

THE FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

The Earliest Writing of the New Testament

The First Letter to the Thessalonians is, according to the majority of biblical scholars, the first of all the New Testament writings. It was written in Corinth about the year 51, when Paul received through his disciple Timothy good news about the community in Thessalonica. This community was founded by Paul during his second missionary journey around the year 50. A summary of his mission at that time is found in Acts 16: 11-17:15.

Background

The city of Thessalonica (the modern-day Salonika) is situated at the north-western end of the Aegean Sea. At the time of Paul it was the principal city of the Roman province of Macedonia.

Most probably, Paul had to leave this city before he wanted to because of the Jew's reaction to his success in winning converts to Christ.

Forced to leave, Paul went to the city of Beroea and from there to Athens. Concerned about the church in Thessalonica and the perseverance of the faithful, Paul sent his disciple Timothy "to find out about their faith" (3:5). Meanwhile Paul moved on to Corinth where Timothy rejoined him.

Purpose of 1 Thessalonians

The good news that Timothy brought back gave Paul motive to rejoice, and moved him to write this letter to express his thanksgiving and encouragement.

Timothy had also conveyed to Paul some questions and some problems that had emerged among the Thessalonians. The questions were about the resurrection of the bodies of the dead and the end of the world. This first letter was written to the newly converted Christian believers, who were largely drawn from the Gentiles of Thessalonica. Within this letter Paul's concern is to encourage the Thessalonians who are suffering because of the Gentiles' pressure to abandon their faith and to continue to form them in their Christian way of life.

A good section of the letter is devoted to the problems of some converts' misunderstanding regarding the future coming of the Lord.

The letter provides important clues to its context, and its purpose is clear. It manifests the thanksgiving of the Apostle for his faithful who have generously corresponded to his apostolic solicitude for the Church in Thessalonica.

Thanksgiving and Encouragement

In the first part of the letter (*1Thess 1:1-3:13*) Paul encourages and manifests his deep affection for this community which gives him motives for exploding in a prolonged thanksgiving. Paul gives an account of his trustful relationship with the community since it was founded. He encourages them by recalling their conversion and their courage in facing oppositions and persecution with faith and love.

Then Paul describes the missionary care and concern of himself and his fellow missionary towards them while they were in Thessalonica and when later he sent Timothy to keep in touch with them.

The main purpose of this part of the letter is to outline the nature of their conversion from idolatry to serve the living God and to live in expectancy of the future coming of the Lord who will free them from the divine wrath.

The message Paul gives is apocalyptic but also prevalently christocentric.

Paul describes the conversion of the Thessalonians as a conversion of faith, love and hope. Their response to Paul's message is very positive notwithstanding the persecution they went through. For this reason the Thessalonians are an example for the other Christian communities.

Exhortations: Serving God and Waiting for his Son

The second half of the letter (*1Thess 4:1 - 5:28*) is devoted to the formation of the community. It can be divided into three parts.

First part: Paul exhorts the Christians to grow in holiness and brotherly love (*1Thess 4:1-12*).

Second part: he reassures the community's worries about what would happen at the return of Christ; he educates them about the resurrection of those Christians who had already died, and uses this occasion to encourage the Christians to live a holy life so that they may be ready for the coming of the Lord and to be with Him forever. (*1Thess 4:13-5:21*).

Third part: Paul gives practical instructions underlining the need to live together in harmony and love and gives his final blessing. (*1Thess 5:12-28*).

The Relevance of 1 Thessalonians

The power of God's Word

The Word of God has been the source of inspiration and guidance throughout the centuries up to the present. In this letter we see that Paul's emphasis and belief is on God who is constantly at work in the community, in the lives of the believers; and on the power of the Gospel.

We have to strengthen our belief that the Word of God "*is now at work*" in the Church (1Thess 2:13) as it was for the first Christians.

COLUMN

Paul in His own Words

Holiness and Hope

Night and day we pray beyond measure to see you in person and to remedy the deficiencies of your faith. Now may God Himself, our Father, and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His holy ones.

1Thess 3:10-13

The Day of the Lord

1Thess: 5:1-11

The Structure of 1Thessalonians

1. Address and Greetings (1:1)
2. Thanksgiving (1:2-2:16)
3. Paul's Desire (2:17-3:13)
4. Exhortation on Charity and Chastity (4:1-12)
5. Resurrection and Parousia (4:13-18)
6. Final Exhortation (5:1-22)
7. Prayer and Blessing (5:23-28)

EVENTS

To celebrate the Conversion of St. Paul: 25 January 2009

The Pauline Books & Media Centre

is planning a Talk by Sr. Bernardita Dianzon, FSP

The Theme: "**The Challenge of Living St. Paul's Message Today**"

Details will follow

Venue: Pauline Books & Media Centre

181 Queen Street – cnr Cumberland Rd – Kensington

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Paul's missionary journeys, enhanced with archaeological, artistic, geographic, and religious facts that brings to life the story of the apostle's struggles.

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