

Chapter Summary: 1 Thessalonians

The new believers in Thessalonica (a city in the northern part of Greece) needed both encouragement and guidance. Paul had brought them the Good News about Jesus, and they had joyfully embraced it. (This is described in the book of Acts.) But there were critical gaps in their understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus.

Some of the Thessalonians had stopped working for a living, probably based on the assumption that Jesus would return soon. Others were despondent because they were afraid that loved ones who had died before Jesus' return had missed their share in the Kingdom. Still others were anxious about all the details related to when and how Jesus would come back.

The believers also hadn't made a complete transition to their new way of living in Christ. Some in the community still indulged in sexual immorality and even adultery, and some were undermining Paul's authority by questioning his motives. Along with this, the Thessalonian believers were facing renewed persecution, tempting some to fall away from their faith.

The Thessalonian community still needed the teaching and leadership of someone like Paul, but he was no longer with them. As described in Acts, the Jewish leaders in Thessalonica reacted angrily when Paul brought the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles. They set events in motion that jeopardized the safety of Paul and Silas, making it impossible for them to stay in the city. Paul later sent his co-worker Timothy to find out how the believers were doing and to report back to him. It may have turned out for the best that Paul was forced to move on from Thessalonica, and from other cities too. The kind of opposition he faced in those cities forced him to find a new way to guide the communities he had started. Since he couldn't remain with them in person, he developed a pattern of teaching them through letters and messengers even as he started new communities of Jesus followers elsewhere. These letters were later gathered together and became a major portion of the New Testament. They have given God's people through the centuries an essential window for viewing and understanding the message and meaning of early Christianity.

Letters in Paul's day had a common form, typically consisting of three parts: an opening, a main body, and a closing.

- In the opening, writers would give their name, identify whom they were writing to, and offer a good wish or prayer for the recipients, expressing gratitude for the relationship.
- In the main body, they would introduce and deal with various items of business.
- In the closing, they would often name and vouch for the person delivering the letter, who would likely read it aloud to the recipients. Then the writers would extend personal greetings and pass along greetings from others. They might also say when they hoped to see the recipients next, and then they end with a final good wish.

Paul makes masterful use of this ancient letter-writing form. He often uses the standard opening and closing elements to summarize the letter's main themes.

This first letter to the Thessalonian believers, the earliest letter we have from Paul, provides the guidance and support they will need to continue following Jesus with maturity and courage. With his opening words, Paul rejoices in their eager reception of the Good News and acknowledges the suffering they are experiencing because of their faith in Jesus. Then, just before his final greetings, he efficiently summarizes his responses to the challenges the Thessalonian believers are facing. He tells them to work hard, live peacefully, and care well for others.

In the midst of this letter, Paul focuses on the great vision of Jesus' glorious return as King and our great hope of the resurrection of the dead. This vision and hope will sustain the Thessalonians as they seek to live renewed lives that are pleasing to God.