

1Thessalonians

I. Setting

- A. 1Thessalonians is the 13th book of the New Testament and 8th among the epistles
 - a. Epistles are the major doctrinal sections of the NT
 - b. They were written to churches or individuals to explain theology, answers questions and address problems of doctrine or practice in the early church.
 - c. In them we find the theology of the New Covenant explained
- B. Traditionally 1-2Thessalonians are considered to be among the earliest of the NT writings.
 - a. 1Thessalonians – 51 AD
 - b. 2Thessalonians – 52AD
 - i. It is remarkable that to such a young group of believers Paul would grapple with such weighty subjects as the rapture and return of Christ.
 - ii. We are never too young in Christ to begin to get a handle on theology and Biblical doctrine.
- C. 1Thessalonians is the 1st of 2 letters written to a young church situated in the northern Greek city of Thessalonica
 - a. The city was large and influential. It was the capital of Macedonia and sat on the northern fringe of the Thermaic Gulf making it an international port city.

Thessalonica was built about 300 years before Christ by Cassandra, one of Alexander the Great's generals. He built the city near the old city of Therma, meaning heat, named for the natural hot springs. Cassandra named the city Thessalonica after his wife, who was also the sister of Alexander

By the time of Christ the city was very large and influential. Estimates it may have had a population of 200,000 people including a large Greek, Roman and Jewish population.

The city was also influential because of its location. It sat on the major Roman roadway and since it was a coastal city also had a large port.

Thessalonica was the largest, most important commercial and political center in Macedonia.

Thessalonica was a cosmopolitan city. It was a resort and health center because of the hot springs. It was a commercial center because of its seaport, fertile plains and the proximity of the Ignatian Way and it was the central political headquarters of Macedonia

- b. The wide spectrum of international people as well as the vast trade in and out of the city made Thessalonica a key location for the Gospel to be shared. This city could serve as a hub for taking the Gospel to the whole world
 - i. Paul declares that:
“For from you the Word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place...”
(1Thes 1:8)

- D. Paul first traveled to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey.
(Acts 16-18)

In many ways the second missionary journey was a vision expansion trip. Paul attempted to go to Asia Minor, then to Bithynia but was directed to cross the Aegean Sea to Europe.

One of the key lessons from this journey is that God had a much bigger vision for Paul's life than Paul had. Paul wanted to take the Gospel to Asia, God wanted to use Paul to take the Gospel to Europe and change the face of human history.

God does the same thing today. As we continue to serve Him, He continues to open doors and do beyond what we could have ever imagined

This may however prove to be quite costly

It was on this trip that Paul visited Philippi, was arrested and beaten before being released. After departing he made the 100 mile journey to Thessalonica.

- E. The Backstory of 1-2 Thessalonians is recorded in Acts 17

- a. After only 3 weeks of ministry, hostility broke out against Paul and his companions and they were forced to flee from the city.
- b. During those few weeks in Thessalonica
 - i. Paul taught regarding the death, resurrection and return of Christ

Acts 17:1-3

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ."

First it is worth noting that Paul established a custom to make fulfilling the great commission easier. His custom was based on the gifts the Lord had given him and the open doors that were made available to him.

Few of us would be given the microphone in a Synagogue but we all have open doors to bring the Gospel to lost people. We need to develop a custom based upon the Great Commission

Second we find that Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures

We are left to wonder what texts Paul emphasized as he explains Christ from the Scriptures.

When he spoke of the cross his message may have included:

- Genesis 3:15 - where the Seed of the woman is promised to bruise the head of the serpent
- Genesis 22 - where Abraham offers his son Isaac and God promises to provide a substitutionary lamb

- Exodus 12 - where the Passover lamb is explained which points to the death of Christ
- Exodus - where the altar of burnt offering is erected as a picture of the cross
- Or Ps 22 where the words of Jesus from the cross are first recorded "Why have you forsaken me"
- Or perhaps would have gone to Isaiah 53 where the crucifixion is foretold in amazing detail 700 years in advance

When he spoke of the resurrection he may have referred to

- Psalm 2 where we are told the holy one will not see corruption
- Or Genesis 22 to see the emphasis on three days
- Or perhaps to the story of Jonah as a portrait of the resurrection

Luke leaves out a third subject of Paul's during his short time in the city. According to 1-2 Thessalonians another key subject of his teaching was eschatology.

We will see that clearly as we go through the details of 1Thessalonians

We will see that they had a basic understanding of the return of Christ and that the letter was designed to clarify some things and straighten out their confusion

ii. Many came to faith in Christ

Acts 17:4

And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

The letter was written to those who believed and was designed to help disciple them in their relationship with Christ

This was not the only method Paul used to help these new believers grow

- He remained as long as he could. Which turns out to be 3 Sabbaths
- He sent Timothy to walk them through the Word. Timothy may have stayed up to 6 months in Thessalonica
- He wrote to them so they would have a valuable resource to help them grow

iii. Others opposed Christ

Acts 17:5

But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.

Those who rejected did so not because of a lack of Biblical support. Paul made His case for Jesus being the promised Messiah. The reason for rejecting was envy. Like Herod and Pilate before them, these men refused Christ because they did not want to give up anything and especially the throne.

Many today have the same struggle; position in family, community or business keep them from surrender to Christ. Not long ago I spoke with a man who knew he needed to come forward at church but he couldn't make public his decision for Christ, however because of his position in the community he was afraid what others would think and say.

Others reject Christ because they do not want to be under authority. This was part of the issue in Thessalonica. The message Paul taught was that Jesus was both the Christ and the king. When Jesus was

asked by Pilate whether He was a king, His response was:

John 18:37

Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?"

*Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. **For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.**"*

Acts 17:6

But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too."

There rejection soon led to persecution. The leader of the synagogue was arrested and brought before the city officials. The charges brought against them were that they were turning the world upside down. This is a poetic way of saying that Paul and his companions are causing trouble in the city with their message.

This stems from a failure to understand the message. The Gospel does not cause trouble it solves it.

The same accusation was brought against Jesus
Luke 23:2

And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King."

They accused Jesus of perverting the nation.

If believers made this statement it might read

- Those men who have brought the message of eternal life
- Those men who risked their lives to explain how sin can be forgiven
- Those men who brought the message that can change a life forever

In reality the message of the Gospel turns the world right side up

- c. After their departure, Timothy returned to Thessalonica to disciple the young believers.

Acts 17:10

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

The difficulties in Thessalonica forced Paul and his companions to depart from the city. We find out from 1Thes that Timothy was sent back into the city to help disciple the new converts and to establish the church

1 Thessalonians 3:1-2

*Therefore, when we could no longer endure it, we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to **establish you and encourage you** concerning your faith,*

Timothy was a young man who received Christ on Paul's first mission trip. When Paul arrived in Galatia the second time he invited Timothy to join the team. His ministry in Thessalonica was his first solo opportunity. It is here where he will learn hands in how to pastor and disciple people.

Timothy's arrival and the letters of 1-2 Thes were Paul's means of long distance discipleship
We have no way of knowing exactly how long Timothy remained in Thes, however we do know that he joined Paul before this letter was sent. He brought an update to Paul regarding the church

1 Thessalonians 3:6

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—

- i. His effectiveness is seen in the complimentary statements Paul makes regarding the church
 - 1. 1Thes 3:6

2. 1Thes 1:2-3
3. 1Thes 1:7-8
4. 1Thes 4:9-10
5. 2Thes 1:3-4

- ii. Timothy returned to Paul with a report and with many questions from the young church
 1. 1Thessalonians answers many of these questions. Particularly regarding what happens to those who die in Christ, and what happens to those who remain alive until His return
 2. About 1 year later a second report reached Paul, filled with more questions. These also have to do with eschatology.
 3. 2Thessalonians is Paul's answer. Making 1&2Thessalonians the major eschatological epistles in the NT along with Revelation.

II. 1Thessalonians

- A. The letter is simply named after the city in which the church was located
- B. Letter was a joint effort of Paul, Silas and Timothy

Silvanus

- He is first mentioned in the Bible in Acts 15:22 where he is called a chief man among the brethren of the Jerusalem Church.
- He was also a prophet Acts 15:32
- He was a Roman citizen like Paul Acts 16:37
- He and Judas Barsabbas were sent to Antioch by the Jerusalem Church to inspect the situation Acts 15:22, 30–35.
- Once he saw the work God was doing in Antioch he wanted to stay and assist Paul and the other teachers

Acts 15:34

However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

- He is later assists Peter in ministry 1 Pet. 5:12.
- Both Paul and Peter call him Silvanus while Luke calls Silas

Timothy

- Timothy came to Christ when Paul first visited Lystra and joined his ministry team on the second mission trip.
- Timothy is mentioned in the salutation in: II Corinthians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians and Philemon.
- Paul spoke of him as “my son in the ministry” 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4
- Later Timothy would Pastor the church in Ephesus

C. The letter divides naturally into two parts

- Chapter 1-3 is autobiographical regarding the time he spent in Thessalonica

This section is one of the most pastoral portions of the NT. While we refer to Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles, it is here in the early chapters of 1Thessalonians that we see pastoring people modeled for us. Anyone seeking to step into ministry should use this text as the model to follow

1 Thessalonians 1:5

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

Paul explains the secret behind the effectiveness of the ministry in Thessalonica

- Power
- Holy Spirit
- Much assurance
- What kind of men we were for your sake

Gospel is most effective when combined with the power of the Spirit and the godly living of those who proclaim it. (There are cases in Scripture and life where God uses believers who are living in compromise, but that in no way justifies their ungodliness)

How effective were they?

1 Thessalonians 1:7-9

7 So that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.

The Thessalonians set the example for the church in Europe

8 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

They became evangelists taking the gospel to the cities around them

9 For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

They left their pre-Christ, worldly practices behind to become followers of Jesus

- b. Chapters 4-5 are doctrinal and seek to answer the questions and solve the problems within the church

2 major areas are addressed

1. Personal Purity

1 Thessalonians 4:1

Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God;

Specifically Paul addresses sanctification and sexual purity

Sanctification is the process of becoming like Jesus in all areas of our lives

1 Thessalonians 4:3-4

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

Remember these believers lived in a world that thought righteousness was upside down. Their view of sexual mores was diametrically opposed to God's. Paul exhorts them to behave toward the opposite sex in a way that is pleasing to God.

Sexual immorality is a broad term and includes anything outside of what God has determined sexual relations to be

- Adultery
- Fornication
- Homosexuality
- Pornography
- Prostitution

The Bible is calling those who want to turn the world upside down to live lives of sexual purity

Personal purity is also seen in the closing section of the letter

1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

16 Rejoice always,

17 pray without ceasing,

18 in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

19 Do not quench the Spirit.

20 Do not despise prophecies.

21 Test all things; hold fast what is good.

22 Abstain from every form of evil.

2. The return of Christ

The second major doctrinal subject in the letter is regarding eschatology, end times or the return of Christ.

Notice that the hope of Christ's return is made an integral part of the Gospel and Christian faith. Clearly Paul thought eschatology was not an advanced course or an elective, He taught it while in Thessalonica and made it a major subject of this letter. More ink

is given to the doctrine of Christ's return than any other doctrine in the letter with the exception of perhaps the doctrine of pastoring.

Each chapter ends with reference to Christ's second coming.

Chap. 1:10 it is linked with salvation

They turned from idols to serve God and await the return of Christ

Chap. 2:19-20 it is linked with service

Paul anticipated the day when all who came to Christ through his ministry would see Christ come

Chap. 3:13 it is linked with sanctification

Paul prays that they might love one another and live blameless lives in light of the return of Christ

Chap. 4:13-18 it is linked with comfort

They were to be comforted by the fact those who died were with Christ and those who remained until the end would be raptured

Chap. 5:1- it is linked with sobriety

Paul explained that they must live ready for Christ will come as a thief in the night

The main subject under the heading of eschatology is the rapture of the church.

Rapture –

- Comes from the Greek word “harpadzo” translated “caught up” in the NKJV.
- Defined as a generation of believers that will enter heaven without passing through the doorway of death

Along with 1Corinthians 15, 1Thessalonians 4-5 are the two biblical passages that address the rapture. From them we learn that Christ will return suddenly, without warning to forcibly remove a generation of believers from earth to heaven without passing through the doorway of death.

Other passages in scripture illustrate the rapture, but it is only these two texts where the doctrine is developed.