

John MacArthur :: Bible Introductions - 1 Thessalonians

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Title

In the Greek NT, 1 Thessalonians is listed literally as “To the Thessalonians.” This represents the Apostle Paul’s first canonical correspondence to the church in the city of Thessalonica (cf. [1:1](#)).

Author and Date

The Apostle Paul identified himself twice as the author of this letter ([1:1](#); [2:18](#)). Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy ([3:2](#), [6](#)), Paul’s traveling companions on the second missionary journey when the church was founded ([Acts 17:1–9](#)), were also mentioned in Paul’s greeting ([1:1](#)). Though Paul was the single inspired author, most of the first person plural pronouns (we, us, our) refer to all 3. However, during Timothy’s visit back to Thessalonica, they refer only to Paul and Silvanus ([3:1](#), [2](#), [6](#)). Paul commonly used such editorial plurals because the letters came with the full support of his companions.

Paul’s authorship has not been questioned until recently by radical critics. Their attempts to undermine Pauline authorship has failed in light of the combined weight of evidence favoring Paul such as: 1) the direct assertions of Paul’s authorship ([1:1](#); [2:18](#)); 2) the letter’s perfect correlation with Paul’s travels in [Acts 16–18](#); 3) the multitude of intimate details regarding Paul; and 4) the confirmation by multiple, early historical verifications starting with Marcion’s canon in A.D. 140.

The first of Paul’s two letters written from Corinth to the church at Thessalonica is dated ca. A.D. 51. This date has been archeologically verified by an inscription in the temple of Apollos at Delphi (near Corinth) which dates Gallio’s service as proconsul in Achaia to A.D. 51–52 ([Acts 18:12–17](#)). Since

Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia was probably written ca. A.D. 49–50, this was his second piece of canonical correspondence.

Background and Setting

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.

Paul had originally traveled 100 mi. from Philippi via Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey (A.D. 50; [Acts 16:1–18:22](#)). As his custom was upon arrival, he sought out the synagogue in which to teach the local Jews the gospel ([Acts 17:1, 2](#)). On that occasion, he dialogued with them from the OT concerning Christ's death and resurrection in order to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was truly the promised Messiah ([Acts 17:2, 3](#)). Some Jews believed and soon after, Hellenistic proselytes and some wealthy women of the community also were converted ([Acts 17:4](#)). Mentioned among these new believers were Jason ([Acts 17:5](#)), Gaius ([Acts 19:29](#)), Aristarchus ([Acts 20:4](#)), and Secundus ([Acts 20:4](#)).

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.

Paul undoubtedly had multiple reasons for writing, all coming out of his supreme concern for the flock from which he had been separated. Some of Paul's purposes clearly included: 1) encouraging the church ([1:2–10](#)); 2) answering false allegations ([2:1–12](#)); 3) comforting the persecuted flock ([2:13–16](#)); 4) expressing his joy in their faith ([2:17–3:13](#)); 5) reminding them of the importance of moral purity ([4:1–8](#)); 6) condemning the sluggard lifestyle ([4:9–12](#)); 7) correcting a wrong understanding of prophetic events ([4:13–5:11](#)); 8) defusing tensions within the flock ([5:12–15](#)); and 9) exhorting the flock in the basics of Christian living ([5:16–22](#)).

Historical and Theological Themes

Both letters to Thessalonica have been referred to as “the eschatological epistles.” However, in light of their more extensive focus upon the church, they would better be categorized as the church epistles.

Five major themes are woven together in 1 Thessalonians: 1) an apologetic theme with the historical correlation between Acts and 1 Thessalonians; 2) an ecclesiastical theme with the portrayal of a healthy, growing church; 3) a pastoral theme with the example of shepherding activities and attitudes; 4) an eschatological theme with the focus on future events as the church's hope; and 5) a missionary theme with the emphasis on gospel proclamation and church planting.

Interpretive Challenges

Primarily the challenges for understanding this epistle involve the sections that are eschatological in nature: 1) the coming wrath ([1:10](#); [5:9](#)); 2) Christ's return ([2:19](#); [3:13](#); [4:15](#); [5:23](#)); 3) the rapture of the church ([4:13–18](#)); and 4) the meaning and time of the Day of the Lord ([5:1–11](#)).

Outline

1. Paul's Greeting ([1:1](#))
2. Paul's Personal Thoughts ([1:2–3:13](#))
 - A. Thanksgiving for the Church ([1:2–10](#))
 - B. Reminders for the Church ([2:1–16](#))
 - C. Concerns for the Church ([2:17–3:13](#))
3. Paul's Practical Instructions ([4:1–5:22](#))
 - A. On Moral Purity ([4:1–8](#))
 - B. On Disciplined Living ([4:9–12](#))
 - C. On Death and the Rapture ([4:13–18](#))
 - D. On Holy Living and the Day of the Lord ([5:1–11](#))
 - E. On Church Relationships ([5:12–15](#))
 - F. On the Basics of Christian Living ([5:16–22](#))
4. Paul's Benediction ([5:23](#), [24](#))
5. Paul's Final Remarks ([5:25–28](#))

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