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1 THESSALONIANS

*Live holy lives until Jesus returns*

WRITTEN

50 AD

KEY VERSE

*"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

5:23

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PURPOSE

Explain how they should live until Jesus returns and what will happen to those who die before Jesus returns.

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## Introduction

Acts 17 tells of when the congregation in Thessalonica was founded in the year 49-50 AD on Paul's second missionary journey. After only a few weeks, he had to flee the city because of the Jews (Acts 17:2, 5). It is probably the same Jews who are persecuting the Thessalonians now (2:14, 3:3), and Paul encourages them to persevere under persecution.

Because he was chased out so quickly, he probably did not have time to finish the basic teaching for this young church. Therefore, he continues in this letter. Timothy has also visited them (perhaps Paul himself was forbidden by the authorities to return) and probably told Paul that they especially wonder what happens to those who have already died before Jesus' return. Paul explains this in 4:13-18. He also writes about how Jesus' return will happen in chapter 5. That day will come as a surprise to the world, but not to the Christians - because they are ready for Jesus to return at any time (5:6, 23). The most important thing is how they should live until this happens - not to figure out when it will happen (5:1-2).

1 Thessalonians was written from Corinth around 50 AD.

### Historical reconstruction

Acts 17:1-9: The church in Thessalonica was founded at the beginning of the second missionary journey, which took place between 49-52 AD.

Acts 17:14-15: Silas and Timothy meet Paul in Athens. Timothy is then sent back to Thessalonica and Silas to another city in Macedonia (Berea? Philippi?). Paul then goes on to Corinth.

Acts 18:2 = 49 AD

Acts 18:5 - Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia to Paul in Corinth = 1 Thessalonians 3:6

Acts 18:11 - Paul spent 18 months in Corinth, so 1 (and 2) Thessalonians were probably written in 50-51 AD from Corinth.

### The situation in the congregation

* Acts 17:4-5: It consists of some Jews, many Greeks (1:9), and *"quite a few prominent women"*, Jason. Has a leadership (5:12), but probably a rather small congregation.
* Persecution is ongoing (1:6, 2:14, 3:3).
* Some seem to have criticized Paul for how he behaved when he was there (2:1-16)
* They were concerned about what happened to those of them who died before Jesus' return (4:13,18).
* The congregation is relatively young. Paul was there for only 3-4 weeks, and he wrote this letter shortly afterward. Should be read as a "follow-up letter" to new Christians. (cf. 3:10)
* No trace of false teaching.

### Structure

**Encouragement (Strengthens the ties between them and Paul)**

1:1 - 2:16 How they received the gospel

2:17 - 3:13 Paul will visit them

**How to live until Jesus' return (The remaining teaching)**

4:1-12 Godly lifestyle

4:13 - 5:11 Jesus' return

5:12-28 Exhortations to a godly life

## Opening (Ch. 1)

A preview of the topics in the letter:

v. 3: *"your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."* → 1:6-10, 2:13, 3:6-9, 3:12, 4:9-10, 5:11 → It goes the right way

v. 4: *"he has chosen you"* → 5:9, 2 Thess 2:13

vv. 5-6: *"our gospel came to you"* → 2:1-16

v. 10: *"to wait for his Son from heaven"* → 2:19, 3:13, 4:13 - 5:11, 5:23

## Reminders:

1:5 *"You know how we lived among you for your sake."*

2:1 *"You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results."*

2:5 *"You know we never used flattery"...*

2:9 *"Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship"*

2:10 *"You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were…"*

2:11 *"You know that we dealt with each of you as a father…"*

3:3 *"For you know quite well that we are destined for them."*

3:4 *"When we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know."*

4:1 *"We instructed you how to live…"*

4:2 *"You know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus."*

5:2 *"For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."*

## Election

1 Thess 1:4 *"We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you"*

1 Thess 5:9 *"God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

2 Thess 2:13 *"God chose you as firstfruits to be saved"*

### Why is he writing this?

To encourage them as they face persecution (3:2-4)

➡ If the election had been a guarantee that they would always believe, he would have no reason to be worried. (3:5, 8)

### If the idea is taken from the election of Israel in the OT...

Used about the whole people and not individual people. Paul seems to be using it for the whole church.

➡ Quite possible for Israel to fall away even if they were chosen...

➡ NT: Also possible to fall away from the faith even if one is chosen.

## Calling

2:12 *"God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."*

4:7 *"For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life."*

5:23-24 *"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”*

2 Thess 1:11 *"With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling"*

2 Thess 2:13-14 *"God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel…”*

A call to live holy lives that lead to salvation (the final salvation at Jesus' return).

## 2:1-16

*"does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you... not trying to please people…never with flattering words... never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed... not looking for praise from people..."* (vv. 3-6)

Paul does not want to be put in the same category as other itinerant religious teachers or philosophers who tried to exploit people. It is probably the Jews in Thessalonica who claim that he does so. Their goal is to get Christians to give up their faith.

v. 9: Besides preaching, Paul and his co-workers also worked to earn a living (as in Acts 18:3). They also received a gift or two from the Philippians (Phil 4:16).

vv. 10-12: Reminds the believers in Thessalonica of how righteous and blameless Paul and his co-workers were among them.

## 2:14-16

*"Jews are the executioners of the Lord, murderers of the prophets, enemies of God, haters of God, opposers of grace, enemies of the faith of their fathers, advocates of the devil, brood of vipers, slanderers, scoffers, people of darkened minds, an assembly of demons, sinners, wicked people, stoners and haters of all that is good.”* Gregory of Nyssa, 4th century (the quote has been translated)

*"Judaism is a corruption. Judas is truly the image of the Jewish people. Their understanding of the scriptures is carnal, but most of all they bear the blame for the death of the savior. They killed Christ."* Augustine, 354–430 (the quote has been translated)

### Who is he talking about?

The non-Christian Jews in Judea in Paul's time persecuted Christians and hindered the gospel. He does not speak generally of all Jews at all times, since he does not include himself and other Jewish Christians in this group. It is the Jews who "do not please God" and "stand against all men".

### What is the point?

He compares the Thessalonians with the Jewish Christians in Judea. Both are persecuted by their own countrymen. According to Acts 17, the Thessalonians were also persecuted by Jews. He encourages them in the face of persecution by reminding them about God’s final judgment.

Paul's theology about the Jews is found in Romans 9-11, not here.

### *"The wrath of God has come upon them at last"* (v. 16)

What does this point to?

1. Something concrete in Judea at that time

* Cumanus (governor of Judea in 48-52)
* Killed thousands of Jewish pilgrims on Passover in the year 49 or 50 AD.
* Was also brutal when he had to stop the riots between Jews and Samaritans in the years 51-52 AD. The Jewish leaders were sent to Rome for questioning.

2. The judgment that happens with Jesus' return

* *"At last"* has the meaning "to the end" in Matt 10:22.

## 4:1-12: Godly lifestyle

### 1. Holiness (vv. 1-8) = God's will → how we should live

Making progress in holiness = belonging to God and acquiring His character.

Practical: avoid sexual immorality (v. 3)

The Bible's definition: all sexual relations outside of marriage

vv. 4-5: holiness as opposed to passionate lust

v. 6: no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister (something other than v. 9… adultery?)

v. 7: God does not call us to be impure but to live a holy life.

v. 8: Rejection of the call to holiness = rejection of God

Rejection of these instructions from Paul (v. 2) = rejection of God (v. 8)

### *"in a way that is holy and honorable"* (4:4-5)

v.4 Should it be translated as *"learn to acquire a wife"* or *"learn to control your own body"*?

*"wife"*

* used in 1 Pet 3:7. Silas helped Peter write 1 Peter (1 Pet 5:12).
* the word is also used for wife in some Jewish texts.
* usually, the verb means "acquire", not "control".

*"body"* (NIV, NASB, NIV, NKJV, NRSV)

* In 2 Cor 4:7, it means the body.
* Jewish ethics used this word when referring to the body.

Anyway, holiness is the opposite of "sensual desire", both in terms of marriage and one's own life.

### 2. The brotherly love (vv. 9-12)

v. 11: Did anyone take advantage of this brotherly love and stop working, maybe because they believed Jesus' return was near? This topic is also brought up in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15.

## What about those who have died before Jesus returns? (4:13-18)

They don't have to worry about the dead. The dead in Christ won't miss anything but will actually rise first.

v. 15:

* *"the Lord’s word"*: Most clearly in Matt 24:30-31, John 5:25, 28-29, 6:39-40, 11:25-26.
* *"coming"*: literally *“presence”* (2 Corinthians 10:10, ESV) or *“arrival”*. Often used about royal visits.

v. 16: A royal visit to a city would be announced by a herald.

v. 17: *"meet"*:

* The word was used for a welcoming committee that went out of town to escort a royal into the town.

Jesus comes to earth as the King, is met by His people (the living and the dead) in the clouds, and then escorted back to the earth (which will be new).

## But doesn't verse 17 describe the "rapture"?

Not interpreted as such until 1830. Supposed to have occurred when Margaret Macdonald was so ill that she thought she was going to die. She is said to have experienced a mixture of prophecies and visions for several hours. She became convinced that Jesus was going to come twice instead of once: first in glory for those who wait for him, and later so that every eye can see Him.

## Are we going to be ready when that happens? (5:1-3)

* Like a thief: Matt 24:42-44, Luke 12:39, 2 Pet 3:10, Rev 3:3, 16:15.
* Acts 1:7: *"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."*

### “While people are saying…”:

* *"People"* refers to the non-Christians, since it is in contrast to *"you, brothers and sisters"* (v. 4).
* Inscriptions throughout the kingdom said that Rome had brought "peace and security". Paul probably criticizes these slogans and the propaganda about the Pax Romana.
* The Christians are not surprised (v. 4), because they are always ready.

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|  | **1 Thess** | **Matthew** |
| Jesus is coming | 4:16 | 24:30 |
| From heaven | 4:16 | 24:30 |
| Together with angels | 4:16 | 24:31 |
| With the trumpet call of God | 4:16 | 24:31 |
| Believers gather with Christ | 4:17 | 24:31 |
| In the clouds | 4:17 | 24:30 |
| At an unknown time | 5:1-2 | 24:36 |
| Like a thief | 5:2,4 | 24:43 |
| The world is surprised by the judgment | 5:3 | 24:37-39 |
| Be awake | 5:6 | 24:42-44 |
| Warnings against drunkenness | 5:7 | 24:49 |

## Exhortations to a godly life (5:12-28)

vv. 12-13: Attitude towards leaders. A leader does not rise above others but works more.

v. 14: The whole congregation must take responsibility for *"those who are idle and disruptive"*, *"encourage the disheartened"* and *"help the weak"*. It is biblical to keep your life in order.

v. 15: Be kind to everyone, even those outside the church. Don't pay wrong for wrong.

vv. 16-18: God's will for them: Always rejoice, always pray, and always give thanks to God.

vv. 19-22: Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Let the Spirit work, but test everything.

## Application

We are not asked to interpret signs and try to calculate when Jesus will come, but we are asked to always be ready. Jesus comes unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.

While we wait, God calls us to live holy lives. (2:12; 3:13; 4:1, 3, 7-8; 5:22-23)

We still have to work and plan for the future. (4:11-12, 5:14)

Mission Strategy: Live a life that is not easily criticized by opponents. (2:1-12)