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Dr. Constable is one of the most respected and beloved teachers of God's Word at Dallas Theological Seminary, and he has served as a Bible teacher and elder at Plano Bible Chapel for many years. Learn more about him at: www.soniclight.com/constable/index.htm. You can explore the rest of the Sonic Light website by left-clicking in the top lighthouse graphic to return to Sonic Light's homepage, or click on one of the tabs to see other pages:

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NOTES ON

1 THESSALONIANS

2007 EDITION

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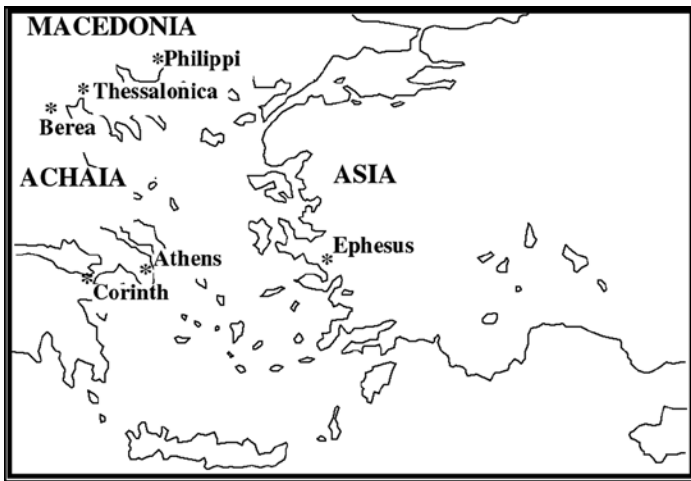
INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Thessalonica was originally an ancient town named *Thermaí*, meaning "Hot Springs." The town gave its name to the Thermaic Gulf of the Aegean Sea on whose shore it stood. In time it became an important city because of its strategic location. Cassander, the Macedonian king, founded the more modern city in 315 B.C. and named it for his wife, who was a half-sister of Alexander the Great. It was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, and it stood on the *Via Egnatia*, the Roman highway to the East. In Paul's day it was a self-governing community with enough Jews in residence to warrant a synagogue (Acts 17:1).

"Under the Romans it was the capital of the second of the four divisions of Macedonia, and when these were united to form one single province in 146 B. C. it became the capital, as well as the largest city of the province."¹

Paul first visited Thessalonica during his second missionary journey with Silas and Timothy. They had just left prison in Philippi and made their way southward to Thessalonica.



For at least three Sabbath days Paul reasoned in the synagogue with those present, and many believed the gospel (Acts 17:2). However, he probably ministered in Thessalonica for a longer time than just three weeks in view of what he wrote that he had done there (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:9; cf. Phil. 4:15-16).² Those who responded to the message of Christ's sufferings and resurrection (Acts 17:3, 7) were Jews (Acts 17:4) and God-fearing proselytes to Judaism. There were also some leading women of the city and many idol-worshipping pagans (Acts 17:4-5).

“If Macedonia produced perhaps the most competent group of men the world had yet seen, the women were in all respects the men's counterparts; they played a large part in affairs, received envoys and obtained concessions from them for their husbands, built temples, founded cities, engaged mercenaries, commanded armies, held fortresses, and acted on occasion as regents or even co-rulers.”³

When the unbelieving Jews heard of the conversion of the proselytes, whom they were discipling, they stirred up a gang of roughnecks who attacked the house of Jason. Paul had been staying with him. Unable to find the missionaries, the mob dragged Jason before the magistrates who simply commanded him to keep the peace. Convinced of the danger for Paul and Jason, the Christians sent Paul and Silas away from the city by night to Berea (Acts 17:10).

Paul and his party began their evangelistic work in Berea in the synagogue, as was their custom. However when many Jews there believed, the Thessalonian Jews came down to Berea and stirred up more trouble (Acts 17:10-13). The Berean Christians sent Paul away to Athens, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:14). Having been sent for by Paul, Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Athens, but he soon sent Silas back to Philippi and or Berea, and Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:1-3; Acts 17:15). Later both men returned to Paul while he was practicing his trade in Corinth (Acts 18:3, 5) with a gift from the Christians in those Macedonian towns (2 Cor. 11:9; cf. Phil. 4:15).

Timothy's report of conditions in the Thessalonian church

led Paul to write this epistle. Some of the Thessalonians apparently believed that Jesus Christ was about to return momentarily and had consequently given up their jobs and had become disorderly (cf. 1 Thess. 4:11; 5:14). Some worried about what had happened to their loved ones who had died before the Lord had returned (4:13, 18). Persecution from the Gentiles as well as the Jews still oppressed the believers (2:17—3:10) who were nevertheless holding fast to the truth and eager to see Paul again (3:6-8). Some outside the church, however, remained hostile to Paul (2:1-12). There appears to have been some misuse of spiritual gifts in the assembly as well as an unfortunate tendency on the part of some to return to their former habits involving sexual impurity (4:1-8; 5:19-21).

It seems clear that Paul wrote this epistle shortly after he arrived in Corinth (1:7-9; 2:17; 3:1, 6; Acts 18:5, 11), about A.D. 51. If one follows the early dating of Galatians, as I have suggested, this epistle would have been Paul's second inspired writing. If Paul penned Galatians after the second missionary journey, 1 Thessalonians could have been his first inspired epistle.⁴ However the first option seems more probable.⁵

A few scholars have suggested that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians before he wrote 1 Thessalonians.⁶ This is not as improbable as may appear at first since the traditional sequence of Pauline letters to churches rests on length rather than date. Nonetheless this theory has not convinced most scholars.⁷

PURPOSE

In view of this epistle's contents, Paul had at least three purposes in mind when he wrote it. First, he wanted to encourage the Christians in Thessalonica who were making good progress in their new faith (1:2-10). Second, he desired to correct misinformation about himself and his fellow missionaries that some of his critics in Thessalonica were circulating (2:1—3:13). Third, he wrote to give additional instruction that would contribute to the Thessalonians' spiritual growth (4:1—5:24). Whereas we regard 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Thessalonians are every bit as pastoral and personal. They reveal much about “Paul's pastoral zeal and his intense interest in the spiritual well-being of his converts.”⁸ As such they are an invaluable resource for people in pastoral ministry.

“Far and away the largest theological contribution of the Epistles [1 and 2 Thessalonians] lies in what they say about eschatology.”⁹

“. . . over a quarter of 1 Thessalonians and nearly half of 2 Thessalonians deal with problems and issues regarding the parousia or coming of Christ from heaven.”¹⁰

“The Thessalonian letters present the first literary evidence for the use of *parousia* . . . in the sense of

the future Advent of Christ: it occurs in this sense six times in the two letters. The event is depicted repeatedly in language borrowed from portrayals of OT theophanies. But it is the ethical implications that are chiefly stressed: the writers look forward to the Parousia especially as the time when their service will be reviewed and rewarded by the Lord who commissioned them, and they will be content, they say, to have it assessed by the quality of their converts.”¹¹

OUTLINE ¹²

- I. Salutation and greeting 1:1
- II. Personal commendations and explanations 1:2—3:13
 - A. Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians 1:2-10
 - 1. Summary statement 1:2-3
 - 2. Specific reasons 1:4-10
 - B. Reminders for the Thessalonians 2:1-16
 - 1. How the gospel was delivered 2:1-12
 - 2. How the gospel was received 2:13-16
 - C. Concerns for the Thessalonians 2:17—3:13
 - 1. Desires to see them again 2:17—3:5
 - 2. Joy on hearing about them 3:6-13
- III. Practical instructions and exhortations 4:1—5:24
 - A. Christian living 4:1-12
 - 1. Continued growth 4:1-2
 - 2. Sexual purity 4:3-8
 - 3. Brotherly love 4:9-12
 - B. The Rapture 4:13-18
 - C. Personal watchfulness 5:1-11
 - D. Church life 5:12-15
 - 1. Attitudes toward leaders 5:12-13
 - 2. Relationships among themselves 5:14-15
 - E. Individual behavior 5:16-24
 - 1. Personal actions and attitudes 5:16-18
 - 2. Actions and attitudes in corporate living 5:19-22
 - 3. Divine enablement 5:23-24
- IV. Conclusion 5:25-28

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, p. 11.
- 2 Robert L. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” in *Ephesians-Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p. 230; Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 7.
- 3 W. W. Tarn and G. T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilisation*, pp. 98-99.
- 4 Thomas, p. 248; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. xi; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:3; et al., held that this was Paul’s first epistle.
- 5 For a fuller discussion of these matters, see Thomas L. Constable, “1 Thessalonians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 687-89; and the New Testament Introductions. Karl P. Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *New Testament Studies* 31:3 (July 1985):336-57, gave helpful background information on the religious and political background of Thessalonica.
- 6 T. W. Manson, “St. Paul in Greece: The Letters to the Thessalonians,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 35 (1952-53):438-46; *ibid.*, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, championed this view. Other scholars have followed his lead (e.g., Wanamaker, pp. 37-45). According to this theory 1 Thessalonians responds to issues alluded to in 2 Thessalonians.
- 7 See F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, pp. xxxix-xliv, for a good discussion of the issue. Other scholars who believed Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians first include E. A. Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (1977 ed.), pp. 43-44; I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 26; R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*, pp. 24-25; Morris, pp. 27-30; and most others.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 9 Thomas, p. 233.
- 10 Wanamaker, p. 10.
- 11 Bruce, p. xxxviii.
- 12 For an outline of the book based on rhetorical analysis, see Wanamaker, p. 49.