

Thessalonica: A Model Church

“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and



Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10¹

1 Thessalonians Series

We are making Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians our focus at the start of this year. What will we learn? Only the Spirit knows, but we shall explore the church in Thessalonica, the character and heart of the apostle Paul, and, most importantly, God himself. We are looking at a letter jam-packed with references to God, Father, Jesus, Christ, Lord and Holy Spirit - a total of 97 mentions in 89 verses. While it is true that we will learn practical aids to our Christian lives, we will, more significantly, learn a great deal about our Heavenly Father.

Subscribe to the Thames Valley podcast feed and YouTube channel to make sure you do not miss the daily devotionals based on 1 Thessalonians as well as the teaching classes.

¹ The picture above is taken of the Odeon in the Roman Forum in Thessalonica. The odeon was a small public meeting place used for various public functions in the forum.



Typical 1st century synagogue

1 Thessalonians Background

Beginnings

Let's remind ourselves how the church began. Read Acts 16 and 17 for the context. Paul, Silas (a link between Paul & Peter, 1 Peter 5:12) and Timothy arrived from Philippi, further east, where he had been imprisoned. There he had preached in the open, since there was no synagogue. That was not his normal approach, and once in Thessalonica he reverted to his more normal pattern - at least, until he was thrown out!

“As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,” (Acts 17:2 NIV11)

Paul preached on three Sabbaths, converting some Jews, some Gentiles and “quite a few prominent women.” Acts 17:4 Although the harvest was plentiful, so was the persecution.

“...they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.” (Acts 17:5)

It looks to me that, although Paul would have been happy to stay (his record demonstrates that he was not short on courage), he took local advice and agreed, for the good of the church, to depart,

“As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.” (Acts 17:10 NIV11)



Location

Where is Thessalonica? It is modern day Thessaloniki, or Salonica, about 200 miles north of Athens. At that time it was the capital of Macedonia and the largest city in the region. It was strategically situated on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway to the East.

Dates

When was 1 Thessalonians written? In the mid-50s AD. It was Paul's second letter after the one to the Galatians. Jesus had been crucified, resurrected and ascended only 20 years earlier. The memories of his life and teaching were fresh in the memories of his followers.



Membership

What do we know of the make up of the church in Thessalonica? Most of them were likely not wealthy since Paul was at pains to stress he did not depend on them:

“Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.” (1 Thessalonians 2:9 NIV11)

It is also the case that he does not warn them about materialism, which he mentions in several of his other epistles. They are young Christians. The entire church is composed of disciples of one year or less of following Christ.

Outline and Structure

We can divide up the letter in various ways, but I offer this one taken from ‘Outlines of Bible Books’, by Lang, Ward, and Nelson.

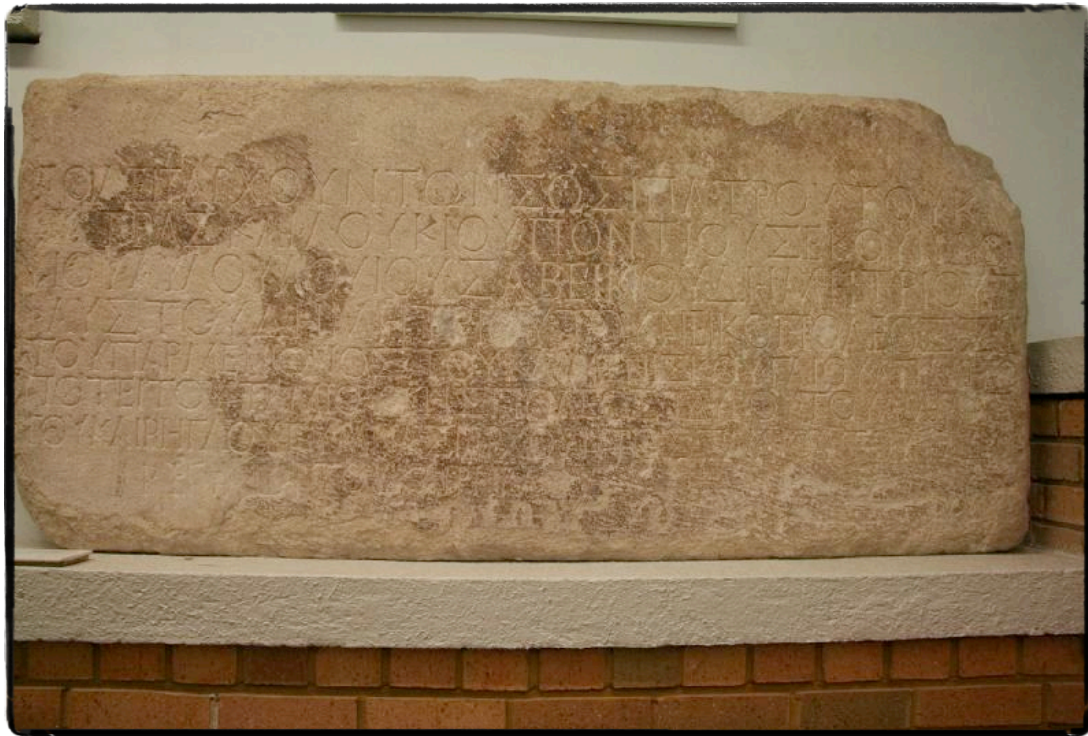
- I. Paul’s Greeting (1:1)
- II. Paul Gives Thanks for the Thessalonians (1:2-10)
- III. Paul’s Ministry to the Thessalonians (2:1-3:13)
 - A. Paul’s Ministry in Thessalonica (2:1-16)
 - B. Paul’s Desire to Return (2:17-3:5)
 - C. Prayer for the Thessalonians (3:6-13)
- IV. Paul’s Instructions to the Thessalonians (4:1-5:22)
 - A. Living to Please God (4:1-12)
 - B. The Coming of the LORD (4:13-5:11)
 - 1. The Living and the Dead (4:13-18)
 - 2. The Day of the LORD (5:1-11)
 - C. Instructions on Church Life (5:12-22)
- V. Closing Grace (5:23-28)

You can gain insight into a book by making your own outline. As you read the text, where do the natural breaks happen? When does Paul extend a topic, and when does he move on to something new? Can you find his shift from personal to congregational, or from God to local needs?

Apologetics and Thessalonica

Some say there are anachronisms in Luke's account of Paul's travels. One such is about the politarchs mentioned in Thessalonica:

“they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here...” (Acts 17:6–7)



The phrase ‘city officials’ translates the Greek word ‘politarches’. No evidence of people with that title was found until the 19th century. In the 1800s archaeologists dismantled a 1st century arch called the Vardar Gate which spanned the Egnatian Way at the west side of the city. This inscription was discovered: “In the time of the Politarchs ..” (on the stone in the picture). Since then a total of 35 inscriptions mentioning politarchs have been found.

Luke was right - again. In his writings he mentions 32 countries, 54 cities and 9 islands. He makes no mistakes. Not one. Luke was a historian of the highest calibre. We can trust what he wrote - including his account of what happened in Thessalonica.

Although my faith does not depend on archaeology, I find it to be a helpful bolster to my faith knowing authors of Scripture like Luke checked their facts and wrote accurately.

Questions for Reflection

Below you will find some questions based on the themes from chapter 1 of Thessalonians. Use them for personal or group reflection and study.

A Model Church

“And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.” 1 Thessalonians 1:7–8

Model: τύπος, typos. Meaning an impression; a print, mark, of a wound inflicted, Jn. 20:25; a delineation; an image, statue, Acts 7:43; a formula, scheme, Rom. 6:17; form, Acts 23:25; a figure, counterpart, 1 Cor. 10:6; an anticipative figure, type, Rom. 5:14; a model pattern, Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5; a moral pattern, Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:7; 2 Thess 3:9; 1 Tim 4:12; Tit 2:7; 1 Pet 5:3

- What was this church modelling? What would it look like?
- What can we imitate in this church that could make us a model church?
- What would God need to do, and how can we cooperate with him?

From Today’s Sermon

1. God-focussed (15 mentions in 10 verses)

- What does it mean to be God-focussed?
- What resources will help you to be God-focussed this year?

2. Turning to serve (v9)

- Turning away: Do you have something to turn away from in order to serve God? What resources do you have to help you?
- Turning towards: What opportunities has God given you to serve one another and the lost? What will help you to serve in faith, love and endurance (v3) this year?

I hope you find these resources helpful. Read 1 Thessalonians several times over the next few weeks. It will richly reward your time and dedication. Let’s learn everything we can from Paul and the Thessalonians.

Your brother, Malcolm