained in Berea ([Acts 17:11-14](#)). They rejoined Paul in Athens (cf. [Acts 17:15](#), [16](#) with 3:1), from which Timothy was later dispatched back to Thessalonica (3:2). Apparently, Silas afterwards traveled from Athens to Philippi while Paul journeyed on alone to Corinth ([Acts 18:1](#)). It was after Timothy and Silvanus rejoined Paul in Corinth ([Acts 18:5](#)), that he wrote 1 Thessalonians in response to Timothy's good report of the church.

Author and Title

As declared in 1:1 and 2:18, all evidence (external and internal) supports the claim of the book that Paul is the author of 1 Thessalonians. Early church fathers support Paul's authorship beginning as early as A.D. 140 (Marcion). Those things that characterize Paul are evident throughout (cf. 3:1-2, 8-11 with Acts 15:36; 2 Cor. 11:28). In addition, a number of historical allusions in the book fit Paul's life as recounted in Acts and in his own letters (cf. 2:14-16; 3:1, 2, 5-6 with Acts 17:1-15). In view of this evidence, few (some radical critics of the nineteenth century) have ever questioned Paul's authorship.

As the first of two canonical epistles to the church at Thessalonica, this book was called in the Greek text, *Pros Thessalonikeis A*, "First to the Thessalonians."

Theme and Purpose

The purpose and burden of the apostle in writing to the Thessalonians can be summarized as follows: to express his thankfulness for what God was doing in the lives of the Thessalonians (1:2-3), to defend himself against a campaign to slander his ministry (2:1-12), to encourage them to stand fast against persecution and pressure to revert to their former pagan lifestyles (3:2-3; 4:1-12), to answer a doctrinal question pertaining to the fate of Christians who had died (4:1-13), to answer questions regarding the "Day of the Lord" (5:1-11), and to deal with certain problems that had developed in their corporate life as a church (5:12-13; 19-20).

Summary

In chapters 1-3, Paul commends them for their faithfulness to the Lord. He wrote, *"thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe"* (2:13).

In chapters 4-6, Paul highlights Love and Hope. He encourages the church to walk in love; to excel still more). He then expounds on the return of Jesus and *"the day of the Lord"*. Paul teaches the church about the resurrection on the last day and that Christ will return in the clouds, this was exactly the encouragement that the church in Thessalonica needed. Lastly, before Paul finishes his letter he does not forget to add that they must pray constantly and *"examine everything carefully"*. In today's world of lies, deception and carnival mirrors, everyone must apply these truths daily.

Key Word(s)

Two key words and concepts stand out in this short epistle: "sanctification" (4:3, 4, 7), and "the coming of the Lord," which is referred to in every chapter of the epistle (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23). The coming of the Lord should not only comfort our hearts, but stir us to godly living.

Key Verses

1:9-10. For people everywhere report how you welcomed us and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God 1:10 and to wait for his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus our deliverer from the coming wrath.

2:13. And so we too constantly thank God that when you received God's message that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human message, but as it truly is, God's message, that is at work among you who believe.

4:1-3. Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. 2 For you know what commandments we gave you by *the authority* of the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification; *that is*, that you abstain from sexual immorality; (NASB)

4:13-18. Now we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest who have no hope. 4:14 For if we believe that Jesus died and arose, so also we believe that God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep as Christians. 4:15 For we tell you this by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep. 4:16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will arise first. 4:17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be snatched up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord always. 4:18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Key Chapter

Chapters 4 and 5 undoubtedly stand out as key chapters because of their teaching on both the coming of the Lord for the church, the rapture (4:13-18), and the day of the Lord (5:1-11), the time in the future when He will intervene in human events to consummate His redemption and judgment.

Commentary

First Thessalonians was written at least five or six years before the great doctrinal treatises known as the Roman, Galatian, and the Corinthian Letters, and with the Second Letter to the Thessalonians which followed it by only a few months, it shares the distinction of being the only epistles that came into existence before the beginning of Paul's third great Missionary journey. Written only a short time after the church at Thessalonica was founded, and called forth by the trials and needs of a young congregation which he felt it in his heart to visit again, but was prevented, they illustrate the apostolic instruction given to a newly organized church, composed of Gentiles, suffering under the persecution of both Jewish and heathen adversaries. They are fresh in allusion to the experiences of Paul while among them, and reveal his deep solicitude when forced away.

When the apostle, on his third missionary journey, passed into Europe, he first planted a church at Philippi, but after a little season was driven from there by heathen persecution. Then, attended by Silas and Timothy, he went westward along the great Egnatian Way, the Roman road which led through Greece to Macedonia. He did not pause until he reached Thessalonica, nearly a hundred miles westward, the chief city of Macedonia, situated around a noble harbor at the head of the Aegean Sea. Its situation

on the great Roman thoroughfare, its position on the extremity of the sea, and the rich country in its rear, had contributed to make it a great commercial city, with a mixed population of Greeks, Romans and Jews, the first being the most numerous. Here, where there was a synagogue, the apostle paused, found employment to meet his frugal wants, and began to preach among his own countrymen. "And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few."

But soon after the unbelieving Jews stirred up an uproar which made it necessary for Paul and Silas to leave and the brethren sent them away by night. Going from there to Berea to the southwest, they first labored there, and later the apostolic labors were extended to Athens and to Corinth. Shortly after Paul's departure from Thessalonica, the persecutions which had driven him away turned upon the church (1 Thessalonians 2:14 1 Thessalonians 3:3), a circumstance that made him yearn to return (3:5). Twice he resolved to do so but was prevented (2:18). Finally he sent back Timothy from Athens (3:1, 2), and when Timothy returned to him at Corinth, to which he had proceeded, the message which he brought was the occasion of this epistle, an epistle full of comfort, instruction and encouragement, but withal, containing also the instruction in righteousness so much needed by a congregation of those so recently heathen and addicted to heathen vices.

It is interesting to know that this church, honored with the first of the apostolic epistles, long continued to enjoy a glorious history. It was afterwards visited by the apostle more than once; and is often mentioned in the history of the church. Though for more than four hundred years under the sway of the Turk, the majority of its population has always continued to profess the religion of Christ. The city is still great and flourishing, in point of commerce the third in the Turkish empire, possessing a population estimated all the way from 75,000 to 100,000. Of these about one-half are Greek Christians, and the remainder nearly equally divided between Mohammedans and Jews. The excellence of the harbor makes it a constant object of eastern diplomacy, and at this time one of the obstacles in the way of settling the "Eastern Question" is to determine what power shall be awarded Thessalonica.