

First Thessalonians

Authorship

Evidence for Pauline authorship is overwhelming, both internally and externally. It is filled with specific historical references to his contact with the Thessalonians and fits the record of Acts.

Date

According to the book itself, Paul is writing soon after establishing the church, which occurred on the first Gentile mission into Macedonia and Achaia. The date is fixed with respect to the proconsulship of Gallio, mentioned in Acts 18:12, which began in either A.D. 51 or 52. The earlier is preferable which places the writing of 1 Thessalonians in early A.D. 51.

Historical Setting

Paul has just left Thessalonica as a result of Jewish hostility and made a brief stop in Athens before proceeding to Corinth, from which he writes this letter. The church had long been established in Judea and was now being expanded into Macedonia and Achaia through the Pauline apostleship.

Original Readers

According to Acts 17:4 early converts included a sizable number of “devout Greeks,” being apparently “Gentiles who had attached themselves loosely to the synagogue.”¹ However, the majority of those who believed were Gentile idol worshippers (1:9). They had been taught in the faith and formed into a church before Paul left (cf. 1:1).

Occasion

Paul’s chief motive for writing is his concern for the church’s ability to withstand the persecution they were suffering (2:14) and to continue to progress in the faith, having made such a good start (1:2-10; 3:10). There is also, perhaps, some concern that the church thinks Paul has some ill feeling toward them. Paul is eager to affirm just how much he thinks of them and how he longs to encourage them in the faith (cf. 1:7-12, 17-20; 3:5-10). He also wants to comfort those who have lost believing loved ones in death by assuring them that their resurrection will occur immediately upon the Lord’s return.

¹ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 18.

Theme Statement

Hope in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ encourages the believer to develop and complete the work of faith out of a labor love.

Outline

- I. Introductory Greeting.1:1
- II. Preface: Paul gives thanks for the church because of their response to God.....1:2-10
 - A. Paul thankfully recalls the results of their election.1:2-4
 - 1. Paul gives thanks for the outcome of their faith, hope, and love.1:2-3
 - 2. Paul is cognizant of their having been chosen by God.1:4
 - B. Paul joyfully recalls their reception of the gospel.1:5-10
 - 1. It had come in word, demonstration, and assurance.1:5
 - 2. It had made them exemplary followers.1:6-7
 - 3. It had, through them, been spoken of everywhere.1:8-10
 - a. Their faith had become well known.1:8
 - b. Their response had been complete.1:9-10
 - 1) It had produced a turning to God from idols.1:9a
 - 2) It had produced a serving of God.1:9b
 - 3) It had produced an expectancy of Christ’s return.1:10
- III. Body: Paul encourages the church on the basis of their past experience, present responsibility, and future expectation.....2:1–5:11
 - A. Paul reviews their response to his past ministry.....2:1–3:10
 - 1. Paul recounts the manner of his coming to them.2:1-12
 - a. He had spoken the gospel in a straight forward manner.2:1-6
 - b. He had cherished them like a gentle mother.2:7-8
 - c. He had instructed them like a devoted father.2:9-12
 - 2. Paul reviews the nature of their response to him.2:13-16
 - a. They had received the Word as the truth of God.2:13
 - b. They had suffered for the Word at the hand of the Jews.....2:14-16
 - 3. Paul relates his current desire for their final training.....2:17–3:10
 - a. He has been prevented from seeing them by Satan.2:17-20
 - b. He has sent Timothy to encourage them in the faith.3:1-5
 - c. He has been encouraged by Timothy’s report of their faith.3:6-10
 - B. Paul reveals the responsibilities of their present service.3:11–4:12
 - 1. Paul prays for their preparedness for the coming of the Lord.3:11-13
 - 2. Paul exhorts them in their personal living.4:1-12
 - a. Summary exhortation: Their conduct should please God.4:1-2
 - b. Personally, God’s will is moral purity.4:3-8
 - c. Corporately, God’s will is brotherly love and orderly living.4:9-12
 - C. Paul rehearses the certainties of the Lord’s coming.4:13–5:11
 - 1. The Lord will come for his own, both deceased and alive.4:13-18
 - a. Believers who “sleep” will be resurrected.4:13-14
 - b. Believers who “sleep” until the coming of the Lord will be resurrected first.4:15-16

- c. Believers who live at the coming of the Lord will be caught up with those who sleep.4:17
 - d. Believers ought to be comforted by this.....4:18
 - 2. The Lord will come in sudden judgment against those appointed to wrath.5:1-11
 - a. The Day of the Lord will be sudden and unannounced.....5:1-3
 - b. The Day of the Lord need not surprise believers.....5:4-8
 - c. The Day of the Lord will not harm believers.5:9-11
- IV. Epilogue: Paul exhorts them in their personal living5:12-22
 - A. They should esteem their leaders.5:12-13
 - B. They should care for each other.5:14-15
 - C. They should be attentive to every spiritual activity.5:16-22
- V. Concluding Blessing and Admonition5:23-28
 - A. Paul wishes them to be completed at the coming of Jesus Christ.5:23-24
 - B. Paul commends prayer and faithfulness.5:25-28

Theme Statement

Hope in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ encourages the believer to develop and complete the work of faith out of a labor love.

Theme Development

In a very brief visit, Paul had seen a number of Thessalonians come to faith in Christ, had encouraged them in that faith, and established a church. Having been driven from the city by persecution he was concerned over the pressures and doubts that these young believers were experiencing. Thus, Paul writes in order to affirm his continued care for them, to encourage them in the faith, and to comfort and console them in their present trials.

I. Introductory Greeting (1:1).

Paul does not write as an apostle or servant but simply with Silvanus and Timothy on behalf of the Father and Son. Perhaps he wishes to be perceived more as a caring parent by these newborn Christians (cf. 2:7, 11).

II. Preface: Paul gives thanks for the church because of their response to God (1:2-10).

In a characteristic prayer of thanksgiving, Paul celebrates the vibrancy of the Thessalonian believers' faith, noting that it had led to a great labor of love, which in turn was being sustained by their confident expectation for the future (1:3-4). God's election of these brethren had brought Paul nothing but joy as he had observed how completely they had responded to the gospel, as witnessed by the reputation they had already gained (1:5-10). In the past they had turned from idols; in the present they were serving God; and they were confident

of experiencing the Lord's future return (1:9-10). Paul will develop these themes in the body of the letter.

III. Body: Paul encourages the church on the basis of their past experience, present responsibility, and future expectation (2:1–5:11).

A. Paul reviews their response to his past ministry (2:1–3:10).

Paul encourages the church by reminding them that he and his companions had delivered to them God's authorized word of salvation (2:1-4) and that they had done so in the most selfless, sensitive, and caring manner possible (2:5-11). This was so that their conduct in the faith would be worthy of God (2:12). Next, Paul reviews the nature of their response, reminding them that they had recognized the gospel as God's word, proven by the persecution they had had to endure at the hands of the Jews (2:13-16). They had put themselves in the best of company, including not only the churches in Judea but also the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

From this beginning, Paul is able to relate his continuing desire to see them perfected in their faith (2:17–3:10). Though he himself has been hindered from coming to them (2:17-20), Paul has sent Timothy as his ambassador of encouragement (3:1-2), fearful that the tempter might cause them to stumble due to concern over his own tribulations (3:3-5). Upon Timothy's positive report, Paul is himself encouraged and prays all the more energetically for their spiritual stability and growth (3:6-10). This launches Paul into a prayer which serves as the transition into his instruction for the present.

B. Paul reveals the responsibilities of their present service (3:11–4:12).

Paul's transitional prayer is directed toward the believers living in such a way that there will be nothing blameworthy against them at the judgment seat of Christ (3:11-13). Their conduct should be pleasing to God, which is in keeping with the commandments they had already received (4:1-2). Two broad areas are mentioned. The first is moral purity (4:3-8). Sanctification—the suiting for service of one set apart exclusively for God's use—requires abstinence from sexual immorality (4:3). This entails each one knowing how to exercise self-control with respect to sexual lusts, in marked contrast to the way Gentiles live (4:4-5).² God's standards of service in this life demand holiness of conduct (4:7-8),

The other broad area prescribes the conduct of interpersonal relationships (4:9-12). Love of the brotherhood has always been a divine expectation, one that the Thessalonians had already

² This is also understood as possessing a wife ("vessel") in accordance with divine design.

obeyed (4:9-10). However, there is always room for growth in love (4:10b) and many ways in which it is to be applied (4:11). Walking properly toward unbelievers is itself an extension of the principle of love since they also are the objects of divine love (cf. John 3:16).

C. Paul rehearses the certainties of the Lord's coming (4:13–5:11).

One of the concerns among the Thessalonian believers was the estate of those Christian who had died before the Lord's return. Paul had apparently taught the imminent return of Christ, which some had interpreted as the immediate return. In order to comfort those remaining (4:18), Paul instructs them, via divine revelation (cf. 4:15), on the truths of the resurrection of the body and the catching up of living believers. Whether deceased or alive, all believers will be taken bodily into the clouds to meet the Lord (4:17).

The resurrection and rapture are comforting truths for the believer. However, the Day of the Lord will have its terrible side as well. For those who do not believe, the day will overtake them like a thief and utterly destroy them (5:1-3). There is no way to tell when this might happen, but Christians need not be taken unaware since we have the light of revelation (5:4-5). Since this day will usher the believer into the presence of Christ and his judgment seat, we must be alert and attentive to how we live, even though we are not appointed to wrath (5:6-10). In this way the believer may be comforted in the face of the unknown future (5:11).

IV. Epilogue: Paul exhorts them in their personal living (5:12-22).

Paul concludes with various exhortations that, if heeded, will go a long way toward preparing them for that Day. Esteeming leaders, living at peace, ministering to each other according to the need, and pursuing good are some of the ways to “walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory” (5:12-15; cf. 1:12). Every area of the spiritual life must be given careful attention (5:16-22).

V. Concluding Blessing and Admonition (5:23-28).

Paul's final blessing summarizes his entire treatise: his desire is that the believer will experience a blameless presentation at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (5:23). God will be faithful to accomplish this if the believer is diligent in allowing the Lord to accomplish it (cf. 3:12-13).

Though some have objected that 1 Thessalonians lacks the doctrinal content of many of Paul's letters, it should be readily observable from the letter itself that Paul had imparted sufficient truth to establish and encourage them in the Christian faith for the prospect of entering into the presence of the Lord in a worthy condition (cf. 2:12).

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