

# FIRST EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONICANS

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**Approximate date:** 50-52 C.E.

**Time period:** season of severe difficulty for a young assembly of Believers, with misunderstandings about the end-times

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Corinth

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Thessalonica

The authorship of 1 Thessalonians is most certainly Pauline, indicated by the personal characteristics we see interspersed throughout the letter,<sup>1</sup> and comparison with other passages (3:1-2, 8-11; cf. Acts 15:36; 2 Corinthians 11:28). Pauline authorship of 1 Thessalonians is not severely challenged, even by many liberal examiners. Silvanus and Timothy are listed as co-senders of 1 Thessalonians (1:1), which has lent some support to them being either co-writers or closely involved with the letter's composition.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, 1 Thessalonians is regarded to be the first extant Pauline letter written,<sup>3</sup> although if it is not, 1 Thessalonians was still one of Paul's earliest extant letters. The historical data that appears in 1 Thessalonians is associated with Paul's visit to Thessalonica seen in Acts 17:5-14. The Thessalonian congregation was founded by Paul on his Second Missionary Journey.

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia, in the Roman period. Thessalonica was a seaport city located at the head of the Thermaic Gulf (now the Gulf of Salonika), serving as the chief seaport in Macedonia. The city was an important trade center on the road leading north to the Danube, and many goods coming and going to Rome went through Thessalonica.<sup>4</sup>

Paul began his early ministry in Thessalonica at the synagogue (Acts 17:1-9), after he had to leave Phillipi (Acts 16:6-40). There was a Jewish presence in the city, but later the group of new Messiah followers became predominantly non-Jewish (Acts 17:4),<sup>5</sup> indicated by Paul's words, "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9, NASU). Many of the Thessalonian Believers came out of Greco-Roman paganism, quite recently as indicated by Paul's greeting. A large sector of his audience also included a number of "devout Greeks" (*IDB*),<sup>6</sup> as the first major group to receive the new faith in Yeshua appear to have been either Greek God-fearers or proselytes to Judaism.<sup>7</sup>

Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica abruptly, due to hostility from the local Jewish community over his preaching the gospel (Acts 17:5-10). The assembly of Thessalonian Believers that had been put together was relatively young and unestablished, only a few months or so, when Paul had to write to them. Paul had sent Timothy to them to find out about their development (3:1-2), and so this letter was composed as a response to Timothy's report. Paul wrote the Thessalonians, mostly new Believers who were to various degrees still maturing in their Messianic faith, about the persecution that they were facing (3:3-5). Paul's letter deals with some practical instructions for proper living (4:1-12), and he wanted to clarify for them some misconceptions regarding the Messiah's return (4:13-18).

It is often agreed that Paul composed his letter from Corinth, the last place he visited on his Second Missionary Journey, and confirmable from internal evidence (1:1; 2:18). The dating of 1 Thessalonians is often tied to the ascension of Gallio into power,<sup>8</sup> as Paul had to go before him to answer charges (Acts

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. F.W. Beare, "Thessalonians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 4:621.

<sup>2</sup> Carson and Moo, pp 534-535.

<sup>3</sup> Beare, "Thessalonians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 4:621; Edgar M. Krentz, "Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the," in *ABD*, 6:515, 517; cf. Merrill C. Tenney, "Thessalonians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 4:832.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Krentz, "Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the," in *ABD*, 6:516; J.W. Simpson, Jr., "Thessalonians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 933-934; Robert K. Jewett, "1 and 2 Thessalonians," in *ECB*, 1413.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 585-586; Simpson, "Thessalonians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 934.

<sup>6</sup> Beare, "Thessalonians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 4:622.

<sup>7</sup> Tenney, "Thessalonians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 4:832.

<sup>8</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 587-588.

18:12-17). “An inscription discovered in Delphi in 1909 contains a letter from Claudius to Gallio, before whom Paul was arraigned in Corinth; it dates the proconsulship of Gallio to the twelfth year of Claudius’s tribunician power and before the latter’s twenty-seventh acclamation in August, A.D. 52...Just when Paul appeared before him is not stated, but Acts 18:12-18 implies that Gallio’s succession took place near the end of Paul’s eighteen-month stay in Corinth” (Tenney, *ISBE*).<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to what some in the Messianic community today might want to believe, no Hebrew or Aramaic origin for 1 Thessalonians has ever been suggested by any reputable New Testament scholar. All are in agreement that Paul wrote this letter in Greek.

“Far and away the largest theological contribution of the Epistles [1&2 Thessalonians] lies in what they say about eschatology” (Thomas, *EXP*).<sup>10</sup> Teachings regarding the Last Days appear in every chapter of this letter (1:9-10; 2:19-20; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:23-24), and are dominated from 4:13-5:11. 1&2 Thessalonians, along with Yeshua’s Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) and the Book of Revelation, form the main sector of end-time teachings within the Apostolic Scriptures. Secondary issues in 1 Thessalonians regard proper sexuality and being aware of the conditions and circumstances in which one is living.

The persecution that the Thessalonians were facing is often attributed to the hostility that the Jewish leadership at the local synagogue had toward Paul (Acts 17:5-9). This hostility may have been because the Greek God-fearers and proselytes in their midst were eager recipients of the good news of Yeshua. The synagogue leaders may have cherished this group of people, and were greatly upset that they left their tutelage.<sup>11</sup> In spite of this, however, the main persecution of the Thessalonian Believers that developed, appears to be of pagan Thessalonian, and not Jewish origin (3:3-4), even though it did possibly come as a result of Jewish influence over local leaders. The initial charge against Paul that the Jews brought was that he was inciting rebellion against Caesar (Acts 17:7).

In general Christian evaluation, 1 Thessalonians is approached as a letter demonstrating some of the early social and spiritual issues faced as the good news spread abroad. Sinful behaviors of paganism were to be a thing of the past for the new Believers. The Messiah is going to return to judge the Earth and sinners, and as such “The hope of Christ’s return was a powerful incentive to holiness” (Tenney, *ISBE*).<sup>12</sup> While there are various themes encountered in 1

Thessalonians viewed as being a bit general by many layreaders, it is important to be aware of how “In the last decade or so [1990s into the 2000s] these two small letters have become some of the most hotly debated documents in the NT...[T]hey reflect the earliest accessible stage of Paul’s pastoral and missionary endeavors and provide our earliest glimpse into a nascent Pauline congregation” (Jewett, *ECB*).<sup>13</sup> There are points of disagreement among conservative and liberal examiners of 1 Thessalonians, as to how true Paul’s letter and the record in Acts 17:1-15 correspond to one another.<sup>14</sup>

“1 Thessalonians is designed primarily as a treatment of the issue of the moment rather than as a general theological treatise” (Tenney, *ISBE*),<sup>15</sup> with the content “fitted to the [assembly] he addresses” (*ABD*).<sup>16</sup> There are questions about Paul’s words about the Jews in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, but this may have far more to do with the local people of Judea and/or a widespread disdain witnessed in the Jewish religious leadership to the gospel, not the Jewish people in general.<sup>17</sup> When evaluating the issues of eschatology and the resurrection (4:13-18), one has to wonder if the Thessalonians were utterly confused over Paul’s emphases on realized eschatology versus future realities yet to be manifested.<sup>18</sup> Paul’s theological orientation that born again Believers were a part of the age to come, may have caused some confusion when various Thessalonian Believers died, for example.<sup>19</sup> It can be legitimately suggested that in Paul’s short time with the Thessalonians, he had been unable to give them a fully developed picture of the doctrine of resurrection.<sup>20</sup>

If there are any challenges that exist in 1 Thessalonians for today’s Messianic community, they do not really relate to the validity of the Torah or aspects of the Messianic lifestyle, but instead relate to the infamous pre- versus post-tribulation rapture debate. While much of contemporary Christianity today leans heavily toward the pre-trib viewpoint, and there is often not an even balance between pre- and post-trib Christians,<sup>21</sup> there is a more even balance between pre- and post-tribulationists in the Messianic community. There is

<sup>13</sup> Jewett, “1 and 2 Thessalonians,” in *ECB*, 1413.

<sup>14</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 589-591; Carson and Moo, pp 532-533, 542-543.

<sup>15</sup> Tenney, “Thessalonians, First Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 4:833.

<sup>16</sup> Krentz, “Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the,” in *ABD*, 6:517.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Krentz, “Thessalonians, First and Second Epistles to the,” in *ABD*, 6:516; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Thessalonians, First Letter to the,” in *EDB*, 1299.

Also consult the FAQ, “1 Thessalonians 2:14-16.”

<sup>18</sup> Simpson, “Thessalonians, Letters to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 934-935.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jewett, “1 and 2 Thessalonians,” in *ECB*, 1414.

<sup>20</sup> Carson and Moo, 546.

<sup>21</sup> It is useful to peruse some of the perspectives witnessed in Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Paul D. Feinberg, Douglas J. Moo, Richard R. Reiter, *Three Views on the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Tenney, “Thessalonians, First Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 4:833.

<sup>10</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” in *EXP*, 11:223; cf. Carson and Moo, 549.

<sup>11</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 586.

<sup>12</sup> Tenney, “Thessalonians, First Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 4:834.

certainly room for improvement in our collective Messianic engagement level with the Epistle of 1 Thessalonians. Understanding some of the early challenges of the Believers, in terms of their relationship with the Jewish Synagogue, and their fervor for the return of the Messiah, certainly contain valuable lessons for our emerging Messianic movement today to reflect upon and consider.

Consult the commentary **1&2 Thessalonians for the Practical Messianic** by J.K. McKee for a more detailed examination of 1 Thessalonians.

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- Tree of Life—The New Covenant*, pp 341-348.



# 1

## **Salutation**

<sup>1</sup> Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the assembly of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Yeshua the Messiah: Grace to you and peace.

## **The Thessalonians' Faith and Example**

<sup>2</sup> We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of *you* in our prayers;

<sup>3</sup> remembering your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, before our God and Father,

<sup>4</sup> knowing, brothers and sisters beloved of God, *His* choice of you;

<sup>5</sup> for our good news 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 persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

<sup>6</sup> And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with joy of the Holy Spirit,

<sup>7</sup> so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

<sup>8</sup> For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

<sup>9</sup> For they themselves report concerning us what kind of welcome we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God,

<sup>10</sup> and to wait for His Son from Heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Yeshua, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

# 2

## **Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica**

<sup>1</sup> For you yourselves, brothers and sisters, know that our visit to you was not in vain,

<sup>2</sup> but having already suffered and having been mistreated, as you know, in Philippi, we had boldness in our God to speak to you the good news of God in much conflict.

<sup>3</sup> For our exhortation *does not come* from error, nor *is it* of uncleanness, nor guile;

<sup>4</sup> but just as we have been approved of God to be entrusted with the good news, so we speak, not as pleasing mortals, but God who examines our hearts.

<sup>5</sup> For we never came using words of flattery, as you know, nor a pretense for covetousness—God is witness—

<sup>6</sup> nor seeking glory from mortals, either from you or from others, when we might have been burdensome as apostles of Messiah.

<sup>7</sup> But we were gentle<sup>a</sup> among you, as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children.

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<sup>a</sup> There is a textual variant present in 2:7, as to whether *ēpioi* (ἤπιοι), “gentle,” or *nēpioi* (νήπιοι), “infants,” is the correct textual reading (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, pp 629-630). The difference between the two terms is that the latter has added the Greek letter *nu* (ν), so the possibility of there being some minor transcriptional error in ancient times is present. Expositors of 1&2 Thessalonians are not entirely agreed on which is the better rendering, with some favoring “gentle” (I. Howard Marshall, *New Century Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 70; F.F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1&2 Thessalonians*, Vol 45 [Waco TX: Word Books, 1982], 31) and others favoring “infants” (Leon Morris, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959], 77; Gene L. Green, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], pp 126-128; Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], pp 65-72).

No major doctrines of the faith are obviously challenged, if an interpreter prefers the reading of *nēpioi* (νήπιοι) or “infants” for v. 7 over *ēpioi* (ἤπιοι) or “gentle,” although it can be a difficult reading unless “infants” is somehow viewed in reference to the

<sup>8</sup> Even so, being affectionately desirous of you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the good news of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.

<sup>9</sup> For you remember, brothers and sisters, our labor and travail, working night and day, that we might not burden any of you, we proclaimed to you the good news of God.

<sup>10</sup> You are witnesses, and God *also*, how devoutly and righteously and blamelessly we behaved ourselves toward you believers;

<sup>11</sup> just as you know how we *dealt with* each one of you, as a father with his own children, exhorting you, and encouraging *you*, and testifying

<sup>12</sup> for you to walk worthy of the God who calls you into His own Kingdom and glory.

<sup>13</sup> And for this reason we also thank God constantly, that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of mortals, but, as it is in truth, the word of God, which also works in you believers.

<sup>14</sup> For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the assemblies of God in Messiah Yeshua that are in Judea, for you also suffered the same things from your own compatriots, even as they did from the Jews

<sup>15</sup> who both killed the Lord Yeshua and the prophets<sup>a</sup>, and drove out us, and displeased God, and are hostile to all people,

<sup>16</sup> forbidding us to speak to the nations that they may be saved – with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.

### ***Paul's Desire to Visit the Assembly Again***

<sup>17</sup> But we, brothers and sisters, having been orphaned from you for a short season – in presence, not in heart – were more abundantly eager, with great desire, to see your face;

<sup>18</sup> because we wanted to come to you – I, Paul, more than once – and Satan hindered us.

<sup>19</sup> For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting? Is it not even you, before our Lord Yeshua at His coming?

<sup>20</sup> For you are our glory and joy.

## **3**

<sup>1</sup> Therefore when we could bear *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone;

<sup>2</sup> and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the good news of Messiah, to establish you and to encourage *you* as to your faith,

<sup>3</sup> so that no one would be disturbed by these tribulations; for you yourselves know that we have been appointed for this.

<sup>4</sup> For indeed when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we are to suffer tribulation; just as it came to pass, as you know.

<sup>5</sup> For this reason, when I could no longer bear *it*, I also sent that I might know about your faith, lest by any means the Tempter had tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.

presumed innocence of newborn babies. The reading of *ēpioi* (ἤπιοι) or “gentle” offers fewer issues in terms of understanding the vantage point of Paul and his audience.

Cf. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, pp 629-630 which favors *ēpioi*; Comfort, *New Testament Text and Commentary*, pp 642-643 which favors *nēpioi*.

<sup>a</sup> The issue of how to handle *hupo tōn Ioudaiōn, tōn kai ton Kurion apokteinantōn Iēsou kai tous prophētas* (ὑπὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων, ἰς τῶν καὶ τὸν κύριον ἀποκτείναντων Ἰησοῦν καὶ τοὺς προφήτας) in 2:14-15 is a complicated one, both textually and theologically. An English version like the NASU includes a restrictive comma, “the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets,” whereas an English version like the HCSB does not include a restrictive comma, “the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets.” One rendering would seemingly imply that the Jewish race as a whole is responsible for the Messiah's death, and another that only a specific sector of Jews were responsible. Still, others favor *tōn Ioudaiōn* being rendered as “the Judeans,” emphasizing their location. The rendering offered here for 2:14-15 favors the view that “the Jews” in view are only those specifically responsible for the death of the Messiah, to be associated with the Jewish religious leaders with whom Paul had difficulty during his visit to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-15).

<sup>6</sup> But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, longing to see us just as we also *long to see you*,

<sup>7</sup> for this reason, brothers and sisters, we have been comforted about you, in all our distress and tribulation, through your faith;

<sup>8</sup> for now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.

<sup>9</sup> For what thanksgiving can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God,

<sup>10</sup> night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

<sup>11</sup> Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Yeshua, direct our way to you;

<sup>12</sup> and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another, and to all people, just as we also *do* to you;

<sup>13</sup> so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Yeshua with all His holy ones.

## 4

### ***A Life Pleasing to God***

<sup>1</sup> Finally then, brothers and sisters, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Yeshua, that, as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and to please God (just as you do walk), that you abound more.

<sup>2</sup> For you know what orders we gave you through the Lord Yeshua.

<sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication;

<sup>4</sup> that each one of you know how to control his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

<sup>5</sup> not in the passion of lust, like the nations who know not God;

<sup>6</sup> *and* that no one transgress and wrong his brother or sister in the matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned.

<sup>7</sup> For God has called us not for uncleanness, but in sanctification.

<sup>8</sup> Therefore he who rejects *this* is not rejecting human *authority*, but God, who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

<sup>9</sup> Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters you have no need that one write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another;

<sup>10</sup> for indeed you do practice it toward all the brothers and sisters who are in all Macedonia. But we exhort you, brothers and sisters, that you abound more,

<sup>11</sup> and that you aspire to live a quiet life, and attend to your own business, and to work with your hands, even as we ordered you;

<sup>12</sup> so that you may walk properly before outsiders, and may have need of nothing.

### ***The Lord's Coming***

<sup>13</sup> But we would not have you ignorant, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.

<sup>14</sup> For if we believe that Yeshua died and rose again, even so, through Yeshua, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.

<sup>15</sup> For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

<sup>16</sup> For the Lord Himself will descend from Heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Messiah will rise first.

<sup>17</sup> Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.

<sup>18</sup> Therefore comfort one another with these words.

# 5

<sup>1</sup> Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you have no need that anything be written to you.

<sup>2</sup> For yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night.

<sup>3</sup> When they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains upon a woman with child; and they will not escape.

<sup>4</sup> But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief;

<sup>5</sup> for you are all children of light and children of the day. We are not of the night, nor of darkness;

<sup>6</sup> so then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.

<sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep in the night, and those who get drunk, get drunk in the night.

<sup>8</sup> But let us, since we are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation.

<sup>9</sup> For God has not appointed us to wrath, but to the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Yeshua the Messiah,

<sup>10</sup> who died for us, that whether we are awake or sleep, we may live together with Him.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

## ***Final Exhortations and Greetings***

<sup>12</sup> But we beseech you, brothers and sisters, to recognize those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord, and admonish you,

<sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

<sup>14</sup> And we exhort you, brothers and sisters, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be longsuffering toward all.

<sup>15</sup> See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all.

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always;

<sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing;

<sup>18</sup> in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Messiah Yeshua for you.

<sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit;

<sup>20</sup> do not despise prophetic utterances;

<sup>21</sup> But test all things; hold fast that which is good;

<sup>22</sup> abstain from every form of evil.

<sup>23</sup> Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah.

<sup>24</sup> Faithful is He who calls you, who will also do it.

<sup>25</sup> Brothers and sisters, pray for us.

<sup>26</sup> Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.

<sup>27</sup> I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brothers and sisters.

<sup>28</sup> The grace of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah be with you.