

1 Thessalonians

Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

Introduction & 1 Thessalonians 1:1–3

June 26, 2013

Background

The backdrop for this epistle is found in Acts 17:1–10. Thessalonica was the second city in Macedonia in which Paul planted a church during his second missionary journey.

Where is Thessalonica?

The city of Thessalonica (modern day Salonika) is situated on the northern end of the Aegean Sea in the province of Macedonia (modern day Greece). The city had been designated a “free city” for its support of Octavian (Augustus Caesar) and Mark Anthony in the Second Triumvirate. This gave several benefits to the city: 1) It did not become a Roman colony; 2) Unlike Philippi, it was not required to absorb a large contingent of retired Romans soldiers; 3) It also meant that *lus Italicum*, or “Italian right” was not imposed, allowing the city’s political institutions to remain intact; and 4) The city was given a degree of local autonomy, including the right to mint both its own and imperial coins. The city was also quite cosmopolitan sitting on the Via Egnatia, the major highway between Rome and the eastern part of the Roman Empire.



By the time of Paul's arrival, the city was composed of the original Macedonian population, Greek immigrants from the south, several Latin speakers from the west, and a large Jewish community of the diaspora. Thessalonica was also home to several religious cults. Amongst others these included the mystery cult of Dionysus and state sponsored cults of Sarapis and Cabirus. There was also an imperial cult dedicated to the worship of Caesar.

Who wrote 1 Thessalonians?

The first epistle to the Thessalonians was written by the apostle Paul, while staying in the city of Corinth. Paul included the names of his traveling companions — Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy — in his opening salutation (1:1). But Paul himself authored the letter.

When was this letter written?

The dating of 1 Thessalonians is closely linked to the date assigned for the proconsulship of Gallio over Achaia. According to Acts 18:12, Paul was brought before Gallio in Corinth shortly after Gallio's arrival in the city to take up his duties as proconsul. Assuming Paul had been in Corinth for approximately one year when he was brought before Gallio (cf. Acts 18:11), and assuming he wrote 1 Thessalonians shortly after his own arrival in the city (cf. Acts 18:5 with 1 Thess 3:6-13), the Thessalonian correspondence may be dated one year prior to the date assigned to Gallio's arrival in Corinth as proconsul.

Archaeological data from a mutilated inscription discovered at Delphi, across from Corinth, naming Gallio as proconsul of Achaia associates his appointment with the 12th tribunal year and the 26th emperorship of Caesar Claudius Augustus. This would place Gallio's proconsulship in Corinth around A.D. 51-52 and, backdating one year for Paul's arrival, provides a date for the writing of 1 Thessalonians of about A.D. 50-51. Depending on the dating of Galatians, this would make the Thessalonian correspondence the earliest of Paul's canonical writings.

Why was 1 Thessalonians written?

After Paul was forced to leave the city, he still had a great burden for the Thessalonians. When his party arrived in Athens, he decided to send Timothy back to Thessalonica to encourage the believers (1 Thess 3:1-2). Paul and Silas then continued on to Corinth and

were rejoined by Timothy early during their stay there. Paul wrote this letter after hearing Timothy's report. His specific purpose was fourfold: 1) Paul wrote to commend the believers for their perseverance in the faith; 2) He felt it necessary to vindicate his actions in an effort to counter his opponents at Thessalonica; 3) he wrote to admonish the congregation against the immoral practices of the surrounding culture; and 4) he wanted to clarify certain questions they had expressed through Timothy regarding the Lord's return.

What is the theme of 1 Thessalonians?

There is a two-fold theme to this letter. When we examine Paul's purposes for writing this epistle, it becomes clear that the theme involves *Christian conduct and the Lord's return*. These ideas are not necessarily disconnected, as the knowledge of the Lord's return will help shape Christian behavior in the present.

Introduction & Greetings (1:1)

The letter begins with a customary greeting from Paul and his companions — Silas and Timothy. Some have suggested that all three of these coauthored the book. However, Paul uses the first person singular pronouns in 2:18, 3:5, and 5:27. He likely included them here because they were members of his party and personally known to the Thessalonian believers. This was a common practice for Paul in many of his letters (cf. 1, 2 Corinthians; Philippians, Colossians, Philemon).

Paul identifies the Thessalonian believers as *in* both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the remarkable things that occurs with every believer is that we have been placed into a union with Christ and the Father as part of the body of Christ. And as born-again Christians, we are recipients of the Lord's grace in salvation, and peace that comes from knowing our future is secure in God.

Personal: Paul's Relations to the Thessalonians (1:2 – 3:13)

The first major section of this letter concerns Paul's personal relations with the Thessalonian believers. In this section he shows his care for them and also defends his actions in not personally coming to them despite his desire to do so.

Thanksgiving for the Reception of the Gospel (1:2–10)

The first thing that came to mind when Paul thought of the

Thessalonians was thankfulness, and there were many reasons for this. When giving thanks, Paul’s thoughts were primarily concerned with their salvation and their conduct.

The Character of Thanksgiving (v. 2)

The manner of offering thanksgiving was through prayer. This verse states that these thanksgivings were continuously offered to God by Paul and his companions. It is wonderful to think about the object of these prayers — “for you all.” The word for “for” is remarkable in this context. It is literally *peri* (περὶ) as in “perimeter.” Paul was encompassing and surrounding these believers with prayer.

The Reasons for the Thanksgiving (vv. 3–10)

Paul names three reasons for continually offering thanks for these believers: their praiseworthy conduct, divine election, and good reports of their actions.

Their Praiseworthy Conduct (v. 3)

There are three virtues that Paul identifies in this verse: the work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope. The grammar of these three constructions shows that the second term in each couplet produces the first. We might translate it this way — your:

work	<i>produced by</i>	faith
labor	<i>produced by</i>	love
steadfastness/patience	<i>produced by</i>	hope.

A good work can be defined as anything a believer does in obedience to God’s word, motivated by faith and love toward God (cf. James 2:21).

A labor of love is a sacrificial giving of oneself for the benefit — specifically the *spiritual* benefit — of another (cf. John 3:16).

A patient hope is an assured confidence that God will right every wrong and reward every sacrifice at His second coming (cf. 1 Thess 1:10).

Conclusion

The gospel is not just a simply a “ticket to heaven” as some Christians teach. The true gospel has the power to transform peoples’ lives, producing the kind of praiseworthy conduct we see in verse three. What has the gospel done in *your* life? We too can be a source of thanksgiving for other believers because of our faith! ~AWB