

1 THESSALONIANS

THEME

Author and Title

Paul is widely regarded as the author of 1 Thessalonians, as evidenced by how compatible the vocabulary, style, and theology are with his other letters. The mention of Silas (“Silvanus”) and Timothy as co-senders (1:1) may indicate Paul’s care to present the missionaries as a united band in order to offset any Thessalonian disappointment that Paul had not come to visit them again but had sent Timothy instead (see 2:17–18; 3:1–2, 6, 11).

Date

Most scholars today date 1 Thessalonians to A.D. 49–51, early in Paul’s 18-month stay in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–18). Only a small minority of scholars, who do not regard Acts as historically dependable, place it in the early 40s A.D. The Delphi Inscription—a letter from the emperor Claudius to the city of Delphi—dates Gallio’s proconsulship of Achaia to A.D. 51–52, and Acts 18:12–17 mentions Gallio, toward the end of Paul’s Corinthian stay.

Theme

The most prominent theme in 1 Thessalonians is the second coming of Jesus. It is mentioned in every chapter of the book (1:10; 2:19–20; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:1–11, 23–24). At Jesus’ future coming, the dead in Christ will rise and will be caught up along with the living to meet the Lord in the air (4:15–17). Unbelievers will be subject to his wrath, but Christians will be delivered from this, inheriting salvation instead (1:10; 5:2–4, 9–10). Those who are destined to participate as saints (lit., “holy ones”) in the second coming must be holy and blameless (3:11–4:8; 5:23), and God, who is faithful, will produce holiness in the lives of those whom he calls (5:24).

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Thessalonica was the proud capital of the Roman province of Macedonia and had a population of over 100,000. Its natural harbor and placement on the busy east-west

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Egnatian Way as well as key north-south trade routes meant that it was a flourishing center of trade and philosophy. It was a free city and was governed by local officials called “politarchs” (cf. [Acts 17:6, 8](#)). Religiously, the city was committed to the Greco-Roman pantheon and the imperial cult; Egyptian cults were also prominent. There was a sizable population of Jews in Thessalonica ([Acts 17:5](#)).

Paul, Timothy, and Silas preached in the Thessalonian synagogue over three Sabbaths, and a number of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles believed ([Acts 17:4](#)). [First Thessalonians 1:9–10](#) suggests that Paul subsequently spent some weeks ministering fruitfully to pagan Gentiles. However, rioters instigated by Jewish opponents dragged Jason (Paul’s host) and some other Christians before the politarchs and charged them with sedition against Caesar ([Acts 17:5–8](#)), forcing the missionaries to leave Thessalonica prematurely ([Acts 17:9–10](#)). Paul was concerned for the new Christians, and therefore a few months later he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica ([1 Thess. 3:1–2, 5](#); see note on [Acts 17:15](#)). Catching up with Paul in Corinth ([Acts 18:5](#)), Timothy updated him on the Thessalonian church ([1 Thess. 3:6](#)).

Timothy reported that generally the church community was doing well. However, not everything at Thessalonica was rosy. Some members of the church had died ([4:13](#)), and because they were not fully informed about what would happen to deceased Christians at Christ’s return ([3:10; 4:13](#)), some apparently thought that those who had died would miss out on the second coming, and they had plunged into hopeless grieving for them ([4:13](#)).

In addition, Timothy related to Paul a Thessalonian question about *the timing of the day of the Lord* ([5:1–2](#)). A number of scholars believe that the query reflected restless impatience or a false sense of security, but this view is countered by Paul’s repeated assurances in [5:4–5, 9](#), along with the lack of threat or warning in [5:1–11](#). Paul reassures the Thessalonians that they are destined not for wrath but for salvation on the day of the Lord. Some think that the Thessalonians were concerned that they would be unprepared for Jesus’ return, but [4:3–8](#) suggests that they were not concerned *enough* about holy living. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that these new Christians were questioning their own final salvation in view of the recent unexpected deaths ([4:13](#)). They may even have wondered whether the deaths were an expression of divine disapproval.

Whatever the specifics, clearly the Thessalonians needed reassurance about those who had died ([4:13–18](#)) and about their own destiny at the second coming ([5:1–11](#)).

The Thessalonians seem to have been vulnerable in other ways too. They had not expected the initial persecution to continue unabated for so long ([3:3–4](#); cf. [2 Thess.](#)

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1:5–7). Moreover, they missed Paul, apparently disappointed that he himself had not yet returned to see them (1 Thess. 3:6–10).

Yet another problem in Thessalonica demanded Paul’s attention: some Christians were bringing the church into disrepute by depending on wealthier Christians to provide for them rather than earning their own living (4:10b–12; 5:14; cf. 2 Thess. 3:6–15). It is possible that this problem was a result of the Thessalonians’ erroneous thinking about the future. However, it may simply be that some church members were selfishly and lazily exploiting the charity of wealthier members to avoid having to work.

When Paul heard Timothy’s generally positive report, he was filled with joyful relief and was eager to encourage the embattled and discouraged Christians and to answer their questions. So he immediately began composing 1 Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:6–8). Paul’s main purpose was to repair the hope of the Thessalonian Christians in the wake of the unexpected deaths of people in their congregation and to reassure them that both the dead and the living were destined to be saved at the second coming (4:13–5:11). Related to this was his desire to reassure the Thessalonians that they were among those elected by God for salvation (1:4; 5:24).

Paul also wished to underline the missionaries’ authenticity as preachers of the gospel of God (1:5; 2:1–12; 2:17–3:10) in the face of real or potential questions relating to his lengthy absence (2:17–3:10), the unrelenting persecution (3:3–4), and the unexpected deaths (4:13). Paul also sought to encourage the Thessalonians by explaining that persecution is normal for the Christian (3:3–4). In addition, Paul is calling the recently converted, predominantly pagan community to sexual holiness (4:3–8) and the idle members of the community to gainful employment (4:9–12).

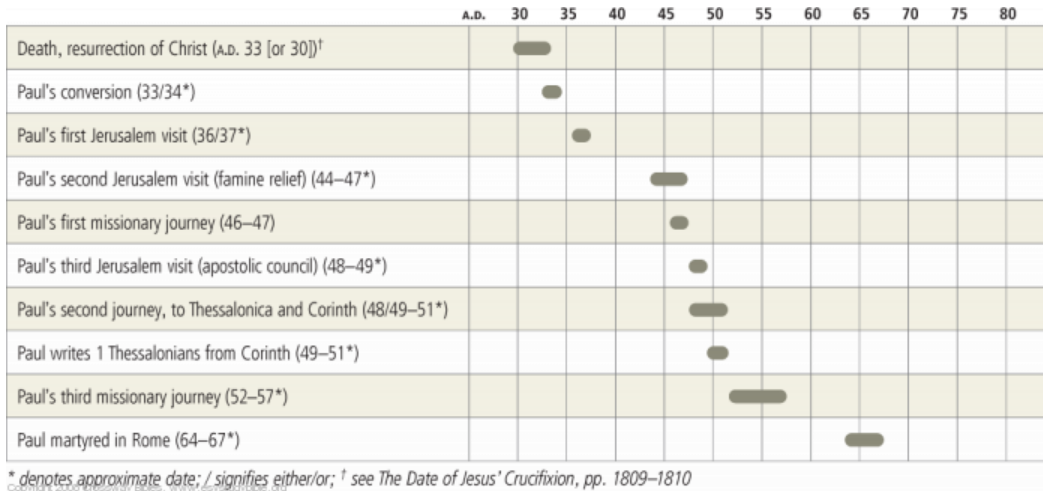
It also seems that Paul is seeking to undo their heavy dependence on him by urging the church to respect and defer to its own ministers (5:12–13). This can be seen in his forbidding the despising of prophesying (5:19–22), his emphasizing Timothy’s credentials (3:2), and his presenting the missionaries as a team (hence the use of the first person plural through much of the letter).

History of Salvation Summary

Christians should look back on the accomplished salvation of Christ, which fulfills OT promises, and look forward to the second coming, which consummates the promises. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#).)

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Timeline



Key Themes

1. The wrath of God comes on those who reject the gospel.	2:16; 5:3
2. Jesus' death and resurrection are the basis for the Christian's hope.	4:14; 5:10
3. Christians are destined not for wrath but for salvation at Jesus' coming.	1:10; 5:4, 9
4. Christians who die will participate fully in the second coming.	4:14–17; 5:10
5. Those who respond to the gospel have been elected by God in prehistory and called by God, and they continue to be called by God throughout their earthly lives.	1:4; 2:12; 4:7; 5:9, 24
6. Christians should live lives of comprehensive holiness.	3:13; 4:3–8; 5:23
7. Christians must never shirk their responsibility to work.	4:9–12; 5:14
8. The authenticity of the gospel is confirmed by the integrity of its preachers.	1:5; 2:1–12
9. Joy, especially in suffering, is a mark of the Christian.	1:6; 5:16

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10. Christians experience the realities of the prophesied new covenant.	4:8–9
11. Faith, hope, and love are essential and universal traits of the Christian.	1:2–3; 5:8

Literary Features

First Thessalonians is an informal epistle that contains all of the usual ingredients of NT epistles. It is a public letter in the sense of being addressed to a whole group, but at many points it reads more like a personal letter to an individual, as it highlights the relationship between author and recipients. The purpose of letters is usually to inform, and this letter informs the Thessalonian church about Paul's feelings toward them, events in his own life, and Christian doctrine and practice.

Distinguishing literary features include: a strong apologetic and autobiographical element; exuberant expressions of thanksgiving for people who are living the Christian life correctly; repeated direct addresses to the recipients of the letter; extended teaching on the second coming of Christ, so that even some of the moral exhortations are related to that doctrine; and the conclusion of each chapter with a reference to Christ's second coming.

The Setting of 1 Thessalonians

c. A.D. 49–51

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth near the end of his second missionary journey. Paul and his companions had established the church in Thessalonica but were forced to leave by opponents of the gospel. Later, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on the church there, and Timothy's report led Paul to write this letter. Thessalonica enjoyed privileged status as the capital of Macedonia and was located on a natural harbor along the busy east-west Egnatian Way.

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Outline

- I. Opening (1:1)
- II. Thanksgiving and Encouragement (1:2–3:13)
 - A. Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope (1:2–3)
 - B. Paul's confidence in the election of the Thessalonians (1:4–2:16)
 - C. Paul's defense of the missionaries during their absence (2:17–3:10)
 - D. A pastoral prayer for the Thessalonians (3:11–13)
- III. Instruction and Exhortation (4:1–5:28)
 - A. On pleasing God (4:1–12)

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- B. On the second coming of Jesus ([4:13–5:11](#))
- C. On community conduct ([5:12–22](#))
- D. Prayer, assurance, and conclusion ([5:23–28](#))¹

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 2301-2304). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.