



Howard Marshall<sup>2</sup> suggests that this letter should be read as a follow-up letter to new converts. Paul majors on encouraging the Thessalonians and giving thanks for them, although it is obviously tinged with sadness and frustration at having to leave so soon. His pastoral concern is clear, as he expresses his longing to hear how they are doing. When he gives them instructions on lifestyle and theology, he is not rebuking them for error, but filling in gaps as he urges them to continue.

Paul is not addressing controversies which might seem alien to our situations. He concentrates more on the everyday realities of living as Christians, issues like loving each other, living holy lives, and maintaining the right attitude to their circumstances. And so the letter should seem especially relevant to us, as Paul discusses issues which will be familiar to us.

## Structure

**1v1** – Greetings

**1v2-10** – Thanksgiving

**2v1-16** – The missionaries in Thessalonica

**2v17-3v13** – Paul's continuing concern for the Thessalonians

**4v1-12** – Living and loving together

**4v13-5v11** – The second coming of Jesus

**5v12-24** – Life together as a church

**5v25-28** – Closing remarks

### **Thanksgiving (1v2-10)**

After a customary but brief greeting (v1), Paul explains that they constantly give thanks for the Thessalonians, particularly their “work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (v3). The effects of faith, hope and love are recurring themes in the letter.

Paul is confident that the faith of the Thessalonians is genuine. Their message came by “words,” “with power,” “with the Holy Spirit,” and “with deep conviction.” And, in the face of persecution, the Thessalonians accepted the gospel with joy, to the extent that their faith was well known, and they became an example for all the believers in the region. Their lives were transformed, and they turned from idols to follow God (v10).

- How does Paul's prayer life match up to ours?
- What would Paul's assessment of Ferndale be?

### **The Missionaries in Thessalonica (2v1-16)**

He goes on to remind them that their visit wasn't a failure (it could easily have seemed that way, given how they had to leave) (2v1). This section could have been written because of criticism of Paul from those persecuting the Thessalonians (v2-3), or it may reflect worries Paul had about how things had been left. Paul and his companions had just left one difficult situation behind in Philippi (see Acts 16) when they arrived in Thessalonica, and the opposition continued there. But they preached the gospel anyway. The way they did this, and the trouble it caused them, is proof that they are working to please God, not men. The opposition was a result of the gospel, and Paul is unapologetic.

Paul uses two connected images to describe their ministry to the Thessalonians – they were like both a mother and a father. As apostles, they would have been within their rights to have let the Thessalonians support them, but they decided not to. Instead, they were like a *mother* in the way they cared for the Thessalonians. This was much more than a job – they shared their lives together. And so Paul and co worked so that they were not a burden on their hosts. But Paul and his companions were also like a *father*. They were “holy, righteous and blameless” (v10), and so they provided a model to follow (see 1v6) as they encouraged the Thessalonians to “live lives worthy of God” (v12).

The Thessalonian Christians experienced persecution for their faith, but this was further evidence for Paul that their conversion was genuine (v13-14). And they shared the experience in common with their Jewish brothers, who had been persecuted by fellow Jews trying to prevent the preaching of the gospel to the gentiles.

- What can we learn from Paul's approach to mission among the Thessalonians?
- How do we react to opposition? How do we compare with Paul and the Thessalonians?

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Marshall, “1 Thessalonians” in *The New Bible Commentary* (IVP).

### ***Paul's continuing concern for the Thessalonians (2v17-3v13)***

After being forced to leave, Paul was desperate to visit Thessalonica again (v17), but he was prevented from doing so (Paul blames Satan for this). He calls the Thessalonians “our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ...” His concern for them comes from his concern for the gospel – they are the result of the message he has dedicated his life to.

Although Paul was prevented from seeing them, Timothy wasn't, and he was sent back to the Thessalonians to “strengthen and encourage” them (v2) in the midst of their difficult situation. Although they understood that trials would happen, Paul was concerned that they might have been led astray, and so he sent Timothy to find out how they were doing.

As it turns out, Paul needn't have worried. It appears that they shared a lot of Paul's feelings. They too remembered the apostles fondly, and longed to see them again. And Timothy brings good news of their faith and love. This is a source of great encouragement and joy for Paul, and he longs even more to see them again. He prays that he will, one day, be able to see them again, and that they would keep going in the meantime, namely that their love would increase and that they would live holy lives, themes which he takes up in the next section...

- Can you identify with any of Paul's feelings in this section?
- Where does your glory and your joy come from?

### ***Living and loving together (4v1-12)***

This section is not a rebuke – Paul clearly recognises that they are trying. He wants them to keep growing in pleasing God – in holy lives, characterised by love.

Verses 3-8 are guidance on holiness. They are to avoid sexual immorality, exercising self-control rather than passionate lust (which is not fitting for their new status as children of God). They have been called to this kind of life by God, which means that it is more than just a human rule. To reject this command is to reject God. Verses 9-10 concern brotherly love between the Thessalonian Christians. But Paul has nothing to say to them on the matter – they are already doing it, without being prompted (which is surely further evidence of Christ at work in their lives). And in verses 11-12, Paul explains that they should aim to live quiet lives that will win the respect of outsiders, and be willing to do an honest day's work. It seems there were those who weren't doing this (see 2 Thess 3v6-15), and they may have been in danger of earning Christians a bad reputation.

- In which of these areas do you most need to listen to Paul?
- Would Paul need to say anything to us about “brotherly love”?

### ***The second coming of Jesus (4v13-5v11)***

Here it seems as if Paul randomly leaps to talking about the return of Jesus. But later he links it back to life in the world. In explaining that Christ will come back, Paul reminds them that this is the hope they look forward to, and it should affect the way we live now.

The Thessalonians had only been believers for a short time, and perhaps some of them had died. This would raise a question, which Paul seems to address here, “what happens to those who die before Jesus returns?” Whatever the reason, Paul explains that their faith in Christ should mean that they see death differently to everyone else, because they have hope. His message is clear: believers who have died have not 'missed out' on Christ's return. They believe in the resurrection, so they believe that the dead will be raised with Christ - being dead is a temporary state, just like being asleep (v14). At the glorious return of Christ, “the dead in Christ” will rise first, and then they will be joined by those who are still alive as they meet the Lord in the air. This will be the start of their eternity face-to-face with Christ.

The Thessalonian believers know that the return of the Lord will be sudden and unexpected (5v3). But although they do not know the date or time, they know with certainty that it will happen, because of their status as “sons of the light and sons of the day.” So, as they wait for the return of Christ, they are live up to their status, being self-controlled and putting on faith and love. The reality of judgement, while horrible for those who don't know Jesus, should actually excite and encourage the Thessalonian Christians because they do not face wrath but salvation. And whether they are awake or asleep (i.e. dead) when he returns, they will live together with him (v10).

- What difference does the hope of the return of Jesus make to our lives?
- What difference should it make? How should it change our attitudes and behaviour?

### ***Life together as a church (5v12-24)***

The last few verses of the letter are a list of important pointers that Paul gives as he closes. But they are all linked, in that they offer guidance for how to live together as a group of believers, and how to continue growing in their discipleship. They are to respect and love their leaders for the work they do, and they are to live in peace with each other (v13). He gives advice about the best way to handle different kind of people; the idle will need warning, the timid will require encouragement, and the weak will need help. All will need patience (v14). And whatever happens, two wrongs do not make a right – instead, they are to be kind to one another (v15).

He tells them to “be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (v16-18). Paul wants their attitude to be right. It would have been easy for them to wallow in self-pity, given the trials they were facing, but their joy and gratitude is not based on their situation, it is based on the gospel. Next is a test for them to apply to prophecy and new teaching – a crucial skill for them to learn if they are to make it on their own. They are to listen to encourage and listen to prophecy, but they are to be discerning about what to accept, holding on to what is good and avoiding what is evil (v19-22).

Paul's concern in all of this is that they would be sanctified by God, that they would continue to grow and that they would be kept blameless until the return of Christ. God has clearly called them, so Paul is confident that he will keep them.

- Do we put these 'simple' ideas into practice as Ferndale Baptist Church?
- What would it look like to be joyful always, praying continually and giving thanks in all circumstances?

### ***Closing Greetings (5v25-28)***

He closes the letter with a request for prayer. He wants his greetings to be passed on to all the brothers (i.e. the rest of the Thessalonian believers), and he wants his letter to be read to all of them. This is not just meant for the leaders of the church or a select few – Paul's care and concern, and the letter they motivate him to write, apply to all of them (v27). And they apply to us too.

## **1 Thessalonians and Us**

In 1 Thessalonians, as in all of Paul's letter, we are privileged to be able to 'listen in' on correspondence between an apostle and a church he clearly loves and cares about. This means there are two ways we can apply this letter to our lives.

Firstly, we can learn from the teaching and instructions Paul directs towards the Thessalonians. His guidance on how to live together as believers apply to us too. And we should not be tempted to think of this letter as basic – we often forget the basic values Paul covers, such as love and holiness. We can also forget where our hope lies. The Thessalonians clearly needed reminding – 2 Thessalonians covers similar ground! We may feel we understand 'the second coming' better than the Thessalonians did, but is it a daily reality for us? And does it affect our lives?

Secondly, we can learn from Paul. Here he explains some of the features of his ministry among the Thessalonians. We can learn from the way he lived among the Thessalonians like both a mother and a father, sharing his life with them (do we take the time to do this with each other, let alone with non-Christians?). And we can learn from his absolute confidence in the gospel and in God's sovereignty.

It would be a mistake to try to decide if we are more like Paul or the Thessalonians. The truth is, we need to realise we are like both. We need to learn what it means to live as Christians, just like the Thessalonians did. But we also need examples to follow, role-models who know what it means to live in the light of the gospel, with an eternal perspective. We have such an example in Paul, and 1 Thessalonians gives us an insight into his life and attitudes. And so while we may feel more like the Thessalonians, the window this letter gives us into Paul's life gives us something to aim for.