

“No Rest for the Righteous” (1 Thessalonians Overview)

THE TITLE: 1 Thessalonians is the first of two canonical letters written to the church at Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a busy seaport town on a major road (i.e., the Egnatian Way) in northern Greece. In the time of Paul it was the chief city of Macedonia.

THE PURPOSE: To communicate thanksgiving, exhortation, and instruction to new believers in the midst of persecution. The intended result, then, is that the saints at Thessalonica (and in the ages to come) might (1) excel still more (1 Thess 4:1, 10) and (2) be blameless at Christ’s coming (3:13; 5:23).

THE THEME: The return of Jesus Christ should spiritually affect our individual lives and churches. Every chapter in 1 Thessalonians ends with reference to the return of Jesus Christ, and each reference relates the doctrine to a practical aspect of Christian living. Here is a summary: 1:10 (salvation and assurance); 2:19-20 (soul-winning and service); 3:11-13 (stability in Christian living); 4:13-18 (strength in sorrow); and 5:23-24 (sanctification of life). Furthermore, over a quarter of 1 Thessalonians deals with problems and issues regarding the return of Christ.¹

THE AUTHOR: The apostle Paul identifies himself twice as the author of 1 Thessalonians (1:1; 2:18). The inclusion of Silvanus and Timothy in the greeting does not mean that they were coauthors. Rather, these men were with Paul in Corinth (Acts 17:10, 16; 18:1) as he was writing the letter (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor 1:19) and played a strategic role in assisting him in the building up of the Thessalonian church (Acts 16:1-3; 17:4, 10, 14).

THE AUDIENCE: The church at Thessalonica consists of recent converts, mostly from a Gentile background (1 Thess 1:9). This would account for the reason Paul never quotes directly from the Old Testament.

THE TIMES: When Paul founded the Thessalonian church, he and his companions were driven out of Thessalonica by jealous Jews (Acts 17:1-10). Paul sent Silvanus and Timothy back to Thessalonica to see how the young Christians were doing (1 Thess 3:1-6). 1 Thessalonians is either the first or second oldest book in the New Testament, depending on the dating of Galatians. Scholars date 1 Thessalonians at approximately 50-51 A.D., meaning that it was written only 18 years after Jesus’ life and death. As such it is one of the earliest pictures we have of the Christian church. Paul becomes the first Christian missionary to set foot in Europe and thus 1 Thessalonians is our earliest missionary document.

KEY WORDS: “Brethren/brother” (19x’s),² encourage/exhort (8x’s).³

KEY VERSE:

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13: “And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.”

CHRIST IN 1 THESSALONIANS: Christ is seen as the believer’s hope of salvation, both now and at His coming. When He returns, He will deliver (1:10; 5:4-11), reward (2:19), perfect (3:13), resurrect (4:13-18), and sanctify (5:23) all who trust Him.⁴

SUMMARY STRUCTURE:

1. Looking back (1:1-3:13)
2. Looking forward (4:1-5:28)⁵

The Structural Outline of the Epistle⁶

Theme Passage	Development
What manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols	2:1–3:13
To serve the living and true God	4:1–12
And to wait for His Son from heaven	4:13–5:11

Notes

¹ Robert L. Thomas, “1 Thessalonians,” In *Ephesians-Philemon*. Vol. 11 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. 12 vols. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), Electronic ed.

² Only 1 Corinthians uses the term “brethren” (*adelphoi*) more frequently than 1 Thessalonians, however, it is three times longer.

³ In all of Paul’s letters, the highest concentration of the technical vocabulary for encouragement or exhortation is found in 1 Thessalonians. *Parakaleo* (“encourage, exhort”) appears eight times, *eratao* (“ask”) twice, *noutheto* (“admonish”), and *paramytheomai* (“console”) twice. See Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 237.

⁴ Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 419.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁶ See René Lopez, “To Possess One’s Vessel: 1 Thessalonians 4:4,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 11:2 (Fall 2005): 25.