



**Thessalonians
Encouragement to the Church Under Persecution
1 Thessalonians 1**

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We begin our study of 1st and 2nd Thessalonians. These are both letters written by Paul to the church in Thessalonica. At least that is how they are normally looked at. As we begin looking at 1st Thessalonians, it would be more appropriate to say, based on the text, it is a letter from Paul, Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy. At least that is how the letter starts.

1 Thessalonians 1:1

“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.” (NASB 2020)

How did Paul wind up being with Silas and Timothy?



Silas joined the missionary team when Paul and Barnabas returned to Jerusalem to report the results of the first missionary trip and meet with the Council as well to discuss gentile conversions.

Acts 15:22

“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,” (ESV)

They all went to Antioch to minister and after encouraging the church there, Silas stayed with Paul and Barnabas.

Paul’s heart though was back in the mission field, and he wanted to go and check on those churches that were recently planted and plant new ones as well. But there was a disagreement over John Mark because Paul thought he had abandoned them in Pamphylia.

Barnabas and Paul split over that issue and at that point, Paul and Silas became partners in the ministry and Barnabas went with John Mark to do ministry. Now there were two missionary teams where before, there had been only one.

It was at this point that Paul and Silas, met Timothy.

Acts 16:1–3

“Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.” (ESV)

Welcome onboard the team Timothy, just one thing we need to fix and then you’re good to go. Ow. Paul and the team were blocked though from doing further new ministry in Asia, then Paul had a dream.

Acts 16:9–10

“And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” (ESV)

The team did ministry in Philippi and witnessed folks coming to the Lord. But when Paul got tired of being annoyed by a demon possessed girl hanging around, he cast the demon out and she was saved. But those who made money off her, didn’t like that and had Paul and Silas arrested and beaten in the marketplace.

Philippi Forum and Via Egnatia



(Bolen, Philippi forum and Via Egnatia from northeast 2023, Used with Permission)

Paul and Silas Prison



(Bolen, Philippi traditional prison of Paul 2023, Used with Permission)

It wasn't all bad. While in prison, Paul and Silas were praying and singing worship music when the Lord freed them through an earthquake. Rather than leave, they remained and saw the jailer and his entire family saved as a result.

The next morning, the city leadership moved to release them, but Paul made mention that he and Silas were both Roman citizens, and what they had just done was illegal.

The team eventually did leave, but not before asserting their rights under the law. As Christians, we need to remember that these days.

There may be times in the near future where we may also have to assert our rights under the law in order to continue to do ministry.

The team then heads southwest on the Via Egnatia through Macedonia towards Thessalonica. Paul started, as normal in the synagogue, teaching about Jesus and some were saved, but most were gentiles and the culture in Greece, being very different than it was back home in Jerusalem, saw many of the high station women coming to Christ separate and apart from their husbands.

Via Egnatia



(Bolen, Via Egnatia from above 2012, Used with Permission)

The road system of Macedonia built by the Romans for troop movement still exists today. This is how travel would take place when Paul and the team would travel from Philippi to Thessalonica.

Macedonian women had a well-earned reputation for their independence and enterprising spirit. If some of the women who believed the gospel at this time were the wives of leading citizens, the initiative was theirs, not their husbands'. (Bruce 1988, 323)

Remember, they started off in the synagogue. Some of those there, were not too happy about what they heard. They also were not happy about the number of potential proselytes being saved.

Thessalonica Forum



(Bolen, Thessalonica forum cryptoporticus arches 2018, Used with Permission)



Imagine being jealous over the work of the Lord. I wish I could say that no longer takes place, but sadly, it still does. Some in the synagogue were. Indeed jealous. Paul and the team had only been there about three weeks, too long as far as those jealous folks were concerned. They were able to convince some of the local hoods to help and somehow the team found out about it, and they became unavailable. When they arrived where the team had been staying, at Jason's house, they grabbed Jason and stirred up the crowd and the officials against Paul and the team.

The accusations made are classic.

Acts 17:6–7

“And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “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.”” (ESV)

The net impact of all of this, Paul and the team, after having been in Thessalonica for only about three weeks, were forced to move onto Berea.

Berea Wall



(Bolen, Berea ancient city wall 2012, Used with Permission)

The same group that got them booted from Thessalonica showed up in Berea and started agitating folks there as well. So, Paul was sent on to Athens where he had to wait for Silas and Timothy to catch up.

While in Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how they were doing. Meanwhile he and Silas went on to Corinth where they were able to spend some time without being shoved out.

Athens Mars Hill



(Bolen, Athens Mars Hill from acropolis 2012, Used with Permission)

But now that Timothy has met up with them in Corinth, having returned from Thessalonica, Paul and Silas catch up and then write this letter based on what they hear from Timothy. This letter is from the team, back to the believers that they left there when they were forced to leave.

If you have ever done a study of the letters of Paul, you will immediately see that the normal method he uses to begin the letter is a bit different. On top of that, this letter is most likely the first document written in the New Testament.

Corinth Temple of Apollo



(Bolen, Corinth excavations and Temple of Apollo 2012, Used with Permission)

At least by the reckoning of most New Testament scholars, Paul wrote the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians around 51 C.E., which makes it the earliest Christian writing and, indeed, the earliest evidence we possess for the existence of Christianity. (Gaventa 1998, 1)

It is indeed, the very first letter of Paul and the very first item to be considered part of the canon of what we now call the New Testament.



Yes, all three who are referenced up front had a part in the letter, but Paul becomes rather predominate as we move through the letter. As we have already determined, the letter is being written to an audience that is predominately gentile with little to no knowledge of Jewish practices. It is a Greek city, but also fully in the Roman Empire.

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia and was the seat of Roman power for the region.

Thessalonica was founded around 315 BC by the Macedonian general Cassander who had destroyed around twenty-six towns in the region and then "settled all the inhabitants together in one city." Thessalonica was capital of the second district of Macedonia. It was given many political freedoms by Rome due to its loyalty to Antony and Octavian in the battle at Philippi (in Macedonia), where Cassius and Brutus were defeated. Octavian, the first emperor of Rome (31 BC–AD 14), known as Caesar Augustus, looked favorably on Thessalonica, which was a "free city" (civitas libera). (Comfort 2019, 583)

The church in Thessalonica is a persecuted church. In fact, some of the members of this new body of believers have been killed. Because of the severity of the persecution they were undergoing, they needed assurance.

"Paul's concern to comfort grieving believers produced 1 Thess 4:13–18. First Thessalonians 5:1–11 reminded readers that those who know the Lord is coming must persist in faithful, godly living. The suffering of the church called forth the assurance that those who were persecuting them would suffer a just punishment (2 Thess 1:6–10). The intrusion of false teaching into the church required the apostle to remind the church of apostolic teachings already received and urge them not to listen to deceptive lies (2 Thess 2:1–15). None of these passages were presented as new information for the church." (Martin 1995, 39-40)

A high-level outline of the book is as follows.

Outline

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3:13 Paul and the teams concern and love for the church they had to suddenly leave after only three weeks.

1:1 – Greetings

1:2-10 – Their example

2:1-12 – Paul's ministry there

2:13-16 – Thankfulness for their response to the gospel

2:17-20 – Dealing with having to leave suddenly

3:1-5 – Paul's concern about the circumstances and the condition of the church when he left

3:6-13 – Good news from Timothy

1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:28 Encouragement from Pastor Paul

4:1-12 – New life in Christ and what that looks like

4:13-8 – The rapture of the church

5:1-11 – The Day of the Lord

5:12-28 – Doing life in the church

1 Thessalonians 1:1

"Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace." (NASB 2020)



The church that was planted by Paul and the team is still there at this point. The desire of those who chased them from town was to prevent that from happening, but they were not only there long enough to see salvations take place, but a small growing church being taught about the things of the Lord.

As we have already discussed, this is a predominately gentile church, and they only know what they have been taught or the Holy Spirit has revealed. Being a new church plant ourselves, there are different camps out there of how to do church. One involves marketing research and determining felt needs of the community then concentrating on meeting those as a church.

Another suggests that we would need to be purpose driven to include all of the trappings you would include for starting any new business. A business plan, marketing research, target markets, and so on. That implies a bottom line to pay attention to as well.

Then there is the culture driven church. One which attempts to have a church take on entertainment being a focus to “stimulate outreach and growth. Take the culture’s forms of amusement, add society’s latest trends, put a spiritual “spin” on it, and you will win the world.” (Lawson 1999, 64)

Don’t get me wrong, I went to graduate school and worked on an MBA at Texas Tech, and this was all something I learned there to use to start a business. I used it too. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt.

But Jesus said something different.

Matthew 28:18–20

“Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”” (NET 2nd ed.)

We call this the Great Commission. It comes direct from Jesus Christ telling us what the number one mission of the church is – reaching the world for Jesus Christ by making disciples.

The means of fulfilling the Great Commission is the power of the Holy Spirit. The method God in His sovereignty has chosen is the evangelistic witness of His own people who have experienced His redemption and are obedient to proclaim the availability of His salvation to all who will repent of their sin and by faith receive Christ as their personal Savior and Lord. (Nix 2013, 45-46)

Paul and the team identify who the owner of the church is and exactly whose business the church should be about.

What sets us apart as a church is the same thing that set apart the church in Thessalonica, we are not here to do the business of man, they have no interest in what we are doing, we are here to do the business of Jesus Christ in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We do not want to look like or be like the world. Our goal in worship is to boldly come into the throne room of the universe and praise the King of Glory for who He is. Our goal as a church is to see lives redirected from hell to heaven and only Jesus can do that. We want to make disciples. Our desire is the same as those in Thessalonica, to be a God driven church built through the power of Jesus Christ.

When I talk about worship, I am hitting a hot button for many folks today. Worship wars have been a hot button issue ever since Vivaldi wrote church music that was not Gregorian Chant. Bach was so concerned he personally wrote over 300 pieces of church music to ensure worship was taking place in a manner that would relate to folks of his day and age.



We continue to do that today. But let me emphasize this, it is worship of the King, not entertainment. Yes, it should be technically excellent, we are performing for Him, but the intent is not to make the singer the center of attention. It is all about Him.

What sets the church apart is that she is not doing the business of man but of Christ. Therefore, she is to be focused on a different bottom line that can only be reached through different means. By His Word, God Himself must equip, enable, energize, and empower the church if she is to be what He desires her to be. Ultimately, God must be the driving force of the church, bringing His glorious presence and all-sufficient power to bear upon the life of His people if she is to be what He desires her to be. (Lawson 1999, 67)

So, our response is to obediently and simply teach the word. We do so chapter by chapter and verse by verse. Because, just as the church in Thessalonica, we are “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” We are sinners, saved by grace, learning together how to be more like Jesus Christ. We are a congregation, in person and online. We are a body of believers, not a bunch of attendees. We are a family; we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We live according to His standards for being in this family which we call the church.

The building is not the church, the body is. He comes and fills each member of the body individually with the power of the Holy Spirit and then collectively, as the body of Christ, we do ministry and change the world around us. Jesus put it very simply as to what would attract people to come and see.

John 13:34–35

“I give you a new commandment—to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples—if you have love for one another.” (NET 2nd ed.)

How should we be identified? As the church that loves each other. We forget that there is a world all around us longing to see God, they want to know what is real and we stand on His behalf saying that our faith in Jesus Christ is real. We exhibit that by loving each other.

John wrote a commentary on this command of Jesus and in it, He tells us that for a world that wants to know what God looks like, when we love each other, we are showing the world what God looks like.

1 John 4:7–12

“Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been fathered by God and knows God. The person who does not love does not know God, because God is love. By this the love of God is revealed in us: that God has sent his one and only Son into the world so that we may live through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God so loved us, then we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God resides in us, and his love is perfected in us.” (NET 2nd ed.)

After making this clear definitive statement of who the church belongs to, then Paul and the team move onto just what this group of believers, this church, means to them. And in the process, we discover more about what the church should be.

How big is this church? We have no clue. We have no idea of their style of ministry, who the senior pastor is or what the goals of this church are.

But we see what Paul believes is important and we need to take note of that since it shows us what we should also be looking for.



1 Thessalonians 1:2–5

“We always give thanks to God for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly keeping in mind your work of faith and labor of love and perseverance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sakes.” (NASB 2020)

Paul and the team love this body of believers. They are still unhappy about only being there for three weeks.

Those who are part of this church though are redeemed. They are in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ implying that they have had an encounter with the Lord and have become believers. In our current culture, we see churches separating from that and becoming social clubs.

When a church, such as the Methodist Church in England just did, decide that using the terms husband and wife or brother and sister is wrong, then you know they have not just strayed off the reservation, they aren't even in the same zip code anymore. From The Methodist Church Inclusive Language Guide.

There is infinite variety in the way that God's creation is expressed in human life. This is worth bearing in mind as we speak and write. Terminology such as 'husband' and 'wife' may sound inoffensive but it makes assumptions about a family or personal life that is not the reality for many people. (Methodist Church UK 2023)

This stand will require them to rewrite the entire Bible since in God's design, He made us male and female. What does this potentially look like?

Ephesians 5:28

“In the same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.” (NET 2nd ed.)

But for those throwing out the Word of God and determining that they know better than God, this will need to be rewritten.

In the same way, each partner ought to love their partner as their own bodies. Those who love their partner loves themselves.

That is no longer the church per Jesus Christ. They no longer even know who He is. It is clear, the church consists of redeemed born from above sinners who have been saved by grace through faith in Christ.

Per Paul and the team, to be a Christian is not about profession, but it is about possession. They possess faith in Christ. And because of that, they are a group worthy of being prayed over daily. Thinking about them is a source of joy for the missionary team. There are three things that are referenced here as characteristics of those who make up a church of those who are truly believers in Christ.

As they came to Christ, they performed a “work of faith.” These were gentiles who were idol worshippers. They turned to the true and living God and exercised faith in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. This faith produced true repentance, they turned from their previous lifestyle and towards Jesus.

The second thing we see as a characteristic, this work of faith produced in them the desire to do works, or a labor of love because of their love of Jesus. Once we come to Jesus Christ, His love now flowing from us in the person of the Holy Spirit, changes everything. We are part of a new family, and He places a



desire in our hearts to do things for Him because of what He did for us on the cross. We love Him and that shows up as works.

James 2:18–20

“But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?” (ESV)

Finally, believers there in Thessalonica are characterized by their “perseverance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Nothing is deterring them from who it is they are waiting on. They are waiting on Jesus Christ from heaven. This implies that they were indeed, in just three weeks, somewhat knowledgeable of future things.

In the book of Revelation, we learn more about this perseverance, this patient endurance, the keep on keeping on looking to our blessed hope and knowing that Jesus Christ is indeed coming soon for His church. In His words to the church in Philadelphia, Jesus referred to this level of perseverance.

Revelation 3:10

“Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.” (ESV)

Here is what we have learned are characteristics of those who are in the church:

- Faith in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross leading to true repentance. We also call this being born again per John 3:16. A changed life.
- Love with legs. Because of their love of Jesus, they are busy serving Him and being the church.
- Perseverance, hope in the faith, endurance. Keeping on keeping on because of a sure faith that Jesus is indeed preparing a place for them (John 14:2 & 3).

This is what a church looks like on the inside.

The Thessalonians had exercised saving faith in Christ in the past when they had believed the gospel, they were loving Christ in the present, and they were hoping for His return in the future. (Constable 1985, 691)

Changed hearts, new lives, loving service and looking for the Lord, “faith, love, hope—which appears here for the first time in Christian literature.” (Fee 2009, 23)

These three spiritual virtues provide clear evidence of their genuine, saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. An authentic commitment to Christ will always manifest itself in a changed life that bears, to one degree or another, this cluster of fruit. (Lawson 1999)

What we learn from this is simple, when Christ changes us, He is the one who works through us in the power of the Holy Spirit. The missionary team hears of this taking place from Timothy, and they point to it as evidence of salvation.

1 Thessalonians 1:4–5

“knowing, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sakes.” (NASB 2020)



This is a predominately gentile church and the evidence just pointed to shows them how they are truly beloved of God and now part of the body of Christ. A family term has just been used, pointing back to the change because of the cross. We are now part of the family if we are in Christ, and for Paul to now say this here, reflects a change because He is a Jew, now calling gentiles brothers and sisters because of Jesus.

They are believers, the evidence is the change that took place in them. "Paul's powerful, Spirit-inspired preaching of the gospel, resulting in their joyful experience of conversion, all orchestrated by the Holy Spirit." (Fee 2009, 29)

Paul is reminding them of their experience, we would call it their testimony. The life before versus the life after. As they are undergoing persecution, remembering what took place and how everything changed, indeed becomes important.

By this time, those in Thessalonica had most likely heard from false teachers and charlatans. That is one way to know whether your ministry is effective, if the enemy shows up and tries to rip you off. HE wouldn't do that if it was ineffective.

Paul reminds the church just how they acted when they first showed up. Paul and Silas still had the visible marks on their bodies of having been beaten in Philippi. I mean, there is a physician now traveling with them, Dr. Luke. We know he joined the team back in Troas (Acts 16:10) before going into Macedonia.

The Lord knew they would need a doctor.

Paul is also defending himself and the team. Remember they came to town and within 3 weeks they had to leave without proper goodbyes. But while they were there, they operated and lived with integrity.

As we go about serving the Lord, we must be careful about how we react and do life on a day-to-day basis. You see, there are others who are watching and learning from us. If you have children, they are the primary audience, but there is a secondary one as well, those folks at work who know you are a believer and want to see just how you do when things go wrong. Will they intentionally challenge you to be able to watch? Yes.

Ephesians 6:12

"For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places."
(NLT)

For us as believers, every day is a day of spiritual warfare. It may not be in your face spiritual encounters, but simple mundane things taking place during the day.

Paul and the team lived with integrity and because they had modeled their lives on Christ, these new Christian's copied them. We must remember this as well. For some, you are the only Christian they have ever dealt with.

1 Thessalonians 1:6-7

"You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word during great affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia."
(NASB 2020)

What they know about Jesus, they have learned by watching us. Paul and Silas were watched carefully when they arrived in town. They had clearly been beaten and very recently. Their bodies still reflected the



recent mistreatment in Philippi. To become a believer was to be prepared to be persecuted just as the apostles were being persecuted.

Paul had warned the new believers in Thessalonica that they were going to suffer for their faith, and this was already happening (1 Thess. 2:14; 3:3–4; and 2 Thess. 1:4–7; 3:3–5). (Green 2002, 98)

They saw the evidence in Paul and Silas, yet they become believers anyhow, knowing that this was possible for them as well.

As a result of their reception of the gospel in the midst of great suffering and the abundant joy they experienced because of the Spirit's presence in their lives, this young congregation became an example for the rest of the Christian churches in the region. (Green 2002, 99)

I wonder in our culture today how well that message would be received. Give your life to Jesus and be persecuted as a result. That is becoming a reality in some places in this nation today.

1 Thessalonians 1:8–10

“For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place the news of your faith toward God has gone out, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us as to the kind of reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is, Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come.” (NASB 2020)

It seems that everywhere Paul and the team go, they hear about the believers in Thessalonica. They have a serious reputation of not only standing firm in the face of persecution, but continuing to be witnesses for the Lord in all that they do.

As they turn away from the world, the world strikes back. That will always be the case for any believer or church who remains firmly and movingly committed to Jesus Christ. Do we expect this here at Calvary, yes. Will it always be the case? Yes.

1 John 4:4

“Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” (ESV)

Remember, a successful witness shares Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, leaving the results with God...the God-driven church is ever sharing Christ with the world, boldly proclaiming Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. (Lawson 1999, 76)

The three keys are repeated here at the end of the chapter. Faith, the people had turned from false gods and had turned towards Jesus. Actively serving Him even in the face of persecution and all the while, waiting for the blessed hope of the soon return of Jesus Christ for His church.

This was a church firmly committed to the imminency of the return of Jesus Christ for His church. Paul will spend some time talking more about that to them. But we learn here, they are already waiting for Him to rescue them from the world.

Two thousand years ago, this church persevered because they knew Jesus and knew He was returning for them. Today we have in front of us, a convergence of all the signs Jesus described in Matthew 24, now happening everywhere all at once. The rapture remains imminent.

He is coming back any second.



Do you know Him? Here in this nation, persecution is not a given for those who believe, at least not yet.

Why not settle the question of faith today?

Romans 10:9–13

“If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.” Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.””
(NLT)

ABC's of Salvation

- A. Acknowledge that you are a sinner, tell Him that.
- B. Believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sin and that He rose from the dead.
- C. Confess that Jesus is Lord. Tell someone about what you have done.



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