

1 Thessalonians Bible Study

Fall 2022

Pre-lesson

(week of September 4)

Welcome to our Bible study on the book of 1 Thessalonians! It helps to know a little bit about the historical background of a book of the Bible - who wrote it, when and where, to whom, and why. You'll find some of the answers to those questions below, but first things first. This week, please start by reading through (or listening to¹) 1-2 Thessalonians, preferably in one setting. *After* that, you can go ahead and read the introductory material below. And then, read (or listen to) the whole book again. You'll notice different things the second time around, and perhaps some things will become clearer or make more sense.

As you read or listen, think about these questions (and come to your first small group meeting ready to talk about your answers):

What stood out to you?

What troubled or confused you?

What is your impression of the author?

What questions do you have?

Introduction to 1-2 Thessalonians

Who wrote it?

While 1-2 Thessalonians are found among Paul's letters in the New Testament, the letters themselves say that they were sent not only by Paul but also by Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy. Silas was a leader in the early church in Jerusalem, and accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey. Timothy, a young believer in the city of Lystra, soon joined Paul and Silas on this journey, and went on to become one of Paul's most trusted associates. It was on this second missionary journey that Paul, Silas, and Timothy spent extended time in Thessalonica, proclaiming the gospel and living among the believers there.

There is no dispute about the authorship of 1 Thessalonians, but many scholars believe that 2 Thessalonians was written by someone other than Paul and his two companions. Among other things, it is differences in tone and subject matter that suggest a different author. However, other scholars, noting similarities in vocabulary and themes,

¹1 Thessalonians: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZJ6NzEwGGY>;

2 Thessalonians: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJqU6PmuAW4>

attribute 2 Thessalonians to Paul. For the purposes of this Bible study, we will assume that Paul, Silas, and Timothy were the senders, as both of these letters indicate.

When was it written?

1 Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters that we have - probably written around 50-51 AD. This makes it the oldest Christian writing we have, since Paul's letters are the earliest materials in the New Testament. (Although Paul was writing after Jesus' resurrection, the gospel accounts of Jesus' life were written later than Paul's letters.) 2 Thessalonians was probably written a few months after 1 Thessalonians, as a follow-up to that letter. Paul wrote these letters only about 20 years after Jesus' resurrection, giving us a rare and precious glimpse into what life in the earliest Christian congregations was like.

To whom was it written? Why?

1-2 Thessalonians were written to the Christian believers in Thessalonica. They would have numbered a few dozen at most, and apparently made up one congregation. Acts 17 gives us an account of the founding of this church. Paul traveled to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, and began by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogue there. He won some converts, including "some" Jews, "a great many" devout Greeks, and "not a few" of the prominent women in the area.

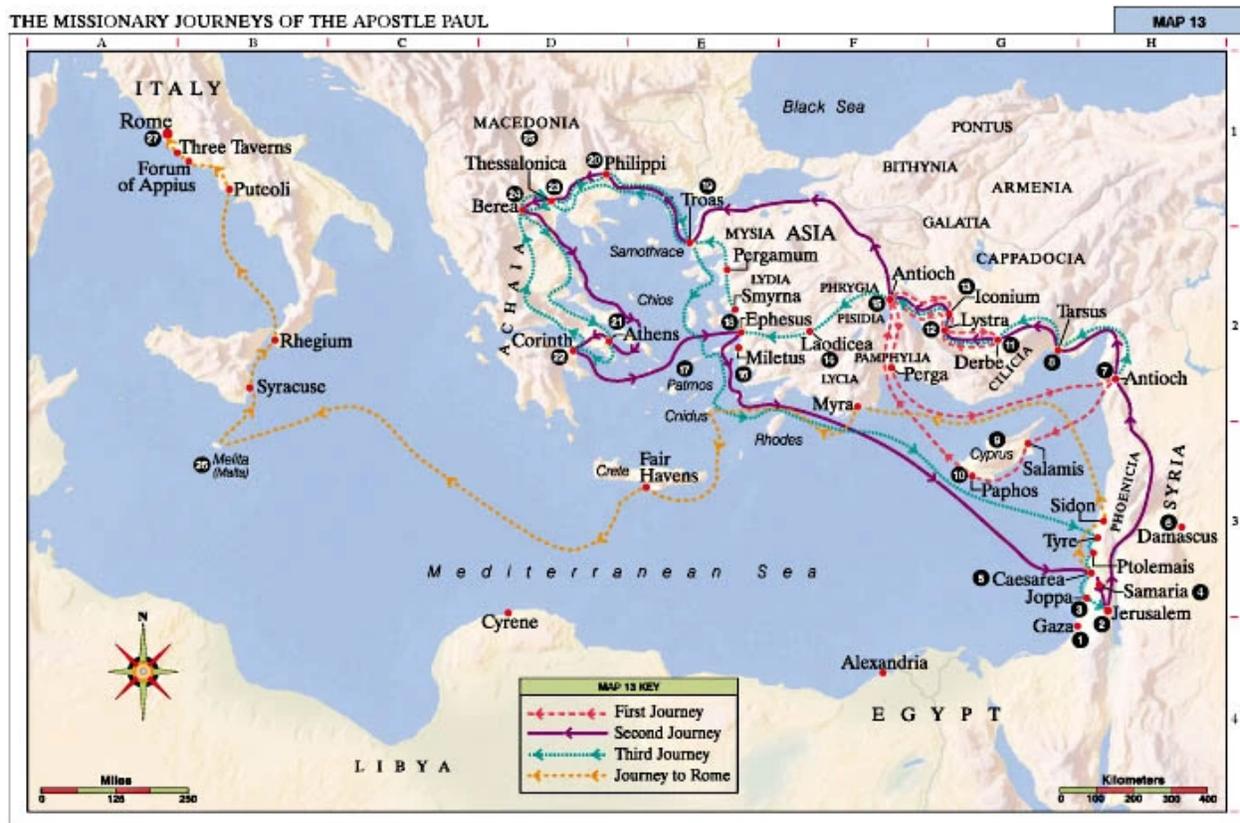
However, Paul and his traveling companions ran into opposition from some of the Jews, who more or less ran them out of Thessalonica, and even followed them to the next town over. Leaving Silas and Timothy behind, Paul went on to Athens by himself. However, Paul was greatly concerned for the Thessalonian believers after his hasty departure from them, and so asked Timothy to return to Thessalonica to find out how they were doing. Among other things, Paul was worried that the harassment and persecution they might be experiencing was doing damage to their faith.

Corinth was Paul's next stop after Athens, and it was there that Silas and Timothy rejoined him. Having been to check on the Thessalonians, Timothy had a favorable report to give about them. They were indeed facing persecution, as Paul feared they might, but according to Timothy's report, their faith remained strong. Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in response to what he heard from Timothy, as well as to address some questions that Timothy had brought back from the Thessalonian church for Paul.

2 Thessalonians was probably written several months after 1 Thessalonians, and indicates how things shaped up among the Thessalonian believers after they had received the first letter. The good news is that their faith had continued to grow. The not-so-good news is that certain problems Paul had addressed previously (like idleness among the believers) had not been fixed and had grown even worse.

What else should I know?

Thessalonica was a Greek city under Roman rule, and the capital of Macedonia (see map below²). Located on the coast of the Aegean sea, it was a busy port city, and it was a stop on a major Roman road. It would have had a very diverse population, with immigrants and travelers from all over the known world. Thessalonica was a challenging place for a church plant to thrive. The religion of the city was polytheistic, with many gods worshiped. In addition, there was a temple to Caesar, who was also worshiped as a god. Loyalty to the emperor was a large part of what had helped the city grow and prosper. Loyalty to Jesus instead put the Thessalonian believers at risk of being ostracized and persecuted, as indeed they were.



And one final thing - the sources that are informing this Bible study:

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² <https://aleteia.org/2018/09/19/a-quick-guide-to-st-pauls-travels-according-to-todays-map/>

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