

1 THESSALONIANS

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BACKGROUND

Paul ministered in Thessalonica for about a month on his second missionary journey ([Acts 17:2](#)). The ministry was very successful ([1 Thes. 1:9](#)), though the unbelieving Jews stirred up the unbelieving Gentiles, resulting ultimately in Paul's leaving town by night and going on to Berea ([Acts 17:5-10](#)). The hostile Thessalonian Jews followed Paul to Berea and caused trouble there as well, so Paul went on to Athens ([Acts 17:11-15](#)). Paul was concerned for the believers who he had left behind in Thessalonica, so he sent Timothy back to check on them ([1 Thes. 3:1-2](#)). Meanwhile, Paul went on to Corinth, where Timothy rejoined him ([1 Thes. 3:6](#); [Acts 18:5](#)) and gave a glowing report of the Thessalonians' spiritual growth, steadfastness, and love for him. Paul wrote this letter to express his joy over the good report, to encourage them in their spiritual growth, and to answer their question concerning what would happen to Christians who had died ([1 Thes. 4:13-18](#)).

AUTHOR

Paul ([1 Thes. 1:1](#); [1 Thes. 2:18](#); see [Romans: Author](#)).

DATE AND LOCATION

C. A.D. 51, shortly after Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth, making it the second earliest of Paul's letters (after Galatians).

» **See also:** [Illustration: Epistles of Paul, The](#)

RECIPIENTS

The Christians of Thessalonica, mainly Gentiles, though there were some Jews as well ([Acts 17:4-5](#)). Their city was the central station and largest city on the Egnatian Way, the Roman highway connecting the Adriatic and Aegean Seas. Paul established three churches—Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea—along this road.

PURPOSE

- To commend the Thessalonians for their steadfastness amid persecution
- To defend himself against criticism of his conduct during his stay at Thessalonica ([1 Thes. 2:1-16](#))

- To explain his absence from them ([1 Thes. 2:17-20](#))
- To explain Timothy's visit to them ([1 Thes. 3](#))
- To give instruction on personal and corporate Christian living ([1 Thes. 4:1-12](#); [1 Thes. 5:12-28](#))
- To explain events related to Christ's second coming ([1 Thes. 4:13-5:11](#))

UNIQUE FEATURES

- 1 Thessalonians tells more about Christ's second coming than any other of Paul's letters. It gives the Bible's most detailed description of the Rapture ([1 Thes. 4:13-18](#)).
- It contains no quotations from, and few allusions to, the OT.
- It is one of the most easily understood of Paul's letters.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

1 Corinthians:

- [1 Cor. 15](#) explains the involvement of living believers in the Rapture; 1 Thessalonians explains how deceased believers will be involved.

Philippians and Philemon:

- These along with 1 Thessalonians are the most nonpolemical of Paul's letters.

2 Thessalonians:

- 1 Thessalonians explains why deceased believers will not miss out on the Rapture; 2 Thessalonians explains why believers will not be involved in the Tribulation.

OUTLINE

1. COMMENDATION AND EXPLANATION ([1 Thes. 1-3](#))
 1. Salutation; commendation ([1 Thes. 1](#))
 2. Paul defends his ministry ([1 Thes. 2:1-16](#))
 - C. He explains his absence ([1 Thes. 2:17-20](#))
 - D. He explains Timothy's mission ([1 Thes. 3](#))
- II. EXHORTATION ([1 Thes. 4-5](#))
 - A. Personal conduct ([1 Thes. 4:1-12](#))
 - B. The Rapture ([1 Thes. 4:13-18](#))
 - C. The day of the Lord ([1 Thes. 5:1-11](#))

- D. Conduct in the church ([1 Thes. 5:12-24](#))
- E. Concluding charges; benediction ([1 Thes. 5:25-28](#))

TIMELINE

- A.D. 35: Paul's conversion
- A.D. 51: Paul in Thessalonica on 2nd journey, writes 1 Thes. & 2 Thes.
- A.D. 57: Paul in Thessalonica on 3rd journey
- A.D. 60: Paul imprisoned in Rome
- c. A.D. 67: Paul martyred

[1 Thes. 1:1-10](#) *Grateful for their good example.* Paul thanked God for the Christians at Thessalonica who, despite great suffering, had become examples to believers throughout Greece, both in personal conduct and in evangelistic zeal. [1 Thes. 1:9-10](#) expands Paul's description of the Thessalonians in [1 Thes. 1:3](#):

- Their "faithful work" involved turning from idolatry to the one true God.
- Their "loving deeds" involved serving the one true God.
- Their "continual anticipation" involved their expectant waiting for Christ's return.

God's Word is effective no matter how ineffective or unworthy the messenger (see [Isaiah 55:11](#); [Phil. 1:15-18](#)), but how much better when the spokespersons and the Scriptures are in perfect harmony, so that the Word goes forth "with power," with the authority of the Holy Spirit ([1 Thes. 1:5](#)).

Concerning being chosen ([1 Thes. 1:4](#)), see exposition on [§1 Peter 1:1-2](#).

[1 Thes. 2:1-12](#) *No flattery, no bad finances.* Paul reminded the Thessalonians that he had been sincere and straightforward with them, working night and day at a secular job to earn his own keep ([1 Thes. 2:9](#); compare exposition on [§1 Corinthians 4:6-13](#)). He had been very caring and personal, like a mother or a father ([1 Thes. 2:7-8, 11](#); compare [1 Cor. 4:14](#); [2 Cor. 6:13](#); [Galatians 4:18-19](#)). [1 Thes. 1:10](#) shows three key dimensions to Paul's ministry:

- Spiritually, he was "pure."
- Socially, he was "honest" with the Thessalonians.
- Personally, he was "faultless."

[1 Thes. 2:13-16](#) *"They've always opposed their God."* Once more Paul commended his readers for their ready response to the gospel, especially considering how much the unbelieving Jews had opposed both Paul and them. Paul reminded them of how consistently the Jews had opposed Christ and the gospel:

- They had "killed their own prophets, and . . . the Lord Jesus" ([1 Thes. 2:15](#); see [Acts 2:22-23](#); [Acts 5:30](#); [Acts 7:52](#)).
- They had "persecuted us" ([1 Thes. 2:15](#)).
- They "opposed everyone," trying to hinder Paul's Gentile outreach ([1 Thes. 2:15-16](#); see [Acts 13:50](#); [Acts 14:19](#); [Acts 17:5](#); [Acts 18:12](#)).

Such strong language has led some to call Paul anti-Semitic. Yet Paul was proud of his own Jewish heritage (see [Acts 22:3](#); [Phil. 3:4-5](#)), and his great heart practically bled for the conversion of his beloved nation (see [Romans 9:1-3](#); [Romans 10:1](#)).

Israel's continuing "to pile up their sins" ([1 Thes. 2:16](#)) would bring God's "anger" but will ultimately lead to salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike (see exposition on [§Romans 9-11](#)).

[1 Thes. 2:17-20](#) *"Frankly, I was stopped by Satan."* Paul had tried several times to revisit the Thessalonians but was always hindered by Satan. His absence from them only increased his desire to see them, for they were his "reward and crown." Perhaps Paul saw Satan's hand in the relentless harassment of his Jewish opponents (see [Background](#)).

[1 Thes. 3:1-13](#) *Timothy's welcome report.* Upon arriving in Athens, Paul, knowing that the Thessalonians were suffering ([1 Thes. 3:3](#)), "could stand it no longer" ([1 Thes. 3:1](#)), so he urgently sent for Timothy (see [Acts 17:15](#)) and dispatched him to Thessalonica to check up on them ([1 Thes. 3:2, 5](#)). Timothy had just rejoined Paul, now in Corinth, with the welcome news that the Thessalonians' faith in God and love for Paul was as strong as ever ([1 Thes. 3:6-8](#); see [Acts 18:5](#)). Paul responded with thanksgiving, expressing again his desire to see them and encouraging them to greater love and holiness ([1 Thes. 3:9-13](#)).

[1 Thes. 4:1-8](#) *God's perfect plan for all his people.* God's will for the Thessalonians was that they would "be holy," often translated "sanctification." This refers to a daily growing in grace and maturing in the faith ([1 Thes. 4:3](#); see [1 Thes. 5:23-24](#); see exposition on [§Hebrews 10:1-18](#)). They were to be monogamous, relating to their spouses honorably, not out of lust. God has just one will for sinners: that they be saved (see [1 Tim. 2:4](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#)). And he has just one will for believers: that they be sanctified ([1 Thes. 4:3](#)).

[1 Thes. 4:9-12](#) *"Mind your own business; earn your own keep."* Christians are to love each other and lead "quiet" lives. They are to be diligent workers, not just to pay their bills but so that unbelievers will trust and respect them.

[1 Thes. 4:13-18](#) *"Don't worry, they'll be first!"* Paul now answered a question that apparently had bothered the Thessalonians. When he was among them (see [Acts 17](#)) he had doubtless spoken of Christ's one day returning to establish his millennial Kingdom, and they probably viewed this event as being just around the corner. But since Paul's departure, a number of the Thessalonian believers had died. Did this mean they would miss out on Christ's return? Paul assured them that, quite to the contrary, when Christ returned to meet his faithful ones "in the air," he would first resurrect and gather to himself those already dead ([1 Thes. 4:15](#)). This will be the second of the three end-times resurrections (see exposition on [§1 Corinthians 15:20-28](#)).

The midair encounter of Christ and his living saints is generally called the "Rapture," from the Latin word *rapio*, meaning "to seize" ("caught up," [1 Thes. 4:17](#)). See exposition on [§1 Corinthians 15:50-58](#).

[1 Thes. 5:1-11](#) *Prepared for the thief?* Not only will all believers, dead and alive, participate in the Rapture, but by God's grace all will avoid the terrible "day of the Lord" that will follow (see [Isaiah: Background](#) and exposition on [§Joel 2:28-32](#)). Often called the Great Tribulation, that day will come unexpectedly during a time of false peace, bringing destruction upon all unbelievers ([1 Thes. 5:1-3](#)).

But while unbelievers will be too deeply mired in their sin to be ready for this judgment ([1 Thes. 5:4-7](#)), believers will be ready, wearing their armor of faith, watching for Christ's return ([1 Thes. 5:5-11](#)).

Christ's second coming is often compared to a thief coming in the night ([1 Thes. 5:2, 4](#); see [Luke 12:39](#); [2 Peter 3:10](#); [Rev. 3:3](#); [Rev. 16:15](#)). The analogy stresses the suddenness of his return and the need for our watchfulness as we await it. Compare [1 Thes. 5:8](#) with [Ephes. 6:10-17](#).

[1 Thes. 5:12-28](#) *"You do your part, and God will do his."* As he concluded his letter, Paul gave several exhortations ([1 Thes. 5:12-22](#)), assuring the Thessalonians that God was ready to bless them and keep them "blameless" till Christ's return ([1 Thes. 5:23-24](#)). He closed by charging them to read this letter to everyone in the church. Concerning the various exhortations:

- Because of their crucial ministry, church leaders should be held in the highest regard ([1 Thes. 5:12-13](#)).
- In the Greek, [1 Thes. 5:16](#) (not [John 11:35](#)) is the Bible's shortest verse. It is often, however, one of the hardest to keep.
- The best cure for pride is not humility (which can lead to false piety) but thankfulness ([1 Thes. 5:18](#); see exposition on ^s[Romans 1:18-32](#)). As someone has suggested:
 - Be careful for nothing.
 - Be prayerful in everything.
 - Be thankful for anything.
- There are two common ways that believers can fail in their relationship with the Holy Spirit:
 - by "stifling" him ([1 Thes. 5:19](#)), which involves not doing what he wants us to do
 - by "bringing sorrow" to him (see [Ephes. 4:30](#)), which means doing what he does not want us to do
- [1 Thes. 5:23](#) has been a main support for the doctrine of "trichotomy," that humans are threefold beings, with a spirit, soul, and body. Whatever Paul may have meant, he was praying that God would thoroughly sanctify each individual believer.
- It is interesting that, though the original Greek text did not have chapter divisions, each of the book's five chapters ends with a reference to the Second Coming:
 - see [1 Thes. 1:10](#), relating to salvation
 - see [1 Thes. 2:19-20](#) and [1 Thes. 3:13](#), relating to faithful service
 - see [1 Thes. 4:17-18](#), relating to sorrow
 - [1 Thes. 5:23](#), relating to sanctification