

I Thessalonians – Introductory Notes

The Church’s planting in Thessalonica:

After receiving a vision of a man calling Paul to come to Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10), he immediately focused his attention in that direction. After a brief stint in Philippi they moved onto Thessalonica passing through Amphipolis and Appollonia (Acts 17:1).

Thessalonica has a long history; hot springs in the area gave the name Therma to a city nearby. In 315BC Cassander¹ built and named a city nearby Therma, Thessalonica, after his wife who was half sister of Alexander the Great. In time, Thessalonica became increasingly prosperous and swallowed up the older city (Therma).

When the Romans defeated the Greeks, they ultimately made Thessalonica the capital of the newly reorganized province.

The city was an economic powerhouse with a population of about 200,000 people; this was by far the largest city in Macedonia.

During the Roman Civil wars, the city sided with Octavian and was rewarded by being made a free city. Its leaders were then called politarchs (Acts 17:6, 8).

Date:

It is widely accepted that this letter was written when Paul was in Corinth at about AD 50-52; several months later II Thessalonians was written. It is believed that only the book of Galatians was written prior to this letter, thus making it one of the earliest Christian writings we have.

Occasion for the Letter:

Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians due to his excitement over what God was doing in their midst. After leaving Thessalonica he went to Berea, Athens, and Corinth. He was constantly being hounded by Jews who had rejected Christ and saw the gospel that Paul proclaimed as threatening to Judaism.

At some point in time when Paul was in Athens, he sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the church in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2). Paul went onto Corinth after having slight success in Athens. He arrived in Corinth a discouraged man, as he would later write that he arrived with “fear and much trembling” (I Cor 2:3).

¹ When Antipater died in 319BC, Cassander managed to wrest the throne from his successor and to establish his connection to the royal family by marrying Thessaloniki, the daughter of Phillip II and half sister of Alexander the Great.

Not long after this experience, Silas and Timothy came back from Macedonia (where Thessalonica is located), with the good news of the converts there. They told Paul that despite the difficulties, the new converts were still standing firm in the faith (I Thess. 3:6-9). This excitement affected Paul's ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:5). The letter foremost expresses Paul's joy and concern for the Christian converts in Thessalonica.

Although progress had been reported to Paul, concerns had popped up as well that Paul addresses in this letter.

There was constant attack by the Jews of the community, they attacked Paul's motives. They claimed that he really didn't love them (otherwise, why didn't he come back), and he was only interested in their money (profit motive) (I Thess. 2:2-6; 2:17-3:5).

Philosophers, teachers, and preachers at the time were wandering from one city to another who took advantage of those that would listen to them; once the con was completed they would move to another city. Paul was being accused of the same thing. If the opposition was effective in attacking his motives then what Paul taught would go down along with his reputation.

Because of the importance of his message, Paul had to argue for the purity of his motives. He pointed out the fact that when he was there he didn't take handouts, he and his associates worked side-by-side with them supporting themselves.

Apart from the external trials from the locals (gentiles) and the Jews of the city, there were also some internal misunderstandings of Christ's return and this caused problems as well.

Some of the Thessalonians received some information that the return of Christ was imminent. However, as time passed some of them died, concerns were raised regarding their eternal status. Did this mean that the dead would miss the great day?

A further inference that was drawn due to the imminent return of Christ was that they saw no need to work. This caused some to be busybodies, gossipers, and lazy people who lived off the charity of others. The fullness of this tendency is seen clearly in II Thessalonians but it is discussed in the first letter as well (I Thess. 4:11-12). So, Paul had to deal with when Jesus was returning; it is very possible that some in the community may have been predicting dates (I Thess. 5:1-3).

Sexual immorality became an issue for the church, as the society in general was quite lenient regarding the lusts of the flesh. As Gentile converts came to Christ they were taught about holiness but the lure of the world became a formidable temptation (I Thess. 4:4-8).

It seems also that the laity of the church had turned against the leaders of the church on some level; it is impossible to determine how severe the problem was but Paul urged the “rank-and-file” to submit to the leadership (I Thess 5:13).

So, we see that Paul was addressing several different concerns in the Thessalonian Church. We will look at each of these in depth as we work through First and Second Thessalonians. We will examine how Paul addresses each of these concerns and apply these Scriptures as we address similar concerns in our own culture and church. But for the introduction, let’s just summarize:

1. Paul dealt with an attack on his motives.
 - a. Are the motives of Christians under attack today?
 - b. How should we respond?

2. Paul dealt with confusion about the return of Christ which led to laziness.
 - a. How do we experience this?
 - b. How should we respond?

3. Paul addressed Sexual immorality in the culture and in the church.
 - a. Is this an issue today?
 - b. How should we respond?

4. Paul addressed a lack of submission to church leaders
 - a. In what ways do we struggle with submission?
 - b. How should we respond?