

First Thessalonians

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is probably the first letter he wrote that we still have today in our Scriptures. If that is true, it is the first book to be written of the 27 books in the New Testament and the oldest Christian writing that we have today. Paul wrote this first letter to the Thessalonians around 50 AD, only about 18 years after Jesus died and rose again.

Writer: The Apostle Paul, along with Silas and Timothy

Date of writing: Around 50 AD.

Original Audience: Followers of Jesus in the city of Thessalonica. Thessalonica is now called Thessaloniki and is in modern-day Greece.

The Reason for the Letter: In Acts 17:1-9, we learn that Paul and Silas traveled to the city of Thessalonica. They began sharing the Good News about Jesus in the Jewish house of worship called the Synagogue. Paul and Silas proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah God promised to send in the Old Testament scriptures. Acts 17:4 says, "some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women." However, some other Jewish people started to cause trouble and started a riot, saying that Paul and Silas were "defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." So, Paul and Silas had to leave the city and go to another place. Sometime later, Paul's co-worker, Timothy, returned to Thessalonica to see how the church was doing. He returned to Paul and reported good news about the believers (3:6-10). Paul is now writing the believers in Thessalonica to encourage them to continue following Jesus and grow in maturity and holiness.



The Main Message of the Letter: In Paul's short letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul starts by praising God and commending the Thessalonians for their faithfulness to Christ Jesus. Paul is delighted that although he had to leave the Thessalonians before he desired, he was hearing reports that the church there is standing strong and remaining faithful. Paul says that people in the surrounding area talked about the Thessalonians church, saying, "They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1:9). Because the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living God, they were now facing persecution from their own people (2:14).

In the middle of the letter, Paul prays for the Thessalonians, saying, "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and everyone else, just as ours does for you."

May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (3:11–13). Paul encourages them to respond to persecution by loving others, being holy, and eagerly awaiting the coming of our Lord Jesus. Paul begins the second half of the letter by saying, “As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living” (4:1). Paul continues to teach and encourage the believers to live holy lives for Jesus. Finally, Paul teaches about what happens to believers who die before Jesus returns and what it will be like when Jesus comes. He closes the letter with final instructions for the Thessalonian church and tells them to “rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:16–18).

Outline of First Thessalonians:

1. Greetings and thanksgiving (1:1–10)
2. Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica (2:1–16)
3. Paul’s desire to return to Thessalonica (2:17–3:13)
4. The call to purity and holiness (4:1–12)
5. Teaching about the Jesus’ return (4:13–5:11)
6. Encouragement to the congregation and final greetings (5:12–28)

Working for a Living

Paul urges the Thessalonian believers to work with their hands and be dependent on no one (4:11–12). Paul and Silas set this example when they stayed in Thessalonica by working to provide for their own needs (2:9). Unfortunately, there seem to have been some people who didn’t want to work in the Thessalonian community (5:14). In another letter Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 3:6–13), this matter will come up again.

At the end of Paul’s letter, he says, “I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters” (5:27). Paul intended for his letter to be read to all the brothers and sisters in Christ to instruct them about God and how we as God’s followers should live our lives. Read or listen to the whole letter from beginning to end. Then go back and read the six sections in the outline above and discuss the following questions:

1. What do you learn about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?
2. What do you learn about people?
3. What do these verses say about honor and shame?
4. What do we need to do after reading these verses?
5. Who can I share this letter with?

Honor and Shame

As you read through this letter to the Thessalonians, you may begin to understand that the Thessalonians were experiencing shame, and Paul was writing to encourage and honor them. The believers were experiencing persecution and shame by society because they followed Jesus. Throughout the letter, Paul reminds them that even if they are not honored by society, they are honored by God. Paul says the believers were chosen by God (1:4) and that the Gospel came to them not only by words but with power (1:5). They are also honored by other churches who have heard about their faith during suffering. Paul says the Thessalonians are a “model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (1:7). He also tells them to “encourage one another and build each other up” (5:11).