

## Lesson 1

# Introduction to 1 & 2 Thessalonians

## Introduction

Today the ancient city of Thessalonica lies beneath Salonica in northern Greece. Thessalonica owes its existence to Cassander, who founded it in 315 BC, naming it after his wife, who was the sister of Alexander the Great. By the time of Paul, the city already had a long and very proud history. During Roman times, it was the capital of Macedonia. The Roman proconsul had his administrative offices in the city, and the Macedonian Senate conducted its business there.

Commercially, Thessalonica sat on one of Rome's major east-west trade routes. The *Via Egnatia* passed through the city and traveled down the coast for over 500 miles. Military and commercial interests would have depended heavily on this road.

## The Establishment of the Church in Thessalonica

The Acts account provides details of Paul's establishing of the church in this city, Acts 17.1-10. This was part of his second missionary journey. Acts 17.4 provides details of large numbers being converted: *And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.* This resulted in unbelieving Jews attempting to drive Paul and his companions from the city. They incited a mob who claimed Paul had committed crimes against the Roman Empire. When they could not find Paul, they dragged Jason and a few others before the city officials. Acts 17.5-7 provides the details:

But the Jews became jealous, and they brought together some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city. Attacking Jason's house, they searched for them to bring them out to the public assembly. When they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city officials, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here too, and Jason has welcomed them. They are all acting contrary to Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king—Jesus."

The city officials required Jason and the others to post a bond and then dispersed the mob. The last thing they needed was a threat to the peace and the lack of Roman intervention that the city enjoyed. Paul and Silas were sent away in the middle of the night, Acts 17.10.

What can we learn from the Acts account? Although what we read covers only ten verses, we can conclude that Paul and Silas made a large impact inside the synagogue and the city. It was enough to provoke their enemies to regard the Christians as a serious threat against their interests. Their ability to stir up large crowds with little evidence of wrongdoing is also intriguing. In 1 Thessalonians 2.18 and 3.5, Paul indicates his desire to return to Thessalonica and his concern for their perseverance. This clearly fits with Luke's historical account given in Acts. The animosity toward the church in Acts is consistent with the references to persecution in the Thessalonians correspondence, 1 Thessalonians 1.6; 2.14; 2 Thessalonians 1.4-7.<sup>1</sup>

The Acts account indicates that Paul's stay in Thessalonica was brief, lasting a few weeks (three Sabbaths, Acts 17.2). But 1 Thessalonians 2.7-9 reveals that he was in the city long enough to work at his trade, provide instructions (4-1-2), lead an example of how a Christian should live (1.6; 2.1-12), and build a strong bond of affection between himself and the believers (2.17-20; 3.6). This indicates that he stayed there longer than the three weeks mentioned in Acts.

The gap of time between Acts 17.4-5 is unknown. There is no indication in Acts 17.5 of how long Paul stayed in Jason's house before the riots forced his departure. He could have stayed several weeks or months. Philippians 4.16 indicates that his stay was long enough for that church to send a contribution(s) to support his ministry there. *Acts' mention of three weeks does not limit Paul's stay but describes only three weeks of his stay.*

After Paul and his companions were driven from Thessalonica, they went to Berea. Paul was driven from there too and went to Athens. Later Timothy joined him there. At some point, Timothy was sent to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3.1-2). When he returned to Paul, he brought good news, and Paul responded by sending the letter we know as *1 Thessalonians* to the church (1 Thessalonians 3.5-6). It is clear from both epistles that Paul kept an ongoing, active relationship with the church in Thessalonica.

## Authorship

1 Thessalonians 1.1 identifies Paul as the author. The letter was known and affirmed as Pauline in the early church. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Ignatius, and Polycarp all appear to have been familiar with 1 Thessalonians as a Pauline letter. Marcion included the book in his list of authoritative books (*Apostolicon*, 140 AD), and the book is included in the Muratorian Canon (180 AD). Clearly, the book was authored by Paul himself.

Several factors support the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians. First, it is well attested, with references from early Christian figures like Polycarp, Ignatius, and Justin, inclusion in certain ancient canons, and quotes by Irenaeus. Later, it was universally accepted. Second, the language, style, and theological content align closely with Paul's other letters, particularly 1 Thessalonians. Third, the circumstances described, and the letter's content are consistent with what would be expected if Paul were the author.

Moreover, there's no plausible alternative author; if Paul didn't write it, it would have to be a forgery, but the motives for such a forgery are unclear, especially considering the letter's specific references to Paul's signature and the genuine needs of the Thessalonian church. Doubts about its authenticity primarily arise due to its similarity to 1 Thessalonians. However, this is not a strong reason to reject it, especially since it contains nothing inconsistent with Paul's style and teachings.

## Date of Writing

It is generally believed that 1 & 2 Thessalonians are some of the earliest of Paul's letters, most thinking them written around 50-51 AD. Not long after Paul's stay in Athens, Paul confronted the Roman proconsul Gallio in Corinth, Acts 18.12-17. According to an inscription from Delphi, Gallio assumed this proconsulship in June of 51 AD.<sup>2</sup> If this is the case, then 1 Thessalonians might have been written about a year before Paul's encounter in Corinth.

## What About 2 Thessalonians?

Some believe 1 Thessalonians did not fully accomplish Paul's intentions. He received feedback indicating that while his defense of his actions was satisfactory, other aspects of the letter were less effective. Some recipients remained idle, and there were misunderstandings regarding the second coming, causing distress among some. Consequently, Paul promptly wrote 2 Thessalonians, likely just weeks after the first letter, to address these issues. This letter continues the themes of encouragement, admonition, and clarification of eschatological matters from the first letter.

## Theological Themes

**Finding peace during persecution.** By receiving the gospel, the Thessalonians believers walked into a new life of being ostracized and subjected to persecution. Their opponents went through the city, labeling them as a subversive group. They also worked up mob action against them. The severity of their persecution posed a great threat to the gospel (1 Thessalonians 3.5). This epistle was written to address the persecution problem and bring peace to the believers. That peace was going to have to be found even amid great difficulty.

- He reminded them that their suffering was *for the kingdom*. (1.5; 5.9-10).
- He told them their suffering was evidence of the *genuineness* of their faith and a true reflection of their imitation of God (1.6-7).
- He reminded them to look beyond the evil they were experiencing and look toward eternal rest (1.3, 10, 3.13).
- He told them they were not alone in their suffering (2.2, 14, 3.7).
- He taught them that they were not surviving on their own strength alone but by God Himself (1.6; 2.17; 3.1-3, 10, 11-13; 5.23-24).
- He assured them that the evil ones doing the persecution would encounter justice (1.10; 2.16b).

**Endurance and Eschatology.** Paul wanted his readers to push through to the coming of the Lord. This is seen in his teaching in 4.13-17 and 5.1-11. There is, through the book, great anticipation of the Lord's return. It will be a day of glorious reunion. The *date* of Jesus' return is not as important as the *fact* of His return, which is sufficient to encourage believers to persevere in evangelism and godly behavior.

**Election and Faith.** A recurring theme throughout the book is the certainty of the Thessalonian's relationship with God. God had chosen them (as He does all who choose Him). The genuineness of their faith and relationship with God was abundantly evident, and their continued perseverance guaranteed a future for them as participants in the kingdom.

**Keywords like "called out," "chosen," and "appointed" are seen throughout the book.** They could be sure because God "is faithful," 5.24. In 2 Thessalonians 2.13-14, Paul says:

This is why we constantly thank God, because when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you welcomed it not as a human message, but as it truly is, the word of God, which also works effectively in you who believe. For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, since you have also suffered the same things from people of your own country, just as they did from the Jews.

## Thought Questions for Discussion:

1. What was the political and economic significance of Thessalonica?
2. On which missionary journey did Paul establish the church in Thessalonica?
3. What does the Acts account reveal about the response of the community to Apostolic teaching?
4. Are there indications that Paul must have stayed longer in Thessalonica than just “three Sabbaths?” If so, what are they?
5. What are some strong internal and external proofs that Paul wrote the letter we will study this quarter?
6. When do we think Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians?
7. What is the purpose of suffering, in the light of persecution and mistreatment?
8. Discuss what Paul says concerning the return of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians. How would these words have provided comfort for these Christians? Us?
9. Considering what you have learned about the background of 1 Thessalonians, how could Paul’s teaching on the assurance of salvation have provided comfort to the Thessalonians? Us?
10. How does focusing on the fact of God keeping His promises provide you with spiritual strength?

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Vol. 33. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> The inscription records a letter from Claudius dated no later than August 1, 52, that mentions the emperor’s friend Gallio, who was proconsul of Achaia at the time. The letter implies that Gallio had been in office for some time; and since such

---

offices were assumed in June of each year, Gallio most likely had assumed his proconsulship of Achaia in June of a.d. 51. See D. Gill, "Achaia," in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 2, Graeco-Roman Setting, ed. D. Gill and C. Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 436–37.