

## THE BOOK OF 1 THESSALONIANS

### ORIENTING DATA FOR 1 THESSALONIANS

- Content: a letter of thanksgiving, encouragement, exhortation, and information for very recent Gentile believers in Christ
- Author: the apostle Paul, joined by his traveling companions Silas and Timothy
- Date: A.D. 50 or 51, while Paul is in Corinth, probably the earliest document in the New Testament
- Recipients: quite new converts to Christ in Thessalonica, mostly Gentile (1:9–10)—Thessalonica was a northern Aegean seaport that also sat astraddle the Egnatian Way (see “Orienting Data for Philippians,” p. 353); in the time of Paul it was the chief city of Macedonia
- Occasion: the return of Timothy to Paul and Silas in Corinth; Timothy had been sent to Thessalonica to see how the new believers were doing (see 3:5–7)
- Emphases: Paul’s loving concern for his friends in Thessalonica; suffering as part of Christian life; holiness regarding sexual matters; the need to do one’s own work and not live off the largesse of others; the resurrection of the Christian dead; readiness for Christ’s coming

### OVERVIEW OF 1 THESSALONIANS

Put yourself in Paul’s shoes. You have recently been to Macedonia’s major city, where you had had good success in preaching the good news about Christ. But your success also aroused enormous opposition. Your host was arrested and charged with high treason, while friends ushered you out of the city by night so that you wouldn’t be brought before the authorities. Thus your stay was much shorter than you had expected, and the new believers are now pretty much on their own, without a long period of seasoned instruction in the way of Christ. (See the account in Acts 17:1–9; the three Sabbath days mentioned in verse 2 does not mean that Paul was in the city for only that long. Rather that was how long he was able to work in the synagogue. Our letter indicates a church of much greater stability, Christian instruction, and renown than two or three weeks would have produced.)

So what would you have done? Try, as Paul did, to return, despite the danger (1 Thess 2:17–18)? And what if you could not return, because “Satan blocked [your] way”? And all the time you know nothing about what has happened in Thessalonica since you left (these were the days before postal service, not to mention telephone and e-mail service!). Very likely you would do what Paul did: Send a younger colleague, who could return without fear of being recognized or of suffering personal danger.

Now Timothy has returned to Paul and Silas in Corinth. A full half of our letter (chs. 1–3) is about Paul’s past, present, and future relationship with these new converts, told in basically chronological fashion. Two clear things about Paul emerge in this section: (1) his deep, personal anxiety about the Thessalonians’ situation and (2) his equally deep relief to learn that things are going basically very well (you can almost hear his sigh of relief in 3:6–8). Two things also emerge about the Thessalonian believers in these two chapters: (1) They continue to undergo suffering and persecution, but (2) they are basically hanging in there with regard to their faith in Christ—although there are also some things lacking.

The rest of the letter takes up matters that have been reported to him by Timothy. Most of them are reminders (see 4:1–2, 9; 5:1) of instructions they had been given when Paul and his companions were among them—about sexual immorality; mutual love, which includes working for one’s own sustenance; and the return of Christ. One altogether new item is also included, namely, what happens to believers who have died before the coming of Christ (4:13–18).

## SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 1 THESSALONIANS

Keep in mind in reading this letter that it is most likely the earliest extant Christian document. To see how Paul deals with very new converts is part of the delight of reading. Notice especially how often Paul reminds them of things they already know (1:5; 2:1, 5, 9, 10, 11; 4:2, 9; 5:1). Given that Timothy’s report about their faith was essentially positive and that on two matters Paul says there is no need to write (4:9; 5:1), the question is, Why then write at all? The answer lies in 3:9–10, where Paul thanks God that overall they are doing quite well, but that there are also some deficiencies. Since he cannot come now, he sends a letter as his way of being present and supplying “what is lacking in your faith.”

On three matters (2:1–12; 4:1–8; 4:13–5:11) it is especially important to be aware of Greco-Roman culture in general and Thessalonian sociology in particular. First, every charge Paul defends himself against in 2:1–6 can be found in pagan philosophical writings—charges leveled against religious or philosophical charlatans. Almost certainly part of the suffering of the Thessalonian believers comes in the form of accusations against Paul (after all, he left town in the dead of night with political charges hanging in the air!). Second, the Greeks and Romans never considered immoral the kind of sexual behavior outside of marriage that both Jews and Christians saw as breaking the seventh commandment; what we would call sexual promiscuity—of all kinds—was simply an accepted way of life. Third, there is plenty of archaeological evidence indicating that the pagan Thessalonians were intensely interested in matters of life after death.

It is also of some interest to read 1 Thessalonians in conjunction with Philippians, since both are directed toward Macedonian (and therefore Greek) cities, yet their citizens are well known in antiquity for their loyalty to Caesar; in both cases Paul and the churches are undergoing persecution because of their loyalty to a “King” other than Caesar.

But there are differences as well. While 1 Thessalonians shows characteristics of a letter of friendship, that friendship was not of the more contractual kind Paul had with the Philippians. Note that in Philippi Paul had accepted financial support, whereas in Thessalonica, even though he stayed with Jason, he chose in this case to work with his own hands. This appears to mark a change in missionary strategy, which will serve Paul’s theological interests in both Thessalonica

and Corinth—here, because in 2 Thessalonians he will eventually appeal to his own example in order to reinforce the instruction given in 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12. See further the comments on 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 on page 372.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 364–366.