

Study 1: Introduction to 1st Thessalonians

Introduction

Background to the City of Thessalonica

Background to the church at Thessalonica

Date and Occasion of the letter

Paul's association with the church

Brief outline of the letter

Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read all of the first letter in a single sitting.
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Work through the introduction and conclusion, and identify the key themes.

Notes for Study 1: Introduction to 1st Thessalonians

Introduction

Imagine that you are the apostle Paul. You have established a church after staying for only a few weeks (probably about 12 weeks), and are then forced to leave through circumstances beyond your control. Your host family has been arrested for treason. You still have much to teach the new christians, and they have many questions for which they are still seeking answers.

It is in precisely this context that the first letter to the Thessalonians was written. Paul had travelled on to Athens, and then Corinth, and writes the letter out of concern for the brethren. To study a letter written to a specific church, we need to understand the local culture into which it was written. Timothy and Silas had come later and brought the long awaited news from Thessalonica. This is the first letter (that we have) that Paul wrote.

Background to the City of Thessalonica

Thessalonica was on the Egnatian Way, the Roman road that lead from Rome to Constantinople (then called Byzantium, and now Istanbul). With a sheltered harbour, it was the capital and a seaport for the second district and the whole Roman Province of Macedonia. However, unlike Philippi it was not a Roman Colony. Today, the modern city of Saloniki is built on the site.

It was founded by Cassander, who took control of Greece after Alexander's death in 332BC, and named it after his wife, a half sister of Alexander the Great.

The first century writer Strabo describes Thessalonica as the most populous town in Macedonia. Other writers describe it as the metropolis of Macedonia and a place of great magnitude. Prolific coinage suggests a high level of prosperity. The population included a large Roman element and a Jewish colony, with some estimates of a population of 200,000 at the time of Paul's visit.

Thessalonica was a "free city" (free from direct influence of Rome in the affairs of the city) being ruled over by a group of magistrates called "politarchs". This designation was peculiar to the magistrates of Macedonian cities. There are several inscriptions found in the city, which use this terminology. Luke uses precisely this description of them in Acts 17:6.

Background to the church at Thessalonica

On the second journey, Paul and Silas and Timothy are heading towards Ephesus, however the Holy Spirit forbids them to go there (Acts 16:6-7). Luke joins them in Troas, and they go to Philippi and establish the church. Paul and Silas are thrown into prison, and the jailer is converted (Acts 16:16-40). After finding that they are Romans, the magistrates ask them to leave the city.

Luke stays behind in Philippi, and Paul, Silas and Timothy travel to Thessalonica. Here a synagogue provides Paul the opportunity to teach the Jews, "...*Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures...*" (Acts 17:2 NKJV). Some of the Jews, and a large number of the Greek proselytes were converted.

However, the Jews reacted by stirring up a rent-a-mob and accusing Paul of treason. They raided the house of Paul's host (Jason) looking for Paul, and when they couldn't find him, took Jason into custody. The accusation that they made was that Paul was stirring up trouble by teaching that there is another King apart from Caesar (ie treason) in the person of Jesus (Acts 17:5-7).

Paul Silas and Timothy are sent away out of the city by night, and go to Berea, where they get a much fairer hearing (Acts 17:11). However, Paul is forced to leave there after the Jews from Thessalonica came down and stirred up the people, but Silas and Timothy remain (Acts 17:14).

Whilst the Acts narrative describes *the three sabbath days* that Paul taught in the Synagogue, his stay in the city was much longer than that, since the church at Philippi sent money to him for

support on several occasions (Php 4:15-16). The period in Thessalonica was probably more like 3 months, as during that period, Paul also worked with his own hands to support himself (2:3:7-9).

The make up of the church is therefore Jewish, Greek proselytes, as well as Gentiles. The culture of the city is Macedonian, under Roman influence but not Roman control.

Date and Occasion of the letter

Occasion

After leaving Thessalonica, Paul, Silas and Timothy travel to Berea, and then Paul goes on to Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea for a while. Whilst in Athens, Timothy came and Paul sends him straight back to Thessalonica to find out how the brethren are doing (1:3:1-2). Silas and Timothy come back to Paul at Corinth, and report the news from Macedonia – especially Thessalonica (Acts 18:5).

Upon Timothy's arrival in Corinth, Paul writes the first letter, and sends Timothy straight back with it to Thessalonica. Upon his return with some questions raised by the brethren, Paul immediately writes the second letter.

Both letters were therefore written almost together, during Paul's stay in Corinth on the second journey, and are therefore the oldest letters (that we have or know about) of Paul's writings, and probably the oldest writings that make up the New Testament.

Date

Paul was in Corinth from 52 to 53 AD, covering a period of 18 months. Both letters were probably written early in the period, making the date most likely late 52 AD.

Paul's association with the church

After establishing the church in Thessalonica, Paul and his co-workers had been forced to leave due to circumstances beyond their control. The brethren were "babes in Christ" and Paul is concerned for their welfare.

In other cities, he was able to leave behind one of his co-workers to assist them becoming established in the faith (Luke stayed behind in Philippi, and he left Silas and Timothy in Berea). Perhaps one (or more) of these workers were able to travel to Thessalonica on occasions to help the brethren – although that might seem unlikely. Silas and Timothy were forced to leave Thessalonica with Paul because they were falsely accused of treason. To come back (especially so soon) would result in a threat of death.

Paul had a very strong knowledge and relationship with the brethren. He knew them, and had probably personally baptised some of them. The letter has the flavour of a *friendship letter*, but not the same kind of *contractual friendship* that Paul had with the Philippians (see notes on the introduction to Philippians for a further discussion on that relationship).

Brief outline of the letter

This outline of the letter is adapted from Fee & Stewart¹

1:1:1	Salutation
1:1:2-1:1:10	Thanksgiving for their conversion
1:2:1-12	Recalling Paul's Ministry
1:2:13 - 16	Thanksgiving – and Thessalonians suffering – renewed
1:2:17 – 1:3:10	Paul, the Thessalonians, and Timothy
1:3:11 -13	Prayer report
1:4:1- 1-8	Sexual purity
1:4:9 – 12	Love, and working with one's own hands
1:4:13-18	The future of christians who have died

¹ Fee, Gordon & Stewart, Douglas: "How to Read the Bible Book by Book" ISBN0-310-21118-2; p.367

- 1:5:1- 11 The coming of Christ
- 1:5:12 - 22 Concluding exhortations
- 1:5:1-58 The resurrection
- 1:5:23 -28 Concluding prayer and greetings



The Via Egnatia – The Egnatian Way was a road built by the Romans. It was well paved, and gently graded, allowing easy travel between Rome and Byzantium. Thessalonica was a major city on this road.



The Agora – the Greek marketplace in Thessalonica was discovered after the bus station was demolished in 1982. Because the new city of Saloniki has been built on top of the old city, very little excavation has been undertaken.



This Roman arch is from the 3rd Century AD, so it would **NOT** have been passed through by Paul. It stands at the eastern entrance to the city.

As an exercise, circle or highlight the key thoughts from the introduction, and also those from the conclusion, and then link them together. Make a list – with special attention to those that appear in both places. *(Quoted from NIV)*

^{1TH 1:1} Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

^{1TH 1:2} We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. ³ We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

^{1TH 1:4} For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you 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--Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

^{1TH 5:12} Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. ^{1TH 5:16} Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

^{1TH 5:19} Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil.

^{1TH 5:23} May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

^{1TH 5:25} Brothers, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

^{1TH 5:28} The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.