

Gospel Doctrine

Lesson: 1 Thessalonians

Reading: Acts 15:36-18:22; 1 and 2 Thessalonians

[PDF version of the lesson notes.](#)

I. Introduction

I am starting to sound like a broken record, but today's lesson really does cover a lot of material. Consequently, I am going to narrow my focus to 1 Thessalonians. This letter is, I think, particularly important in light of the fact that it is probably the oldest extant Christian document. I think Philip Esler, in the *New Jerome bible Commentary* does a nice job of explaining the importance of 1 Thessalonians:

It is widely agreed that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest extant Christian text, a precious document which brilliantly illumines one segment of the Christ-movement less than twenty years after the death of Jesus.[1]

Authorship: Paul is the author of this epistle, and scholars almost universally affirm the Pauline authorship of the letter.[2] Of course, the letter is actually coauthored by Paul, Silas, and Timothy (with Paul as the lead and primary author).

Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. -- 1 Th 1:1

Still, I think it is hard to argue that these aren't Paul's thoughts.

Date Written: Most scholars believe the letter was written in 50 or 51 CE.[3] As I mentioned before this dating implies that not only is it probably the first surviving letter[4] written by Paul but it is also the first surviving Christian document. It likely predates all the gospels. It give us our earliest glimpse into the Christian community and the messages and doctrines they emphasized and found particularly valuable.

The Audience: The church at Thessalonica. The city was a port city in what is now the Northern part of Greece. "At the time of Paul, Thessalonica was important for economic, commercial, and political reasons. Because of its harbor and its location on the Egnatian Way, the main Roman road across the Balkans, Thessalonica had become a thriving commercial center." [5] Paul and Timothy have clearly visited and taught the fledgling community before. This letters follows Timothy's report to Paul.

II. Outline and Structure of 1 Thessalonians

I. Salutation (1:1)

II. Thanksgiving (1:2-3:13)

A. Thanksgiving Introduction (1:2-10)

B. Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica (2:1-16)

a. The Divine Basis for the Initial Visit (2:1-4)

b. Their Behavior and Example (2:5-12)

c. The Response of the Thessalonians (2:13-16)

C. The Present Situation (2:17-3:13)

a. Paul's Desire to Visit (2:17-20)

b. Timothy's Mission (3:1-5)

c. Thankful Receipt of Timothy's Report (3:6-10)

d. Prayer for the Thessalonians (3:11-13)

III. Living a Life Pleasing to God (4:1-12))

A. Keeping Traditions (4:1-2)

B. Purity (4:3-8)

C. Brotherly Love (4:3-8)

IV. The Lord's Coming (4:13-5:11)

A. The Circumstances of this Coming (4:13-18)

B. The Need for Wakefulness (5:1-11)

V. Final Exhortations and Greetings (5:12-28)

A. Honoring Leaders (5:12-13)

B. Christian Identity-indicators (5:14-22)

C. Prayer for the Thessalonians (5:23-24)

D. Closing Prayer and Instructions (5:25-28)

- Note from the outline we can observe many typical parts of Hellenistic letters. For example, the letter begins with a salutation and thanksgiving.
- What parts stuck out or resonated with you when you read the epistle?
- Does anything about the letter surprise you? Are you surprised by the structure or maybe some of the things Paul focuses on?
- What about the tone of letter? How would you describe the tone?
- As I read the letter I was really impressed with the tone of the letter. It just seemed deeply personal. The thanksgiving (which is quite long since it takes up basically the first three chapters) is very touching. It seems very heartfelt. Maybe most importantly, I was struck by a sense that they were in things together (Paul and the church at Thessalonica). That Paul, Silas, and Timothy were part of the community. Not interested observers, but part of the community. You get a real sense of the longing Paul has to be with the community (his community). They are brothers and sisters in a very real sense. Did you see these same elements when you read the letter? If so, do you think this expresses or implies a lesson or important principle? Does this tell us something about our Christian

Community? Leadership?

III. The Prescript (Salutation)

- Read 1 Th 1:1:

(1) Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- What does Paul emphasize in the prescript? Why is it important?
- Do you think it is important that Paul doesn't mention or describe himself as an apostle in the prescript (note, he does seem to mention his apostleship and the apostleship of Timothy and Silas in 2:6-7)?
- Do you think it is important that the letter is addressed to a group and no person or people are expressly named or singled out?

III. Thanksgiving Introduction

Read 1 Th 1:2-10:

(2) We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; (3) Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; (4) Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. (5) For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. (6) And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: (7) So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. (8) For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. (9) For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; (10) And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.

- It is traditional for a Hellenistic letter to have a Thanksgiving. However, some scholars point to differences or uniqueness related to Paul's thanksgiving.[7] If you had to guess, what feature or features are unique?
- What is the role of prayer in this pericope? What does Paul commemorate in his prayers? What do you think Paul is most grateful for?

- Do these verses give a sense about what Paul believes is at the core of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ? Do these verses indicate or hint at how Paul thinks someone gets converted to the gospel?
- Do you get a sense for Paul's affection for the community in this section?
- Is it fair to say that Paul's missionary success in Thessalonica was very important to him and early Christianity? Is it related to why Paul uses the phrase "election of God?" Is Thessalonica important because it was a "beachhead" into Greece for Paul and early Christianity?[8]
- What is meant by the phrase "election of God?" Do you think verses 5-10 give important clues about how Paul uses and what Paul means by election in the present context? Do you think the Old Testament is in the background for the use of this word?
- What do you think it means when in verse 5 it says that the gospel came by power and not just by word?

(5) For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.

- Does verse 9 imply that the community was at least in part comprised of Gentiles? Why is verse 9 an important verse? Do you think the Old Testament is an important backdrop for this verse as well?
- What idols were they people likely serving before their conversion? Do you think the Roman Emperor is implicitly part of the conversation with respect to idols?
- What does the designation "Lord Jesus" mean in this context?
- The conversion experience for this community was associated with both suffering and joy. Should we view the conversion experience as connected to both of those things in general? Why or why not?

IV. Behavior

Read 1 Th 2:1-8:

1 For yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain:
 2 But even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention. 3 For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile: 4 But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. 5 For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke

of covetousness; God is witness: 6 Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ. 7 But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: 8 So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us.

- What do you make of Paul's rhetoric in these verses? Are you surprised? Does it sound like he is bragging?
- Why do you think that Paul emphasizes his behavior when he was with the community? How would you describe his behavior?
- What do you make of the phrase, "But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children?"
- NT Wright provides the following background for these verses:[9]

The ancient world had its fair share of wandering salesman, traveling teachers, people who tried to make a living by offering their hearers fresh wisdom or insight, some kind of magic, a new philosophy, or whatever. When Paul and his companions arrived in a city and began to tell their strange story, many people must have thought that's the sort of people they were. They knowing ones in the crowd would be waiting for the moment when the speakers produced a money-bag and requested contributions, or invited people to pay to hear more in private. The cynical ones among them would be waiting for darker events still: for the speakers to single out for special 'instruction' those (of either sex) who were physically attractive. At the very least, it would be expected that newly arrived teachers would want to make a good name for themselves, to be well known and well liked around town.

- Even if the preceding is an important backdrop, why would Paul explicitly talk about how he and his fellow missionaries acted? Why remind his readers of these facts?
- Why did Paul emphasize his own suffering before he came and preached in Thessalonica? Why does it emphasize to his readers? Does it remind the reader that Paul isn't in this for the wrong reasons? Would Paul even go further? Does Paul see his suffering as evidence of the truth of his message?
- How does Paul invoke God in these versions? What does he emphasize about God? How was God related or involved in Paul's actions?

V. Climax of the Greeting?

Read 1 Th 2:17-20:

17 But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. 18 Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us. 19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? 20 For ye are our glory and joy. -KJV

17 As for us, my dear family, we were snatched away from you for a short time, in person though not in heart. We longed eagerly, with a great desire, to see you face to face. 18 That's why we wanted to come to you . I, Paul, again and again . but the satan got in our way. 19 Don't you see? When our Lord Jesus is present once more, what is my hope, my joy, the crown of my boasting before him? It's you! 20 Yes: you are our glory and our joy. -NT Wright

- What is Paul's argument in these verses? How are these verses connected to the previous parts of Paul's greeting? Should we view these verses as the climax of the greeting?
- Do these verses help make sense of why Paul uses the following metaphors in verses 2:7-8 and verse 2:11:

7 But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children:
8 So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. 2:7-8

As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children, 2:11

- Do these verses help make sense of why Paul mentions his behavior? Why it almost sounds like he is boasting at the beginning of chapter 2?
- I am always impressed with the degree to which Paul's arguments are connected. He brings the greeting together in a remarkable way in these verses. His rhetoric has led up to this point: Paul feels like a father who has had his children stripped away from him. This reminds his readers dramatically of at least two important things. First, it makes clear his love for them, and second it reminds the community of why they desperately need to listen and follow Paul's instruction.

VI. Timothy's Report

Read 1 Th 3:6-10:

(6) But now when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you: (7) Therefore, brethren, we were

comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith: (8) For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord. (9) For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; (10) Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?

- Is there anything surprising about Paul's discussion of the report? What do you make of verses 8-9? What do those verses tell us about Paul?
- Why was the report's good tidings? What does Paul emphasize?
- In the first chapter, Paul emphasizes faith, hope, and love (charity) Do you think it is noteworthy or important that in verse 6 Paul doesn't mention hope? Do you think the missing use of hope is related to verse 10? Do you think it helps explain Paul's exhortation in 4:9-14?

(9) But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. (10) And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; (11) And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; (12) That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing. (13) But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. (14) For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.

VII. Prayer

Read 1 Th 3:11-13:

(11) Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. (12) And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: (13) To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

- Do you think it is fair to describe these verses as a prayer? Do you think you can pray in a letter?
- What do we learn about Paul from the prayer? What do we learn about the church in Thessalonica?
- Do you think that verse 13 implies that Paul and the church at Thessalonica believe that the coming or return of Jesus Christ would be soon (within their lifetime)?

- Paul speaks of holiness in verse 13? What do you think he means by holiness given the context of verse 13 and the rest of the letter?
- Specifically, what is meant by blameless in holiness? Does this mean to be blameless and holy? Are they roughly equivalent? Something else? Why is "blameless in holiness" a critical or the critical attribute?
- Philip Essler points out that the opposite of holiness is, "impurity", which is the "label for the filthy world of idolatry and immorality which they have left behind." [10] How does this affect your understanding of "blameless in holiness?"
- Does this theme of holiness help us understand the content of chapter 4? What parts of chapter 4 address this theme of holiness? How do they help us understand what Paul means by holiness and blameless in holiness?

Endnotes

1. Barton, John, and John Muddiman (Editors), 2001, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1199.
2. Brown, Raymond E. (editor), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (editor), and Roland E. Murphy (editor), 1990, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 773.
3. Brown, Raymond E. (editor), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (editor), and Roland E. Murphy (editor), 1990, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 773.
4. Some conservative scholars have argued that Galatians is earlier than 1 Thessalonians. The proposed date range for Galatians is about 49-55 CE (See F.F Bruce in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*). Another example; G.N. Stanton in the Oxford Bible Commentary argues for a range between 49-58. I think the identification of 1 Thessalonians as the first Pauline epistle reflects this broader hypothesized date range and that many scholars believe (given the range) that the probability that Galatians is written post 51 is pretty high.
5. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, 772.
6. Adapted from Barton, John, and John Muddiman (Editors), 2001, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1202.
7. Brown, Raymond E. (editor), Joseph A. Fitzmyer (editor), and Roland E. Murphy (editor), 1990, *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, Prentice Hall, 774.
8. Wright, NT, Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians.
9. Wright, NT, Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians.

10. Adapted from Barton, John, and John Muddiman (Editors), 2001, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1206.