

The Thessalonian Letters: Faith, Love, and Hope

Introduction

The two New Testament letters to the Christians at Thessalonica reveal the pastoral heart of Paul the missionary. He and the missionary leadership team had established the church at Thessalonica in the Roman province of Macedonia, the same province as Philippi, near the midpoint of the first century AD (see Acts 17:1-9). According to Acts, after spending only a brief time there, the leadership team had left the city and continued the missionary efforts in Berea, Athens, and Corinth. Out of pastoral concern for the Thessalonian Christians and a desire to provide them further instructions on some questions they had, Paul wrote back to them. The result is our two New Testament letters, 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

First Thessalonians is the oldest letter of Paul, having been written about 50 AD. Mark, the first of the four gospels to be written down, likely did not appear until the mid 60s. It is possible that the Book of James is the oldest New Testament book, perhaps written as early as 48 AD, but it is also possible that 1 Thessalonians itself is the very earliest New Testament book to have been written.

First and Second Thessalonians resemble each other in structure, and each contains some elements that remind us of the other. In each letter, Paul began by giving thanks for the church at Thessalonica. In the first session on 1 Thessalonians we will study the sort of church it was and seek to discover qualities we can apply to our own churches (1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 2:13-20; 3:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4).

Especially in 1 Thessalonians, Paul described the way in which he and the missionary leadership team sought to give leadership to the Thessalonians. The second session on 1 Thessalonians looks at the qualities of leadership that Paul commended and the leadership team demonstrated (1 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 5:12-13). This session will call us to consider the kind of leadership we ourselves value.

The third session focuses on the ways in which the Thessalonian Christians were to live so as to please God (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12; 5:14-21). This session will challenge us to measure our lives by these qualities.

The fourth session treats a theme that appears in both letters—the Christian hope and the return of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:5—2:12). Much space is given in each letter to this theme. Our study will emphasize the treatment of this theme in 1 Thessalonians. This passage, particularly 4:13-18, has long been the source of great help to Christians who have lost loved ones. As we study the Christian hope in this session, the message for the Thessalonian Christians and for us is to "encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18), rather than to fear or ignore them. Studying this passage should enable us to deal in a Christian manner with death—the death of our loved ones and, lest we forget, of ourselves. On the other hand,

the difficulty of understanding the eschatological teachings in 2 Thessalonians, especially 2:3-12, has long been acknowledged. No less a scholar than the great theologian Augustine, a fifth-century church leader, said of 2 Thessalonians 2:7, "I admit that the meaning of this completely escapes me."¹ Thus the eschatological passages in 2 Thessalonians are in the background rather than being the focal text.

The final session deals with a problem that appears in both letters—the failure on the part of some of the Thessalonians to express their Christian faith in their daily work (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13). They simply did not work, evidently expecting others to support them. This session gives us an opportunity to consider how we ourselves live out our faith in an area we often neglect—our daily work.

Biblical Teaching #22 The Thessalonian Letters: Faith, Love, and Hope

Unit 49: Instructions for Christian Living

22-49-00-en	The Thessalonian Letters: Faith, Love, and Hope -- Introduction	
22-49-01-en	A Church for Which to Be Grateful	1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 2:13-14
22-49-02-en	Leadership That Inspires Followers	1 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 5:12-13
22-49-03-en	Instructions for Lives That Please God	1 Thessalonians 4:1-12; 5:14-22
22-49-04-en	Hope for Loved Ones and Ourselves	1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11
22-49-05-en	Faith That Works in the Workplace	2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

¹ Augustine, *City of God*, chapter 20, cited in F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), 185.