

1 Thessalonians 1:1  
Additional Reading Acts 17:1-15

Introduction to 1 Thessalonians

Before a detailed study of a Bible book, it is helpful to look into its background, to find out when and why it was written. So we begin in the Acts of the Apostles, on the second of Paul's three missionary journeys. Something momentous has happened – the Gospel has reached Europe. Hitherto, as far as records go, it had only been preached in Palestine, Syria and "Turkey". But while Paul was in Troas, he received the vision of the man of Macedonia asking him to come over and help them. He sailed to Samothrace, and arrived in Philippi (c.f. Lydia and Philippian jailer, Acts 16), and then went south-west to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It probably had 200,000 people living in it, very large for an ancient city. It was on the important route from the East to Rome. It had a good harbour, it was a good place for trade, and therefore there were a good number of Jews to be found there. The name Thessalonica is actually a lady's name, she was the wife of Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's generals. He founded the city in the fourth century B.C., and named it after his wife.

Today it still survives as Thessaloniki or Salonika. It is the second most important city in Greece today. Many other New Testament towns are in ruins today – Ephesus and Laodicea, or are now important towns containing ruins of ancient city, like Thyatira and Philadelphia.

Paul goes to Thessalonica

On Paul's arrival, he spoke on three Sabbaths for the Jews in the synagogue. As a good teacher, he began where they were. From the Old Testament prophets he showed that they were fulfilled in Christ. Many people were converted. Some prominent women were among the converted. The Jews started a riot. Jason was accused of harbouring the missionaries, and his house was attacked, and he was brought before the civic leaders.

Paul described Christians as those who have turned the world upside down. He said there was another king – called Jesus. This was a challenge to the Roman Emperor. The Christians sent Paul and Silas away to Berea at night, smuggled under the cover of darkness. In Berea there were more fair-minded people, who received the Word readily and examined the Scriptures and tested the Apostle's teaching by them. A church was gathered. But troublemakers from Thessalonica arrived, and Paul hurried away south to Athens, where Timothy and Silas later joined him, at Paul's request.

Timothy was later sent back to Thessalonica to see how the church was getting on, and reported back to Paul, who had now moved on to Corinth. The result was Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, in about 51A.D. (because Gallio was proconsul of Achaia at the time Paul was in Corinth).

This was the first letter Paul ever wrote, unless it was Galatians, therefore the first New Testament book to be written (Many of the epistles were written before the gospels).

### Paul writes to the Thessalonians

Paul had to write to the Thessalonians. Those young Christians were getting on well, they were zealous and growing, but needed teaching and advice in the face of trials and persecution. Christian moral standards needed to be reinforced. There were tensions in the fellowship. They were worried about what would happen to Church members who died before the second coming. Also Paul needed to write because he was facing criticism about his work and motives.

There is value in studying this letter because of the wonderful insight it gives into a newly established church in the first century. We learn how it came into being, what Paul taught the church, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it spread the Gospel. It is also remarkably up-to-date. The teaching about new Christians, the moral standards expected of them, how to live together in a church fellowship, how to spread the Gospel, what is going to happen when Christ returns – is all relevant to us today.

Later Paul wrote a second letter to the Thessalonians to give further encouragement because they were facing persecution. He dealt with further difficulties about understanding the second coming. Also some of the church members had given up working, and Paul needed to speak very severely to them.

This first letter has a lot to say to the local church – what are we here for? Why did God establish the church? How should we behave to one another? What kind of lives should we live before the world? What should be our attitude to the Word? How should we treat our leaders? And how should they minister to and care for us? What should their attitude be to us? C.f. Paul's example in all this.

### The text of 1 Thessalonians 1:1

Paul's letters are like ordinary letters of the ancient world in their layout – starting with the writer, then the reader, then a greeting, and a wish for the reader's welfare. The letter comes from Paul, Silas and Timothy (the young man who joined the missionaries at Lystra, whose mother was a Jewess believer, and father was a Greek). The readers were the church at Thessalonica, the "called out" ones, (ἐκκλησία) called out from darkness, the world and sin, to belong to the Lord.

They are described as **the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. The Greek *ἐν* governs both terms – two equal persons of the Trinity (the Holy Spirit is mentioned in v.6). Here in Paul's very first, or at least very early, epistle the equality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is taught. The Son gets His full title here "Lord Jesus Christ". The word "Lord" *κύριος* is used for Yahweh the God of Israel in the LXX manuscript, hence He is as fully divine as the Father, they are one and the same essence, and as our Lord He should be the object of our worship. The name "Jesus" means the one who saves. Salvation is through the Son of God. He alone is Saviour. The word "Christ" is Greek for Messiah, the anointed one. He fulfilled the prophecy about the coming Messiah.

We are “in” God the Father and Lord Jesus Christ – a very rich and deep statement. Not just “founded on”, or “belonging to”, or “created by”. These are all true, but this statement means more than this. C.f. Jesus as the Vine, we are the branches (John 15). We are in Him, as branches are in the vine. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul says we are in Christ, as limbs are in a body, in the closest possible union. We dwell in Him, and He dwells in us. We share the same life and nature. Just as the sap flows into the branch from the trunk, so Christ’s life flows into us. We are rooted in God and Christ, living in them, drawing life from them.

Every church and every member has two addresses, two homes, two environments: “in God”, and “in the world”. This statement would have encouraged the new church. They were new, insecure, persecuted, under pressure, only a few months before they had been grovelling before idols. But Paul stresses their security is in God. Here is life, strength and security.

Here is the source of our security. Rooted in God, with His life flowing into us. Here is the secret of Christian life, the reality that Christ is within. We have His life, power, love peace, joy, as we yield ourselves and come under His control. We must keep looking to Him, depending totally on Him, in order to enjoy that life, where He manifests Himself in us and through us.

This takes away the anxiety of life, and makes us adequate. No matter where He places us. In the easiest position He gives grace, in the hardest place, His grace is sufficient. If in great perplexity, He gives much guidance, if in trial He gives much strength. His resources are ours. The secret – in total self-despair, we rest on Christ.

### Grace and Peace

Finally Paul wishes these Christians grace and peace. There is no greater blessing. Grace is God’s totally undeserved favour and support, not only at the beginning but throughout the Christian life. Peace is not merely no conflict, but knowing the fullest of spiritual healing and harmony. We cannot have peace without grace. Grace is the fountain, peace is the stream. Brownlow North of Edinburgh said, “You want peace, but you do not humble yourself to take grace. They are like the engine and the train. The engine goes first, then the train follows behind. Only when you know grace will you enjoy peace.”