

1 Thessalonians – Lesson 2

The Greeting of the Letter

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1

- (a) Where is Thessalonica *located*, geographically? What *kind* of a city was it? Why was it an *important* city during the First Century?

Thessalonica is located in the province of Macedonia, in northern Greece. It is situated on a harbor of the Aegean Sea, and is on the Egnatian way, a major E-W highway connecting it to both Philippi and Berea. It was a highly cosmopolitan city of the time, with much commerce and philosophical activity, including all of the various religious cults. It was an important city because it was large in size, had a significant number of Jews, and was a major hub of economic activity for the area.

- (b) According to 1:1, who is/are the *author(s)* of this letter? Why are *three* people named?

The letter identifies Paul, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy as the ones issuing the greeting (or salutation) of the letter. They were the ones who had traveled to Thessalonica on the Second Missionary Journey and established the church there, so it is reasonable to assume that all three would send greetings through the letter back to the church. However, it is most likely that Paul himself was the author of the letter, with the others simply being included by him in the salutation for the above reason.

- (c) Approximately *when* was this letter written? From *where*? What *compelled* it to be written?

The letter was probably written in the Fall of 50AD from Corinth; that date is determined by following the timing of the events in the book of Acts involving the conversion of Paul, his time in Tarsus, and the dating of his First and Second Missionary Journeys. Given that Paul was in Corinth for about 18 months from early in 50AD into 51, this letter was probably written, then, near the beginning of that time. The reason for the letter was Paul's concern about the Thessalonians after he had been "forced" to leave the city when persecution against the Christians first broke out (and Jason was arrested); he wanted to know if they had continued in the faith. After dispatching Timothy back to Macedonia from Corinth, and then getting Timothy's report on his return, Paul immediately dispatched these letters to reassure them in the various questions and problems that had arisen in the church during his absence.

- (d) Numbering Paul's letters in the N.T. from the first written to last written, in which *position* does this letter fall? Is there any *significance* to that position?

It is without doubt that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians first of all his letters; it was written shortly after the completion of the First Missionary Journey when Paul returned to Antioch and discovered that certain "Judaizers" had infiltrated those churches to persuade the new Gentile believers to conform to Jewish laws to be counted as Christians. This would prompt Paul to want to return to them and correct this error, which he did at the beginning of his Second Missionary Journey (albeit with Silas, not Barnabas). However, after the Macedonian Call, and his subsequent trip to Athens and Corinth, the next letter for Paul would be this one, the letters to the Thessalonians. Thus 1 Thessalonians is probably Paul's *second* letter, while 2 Thessalonians is the *third* of the thirteen (or fourteen?) that we have in our New Testament.

2. (a) Read Acts 17:1-9. Give a brief *synopsis* of the events at Thessalonica recorded there.

Paul and his team arrive in Thessalonica after having traveled through the towns of Amphipolis and Apollonia without making any converts. Paul preaches for three Sabbaths in the synagogue, and a number of converts are made. However, other Jews become jealous of Paul's "success" in the city and, unable to find him or Silas, arrest Jason, their host, accusing them all of treason against Caesar. When the whole city erupts, some members of the church secretly bid Paul and Silas to leave, which they do.

(b) From those same verses, what was the *substance* of Paul's preaching to the Jews? What was he trying to *prove* to them? *Why* would he take this approach?

Because Paul was preaching *to Jews*, he used an argument before them that would appeal to their Jewish understanding: given that the Christ (i.e., the Messiah) was to suffer, die, *and be raised again* (a fact he gleaned from the Old Testament prophecies, which the typical Jew *should have recognized*), Paul argues that Jesus (i.e., the one who had died *and was raised*) was the Christ they had been looking for. In the simplest sense, Paul's preaching was to persuade Jewish minds to "see" the truths of Scripture that they had been overlooking, and to connect those truths to Jesus of Nazareth, thus causing them to believe that Jesus was (indeed) Yahweh in flesh *and* the Messiah of Israel.

(c) Compare Acts 17:4 with Acts 18:4-6. What is the *difference* of the response in Thessalonica to the one Paul received in Corinth? How *long* did Paul wind up staying in Corinth?

In both cases, Paul went immediately to the synagogues of each city to try and convince the Jews of the nature of Jesus as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. In Thessalonica, that preaching did produce some converts. But, in Corinth it does not appear that it did. Instead, the Corinthian Jews rejected his message, so Paul left the synagogue, stayed in the city, and preached primarily to Gentiles instead. With no overt persecution of him (because there was no significant outbreak of conversions), Paul was allowed to remain in the city and preach, which he did for 18 months.

3. (a) Compare the opening words of 1 Thessalonians to the other letters of Paul in the New Testament. In which other ones does Paul write *alone*, and in which does he include *others*? Do you see a *pattern*?

1 Thessalonians (like 2 Thessalonians) starts with a greeting from Paul, Silas, and Timothy; other letters with Timothy as a co-greeter include only Colossians, Philippians and Philemon. All of the others (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus) name Paul alone as the author. One could argue the presence of a pattern: the letters including Timothy in the greeting are written in specific situations where Timothy would be an important personality for Paul to use in demonstrating his *affection* for the audience in question. In Colossians, Philippians and Thessalonians, for example, Paul wanted to assure these churches that he cared for them greatly, and Timothy would "personify" that affection (i.e., as Paul loved Timothy, so Paul loved the church). The same could be argued for Philemon: Paul wanted Philemon to act towards the slave Onesimus out of brotherly love, and Timothy's inclusion would show that to Philemon. Additionally, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon were Paul's "prison epistles," where Paul was imprisoned in Rome with Timothy ministering to him; the inclusion of Timothy would signal Timothy's care, which would be relevant to them.

(b) What is the definition of the term "*church*," as Paul would understand it concerning them?

Church, or *ecclesia* in the original language, meant "called out ones" or "gathered ones," those who have been called out of the world together in Christ by the Spirit of God through faith in the message of the gospel. The converts in Thessalonica now formed a church, a common group of people who were gathered for the purpose of worship, instruction, fellowship, and ministry under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Paul understands that *everyone* who has been converted to true faith in Christ now belongs to the Church (i.e., in a universal sense) and the local incarnation of that body wherever they call home.

4. (a) Why does Paul *attribute* the church at Thessalonica to both “*God the Father*” and “*the Lord Jesus Christ*?” How were each of those members of the Trinity *involved* in its establishment?

Paul was highly *trinitarian* in his theology: he understood that the message of the gospel was a work of all three members of the Godhead. The Father is the one who decrees the salvation of an elect people, so the church at Thessalonica would be made up of those who were determined by God to be a part of it (i.e., unlike Amphipolis and Apollonia, where no converts were made, implying no decree of election had been established by the Father in that place at that time). And, of course, the Son (or, as Paul would put it “*the Lord Jesus Christ*”) was the one who came to accomplish the salvation decreed by the Father, so the church at Thessalonica was *his* body of believers. The Spirit (although unmentioned here) is the one who draws the elect *into* the body of Christ by faith and gathers them together, so the church at Thessalonica would be established by his direct work in time and space. Thus, the church is entirely a *trinitarian* work.

- (b) What does Paul *mean* for them in the greeting “*grace to you and peace*?”

Although this is a standard greeting for Paul, and consistent across most of his letters, it is not just a “cookie-cutter” greeting (e.g., like “hello”). Paul greets them with a prayer of both the grace of God and the peace of God to come upon them through their reading and understanding of his letter. Grace, the choice of God to act benevolently, would come upon them as God would work through Paul’s words to encourage and strengthen them in the faith. Peace, a true relationship with God without strife or wrath, would come upon them as God would continue to show his love towards them as Paul outlines what Christ has done on their behalf. In other words, the greeting is Paul’s prayer that God would continue to pour out his benevolence upon the church as they are instructed through the words of the letter.

5. Having heard the introduction, and read some of the book, what do you hope to *get out* of this study?

Although the answer to this question will certainly vary from person to person, the most *obvious* answer should be that the learner would see his faith and trust in Jesus grow *through* a deeper understanding of the relationship of Christ to his church. This should be particularly noticeable through a better understanding of the key theme: the promise of the imminent return of Christ and our responsibility in the meantime. In the simplest sense, the best outcome of such a study should be an increasing hope in the return of Christ coupled with a greater sense of urgency to do all that he has commanded before he does.