

## Bible 101

### 1 and 2 Thessalonians

*Mantra for Bible study at Redeemer: Bible is a book of truth (about God), not a book of facts!*

## 1 THESSALONIANS

### Important sections to read

- 1 Thess. 1:2-3 = the faith, love, and hope of the Thessalonians
- 1 Thess. 4:1-12 = live a life pleasing to God
- 1 Thess. 5:9-10 = hope in the face of death

### Authorship/time period/audience

The first letter to the Thessalonians was written by Paul sometime in the years 40-53 CE. So, it is likely the earliest writing we have from the early Church.

Thessalonica was a Roman city in what is now northeast Greece; it was a commercial and cultic center. Paul had visited the city during his second missionary journey, preaching and teaching in synagogues there for just a few weeks. Jews and Gentiles lived in the city filled with worship of the emperor and other Roman gods. Persecution occurred because the Christians believed their devotion belonged to Jesus, not to the emperor.

The ministry of Paul, Timothy, and Silas in Thessalonica is recorded in Acts chapter 17. Paul and his co-workers were forced to leave the city due to civil disturbances. When Paul couldn't return to Thessalonica as he hoped, he wrote this letter (probably from Corinth). Meanwhile, Paul had sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to give support to these early Christians and Timothy had given his report about the status of that community to Paul.



### Themes of the letter

Because this is such an early letter of Paul, it doesn't address major themes, such as "justification by faith," that he develops in his letter to the Galatians and other later letters. Instead, this pastoral letter shows some of the issues concerning this early Christian

community. In contrast to some of Paul's other letters, he doesn't have any complaints about their behavior or any lack of faith.

The letter has two sections:

- the past work of Paul with the Thessalonians (Chapters 1-3)
- current concerns in the church there (Chapters 4-5).

### Past work of Paul with the Thessalonians

Paul begins with words of thanksgiving about their lives:

*We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1:2-3)*

The hope in Jesus Christ is a theme throughout the letter.

Because he had only been able to be with the Thessalonians for a short time, he takes time to recall his time with them: how he had worked, so as not to be a burden on them, even while proclaiming the gospel to them; how he had acted as a parent to these new believers, knowing that different ones had differing needs in development of their faith; and how these new believers who were being persecuted encouraged others who were also facing persecution. He is answering charges from those who are trying to discredit what he had preached while he was with them.

He goes on to say how much he has wanted to return to them. Because that isn't possible, he realizes that they need strong leadership to help them stay strong in their growing faith; that is why he has sent his trusted co-worker Timothy back to them to support them. He shares the encouraging report Timothy has given him.

### Current concerns in the church there

Paul encourages the Thessalonians to live lives pleasing to God and to extend that love to others – in both cases, *“to do so more and more”* (4:10). He also expresses his concern for them as they continue to experience persecution.

Because Jesus died/rose again during the lifetime of believers during that time, Paul and others think that the Second Coming of Christ is not too far in the future. The Thessalonians are concerned about the people who have already died. Paul reassures them, giving them hope:

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive,*

*who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.*  
(4:13-15)

In the last chapter Paul encourages them to prepare for that unknown “day of the Lord” (i.e., Christ’s return) by again referring to faith, love, and hope: “... *put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation.*” (5:8b)

Before the final greeting/benediction, Paul once more gives advice about how to live a faithful life:

*But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.* (5:12-21)

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## 2 THESSALONIANS

### Important section to read

- 2 Thess. 2:13-15 = chosen for salvation

### Authorship/time period/audience

This letter, attributed to Paul, was written to the believers in Thessalonica by one of his coworkers (possibly by Timothy). Based on the content in the letter, the majority of current scholars believe it was likely written somewhere between 75 and 90 CE, many years after Paul’s death. Scholars say that the mention of judgment (e.g., in 1:5-10) is an indication that it was written later in the life of the Christian community because that topic hadn’t been developed during the period of the first letter. Some scholars favor an earlier date of 50 CE.

### Themes of the letter

The author addresses the false teaching by some people that the time of Christ’s return is here, that it has already happened. He tells them that this is not true and encourages them not to panic because they have been chosen by God for salvation. They are to focus on what they were taught by Paul, Timothy, and the others.

*As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. (2:1-3)*

*But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter. (2:13-15)*

He encourages them as they live with persecution and commends them for their faith.

*We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. (1:3-4)*

But this author also uses words of correction not present in the first letter. As time has passed, some of the believers have not been working to support the community.

*For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. (3:10-13)*

## **Reflection**

What is our reaction if “false teachings” are present in an aspect of our lives? How do we decide what is the truth?