



THE FIRST LETTER OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONIANS

The year is AD 51, and a man named Paul and his friends Silas, Luke, and Timothy have arrived in Corinth. Paul decides to write a letter to a group of young Christians in Thessalonica, the capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia.

The two brief letters he then wrote have been preserved, and we are able to read them almost two millennia later. What Paul has to say is still fresh and challenging, because the problems that were the concerns of the Thessalonian Christians are still active issues today. But more important than the issues, it is the faith of Paul that is as relevant now as it was in the first century. What Paul believed continues to be as startling and as good when we meet it in the twenty-first century as it was in the first century, in the world of Claudius, Seneca, Gallio, and the rapidly growing bands of Christians that were scattered throughout the cities of the Roman Empire.

These letters are teaching letters written from a teacher-pastor to an urban congregation of Christians. They are also personal letters written from a friend to friends. The letters are warm and human, clear-headed and salty.

The Christians in Thessalonica, to whom the letters are addressed, lived in an old city. In its earliest years it was called Therma. Its location was strategic, on the Via Egnatia, the major overland route from Italy to the East, and at the northeast corner of the Thermaic Gulf (the Gulf of Salonika). In 315 BC the city was renamed Thessalonica in honor of the half sister of Alexander the Great. In the year 146 BC, after the Roman takeover of ancient Greece, this city was made capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. In 42 BC the city was further honored by being recognized by Rome as a “free city,” a status allowing more self-rule. In Rome’s attempt to win Greek support, several cities of ancient Greece held this distinction (e.g., Athens and Sparta).

See also “*The With-God Life*” essay for this section of the Bible,
“*The People of God in Community*,” pp. 255–60.

Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica

Luke gives a brief but very interesting narrative of the establishment of the Christian church in Thessalonica in the book of Acts. He tells us that following Paul and Silas's imprisonment and release at Philippi (Acts 16: 16–40), they left for Thessalonica: "After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews" (17:1).

Luke tells us that Paul's practice was to attend the local synagogue and share his faith in Jesus Christ as Messiah from within that setting: "And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This is the Messiah, Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you,'" (17:2–3). Paul's message, according to Luke, is that the Messiah must suffer and that this suffering Messiah is in fact Jesus.

Paul has surprising good news to announce: the Messiah has conquered evil and death by taking upon himself the fury of evil and the suffering and loneliness of death. Jesus disarms these foes by absorbing their full intensity. Not only does the Messiah suffer real brokenness, but he conquers death with the real victory of resurrection. As for the enemies of righteousness, the Messiah identifies with their loneliness too and takes their place as well. This is Paul's message to the people in Thessalonica.

Luke tells of their mixed response: "Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces they formed a mob" (17:4–5). Of those who responded to Paul's message, including both Jews and Gentiles, Luke makes a special point of mentioning the fact that some of the city's prominent women accepted the message of Paul and Silas. Women played a vital role in the New Testament Church, and this reference is one specific marker of that fact.

Those who opposed Paul's message "set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason's house. When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities" (17: 5–6). Luke also tells us of the charges made against Paul and Silas and the new church at Thessalonica. Note the unintentional but unmistakable compliment paid to the early Christians and to their Lord: "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus" (17:6–7).

Continuing Relevance

It is likely that the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians is the earliest letter of the New Testament. This means that, for us as readers of the New Testament, we find in 1 Thessalonians what was first on the mind of Paul and what troubling issues first confronted the early Church.

Three issues become clear. One concerns the timing of the return of Jesus Christ in fulfillment of his promise following his victory over death. The second issue has to do with the ethical behavior of Christian, especially in regard to marriage. The

third concerns the role of Christians in the world today. Three issues of critical concern then—and now. What is our task as disciples of Jesus Christ here and now? As we read its pages and watch the book unfold, Paul will clear the air for us today just as he did for his first-century friends.

Earl F. Palmer

Salutation

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in
God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

The Thessalonians' Faith and Example

2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters^a beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of

the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions^b report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica

2 You yourselves know, brothers and sisters,^a that our coming to you was not in vain, ²but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. ³For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, ⁴but just as we have been approved by

a Gk *brothers* *b* Gk *For they*

1:2–3 *We always give thanks.* Paul begins his letter with a prayer for his friends. He prays that their faith will have “work” in it; he means faith as an event that happens. He prays for love in their lives that toils. He prays for hope that stays and holds out and endures. All of this prayer is possible because of God’s love, which made us his own before we loved or hoped or believed. This is the theme of grace that dominates the opening of the letter.

Responding

1:5 THE WITH-GOD LIFE. In addition to his teaching, Paul names three ways the gospel came to the Thessalonians: through power, the Holy Spirit, and conviction. Recall when you became convinced of the truth of the gospel, that is, that Jesus was born, lived, died

rose from the dead, and lives among his people today through the presence of his Spirit to guide and teach them. As a way to reinforce this teaching, read and memorize Rom 8:9–11, a wonderful passage that describes the Holy Spirit’s relationship with the People of God. *See also* Spiritual Disciplines Index.

1:6 *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.* Imitation is how human beings learn and grow. Everything depends on whom or what we choose to imitate. The disciples at Thessalonica had it exactly right: they imitated Paul and his company and the Lord.

1:9–10 *you turned to God.* It is because of God’s truth and grace that people such as the Thessalonians have turned away from the idols, because the better hope met them in God’s truth.

God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; ⁶nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, ⁷though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle ^aamong you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. ⁸So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

⁹ You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; ^bwe worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. ¹¹As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, ¹²urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

¹³ We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. ¹⁴For you, brothers and sisters, ^bbecame imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, ^cand drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone ¹⁶by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last. ^d

2:1–20 *share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves.* In chapter 2 Paul affirms his own relationship as teacher and friend with the young Christians at Thessalonica. This demonstrates the pastoral task of spiritual formation in all its tenderness. Paul even uses the

Paul's Desire to Visit the Thessalonians Again

¹⁷ As for us, brothers and sisters, ^bwhen, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. ¹⁸For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way. ¹⁹For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? ²⁰Yes, you are our glory and joy!

3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we decided to be left alone in Athens; ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming ^cthe gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, ³so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. In-deed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. ⁴In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know. ⁵For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain.

Timothy's Encouraging Report

⁶ But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. ⁷For this reason, brothers and sisters, ^bduring all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. ⁸For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in

^a Other ancient authorities read *infants*

^b Gk *brothers* ^c Other ancient authorities read *their own prophets*

^d Or *completely or forever*

^e Gk lacks *proclaiming*

image of a nurse caring for helpless infants (v 7).

2:14 *you . . . became imitators of the churches of God . . . in Judea.* The circle of imitation now expands to others. Imitation is a humble action, and children, for example, are always eager to do it.

the Lord. ⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

A Life Pleasing to God

4 Finally, brothers and sisters,^a we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴that each one of you know how to control your own body^b in holiness and honor, ⁵not with lustful passion, like the Gen-tiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister^c in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷For

God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.

⁹ Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters,^a you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters^a throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved,^a to do so more and more, ¹¹to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹²so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.

The Coming of the Lord

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters,^a about those who have died,^d so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.^d ¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.^d ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will de-

a Gk *brothers*

b Or *how to take a wife for himself*

c Gk *brother*

d Gk *fallen asleep*

3:12 *increase and abound in love for one another.* Paul urges the Thessalonians to live here and now as men and women and as married folk in a way that honors God because Jesus Christ has given them his grace.

4:1–18 *Finally, brothers and sisters.* In chapter 4, Paul urges the Christians to live in marriage with tenderness and honor. The health of marriages is a major pastoral concern for Paul. For us too.

4:3 *For this is the will of God, your sanctification.* Sanctification, that is, our growth in grace, is here directly applied to sexual purity, and specifically to the problem of fornication—sexual intercourse between people who are not married to each other. And we thought times had changed!



Responding

4:11 STUDY. The King James Version translates the beginning of this verse “study to be quiet,” while the NRSV translates it “aspire to live quietly.” What qualities are needed to “study to be quiet”? During the next three weeks do things that will encourage these qualities in your life: driving the speed limit, perhaps, or visiting with your neighbors, or reading a book to your spouse, child, or friend. See also *Spiritual Disciplines Index*.

4:13–18 *But we do not want you to be uninformed.* The apostle assures believers of the hope they have as those who belong to Christ. Paul faces up to false teachers who are arguing that select, and therefore superior, believers

scend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

5 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters,^a you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved,^a are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one an-

other and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Final Exhortations, Greetings, and Benediction

¹² But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^a to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, beloved,^a to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, bepatient with all of them. ¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets,^b ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound^c and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

²⁵ Beloved,^d pray for us.

a Gk *brothers* b Gk *despise prophecies*
c Or *complete* d Gk *Brothers*

have already won ultimate victory and that other ordinary believers are left behind. Paul is here challenging the early development of a false Gnostic ideology that the early Church will confront in full force in the second and third centuries.

5:1 22 *Now concerning the times and the seasons.* Paul’s major point in this passage is that Christ will come again like a thief in the night; therefore Christians should not be terrorized by the false teachers who have timetables with which they have frightened many at Thessalonica. Instead, Paul urges each of us who are believers to stay faithfully at our post. His word “idlers” in verse 14 is *ataktos*, which means literally “to be away from one’s post.” We are to live our lives in faith, hope, and love, as he prayed in the beginning of the letter, and to trust God with the timing of our lives and of history.

5:12–22 *But we appeal to you.* This final laundry list of counsels is pregnant with spiritual formation implications. It describes the effective functioning of community life. Note how counsels for ordinary tasks mingle with counsels on matters of deep spiritual import. In the community of disciplined grace, respecting co-workers and helping the weak are just as essential as praying without ceasing and not quenching the Spirit.

5:17 PRAYER—See Spiritual Disciplines Index **5:24** *The one who calls you is faithful.* If we believe in this Lord, there will be a change in our life. Paul teaches that the Holy Spirit, who confirms the reality of Christ to us, also changes our motivation and our self-understanding. The Holy Spirit does not cancel out our freedom—in fact, our freedom is intensified—but the Holy Spirit fills us with the living companionship of

26 Greet all the brothers and sisters^a with a holy kiss. 27 I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them.^b

28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.^c

a Gk *brothers* *b* Gk *to all the brothers* *c* Other ancient authorities add *Amen*

Christ (1:2-10). In Paul's way of looking at this, the results are far-reaching and demanding. Christ as our Shepherd-Lord calls us to the way of righteousness. This call has direct implications in our marriage, work, and personal relationships. Another discovery we make in this letter

is that the Christian Church itself is in continual need of renewal and correction. The Church as a fellowship is not within itself absolute; in fact, it often goes astray, so that it must be repeatedly called back to its good center, Jesus Christ himself.