

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

1 Thessalonians

Date of composition: A.D. 50-51, the first of St. Paul's letters.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy brought the gospel to Thessalonica (northern Greece) during his second missionary journey sometime between A.D. 49-50. Thessalonica was perfect for spreading the word of God given its seaport and trade routes that allowed the gospel to spread to all points throughout the Empire. Although Thessalonica was a thriving Greco-Roman city with many pagan cults, it also had a large Jewish population. So Paul began preaching in the synagogues and as a result, **“some of the Jews . . . a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women”** were brought to the faith (Acts 17:4).

Soon, however, the Jews became jealous of Paul's success and incited a mob against him and his fellow missionaries, forcing their expulsion from the city (Acts 17:1-9). Leaving Thessalonica, Paul travels forty-two miles east to Berea where he encounters more opposition (Acts 17:22-34). Finally, in Athens, Paul meets up with Silas and Timothy. Still, Paul is anxious about the church he left behind. So Paul sends Timothy back to Thessalonica to assess the situation there.

Later, while Paul is in Corinth, Timothy brings back news from Thessalonica. Paul then writes his First Letter to the Thessalonians, assuring them of his love and affection, but also giving them instructions (3:6). Because there are no serious abuses to correct, Paul's tone is gentle and optimistic. For the new “Way” is not acquired once and for all, but must be encouraged and reinforced by further clarification and repeated admonition.



Chapter 1

Paul's genuine concern is whether the Thessalonians are standing firm in their newfound faith. Despite their suffering, Paul encourages them by appealing to their own experience of conversion. Paul uses the phrase, **“with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit”** because for him, joy is one of the true hallmarks of genuine spirituality (1:6).

Chapter 2

Aware that the message of the gospel in Thessalonica has spread to the Jewish synagogues, and therefore among the Gentiles who attend, Paul urges the Thessalonians to recall the way things were in the beginning so that **“no one deceives you in any way”** (2:3). Paul reminds them that the public abuse that he and Silas suffered in Philippi has only emboldened them to preach the gospel in Thessalonica.

Upon Timothy's return, Paul learns that some are claiming that his teaching is false, and that he is greedy and dishonest. But Paul insists that he and his companions **“worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you”** (2:9). The Thessalonians also know that Paul is being harassed by Jews in their city, who expect the Gentiles to keep at least the minimum requirements of the Torah or Law (circumcision, food laws, keeping the Sabbath).

Chapter 3

Paul does not return to Thessalonica but sends Timothy with his letter. The object of Paul's concern continues to be the faith of the Thessalonians and whether they are putting their trust in Christ. Paul knows they are going to suffer further persecution. And while Paul seldom attributes personal human failure to the work of Satan, he does see Satan's influence in the persecution of Christians. When Timothy returns Paul is greatly relieved to hear that the Christian community has not collapsed (3:6-10).

Chapter 4

Paul now shifts to matters that Timothy has reported back to him, such as how are believers in Christ to live in the world and with one another? What happens to believers who died before the coming of Christ, that is, the final Day of the Lord? Paul senses that the faith of the Thessalonians is wavering, so he wants to give further instruction (4:3-8; 4:9-12). Paul is also aware that not all of them are involved in the errors that need correction, so he maintains the friendly tone of his letter.

Paul is also concerned about matters of sexual immorality. Indeed, for a people for whom sexual activity outside of marriage was the cultural norm, Paul tells them that their behavior must be in keeping with God's own Christian character; that refusing to reject sin is a rejection of God himself. For Paul the Holy Spirit is the power for truly Christian behavior. God is their constant divine companion by whose power they become holy. And while sexual purity is not the only measure of holiness, nevertheless it is a significant factor in personal sanctification.

Another issue concerns those who think they need not work, who are living off the largess of others in the newly formed Christian community. Paul insists they must not burden their fellow believers by taking advantage of their kindness. The point is not about "work" per se, but the meaning of love within the newly formed people of God. Again, Paul eases into his words of correction—**"aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands"**—for the small minority who need correction (4:11).

Paul does not want the church in Thessalonica to bring shame on itself. From Paul's perspective the issue is *philadelphia* ("mutual love"); a word used throughout the Greco-Roman world for love between siblings, but used here for the first time in the New Testament. It is the familial relationship of God's newly formed people with each other.

The Thessalonians must understand that their present sufferings are what precedes the Lord's coming. But in the meantime, some have died, so of course the Thessalonians are concerned about them. Paul does not want the Thessalonians to **"grieve as others do who have no hope"** (4:13). Those believers who have died will be raised to join the living at Christ's coming. Paul's conviction is based on Christ's own bodily resurrection. Paul is not trying to spell out the "how" of our future bodily resurrection but only the fact of it. The living have no advantage over the dead regarding the Second Coming.

That the **"dead in Christ will rise first,"** means neither that they are the first to get to heaven, nor that they will be raised before others at the final judgment (4:16). Rather, they will be raised as the first so that all believers—living and deceased—will be together to meet the coming Lord in the sky. Thus the **"dead in Christ"** are meant to distinguish them from all others who have died.

Chapter 5

Paul now addresses how the Thessalonians are to live in the meantime **"before the day of the Lord"** (5:2). While Paul stresses the unexpected nature of the Lord's coming, he is not threatening but encouraging them to live their faith courageously, confident of their own future. Similarly with

the images of light and darkness, drunkenness and sobriety, Paul's point is: live as believers in Christ in contrast to your pagan neighbors who do not know the Lord.

With Paul's letter at an end, he writes as one saying goodbye to his friends. Paul urges them not to quench the Spirit or the Spirit's gifts but "**test everything**," hold fast to the good and avoid every evil (5:21).

It is noteworthy that the standard "goodbye" in ancient letters was *erroso* (Greek, "be strong"), which James uses in his letter (Acts 15:29). Paul's "goodbye" is "**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you**" (5:28). Paul uses "grace" to embrace all that God has done and that Paul prays God will do for his Thessalonian friends through Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians

Date of Composition: A.D. 51-52.

As the persecution of Christians continued, some Christians were declaring that the end time was already upon them, creating further problems such as idleness and disruptive behavior. With this, Paul writes his second letter to the Thessalonians, invoking his apostolic authority to restore order.

For Paul there are two Christian virtues that needed further attention. The issue was not simply with the Thessalonians' faith, but with the *steadfastness* of their faith. At the same time, Paul gives thanks to God that their faithfulness is showing signs of increase (3:10). Paul's second point is that nothing is more important for their understanding of Christian life than their love for one another.

Chapter 1

Paul is concerned that the Thessalonians understand the nature and purpose of their suffering, and the role of suffering in anticipation of God's righteous judgments on their enemies. Paul reminds them that God's judgment will be that "**you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God**," since this is the ultimate goal "**for which you are in fact suffering**" (1:5). At the same time Paul points to the future; that the present suffering has a role to play regarding their presence in the kingdom. Suffering is the lot of those who would be disciples of the suffering servant Messiah.

Indeed, in both First and Second Thessalonians there is the sense of the "already/not yet." Life for the Christians in the present is grounded on Christ's Resurrection, which also guarantees their own certain future. Paul's prayer is that "**our God may make you worthy of his calling**" (1:11).

Chapter 2

The teaching about the "**day of the Lord**" (1Thessalonians 5:1-11) has shaken some Christians in their present sufferings. Others take a dim view toward working with their own hands, thinking that if the final judgment has come, why work at all? But Paul has been teaching that the "day of the Lord" will be preceded by certain events, and that such events surrounding it will simply be too visible for any of them to miss. Paul concludes with a thanksgiving, an exhortation and prayer for their steadfastness in faith.

Paul does not want his teaching to be either ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented. He understands that this community needs to be a bit more perceptive about the work of the Holy Spirit, and urges them to hold fast to what has been handed down to them *directly* from him.

Paul also does not want evil to have the last word. Though the "**man of lawlessness**" will cause evil in the world, his ultimate destruction is assured (2:3,7). The Thessalonians are not to be deceived about the day of the Lord, but remain confident about the future, despite the false teaching of others. God can be trusted with the future; and for those who trust him there is an underlying

certainty that they also will be part of that future. If the timing of the coming of the Lord is not known, believing and waiting patiently and expectantly for it is to live the gospel.

Chapter 3

Paul returns to the issue of the idlers and their need to work rather than be a burden to others. Paul affirms the majority of the Thessalonians, but once again warns the minority who have not yet heeded the instructions in his first letter. Typical of Paul, he first presents a positive dimension of a group of believers, before addressing those who are creating difficulties.

Paul urges the “**busybodies**” who are feverish in their expectation for the “day of the Lord” to work “**with quietness**” and thus “**earn their own living**” (3:11-12). In Paul’s first letter he defends his right to work with his own hands; now, in his second letter, he is telling the idle that they should follow his example.

Then Paul urges the faithful not to grow weary in doing what is good. Since this is the attitude of the majority of the believing community, Paul concludes by spelling out how they are to deal with the disobedient, especially after having been shamed by the public reading of his letter. The majority are not to associate with them, so that the idlers themselves might become ashamed of their conduct. At the same time, the majority are not to forget that these idlers are still members of the family, and so they must still be considered brothers and sisters.

Paul ends his letter in typical Jewish fashion by offering a wish of peace. With final greetings and a benediction, Paul’s letter concludes with the one word in Paul’s vocabulary that embraces all that God has done, and that he desires that God will do for his Thessalonian friends through Jesus Christ: “**the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all**” (3:18).

