

## **Book of 1 Thessalonians**

### **Author and Date:**

The Apostle Paul identified himself twice as the author of this letter (1:1; 2:18).

Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy (3:2, 6), These were Paul's traveling companions on the second missionary journey when the church was founded (Acts 17:1-9), and were also mentioned in Paul's greeting (1:1).

Though Paul was the single inspired author, most of the first person plural pronouns (we, us, our), refer to all 3.

However, during Timothy's visit back to Thessalonica, they refer only to Paul and Silvanus (see 3:1-2, 6).

Paul commonly only used such editorial plurals because the letters came with the full support of his companions.

Paul's authorship has not been questioned until recently by radical critics.

Their attempts to undermine Pauline authorship have failed in light of the combined weight of evidence favoring Paul such as:

- (1) The direct assertions of Paul's authorship (1:1; 2:18);
- (2) The letters perfect correlation with Paul's travels in (Acts 16-18);
- (3) The multitude of intimate details regarding Paul; and
- (4) The confirmation by multiple, early historical verifications starting with Marcion's canon (in A.D. 140).

The first of Paul's two letters that were written from Corinth to the church at Thessalonica is dated (ca. A.D. 51).

This date has been archeologically verified by an inscription in the temple of Apollos at Delphi (which was near Corinth), that dates Gallio's service as proconsul in Achaia to (A.D. 51-52; see Acts 18:12-17).

Since Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia was probably written in (ca. A.D. 49-50), this was his second piece of canonical correspondence.

“Time of Writing”:

Since this epistle was certainly written during Paul's long stay at Corinth (Acts 18:5; 1 Thess. 3:6), the date can easily be fixed.

An inscription discovered at Delphi (dated from the summer of A.D. 52), refers to the proconsulate of Gallio, a position held for only two years.

Paul arrived at Corinth before Gallio assumed this position, perhaps a year earlier.

Thus, the time of the writing of 1 Thessalonians must have been the (summer or fall of A.D. 51).

### **Background – Setting:**

Thessalonica (modern Salonica), lies near the ancient site of Therma on the Thermaic Gulf at the northern reaches of the Aegean Sea.

This city became the capital of Macedonia (ca. 168 B.C.), and enjoyed the status of a “free city” which was ruled by its own citizenry (Acts 27:6), under the Roman Empire.

Because it was located on the main east-west highway, Via Egnatia, Thessalonica served as the hub of political and commercial activity in Macedonia, and became known as “the mother of all Macedonia”.

The population in Paul’s day reached 200,000 people.

Paul had originally traveled 100 miles from Philippi via Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey (A.D. 50; Acts 16:1 – 18:22).

As his custom was upon arrival, he sought out the synagogue in which to teach the local Jews the gospel (Acts 17:1-2).

On that occasion, he dialogued with them from the Old Testament, that concerning Christ’s death and resurrection in order to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was truly the promised Messiah (see Acts 17:2-3).

Some Jews believed and soon after, Hellenistic proselytes and some wealthy women of the community also were converted (Acts 17:4).

Mentioned among these new believers were Jason (Acts 17:5), Gaius (Acts 19:29), Aristarchus (Acts 20:4), and Secundus (Acts 20:4).

Because of their effective ministry, the Jews had Paul’s team evicted from the city (Acts 17:5-9), so they went south to evangelize Berea (Acts 17:10).

There Paul had a similar experience to Thessalonica with conversions followed by hostility, so the believers sent Paul away.

He headed for Athens, while Silvanus and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:11-14).

They rejoined Paul in Athens (compare Acts 17:15-16 with 3:1), from which Timothy was later dispatched back to Thessalonica (3:2).

Apparently, Silas afterwards traveled from Athens to Philippi while Paul journeyed on along to Corinth (Acts 18:1).

It was after Timothy and Silvanus had rejoined Paul in Corinth (see Acts 18:5), that he had written 1 Thessalonians in response to Timothy's good report of the church.

Paul undoubtedly had multiple reasons for writing, all coming out of this supreme concern for the flock from which he had been separated.

Some of Paul's purposes clearly included:

- (1) Encouraging the church (1:2-10);
- (2) Answering false allegations (2:1-12);
- (3) Comforting the persecuted flock (2:13-16);
- (4) Expressing his joy in their faith (2:17 – 3:13);
- (5) Reminding them of the importance of moral purity (4:1-8);
- (6) Condemning the sluggard lifestyle (4:9-12);
- (7) Correcting a wrong understanding of prophetic events (4:13 – 5:11);
- (8) Defusing tensions within the flock (5:12-15); and
- (9) Exhorting the flock in the basics of Christian living (5:16-22).

### **Historical – Theological Themes:**

Both letters to Thessalonica have been referred to as “the eschatological epistles”.

However, considering their more extensive focus upon the church, they would better be categorized as the church epistles.

Five major themes are woven together in 1 Thessalonians:

- (1) An apologetic theme with the historical correlation between (Acts and 1 Thessalonians);
- (2) An ecclesiastical theme with the portrayal of a healthy, growing church;

- (3) A pastoral theme with the example of shepherding activities and altitudes;
- (4) an eschatological theme with the focus on future events as the church's hope; and
- (5) A missionary theme with the emphasis on gospel proclamation and church planting.

First and second Thessalonians comprise some of the earliest New Testament writings.

The first epistle was penned at Corinth by the apostle Paul in response to Timothy's report on the progress of the church they had recently established there (3:1-6).

Paul, along with Silas and Timothy, founded the church at Thessalonica on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-14).

The apostle had been drawn to this important Roman port after seeing a vision in which a Macedonian man was calling for help (Acts 16:9).

"The City".

Thessalonica (Salonika today), had been named (in 315 B.C.), by Cassander after his wife, Alexander the Great's half-sister.

Under the Romans the city, famous for its hot springs, had burgeoned to a population of over 200,000 people.

It was situated strategically on the Via Egnatia, the main Roman highway from east to west.

Its sheltered harbor made an ideal naval station.

The city was a natural center for traffic moving in all directions.

In Paul's day, it was the capital of Macedonia.

Although the provincial governor was headquartered there, he did not exercise any authority over the city of Thessalonica.

As a free city, it was ruled by politarchs and enjoyed political autonomy.

As a military and commercial center, Thessalonica became famous for its wealth as well as its vice, attracting a strange mixture of Roman high society and pagan sensuality (Acts 17:4; 1 Thess. 4:1-8).

It also attracted merchants from other parts of the empire, including numerous Jews (Acts 17:4).

The nucleus of the church was formed from this group of Jews, although (1 Thessalonians 1:9), indicates that the Apostle to the Gentiles had his greatest success among the non-Jewish peoples of the city (Acts 17:4).

“The Church”.

In Europe Paul and his companions had gone first to Philippi (Acts 16:12), where they established a church and were miraculously delivered from the jail.

Leaving Philippi, they traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica.

Going first to the Jewish synagogue, Paul there won his first converts, and met also his most serious opposition.

His ministry in the city lasted less than a month.

During that time he worked as a tentmaker, not wishing to burden the fledgling assembly with his needs, and spent the balance of his time at the home of Jason, organizing the new believers into a church.

But almost immediately the Jews brought Paul before the politarchs and had him expelled from the city.

He went on to Berea, meeting great initial success, but was again opposed by the Thessalonian Jews who dogged his trail and incited the people to riot against him.

Paul barely escaped with his life, traveling to Athens where his message was received with very little enthusiasm.

From Athens Paul dispatched Timothy to check on the situation in the Thessalonian church (3:2).

“Occasion and Purpose”.

After all this persecution and rejection of the gospel, Paul came to Corinth (Acts 18:1), “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3).

When Silas and Timothy returned bearing good news about the Macedonian churches, Paul was greatly encouraged and pressed forward with his work (Acts 18:4-5).

But the Thessalonians were also reportedly having difficulties.

Gentiles, and especially Jews, were impugning Paul’s sincerity, defaming him as a wandering charlatan who had deceived them.

The church was also somewhat confused about the second coming of Christ.

Some members worried about believers who had died before His return.

Others considered it unnecessary to continue working, since Christ would return at any time.

Still others were sinking back into the immorality of the culture.

There was also a crisis in the leadership; many of the rank-and-file apparently were being offended by certain tactless elders.

These and other minor difficulties occasioned Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.