

# The Epistle of I Thessalonians

## The Book of Christ's Return

The Apostle Paul ministered in the city of Thessalonica for about a month on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:2). Souls were won to Christ and a church was established. This was a model church (1:7), a testimony to the whole area that we would call Greece today.

As in all his epistles, Paul writes like a concerned parent. In a spiritual sense, he was the father of thousands of God's children. Every person who trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior as a result of his ministry was like the birth of a baby. Every church established was like a church nursery filled with the joy and challenges of new life. Example: Paul referred to Timothy as "my own son in the faith" (I Timothy 1:2).

Paul continued his missionary journeys, not stopping very long in one place, with few exceptions. But his concern for the young churches established along the way never wavered. His heart ached to be with his spiritual children, to see to their spiritual nourishment and to protect them from the enemies of the Gospel of Grace. Both of Paul's epistles are filled with expressions of Paul's heart for his spiritual children.

### I. The Author

Paul identifies himself as the author of the epistle (I Thessalonians 1:1; 2:18). His companions and geographical movements correspond to His second missionary journey as recorded in Acts 16-18 (2:2; 3:1, 6). The character (personality) of Paul is clearly demonstrated:

- A. His concern for the converts (3:1-2) especially his desire for their spiritual good (3:8-11).
- B. His tenderness (2:7).
- C. His joy reflected when he hears from Timothy concerning the growth of converts (3:6-7).
- D. His understanding and sympathy when they were in need (4:13-18).

Add to this the fact that the typical Pauline style is clearly evident in his opening salutation, blessing, prayer of thanksgiving, major section on doctrine and practice, personal greeting to end the letter and the distinctive Pauline words and phrases [e.g. faith, love, hope (1:3; 5:8) and the use of the word "always"].

### II. The City

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was founded in 315 BC by Cassander, King of Macedon. It became the second largest city in Macedonia (Philippi being the first) and was the site of a major Roman naval base. It was also a key seaport for the agricultural plains of the region. It was situated on the northernmost point of the Thermaic Gulf, a short distance east of the mouth of the Axios River, on Rome's greatest highway, making it a great commercial center with the Orient. Earlier, the town was named *Therma*, probably because of the warm mineral springs, which still exist in the vicinity today.

When Paul arrived in the city, it had a population of more than 200,000, which was very large for that time. The Jewish population of the city was both large and influential. As could be expected, Paul and his missionary team were driven out of the area by the Jewish opposition. The city still stands today although its name has been changed to Salonika. Mount Olympus, the fabled home of the Greek gods, is on the southwestern horizon.

### III. The Church

Paul's physical condition when he arrived in Thessalonica must have been pathetic as he had come from Philippi where he was "shamefully entreated" (2:2). The trip alone was roughly four days journey (100 miles). His back was probably still lacerated when he entered the city and yet in just four short weeks he organized a marvelous church. Note the events of that ministry:

1. He preached first in the synagogues of the Jews (Acts 17:1-2).
2. He reasoned with them from the Scriptures (Acts 17:2). It has been said that in just less than four weeks, the listeners received a seminary course in *doctrine*.
3. He preached Christ: His suffering, death, and resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:3).

4. The results were incredible. Immediately these converts began to turn their world upside down for Jesus Christ (Acts 17:4-6). There were some Jewish converts, but most of the converts were Gentiles and a church was formed.
5. The strict Jews were enraged by this activity and they engineered a mob to hinder the ministry. The opposition became so great that the new Christians had to smuggle the three missionaries out of the city under the cover of night.
6. Paul then went to Berea where many Jews and Greek proselytes believed. When the Thessalonian Jews heard of this, they came and stirred up the people there against him, which caused him to flee to Athens. From Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to strengthen the faith of the new believers there and to get a report on the church. Timothy brought back a marvelous report of how the church was thriving in spite of great persecution (3:1-9). The saints there longed to see and be taught by Paul again.
7. Paul was thrilled and wrote the first epistle to commend them for their faith and explain his absence. This letter was written from Corinth in the summer of 51 AD.

#### IV. The Purpose

1. To commend them for their Christian walk under persecution (1:1-10).
2. To encourage and strengthen the new believers in the things of Christ.
3. To answer false accusations made about him and his ministry (2:1-12).
4. To explain why he sent Timothy to them (3:1-13).
5. To warn them against involvement in the immoral practices of their pagan culture (4:1-8).
6. To condemn the sluggard lifestyle (4:9-12).
7. To clarify the doctrines of last things, especially relating to death and resurrection for those who were unduly anxious about loved ones who had passed away. He emphasized Christ's coming and the *Day of the Lord*. He wanted them to understand that this was a time of wrath and judgment, to which the people of God were not appointed.

#### V. Keys to Understanding I Thessalonians

1. There are 5 chapters, 89 verses and 1,857 words in the King James Translation.
2. Key Words
  - A. Wait (1:10)
  - B. Coming (2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23)
3. Key Verses
  - A. I Thessalonians 2:13 – ***For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because when ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.***
  - B. I Thessalonians 1:9-10 – ***For they themselves show 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; and to wait for His Son from heaven, Whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.***
  - C. I Thessalonians 4:14 – ***For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.***
4. Key Chapter – Chapter 4
5. Key Doctrine Emphasized – The Second Coming of Christ (1:3, 10; 2:2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:23).
6. Key Characters in I Thessalonians
  - A. Paul – An Apostle of Jesus Christ, founder of the Church at Thessalonica and author of the epistle.
  - B. Timothy – Paul's associate who visited the Thessalonian believers and attested to their faithfulness.
  - C. Silas – Traveled with Paul as a missionary (1:1).

## VI. Epistle Outline

- I. Paul's Commendation of the Church (1:1-10)
  1. Its Character (1:1-3)
  2. Its Example (1:4-7)
  3. Its Reputation (1:8-10)
- II. Paul's Conduct among the Church (2:1-12)
  1. His Motive (2:1-6)
  2. His Method (2:7-12)
  3. His Message (2:13-20)
- III. Paul's Care for the Church (3:1-13)
  1. His Concern (3:1-5)
  2. His Prayer (3:6-13)
- IV. Paul's Charge to the Church (4:1 – 5:28)
  1. Walk in Purity (4:1-8)
  2. Walk in Love (4:9-12)
  3. Walk in Hope (4:13 – 18).
  4. Walk in Knowledge (5:1-11)
  5. Walk in Service (5:12-28)

## VII. Observations in I Thessalonians

1. Terms Defined
  - A. **Day of the Lord:** A period of judgement starting at the Tribulation and continuing through the Millennial Kingdom (emphasis on the time of Tribulation).
  - B. **Rapture:** The word does not occur in the text, but it is described in I Thessalonians 4:16-17. It comes from the Latin word for *caught up*. The rapture is the *great catching up* of believers from the earth to meet the Lord in the air just prior to the Tribulation.
  - C. **Sanctification:** The coming of Christ is significant motivation to holy living (4:3, 4; 5:23). In the process of striving toward holiness, the believer becomes more and more like His Savior, Jesus Christ. Every believer should strive towards this goal (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 5:1; Philippians 2:5), even though he will not fully and finally achieve it until he stands before the Lord in glory (I John 3:2).
2. An outline based on one of the key words – **Wait**.
  - Chapter 1 - Wait Worshiping
  - Chapter 2 - Wait Witnessing
  - Chapter 3 - Wait Working (3)
  - Chapter 4 – Wait Walking
  - Chapter 5 – Wait Watching
3. The exaltation of the Deity and Lordship of Christ is most evident in this epistle.
  - A. **Lord** Jesus Christ (1:1, 3; 2:19; 3:11, 13; 5:9, 23, 28).
  - B. **Lord** Jesus (2:15; 4:1,2).
  - C. **Lord** (1:6, 8, 12; 4:6, 15, 16, 17; 5:2, 12, 27).
4. God's Character in I Thessalonians
  - A. **Faithful** – (5:24)
  - B. **Wrathful** (1:10; 2:16)
5. **Practical Exhortations** in I Thessalonians 5:11-27 (Responsibility of Believers).
  - A. Comfort (encourage) one another (11)
  - B. Edify one another (11)
  - C. Know or understand them that teach you the Word (12)

- D. Esteem the preacher and teacher (13)
- E. Be at peace with one another (13)
- F. Warn the unruly (14)
- G. Comfort the faint-hearted (14)
- H. Support the weak (14)
- I. Be patient with all men (14)
- J. No fighting among yourselves (15)
- K. Follow good (15)
- L. Rejoice always (16)
- M. Pray without ceasing (17). Practice God's presence in your lives.
- N. Give thanks in all things (18)
- O. Quench (stifle) not the Spirit (19)
- P. Despise not the Word (20)
- Q. Prove or test all things (21)
- R. Hold fast to that which is good (21)
- S. Abstain from all appearance of evil (22)
- T. Pray for us, one another, them that labor (25)
- U. Greet one another with a holy kiss (26). We shake hands today but in that day, a kiss was a symbol of welcome to the Jew.

## 6. Spirit, Soul and Body

I Thessalonians 5:23 is the only place in the New Testament where a person's make-up is divided into three parts. The indication is that no part of a person's make-up should be exempt from total consecration to God.

- A. Body – The physical entity separate from soul and spirit through which the inner person expresses himself and by which he is recognized.
- B. Spirit – That part of man that enables him to contact (communicate with God) and be regenerated by the Holy Spirit – the highest and most unique part of man.
- C. Soul – This designation speaks of a person's personality or essence, that part of man that makes him conscious of himself.