1 Thessalonians

Introduction

**DATE OF WRITING**

Thus this Epistle was *first in date of all Paul's extant Epistles*. The Epistle is written in the joint names of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, the three founders of the Thessalonian Church. JFB[[1]](#footnote-1)

From the Acts reference, where one is told that Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica by way of Philippi, from whence they had been asked to leave by the town authorities, we may legitimately assume a date circa 49 or 50 CE for the writing of this letter.- 1 Thessalonians, Gordon Fee (hereafter, Fee)

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

On his second missionary journey Paul founded the first European church at Philippi. Continuing his journey one hundred miles farther, he came to Thessalonica, which was the capital of the second Roman district of the province of Macedonia. It was a large and important commercial city, containing much wealth and learning. To this day it is the second city in European Turkey, ranking next to Constantinople, and has between 75, 000 and 100,000 inhabitants. It is now called Saloniki. TCGR[[2]](#footnote-2)

According to the Greek historian Strabo (d. 23 CE), the present city was founded by Cassander in the fourth century BCE and was named after his wife Thessalonice (= “victory of Thessaly”), who was a daughter of Philip and half-sister of Alexander the Great. In 167 BCE, when Macedonia was annexed by Rome and divided into four parts, Thessalonica became capital of the second district. When the province was reorganized in 148 BCE, it became the capital of the province of Macedonia. In the give-and-take of history, the city was fortunate enough to side with Octavian (later Augustus) in the Roman civil war (42 BCE) and thus in victory was awarded the status of a “free city.” At the same time, of course, as with Philippi, this assured loyalty to the emperor — and the imperial benefits that went with such loyalty. Fee

It almost certainly had a population mix similar to that of Corinth, making it an especially cosmopolitan city, in comparison, for example, with an interior town like Philippi. Fee

It was also a city where, unlike more truly Roman cities, women held places of honor and authority. These various realities also meant that it had a considerable mix of trade guilds and religions. Fee

**PAUL’S STAY IN THESSALONICA**

But the evidence of the two Thessalonian letters, both Paul’s own references to his teaching them and the degree of Christian maturity the letters reveal, suggests that the believing community had been more sufficiently grounded than one would normally expect to have happened in two weeks. And since Luke’s time reference had to do with the length of Paul’s ministry in the Jewish synagogue, not with his stay in Thessalonica as such, one should probably posit a stay of several weeks or months.

Paul further reminds them that he had worked “with his own hands” so as not to be a burden to them and thus also to offer them an example to follow. These kinds of behavioral models would be difficult to establish in two weeks. But the ultimate proof of a longer stay comes from a passing reference in Philippians 4:16, where Paul reminds that congregation that “once and again” they had ministered to his needs while he was in Thessalonica. The “once and again” by itself pushes the time frame far beyond two weeks. But having said all that, we still remain in the dark as to the actual length of stay — probably some six or more months, but who is to know? Fee

Thus the letter is full of information that is either reminding them of what they had already been taught or reinforcing what they already know.

First, the majority part of the “recall” language is to remind them of his earlier time among them, where two matters stand out: their conversion and his manner of life while among them. Fee

**PURPOSE OF LETTER**

At the same time three matters need to be spoken to, which ultimately accounts for the letter: a question related to the sanctity of the marriage bed; the refusal to work by some who were able to, but chose rather to live off the largesse of others; and questions about the nature and timing of the Lord’s return. Fee

Paul more than once refers to their suffering in the face of opposition (1:6-7; 2:14-16; 3:2-4); second, he also offers a considerable defense both of his ministry while among them (2:1-12) and of his actions since leaving (2:17-3:5). These are best understood as related themes; that is, the persecution the Thessalonian believers are experiencing from their former pagan associations (2:15) is in some way related to their becoming the converts of an itinerant Jewish propagator of a new (non-Greek) religion, Fee

**EXEMPLARY CHURCH**

But not only is "the Church of the Thessalonians" a model church in this respect; it is a model also in that it was most remarkable for its missionary activity. Sound doctrine produced -fruitful service for God. From this assembly in Thessalonica sounded forth the word of God throughout Macedonia and Achaia (I Thess. i. 8). A tract of country as large as Great Britain was evangelised by this little flock. Bullinger

The style is calm and equable, in accordance with the subject matter, which deals only with Christian duties in general, taking for granted the great doctrinal truths which were not as yet disputed. JFB

The earlier Epistles, as we should expect, are moral and practical. It was not until Judaistic and legalizing errors arose at a later period that he wrote those Epistles (for example, Romans and Galatians) which unfold the cardinal doctrines of grace and justification by faith. JFB

**BIBLICAL HISTORIC ACCOUNT**

**Acts 17:1-4 (NKJV)**

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3  explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and *saying,* "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ."   
4  And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

From the First Epistle to the Thessalonians it appears that the converts were nearly all Gentiles; not only such as had before been proselytes, who would be gained in the synagogue, but such as up to that time had been idolaters ([1Th 1:9, 10](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=1Th+1%3A9-10)). During his stay, while Paul supported himself by his own labor ([1Th 2:9](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=1Th+2%3A9); [2Th 3:7-9](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=2Th+3%3A7-9)), he received supplies once and again from the Philippians, of which he makes honorable acknowledgment ([Php 4:15, 16](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Php+4%3A15-16)). *A Commentary: Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments. JFB*

**Acts 17:5-9 (NKJV)**

But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. 6  But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.   
7  Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king--Jesus." 8  And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. 9  So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.10  Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

**“Lewd fellows of the baser sort”**—better, perhaps, "worthless market people," that is, idle loungers about the market-place, of indifferent character. JFB

**“Assaulted the house of Jason”**—with whom Paul and Silas abode ([Ac 17:7](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ac+17%3A7)), one of Paul's kinsmen, apparently ([Rom 16:21](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+16%3A21)), and from his name, which was sometimes used as a *Greek* form of the word *Joshua* [Grotius], probably a Hellenistic Jew. JFB

“**And when they had taken security of Jason and of the other”**—"the others"—probably making them deposit a money pledge that the preachers should not again endanger the public peace. JFB

**Acts 17:11-12 (NKJV)**

These[[3]](#footnote-3) were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily *to find out* whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.

“**These were more noble than those in Thessalonica”**—The comparison is between *the Jews* of the two places; for the triumphs of the Gospel at Thessalonica were mostly among the Gentiles. See on [Ac 17:2-4](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ac+17%3A2-4). JFB

“I**n that they received the word with all readiness of mind”**—heard it not only without prejudice, but with eager interest, "in an honest and good heart" ([Lk 8:17](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Lk+8%3A17)), with sincere desire to be taught aright (see [John 7:17](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Jn+7%3A17)). Mark the "nobility" ascribed to this state of mind. JFB

“**Searched the scriptures daily whether those things were so”**—whether the *Christian* interpretation which the apostle put upon the Old Testament Scriptures was the true one. JFB

**1 Thessalonians 1:1 (NKJV)**

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Silvanus is the full name, and Silas the abbreviation. TCGR

**Silvanus**—a "chief man among the brethren" ([Ac 15:22](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ac+15%3A22)), and a "prophet" ([Ac 15:32](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ac+15%3A32)), and one of the deputies who carried the decree of the Jerusalem council to Antioch. His age and position cause him to be placed before "Timothy," then a youth ([Ac 16:1](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ac+16%3A1); [1Ti 4:12](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=1Ti+4%3A12)). Silvanus (the Gentile expanded form of "Silas") is called in [1Pet 5:12](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=1Pe+5%3A12), "a faithful brother" (compare [2Cor 1:19](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=2Co+1%3A19)). They both aided in planting the Thessalonian Church, and are therefore included in the address. JFB

a. “To the Church” The fact that they are designated as “the church of the Thessalonians” indicates that this usage of the Greek word ekklēsia was by now (ca. CE 48) an already established practice among the early followers of Christ.-Fee

b. Gentile converts to Christianity were no longer members only of Greco-Roman culture. They had entered the “society” of a people whose roots were in Judaism and whose story had its origins in the Old Testament, a story which the Thessalonians would have known well in its Greek form — the Septuagint (LXX). And the primary term used to refer to this new “society” was that used in the earlier form of the story when referring to Israel as “the gathered people of God.” The new expression of that “gathered people” had now taken deep root in Macedonia. Fee

c. They are “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Indeed, this is the only place in the entire corpus where believers are thought of as having their existence “in God.” Fee

The more significant thing about this phrase, however, is its assumed “high” Christology (High Christology = honoring Jesus). Fee

This is the first of many instances where one preposition controls the twofold object of God and Christ, where the two “divine persons” (to use the language of a later time) are seen to be in the closest union regarding divine activities. Fee

d. In the Father and in the Son

This designation also suggests that from a very early time Paul (and other believers) had already come to recognize both the Father and the Son in the Greek text of the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one!) After all, Paul’s clear expression of this in his next letter (1 Cor 8:6) is not argued for, but argued from. Thus the “one God” of the Shema is the Father, while the “one LORD” of the same Shema is Jesus Christ (the “Son” being assumed under the reality of God as Father). It is therefore altogether likely that this first mention of God in the Pauline corpus comes to us with this understanding of the Shema already well in hand. And here it indicates the secure position of the Thessalonian believers. They are “in” both the Father and the Son simultaneously. Fee

e. “Grace to you and Peace”

*Grace* was the Greek and *peace* the Hebrew salutation; Paul here combines them. Grace indicates the favor of God and all the gifts which flow from it, while peace represents tranquility and prosperity, either inward or outward. TCGR

The traditional greeting in the Hellenistic world was chairein — the infinitive of the verb “to rejoice,” but in salutations meaning simply “Greetings!” (see Acts 15:23; Jas 1:1). In Paul’s hands this now becomes charis (“grace”), to which he adds the traditional Jewish greeting shalom (“peace,”39 in the sense of “wholeness” or “well-being”). Fee

It is worth noting that this is the invariable order of Paul’s words, not “grace and peace to you” as in most translations. Very likely there is significance to this order: the grace of God and Christ is what is given to God’s people; peace is what results from such a gift. Fee

In a profound sense this greeting therefore nicely represents Paul’s larger theological perspective. The sum total of God’s activity toward his human creatures is found in the word “grace”; God has given himself to his people bountifully and mercifully in Christ. Nothing is deserved, nothing can be achieved. The sum total of those benefits as they are experienced by the recipients of God’s grace is “peace,” God’s eschatological shalom, both now and to come. Fee

**1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 (NKJV)**

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, 3 remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father,

2. Paul, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy give thanks for them and mentions them in their prayers

Thus Paul says that in prayer he and his apostolic companions give thanks for them by doing two things: always mentioning them in prayer as they constantly remember their faith, love, and hope; and all of this because they also know that these latter are the evidence of the Thessalonians’ election. Fee

Thus, Paul envisions himself and Silas and Timothy as being “in the presence of our God and Father,” as they offer joyful thanksgiving to God for the Thessalonian believers. Fee

3. The Thessalonians expressed their love for each other in good works (Eph. 2:10)

a. Timothy had brought a good report of them to Paul.

Indeed, one should read these words first of all in light of chapters 2 and 3, knowing that they are expressed in response to Timothy’s return with an essentially good report about the Thessalonian believers, even though they are now in the throes of considerable persecution (see 2:14; 3:2-5). Paul’s gratitude to God for them finds expression in terms of the especially Christian triad — faith, love, hope — which appears here for the first time in Christian literature. Fee

b. Work of faith, labor of love, patience of hope

True faith in Christ — as with true faith in the Old Testament — expresses itself in “work”. Fee

This also means that the word “love” in this case refers to “love for others,” rather than out of love for Christ. Fee

“Hope,” therefore, in Paul is a “content” word, meaning a word that has to do with his absolute certainty about the future based on Christ’s resurrection, not a word of wishfulness about a less than sure tomorrow. Fee

Their "work of faith" (verse 3) was seen in that they had "turned to God" from every idol (verse 9). Their "labour of love" (verse 3) was seen in that they now served the living and true God (verse 9). Their "patience of hope" (verse 3) was seen in that they waited for God's Son from heaven (v. 10). Bullinger

**Work of faith**—*the working reality of your faith*; its alacrity in *receiving* the truth, and in *evincing* itself by its fruits. Not an otiose assent; but a *realizing, working faith*; not "in word only," but in *one* continuous chain of "work" (singular, not plural, *works*), [1Th 1:5-10](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=1Th+1%3A5-10); [Jas 2:22](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Jas+2%3A22). So "the work of faith" in [2Th 1:11](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=2Th+1%3A11) implies its *perfect development* (compare [Jas 1:4](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Jas+1%3A4)). JFB

L**abour of love**—The *Greek* implies *toil*, or *troublesome labor*, which we are stimulated by love to bear JFB

H**ope in our Lord Jesus**—literally, "hope *of* our Lord Jesus," namely, of His coming ([1Th 1:10](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=1Th+1%3A10)): a hope that looked forward beyond all present things for the manifestation of Christ. JFB

Your "faith, hope, and love" were not merely such as would pass for genuine *before men*, but "in the sight of God," JFB

**1 Thessalonians 1:4 (ESV)**

4  For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,

Thus, just as later in writing to the Galatians, Paul here shows none of the contemporary Western church’s anxiety about appealing to experience as part of the overall reality of coming to Christian faith. In this case Paul’s concern seems clear. He grounds their experienced faith in God’s prior love and election Fee

The noun “election” itself is found elsewhere in Paul’s letters only in Romans 9-11, all having to do with Israel. Elsewhere Paul uses the verb (Eph 1:4) or the adjective “elect.” Although this language does not occur frequently in his letters, its occurrence in a passage like the present one indicates that it is presuppositional for him. It should be noted that in the present case Paul is thinking of the whole body of Thessalonian believers as elect, not individual believers. Indeed, although he refers once to an individual as “chosen” (Rom 16:13), his understanding of such election is presuppositionally related to a person’s incorporation into the community of believers. Moreover, for Paul “election” is always a referent to believers, and thus reflects a reality after the fact, not before; and as here it is always seen as an action of God’s love, and thus it becomes a dynamic force in the life of the believing community. Fee

**Romans 1:7 (ESV)**

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**2 Thessalonians 2:13 (ESV)**

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

**1 John 4:16-17 (ESV)**

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.   
17  By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world.

1. James, Fosset, and Brown, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/jamieson-fausset-brown/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. THE STANDARD BIBLE COMMENTARY, “Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Roman by J. W. McGARVEY, LL.D., and PHILIP Y. PENDLETON, A.M. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Jews in Berea [↑](#footnote-ref-3)