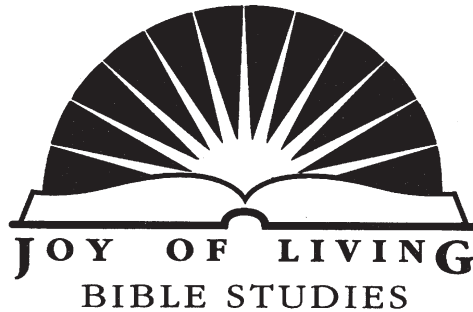


1 Thessalonians

Lesson 1



Paul, The Author

The apostle Paul, the author of this letter to the church in Thessalonica, is known as the great apostle to the Gentiles. His Hebrew name was Saul, and in the Book of Acts he was called Saul until Acts 13:9, which says, "Then Saul, who was also called Paul..." From then on in Scripture he is always called Paul, the Greek form of his name. Paul, a Jew, was a Roman citizen from birth, so he probably bore both names from an early age. The apostle always referred to himself as Paul in his letters.¹

Paul was born near the beginning of the first century A.D., in the busy Greco-Roman city of Tarsus, located at the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea. There he learned his first language, Greek, was taught a trade, and received his early schooling. Growing up in a Gentile city may have helped him bridge the gap between Gentiles and Jews after his conversion to Christianity. However, he was never ashamed to acknowledge himself a Jew (see Acts 21:39) and was proud of his Jewish background (see 2 Corinthians 11:22). He was the son of a Pharisee (see Acts 23:6) and was raised as an orthodox Jew. He was trained in Jerusalem under the famous rabbi Gamaliel (see Acts 22:3).

When Paul first appears in the book of Acts he is called a "young man" (Acts 7:58), and he was already an acknowledged leader in Judaism. He was intensely opposed to Christianity, and actively persecuted the followers of Jesus Christ (see Acts 26:10-11). He was convinced that Christians were heretics and that the honor of the Lord God demanded their extermination.

Paul's Conversion

The story of God's divine intervention in Paul's life is told in Acts chapter 9. Paul was on his way to Damascus, planning to arrest any Christians he found there and take them back to Jerusalem as prisoners. A light from heaven flashed around Paul, temporarily blinding him, and Jesus audibly spoke to him from heaven. Paul at once realized

how wrong he was, and surrendered to Jesus' call. From that time on he served Jesus Christ and the church with all his heart.

Paul first became involved in ministry to the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria. The church in Jerusalem had sent Barnabas to Antioch to help lead the growing church there. Barnabas brought Paul to work with him in Antioch, and for a whole year they met with and taught the church there (see Acts 11:19-26). The work of Gentile foreign missions was begun by the Antioch church under the direction of the Holy Spirit when they sent Barnabas and Paul off on their first missionary journey in about 48 A.D. (see Acts 13:1-3).

Paul's Visit to Thessalonica

The apostle Paul, accompanied by Timothy and Silas, visited Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, traveling there after a tumultuous visit to Philippi (see Acts 16:12-40). Perhaps you might like to trace Paul's steps on the map on page 45.

Thessalonica is known today as Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, and the capital of the Greek region of Macedonia. Cassander, king of Macedon, founded Thessalonica in 315 B.C. naming it after his wife, the sister of Alexander the Great. After the fall of the kingdom of Macedon in 168 B.C., Thessalonica became a city of the Roman Republic. It grew to be an important trade-hub located on the Via Egnatia, a Roman road that connected Byzantium (later Constantinople), with Dyrrhachium (now Durrës in Albania), facilitating trade between Europe and Asia.² We see the providence of God in the arrival of Christianity in Thessalonica! If Christians were settled in Thessalonica, their witness was bound to spread both eastward and westward.

In the short time he was in Thessalonica, Paul created a great stir (see Acts 17:1-10). He began by preaching in the Jewish synagogue each Sabbath, teaching that Jesus was the crucified and risen Messiah. Some of the Jews believed, as did many God-fearing Gentiles and prominent women who had been regular worshippers at the synagogue. But the unbelieving Jews caused a riot, attacking the house where the three missionaries were staying. Though Paul, Silas and Timothy were not present, the mob dragged the owner of the house and some of the other believers before the city authorities, accusing Paul and his companions of causing "trouble all over the world" (Acts 17:6).

1. Much of the material about the apostle Paul in this and the following paragraphs was taken from:

J.D. Douglas, revising editor. Merrill C. Tenney, general editor. *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987. "Paul." 756-761.

David Noel Freedman, editor. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. "Paul." 1016-1020.

2. "Thessaloniki." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 2 Apr 2007, 10:17 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 5 Apr 2007 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Thessaloniki&oldid=119688189>>.

On account of this great uproar, the Thessalonian believers sent Paul and Silas southwest to the city of Berea (see Acts 17:10). Since Timothy is not mentioned, it is possible that he stayed in Thessalonica or went back to Philippi and then rejoined Paul and Silas in Berea. More riots occurred in Berea, so Paul temporarily separated from Timothy and Silas, moving on to Athens, where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him, and then to Corinth.

Although he spent only three weeks in Thessalonica, Paul not only founded a church there but also grounded it firmly in the faith. It was an unusual thing even in the ministry of Paul that this flourishing church should be established in less than a month! Henrietta Mears noted, "Paul's success in Thessalonica has not been the usual experience of missionaries among the heathen. Carey [William Carey, 1761-1834, British missionary and author] in India, Judson [Adoniram Judson, 1788-1850, American pioneer missionary] in Burma, Morrison [Robert Morrison, 1782-1834, British pioneer missionary] in China, Moffat [Robert Moffat, 1795-1883, Scottish missionary, translator and father-in-law to David Livingstone] in Africa each waited seven years for his first convert. But here, the Holy Spirit allowed Paul to reap a sudden harvest."¹

Paul wanted to revisit the church in Thessalonica, but found it impossible: "For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan stopped us" (1 Thessalonians 2:18).² However, Paul did send Timothy to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonian believers in their faith. Timothy returned to Paul in Corinth with good news about their faith and love (see 1 Thessalonians 3:1-6).

Paul's Letter

After hearing Timothy's report, Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians. Timothy had discovered that there were some issues to be addressed. The Thessalonian Christians were concerned about the delay in the Lord's return. They were worried about friends who had died and feared that they would not have any part in the glory of the Lord's coming. Some of them were so overwhelmed by the truth of Christ's expected return that they had given up their jobs. They also suffered severe persecution, and were pressured to conform to the sexually promiscuous practices common in their day. Paul wrote this letter to address these things and to encourage these new converts. One of the earliest letters Paul wrote, 1 Thessalonians was probably written during the latter part of Paul's stay in Corinth around A.D. 50-51.

The major problem of the church in Thessalonica was that they misunderstood the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, so this was a major focus of Paul's letter. It is mentioned in the closing of every chapter: "To wait for his Son from heaven" (1 Thessalonians 1:10); "In the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes" (1 Thessalonians

2:19); "When our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones" (1 Thessalonians 3:13); "Caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17); "May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Throughout history Christians have held many views about when and how Christ will return. But, as Henrietta Mears wrote, "There should be nothing doubtful or divisive about this 'blessed hope' [see Titus 2:13] of our Lord's return. No one can read the Word without finding the teaching. Let us not quarrel with one another about so sweet a message as our Lord's, 'I will come again' [see John 14:3]. This is the Christian's hope. Let us rather be watchful, for we know not the day nor the hour when the Son of man comes (see Matthew 25:13)."³

1. Henrietta C. Mears. *What the Bible Is All About* (Ventura: Regal, 1997) 542.

2. Satan has been defeated by Jesus Christ's death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. But until Jesus returns to earth to bring about the final victory, Satan is still the prince of this world and is working against God's people.

3. *What the Bible Is All About*, p543.

Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☛ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☛ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☛ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☛ Answer the “Challenge” questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☛ Share your answers to the “Personal” questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians or from your teacher’s lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, or post it in a prominent place. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its “address” (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read 1 Thessalonians 1, concentrating on verses 1-2.

1. Who sent greetings to the Thessalonian Christians? (1 Thessalonians 1:1a)

2. Challenge: What do you learn about Silas in the following verses? Summarize briefly.
Acts 15:1-2, 22

Acts 15:36-40

3. a. Read 1 Timothy 1:2a. What does Paul call Timothy? What do you believe he meant by this?

b. Personal: Have you ever introduced anyone to the Lord Jesus Christ, so that you are able to say, “My true son in the faith,” or “My true daughter in the faith”? If not, would you like to pray now and ask God to provide opportunities to do this? Read Romans 3:23; 6:23; and 10:9-10, which will help you know what to say.

4. a. What blessing did Paul give to the Thessalonians? (1 Thessalonians 1:1b)

b. Challenge: Look up the meaning of the words “grace” and “peace” in a dictionary.

5. What did Paul, Silas and Timothy always do for the Thessalonian believers? (1 Thessalonians 1:2)

6. Personal: Do you pray regularly for other believers? Do you encourage them by telling them that you pray regularly for them? Perhaps this would be a good time to begin a prayer notebook, listing people for whom you want to pray regularly.

Third Day: Review 1 Thessalonians 1, concentrating on verses 3-4.

1. What did Paul, Silas and Timothy remember about the Thessalonian Christians as they prayed for them? (1 Thessalonians 1:3)
2. What does Paul say allowed the Thessalonians to exhibit these qualities? (1 Thessalonians 1:3)
3. Challenge: Read James 2:14-26. How does James show that true faith leads to actions that please God?
4. What does Paul know about the Thessalonian believers? (1 Thessalonians 1:4)
5. How does Ephesians 1:4-5 express this same fact about all believers?
6. Personal: God loves you and wants you to be His child by adoption through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Have you responded to His love and believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior?

Fourth Day: Review 1 Thessalonians 1, concentrating on verses 5-6.

1. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5 Paul refers to "our gospel." What do you learn in the following verses about the gospel Paul and his companions preached?
Romans 1:16-17

Galatians 1:11-12

2 Timothy 2:8
2. How did God use the words and lives of Paul and his companions to bring the Thessalonians to faith in Him? (1 Thessalonians 1:5)

3. Challenge: What did Paul say in the following verses about his preaching? Did he take the credit for leading so many to belief in Jesus Christ?

1 Corinthians 1:17-18

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

4. a. How did the Thessalonian believers learn to live as Christians? (1 Thessalonians 1:6a)
- b. Personal: If you are a Christian, is there a believer that you have imitated as you learned to walk with the Lord? Do you think there are believers that might be imitating you?
5. a. What did the Thessalonians have to endure as a result of becoming Christians, and how did they respond? (1 Thessalonians 1:6b)
- b. Challenge: Read Acts 17:1-10. What example is given of the suffering the Thessalonian believers experienced? Summarize briefly.
6. Personal: Have you experienced suffering because you have followed Jesus Christ? Have you also experienced “the joy given by the Holy Spirit” in spite of your suffering? If you would like to, share with your discussion group to encourage others.

Fifth Day: Review 1 Thessalonians 1, concentrating on verses 7-8a.

1. Where had the Thessalonian Christians shared their faith? (1 Thessalonians 1:7)
2. Challenge: Locate Macedonia and Achaia, the two Roman provinces into which Greece was divided, on the map on page 45. Find Thessalonica, which was a city in Macedonia.
3. Every believer is to be a model for other believers. What do you learn about this in the following verses?
- 1 Timothy 4:12b
- Titus 2:6-7a
- 1 Peter 5:2-3
4. What was the result of the Thessalonians' modeling of true Christian faith? (1 Thessalonians 1:8a)

5. Personal: If you are a believer, do you realize that you are a model to others? They will judge the truth of Christ's message by your life and words. Does this seem too heavy a responsibility to you? If you are willing to depend on the Holy Spirit who lives within you, He will produce fruit in your life that will allow the Lord's message to ring out to everyone around you. Read Galatians 5:22-25. How does this encourage and challenge you to live by the Spirit?

Sixth Day: Review 1 Thessalonians 1, concentrating on verses 8b-10.

1. What evidence in the lives of the Thessalonians showed that they had become Christians? (1 Thessalonians 1:8b-9)

Acts 14:15 (Paul and Barnabas are speaking to the crowd in Lystra who wanted to offer sacrifices to them)

Acts 20:21 (Paul is speaking to the elders of Ephesus)

Acts 26:17-18 (Jesus is speaking to Saul—who later was called Paul—on the road to Damascus)
3. Whose return were the Thessalonians waiting for? (1 Thessalonians 1:10)

4. Challenge: What do you learn in the following verses about the coming return of Jesus Christ?
John 14:1-3

Acts 1:9-11

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17
5. Jesus, through His death on the cross, paid for the sin of every believer and rescues us from “the coming wrath” of God against sin. What do you learn about God's coming wrath and Jesus' rescue of believers in the following verses?
John 3:36

Romans 1:18

Colossians 3:5-6
6. Personal: In Paul's day, the Gentiles worshipped physical idols. Today in our culture most people do not bow down to physical idols, but are just as lost in bondage to “worthless things.” Have you turned away from darkness to light, from worthless things to the true and living God? Do you look forward with joy to the return of Jesus Christ, or are you still in fear of God's judgment of your sin? Why not pray about this now?