

The New Testament Book 13

I Thessalonians

Thessalonica was on the northwest coast of the beautiful Aegean Sea, in the Roman Province of Macedonia (today, northern Greece); it was within sight of Mount Olympus, supposed home of the pagan gods of Greece. Its first known name was “Therma,” for the hot springs in the area; in 316 BC it was renamed in honor of Thessalonike, half-sister of Alexander the Great.

Thessalonica was the chief city of Roman Macedonia. It had a fine natural harbor, was on a well-watered plain, and, like Philippi, was on the Great Northern Military Highway, which connected the city of Rome with Roman Asia¹. Its location made it prosperous then, and still does; today it is a large city in northern Greece, and is called Saloniki.

The two letters to the church at Thessalonica were probably the earliest of Paul’s epistles; if so, then this would be his very first such letter. He had established this church on his second missionary journey; and he seems to have been there only a relatively short time--perhaps only three or four weeks--before severe persecution forced him to leave². He had been driven away by the local Jews, most of whom were hostile to his message, before he could fully instruct the church there; and the new Christians had many fundamental questions³. They were especially troubled about the state of those who had died, and how this would relate to the return of Christ.

Ancient inscriptions found there suggest that the Thessalonian pagans had no concept of life after death. This further suggests that the Jewish community there consisted of Sadducees; but this, of course, is merely speculation⁴.

Paul’s time invested in Thessalonica, however brief it may have been, plus his two letters to that church, and Timothy’s brief ministry there, paid huge

¹ Cicero, the great Roman historian, philosopher and political leader (my favorite Roman), wrote, "Thessalonica is in the bosom of the Empire."

² Acts 17:1-10 and I Thessalonians 2:17 suggest a brief stay at Thessalonica. Philippians 4:16 suggests that he may have stayed a little longer, for he was there long enough for the church at Philippi to send money to him twice. Most commentators believe that he was there only three or four weeks. The length of his stay there, however, remains uncertain (and relatively unimportant).

³ By contrast, Paul stayed in Ephesus for about three years, living and teaching there longer than with any of his other churches. It is not surprising then, that the church there was still the model church of Roman Asia at the end of the first Century (Rev 2:1-7). In his relatively brief stay at Thessalonica, compared with Ephesus, Paul had been able to teach the new Christians very little.

⁴ The Sadducees did not believe in spirits, angelic or otherwise, or in life after death. For more on the Sadducees, see “Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

dividends. The gospel spread from Thessalonica; and, until its capture by the Turks in 1430 AD, it was a stronghold of Eastern Christendom. The church at Thessalonica was largely responsible for carrying the gospel to the Slavonians (modern Croatia) and Bulgars (modern Bulgaria), earning it the title “The Orthodox City.” Today it has more remains of ancient and medieval Christendom than any other place in ancient Greece, although its cathedral is now a Muslim mosque⁵.

It is interesting that, in his few weeks at Thessalonica, Paul’s teaching emphasis was on end-time events and the Second Advent of Christ. It makes me wonder if this was the topic with which he began at all of his Gentile churches. In the Jewish synagogues, his leading topic seems always to have been the resurrected Jesus, and his credentials as the long-awaited Messiah.

From Thessalonica, Paul’s party had traveled west to Berea and ministered there; but hostile Jews from Thessalonica had followed him, and created trouble at Berea, again forcing Paul to leave. Paul had left Silas and Timothy to continue the work at Berea, and traveled on to Athens, 200 miles south. After preaching there, Paul sent for Silas and Timothy and, when they rejoined him at Athens, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, to check on things there, and to do some further teaching⁶. By the time Timothy returned, he found that Paul had gone from Athens to Corinth, and he followed Paul there.

In Corinth, Timothy reported that the Thessalonians had suffered persecution, but persevered; they were also confused about the meaning of death as it relates to the return of Christ. Some were idle--not working--apparently expecting the return of Christ at any moment, thus negating the need to work. This epistle, written from Corinth, is Paul’s response to Timothy’s report.

***NOTE:** In reading the Book of Revelation and related passages of Scripture, such as I Thessalonians 4:13-18, this matter of understanding the meaning of death, what becomes of the dead, and how it all relates to the return of the risen Christ, can be difficult for us today, even as it was for those new Christians at Thessalonica in the 1st Century. We of the Study Guide Team discovered this early in the work on Revelation, when questions were raised and there seemed to be no answers*

⁵ Schaff, Philip, History of the Christian Church, Volume I, p 755.

⁶ I Thessalonians 3:2.

. For a summary outline of these events, and how they probably relate to one another, and how they apply to the redeemed and the unredeemed, see "Death, Resurrection, Judgment, and Eternal Destinations; Keeping Our Bearings in the Book of Revelation" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

A. Author. There can be little doubt that the human author is Paul, as stated in the very first verse, and in 2:18. He includes Timothy and Silas ("Silvanus") in his salutation. Very early manuscripts, including Marcion's canon, the Muritorian canon, and the writings of Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria, ascribe the epistle to Paul.

B. Place and Date. This letter was written from Corinth, about 50-53 AD.

C. Occasion. It seems that, in the short time that Paul had been able to teach in Thessalonica, he had emphasized the good news of the resurrection and the return of Christ. From the text it seems that, since Paul had been driven away, some of the new Christians had died. Because of the belief of some there, that there is no life after death, the new believers thought that those who had died would have no benefit from the return of Christ, and they were very sad. To clarify this, and other doctrinal matters, this epistle was written.

D. Theme. The primary theme of I Thessalonians is the return of Christ (which is mentioned in all five chapters), and how it relates to the life and death of believers, including the classic, vitally important passage on life, death, and the Second Advent, in 4:13-18.

A secondary theme is the necessity for working and earning financial support. It seems, as already noted, that with their minds focused on the soon return of the Lord, some had ceased to work because they expected Him to appear at any moment.

E. Highlights. Highlights in I Thessalonians include the following:

1. The Gospel Preached "with Signs Following." (1:1-10)

After his usual salutation, this time including Silas (Sylvanus) and Timothy (Timotheus) in his greeting, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that, in the short time that he had been with them, he had preached the truth of the gospel. Not only that, he wrote, but he reminds them that the gospel he preached had been confirmed by the power of the Holy Spirit, in miracles performed among them⁷. Although the church there was not well taught, the people were on fire for the Lord because they had experienced the power of the Spirit (and, undoubtedly, still were experiencing that power). Their

⁷ Mark 16:19-20; Rom 15:17-19.

zeal for the gospel, and the news of what is happening among them, is already spreading throughout Macedonia (northern Greece) and Achaia (southern Greece). This has already brought persecution on them, and yet they are enduring it with joy⁸.

2. The Pure Approach to Ministry. (2:1-12)

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that when He, Silas, and Timothy had ministered among them, they were motivated by love, and that they not only gave the Thessalonians the wonderful Word of God, but also gave of themselves, with their caring and love. He reminds them that he and the others were humble and sincere, not seeking glory or the praises of men, and that, while they were with them they asked to be given nothing. Instead, they worked to provide for themselves, so that the Thessalonians received the pure Word of God, and it had cost them nothing⁹.

NOTE: Paul's description, in verses 1-12, of the way he, Silas and Timothy had selflessly ministered to the Thessalonians, does not describe what we see in some Christian leaders today. Too many seek recognition, glory and personal gain, and it must make the Great Shepherd sad; in some cases, I suspect, it makes Him furious. Those of us in pastoral, teaching, and evangelistic ministries today would be wise to keep these verses, and their message, before us as a guide and example for ourselves; for, someday, we will have to answer to the Great Shepherd for the way that we shared his gospel and related to his sheep.

3. Ye Are Our Glory and Joy. (2:13-20)

Paul notes that the Thessalonian Christians are being persecuted by their fellow countrymen, and have suffered for their faith, even as the churches in Judaea have suffered, being persecuted by the other Jews, the same people who had killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets. He understands this kind of persecution by their own people, because Paul and his party have experienced it, everywhere they go. He tells them that, many times he has longed to return to them, but was hindered by Satan. He closes this passage with reassurance that these things will not prevent them, or him, from being part of the rejoicing when the Lord returns. And, at that happy day, recognition and honors given by men will not be his wreath of victory; instead, his glory and joy will be the Thessalonian Christians themselves, the fruit of his ministry.

⁸ John 16:33; II Tim 3:12.

⁹ II Thessalonians 3:8. Paul and his party also received financial support from the church at Philippi during their brief time at Thessalonica, also making it possible for the ministry to cost the Thessalonians nothing (Phil 4:16).

***NOTE:** Verse 2:17 tells us that Paul had desired to re-visit the Thessalonian church, but that Satan had “hindered” him¹⁰. Satan could not absolutely prevent Paul from going back to Thessalonica; but he could make it difficult or inconvenient for him by deception and manipulation of people and circumstances. This is yet more evidence that Satan has a certain amount of supernatural power, but that it is limited. This fundamental fact of spiritual life is clearly illustrated in Job, Chaps 1 and 2.*

4. We Cannot Expect Trouble-Free Lives. (3:1-8)

Paul speaks of how he had longed to know how they were doing, his reason for sending Timothy back to see them after his apparently abbreviated ministry among them. And he had not sent Timothy simply as a messenger, but so that he could also minister to the needs of the Thessalonians, teach them and comfort them in their afflictions. Paul had told them, before he was driven away, that they would be persecuted. And, he tells them, as Christians we “are appointed to” afflictions--that trouble and persecution are to be expected¹¹. And, he says, he and Silas are greatly comforted to know that the Thessalonians are not losing faith, but are overcoming the difficulties of their trials.

5. Paul’s Desire to Return to Thessalonica. (3:9-13)

Paul speaks of his gratitude to God for the joy he has in receiving the good news that Timothy has brought about them. He then expresses his prayer and hope that he may return to Thessalonica, to continue and fulfill the teaching there, and to disciple them, so that they will abound in love for God, for one another, and toward all men. His purpose in all this is that their hearts might be established in holiness when the Lord returns.

***NOTE:** It appears that Paul’s desire to return to Thessalonica was never fulfilled. He did travel again through Macedonia (northern Greece) on his 3rd missionary journey, but there is no mention of a return to Thessalonica in Acts 20. Since Luke was a very careful historian, whose goal was to record the story completely and accurately, it is unlikely that he would have failed to mention even a brief visit there by Paul and company¹². We cannot be certain, but it seems that Paul was only present with the Thessalonians during his brief ministry there, on his second missionary journey.*

6. An Exhortation to Holy Living and Hard Work. (4:1-12)

¹⁰ The Greek word rendered “hindered” here is *enokpto*, and it means literally to cut into, as in cutting up a road, or placing obstacles across it, to slow the progress of others.

¹¹ John 16:33; Phil 1:29; I Pet 3:17, 4:19.

¹² See in this regard “Luke the Historian” in the introductory material of the study guide to Luke, and Lk 1:1-4.

Continuing his emphasis on holiness in preparation for the Lord's return, Paul gets specific. He rebukes them (gently, it seems to me) for fornication, telling them that such a way of life is typical of Gentiles who know nothing of God and his will for us.

In verse 5 Paul uses the expression "the lust of concupiscence." In these four words a vitally important fundamental fact of life is expressed: it is that lust (sexual or otherwise) is always selfish. It is never about pleasing or helping someone else; it is always about pleasing or satisfying one's selfish desires. Concupiscence is derived from the Latin *cupere* "to desire"; the Latin prefix *con* adds the expression of "intensive force." A related word is "cupidity," meaning greed for money or other possessions; it is a decidedly negative word expressing selfishness. Those four words of Paul in verse 5 are worthy of our contemplation.

He also speaks of defrauding one another. He is not specific about this, but implies that it pertains to all misuse of one another, in terms of sexual matters or business transactions. And he lays particularly sobering emphasis on this matter by saying that the Lord is the One who will avenge such defrauding of one another. He urges them to abound in selfless brotherly love, and to live quietly and peacefully, working to support themselves, so as to set an example of honesty and godliness to those non-Christians around them, and to have all of the things that they need.

7. The Death of Christians and the Return of Christ. (4:13-18)

The last six verses of Chapter 4 constitute the classic summary of the meaning of death for Christians, as it relates to the return of Christ in the air, and the catching away of Christians, both the dead and the living, in the event that we have come to call "The Rapture."

Failure to understand this seems to have been the principal problem in the Thessalonian church, for they were expecting Christ to return so soon that many of them had stopped working, seeing no need of it. Paul sets about to make the matter clear for them; and, as a result, what a blessing this is for us! In the same way that misunderstandings about spiritual gifts in Corinth led to our having Paul's guidance and understanding concerning them, this problem at Thessalonica has led to our having a clear understanding of the matters of life, death, and the return of Christ.

He ends this classic passage by exhorting the Thessalonians to comfort one another by reminding one another of the truth just expressed. We should likewise use these verses to comfort other Christians who are dealing with the death of a loved one.

NOTE: *When my father died suddenly at age 76, I was a new Christian, having met the living Lord at age 40, after a lifetime in church. I was feeding on the Word voraciously, and taking it very literally. The final verse in this classic passage tells us to comfort one another with these words, so I sat my mother down and read them to her, to comfort her.*

She had an incisive, analytical mind and, after I finished, she told me that there was something contradictory in the passage. I asked what it was, and she pointed out that the passage says that those who have died will be brought back in the air with the Lord; and yet, it also says that the dead will rise up out of the grave to meet Him in the air. How, she asked, could both be true? I was stumped; I had failed to notice this apparent contradiction. It drove me into a careful study of the passage, and the related passages, such as I Corinthians 15:51-58.

The answer, as I now see it, is that when the Lord returns, it is the spirits of the redeemed dead who will return with him. The dead who rise up out of the grave to meet Him in the air will be the mortal, physical, remains of the redeemed; and, whatever physical material remains, becomes, on the way up, glorified bodies which are united with their spirits in the air.

We who are alive and remain will immediately follow the dead, and our imperfect bodies will become glorified bodies on the way up. This "catching away" of those of us who are alive when He comes, as previously mentioned, is commonly referred to in evangelical Christian circles as "The Rapture." The English word "rapture" is derived from the Latin verb "rapere," meaning "to snatch up" or "carry away." It is the same Latin word from which we derive the word "raptor," which we use to identify eagles, hawks and other predatory birds, which capture their prey with curved talons and snatch them into the air, to feed themselves and their young who are still in the nest¹³.

I hope this helps; and I am so glad that my mother, who has since joined my father in Heaven, pointed out my need to get my understanding of this passage straight.

8. As a Thief in the Night. (5:1-14)

Still dealing with end-time events, Paul makes it clear that when Christ returns there will be no warning¹⁴. Because of this, the Thessalonians

¹³ See also in this regard Matthew 24:29-41; I Cor 15:51-54; and Phil 3:20-21. For a more thorough attempt at sorting out the return of Christ in the air (the rapture), and his later return in the Second Advent as Christ the King and end-times Judge, see "Death, Resurrection, Judgment, and Eternal Destinations; Keeping our Bearings in the Book of Revelation" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

¹⁴ Acts 1:6-7.

should live godly lives, putting on their spiritual armor each day, encouraging one another, strengthening one another, so that, when the Lord does return, they will be ready for Him, whether He returns at night or in the day¹⁵. He also admonishes them to get to know their leaders, to acknowledge and appreciate them for the work they do. Likewise, he says, they should warn those believers among them who are unruly or contentious, comfort and assist those believers who are discouraged or feeble-minded, and to seek to be at peace with one another.

This passage contains a lot of specifics; but perhaps a valid summary of it would be to live each day as if you knew that it is the day of the return of Christ, or the last day of your life.

NOTE: The word “feeble-minded” in v 14 is the subject of disagreement among translators. The underlying Greek word is oligopsuchos, which literally means “small-souled” or “small-minded.” Most modern translators render the word “faint hearted.” It seems to me that both renderings can be valid; and the key is the context. We are to “comfort” such believers, i.e. those who are discouraged, or who have difficulty understanding what they are being taught about the faith and how we should live. We do not all learn with the same speed.

9. Eight Rules for Christian Living. (5:15-22)

Paul follows the discourse on being always ready for the return of Christ with a summary--we might say a list--of rules for this kind of living:

a. No Revenge. We are not to render evil for evil, seeking to get revenge when we are wronged. This rule for living is repeated throughout the Bible, from Deuteronomy to Hebrews, so it must be something strongly on God's mind¹⁶.

b. Rejoice Evermore. We are to be joyful always, remembering the unspeakable gift of forgiveness and salvation, for we are children of God! We can rejoice, even when we are unhappy, for, even in unpleasant, discouraging or painful circumstances, we are still the children of God. This transcendent fact gives us victorious joy, whether we are happy or sad. Happiness depends on circumstances; joy transcends circumstances,

c. Pray Without Ceasing. We should always be in a prayerful attitude, whatever we are doing. A good way to establish this is to habitually thank the Lord all day, for every little good thing, and for bad things that don't

¹⁵ Ephesians 6:10-18. Here Paul expands a bit on the spiritual armor listed in Eph 6. He calls the breastplate of righteousness also “the breastplate of **faith and love**,” and the helmet of salvation “the helmet of the **hope** of salvation.”

¹⁶ For examples, see Deuteronomy 32:35; Ps 94:1; Rom 12:19; and Hebr 10:30.

happen. And, I Corinthians 14:14 strongly suggests that we can even pray perfect prayer and praise, in the Spirit, in our sleep. I can state as a fact that this occurs; and why should it be difficult to believe? People talking in their sleep is a common phenomenon; why should we not talk to God in our sleep?

d. In Everything Give Thanks. Paul had the idea of thanking God all the time, long before the idea occurred to me. This rule cannot be separated from c. above. It can be difficult to give thanks in time of tragedy or loss; but we can do it; we can thank the Lord that we are still his children, and for the assurance that, for us, living in his will, even bad things will somehow work together to bring good¹⁷. And note that the opening word in verse 18 is “In”; we are to give thanks in difficult or tragic times and events **in** everything--not **for** difficult or tragic times and events.

e. Quench Not the Spirit. We are to seek to be led by the Spirit of God at all times, and we are not to quench, resist or suppress his promptings or outward expressions of his power--neither in our personal lives, nor corporately, in church gatherings.

f. Despise Not Prophecyings. We are not to belittle or dismiss prophetic utterances (the underlying Greek word, *propheteais*, literally “prophecies”); rather, we are to listen carefully and respectfully, and be glad that the Holy Spirit is blessing us with a message of edification, exhortation or comfort¹⁸. We are, of course, expected to judge and evaluate them, rejecting those that are false, misleading, or in other ways wrong.

g. Prove All Things; Hold Fast That Which Is Good. We are to listen respectfully to ideas, plans, prophetic utterances, doctrines or teachings. However, we are equally enjoined to hold onto, embrace and follow only those which are good; and, by clear implication, we are to judge and reject those which are false, unwise or sinful. It is not by chance that this rule follows immediately after the one above it, for they cannot be separated. Among its other meanings, it is just another way of expressing the cautionary guidance of I Corinthians 14:29.

h. Avoid Even the Appearance of Evil. We are not only to eschew evil, to choose against it and reject it, but we should also be careful to avoid even the appearance of it; for someone, seeing us, may believe that we are committing an evil deed, even when we aren't. Thus, he may be affected by his assumption, either thinking ill of us, or assuming that what he thinks he

¹⁷ Romans 8:28.

¹⁸ I Corinthians 14:3, 39-40.

sees is acceptable, and is encouraged to embrace the evil that he thinks he sees.

10. The Trinity of Man. (5:23-24)

Paul sums up his letter by saying that his prayer is that the God of Peace will sanctify the Thessalonians wholly, completely, setting them apart from evil, carnal and impure things, in their spirits, their souls and their bodies, preserving them in a holy state until the Lord returns. The Lord who is calling them to Himself, he says, will faithfully do his part.

NOTE: *There are revelations of the triune nature of man throughout the New Testament; the most clear, however, is preserved for us in this passing, almost “by the way,” statement of his desire for them here, in a single verse (v23). He says that he is praying for each of the Thessalonians to be sanctified **completely** (in spirit, soul and body--the three parts of our being).*

The common (and erroneous) concept of man is that we consist of two parts: body and soul. It is impossible fully to understand the New Testament, or even to understand life, without the knowledge of the triune (three-part) nature of man. For more information on this see “The Trinity of Man: Spirit, Soul and Body” in Part IV (Selected Topical summaries).

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In a brief closing salutation, Paul urges the Thessalonians to pray for him and his party, to greet one another with a holy, chaste kiss, and to have this letter read to “all the holy brethren.” And, with this brief benediction, he closes his letter.