

LESSON 1

OVERVIEW OF 1 THESSALONIANS

Getting Acquainted

First Thessalonians covers a wide range of themes in only five short chapters: election, friendship, Satan, sex, love, work, and death, just to name a few. Yet perhaps its most dominant theme is the end times—specifically, the second coming of Jesus. As his redeemed people, Christians ought to live lives of holiness and love as we anticipate that final day. Christ’s return will bring to completion all of God’s promises, including judgment for his enemies and salvation for his ex-enemies—those who have become his people, his friends, and his bride. Whether now deceased (1 Thess. 4:13–18) or still living (1 Thess. 5:1–11), anyone who has in faith embraced King Jesus is eternally secure.

Interestingly, the title “Lord Jesus” appears 11 times throughout this five-chapter letter—more than in any other New Testament epistle except 2 Thessalonians (12 times) and 1 Corinthians (11 times). For all of Paul’s emphasis on other important matters, then, the letter’s ultimate focus is on the one who pervades its pages: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Definition: Epistle

A type of letter common in New Testament times. Epistles typically included (1) an introduction of author and recipient; (2) greetings and expressions of thanks; (3) the body of the letter; (4) personal greetings and signature; and (5) a closing doxology or blessing. Twenty-one of the NT’s 27 books are epistles, 13 of which were penned by Paul.

Placing 1 Thessalonians in the Larger Story

In fulfillment of God’s millennia-spanning promises, Jesus the Messiah came to earth, lived, died, rose, and ascended in order to reconcile rebels to their Maker. After a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19), Paul was chosen and commissioned as an apostle to broadcast that gospel and to plant churches. God blessed Paul’s witness in Thessalonica so much that a church was established before the apostle’s abrupt exit (Acts 17:1–11). It is to this young church that he now writes from Corinth, some 360 miles (by land) to the south, addressing the Thessalonians in light of a report from Timothy’s recent visit (1 Thess. 3:6). The letter’s scope stretches from eternity past (1 Thess. 1:4) to its particular focus on eternity future (1 Thess. 1:10; 2:19–20; 3:13; 4:13–5:11, 23–24).

Definition: Apostle

A “sent one.” In the New Testament, the word is most commonly used as a technical term for eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus whom he personally chose and commissioned to represent him.

Key Verse

“Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” (1 Thess. 2:8)

Date and Historical Background

After seeing a vision of a Macedonian man urging him to “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9), Paul embarked on a journey to that region with Silas and Timothy, “concluding that God had called [them] to preach the gospel” there (Acts 16:10). They traveled first to Philippi (Acts 16:11–40) before proceeding to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia, a Roman province in northern Greece. Boasting a population of more than 100,000, the city was a powerful commercial center in the Greco-Roman world. It was strategically located on the coast of the Aegean Sea at a key juncture along the Via Egnatia (a major Roman east-west highway). The city, therefore, attracted a diverse array of people and philosophies. This cosmopolitan makeup shaped its religious climate as well. While primarily polytheistic, Thessalonica included a sizable number of monotheistic Jews.

In Acts 17:1–11, Luke recounts Paul’s visit to the city. He entered the local synagogue and on three consecutive Sabbaths “reasoned with them from the Scriptures” and proclaimed Jesus as the Christ (Acts 17:2–3). Some of the Thessalonians “were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” (Acts 17:4). Nevertheless, a band of jealous Jews “formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd” (Acts 17:5). Unable to find Paul, Silas, or Timothy, they dragged Jason and some others before the authorities and charged them with sedition: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6–7). Narrowly escaping by night, Paul and his associates journeyed west to Berea, where, Luke notes, the Jews were “more noble than those in Thessalonica” (Acts 17:11). However, on learning that Paul was in Berea, some of the Thessalonian Jews “came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds” (Acts 17:13). Paul again escaped, sailing south to Athens (Acts 17:16–33).

Paul’s next destination was Corinth, where he remained for 18 months (Acts 18:1–18). Paul wrote to the Thessalonians from Corinth around AD 50–51, on the back end of his second missionary journey. First Thessalonians is probably his earliest New Testament letter after Galatians (c. AD 48).

Definition: Polytheism

The belief in or worship of multiple (*poly*) gods (*theism*). The Thessalonians served and revered various Greco-Roman deities, including Aphrodite, Demeter, Dionysus, and Zeus. Idolatry was rampant in the city (1 Thess. 1:9).

Outline

Opening Greeting (1 Thess. 1:1)

Thanksgiving and Encouragement (1 Thess. 1:2–3:13)

Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope (1 Thess. 1:2–3)

Paul's confidence in the election of the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:4–2:16)

Paul's defense of the missionaries during their absence (1 Thess. 2:17–3:10)

A pastoral prayer for the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:11–13)

Instruction and Exhortation (1 Thess. 4:1–5:28)

On pleasing God (1 Thess. 4:1–12)

On the second coming of Jesus (1 Thess. 4:13–5:11)

On community conduct (1 Thess. 5:12–22)

Prayer, assurance, and conclusion (1 Thess. 5:23–28)

As You Get Started

Do you have a sense of any specific themes in 1 Thessalonians?

Without using your Bible, do any passages from the book come to mind?

Has the book been meaningful to your Christian life in any way?

If 1 Thessalonians could somehow be erased from the Scriptures and wiped from our memories, what would we lose?

What do you think are some of 1 Thessalonians' crucial truths for believers?

What is your general understanding of the role of 1 Thessalonians in Scripture as a whole?

What does it uniquely contribute to Christian theology? That is, how does this letter crystallize our understanding of God, salvation, the church, the end times, or any other doctrine?

What aspects of 1 Thessalonians have confused you in the past?

Are there any specific questions you hope to have answered through this study?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a few minutes to ask God to bless you with increased understanding and a transformed heart and life as you begin this study of 1 Thessalonians.

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