

Reading 1 and 2 Thessalonians

Key Historical Background to 1 Thessalonians

- Paul, Silas and Timothy were the first to share the Gospel in Thessalonica, where many Jews and Gentiles came to believe and follow Jesus (Acts 17:1-4). Very quickly, Paul and the others faced persecution and even violent danger from the Jewish community there (Acts 17:5-6; 1Thess 1:6; 2:2). Thus, Paul was forced to leave the city prematurely (Acts 17:9-10).
- Paul was concerned for these new believers, so he sent Timothy to them a few months later (1Thess 3:1-2), who brought back a good report to him (3:6-10). The report did relay some big questions and problems the church faced, and in this letter Paul addresses those issues.
- The questions related to the timing and meaning of Jesus' return, what happens to believers who die before Jesus' return, and how believers should live as they wait for that day. Paul's letter mentions the coming of Jesus in every chapter, and shows how Paul connected Christian hope with everyday living.

Summary of Main themes in 1Thessalonians

Paul encourages the Thessalonians for growing in their faith (1:1-8), and turning from idols to follow Jesus and wait for his coming (1:9-10). Paul wants them to see that hardship and suffering can be expected in the journey of following Jesus, and that persecution will likely continue for them, though God will be faithful to them (2:1-16). Paul longed to know that the believers were doing all right (3:1-10), and now prays that God help them increase in living holy lives, loving and serving each other (3:11-12). He challenges them that sexual purity is crucial to following Jesus (4:1-8), along with serving each other (4:9-12). He clarifies their questions about the return of Jesus: believers who have died will be raised from the dead at the second coming, and greet Jesus with all other believers when he comes to establish his kingdom (4:13-17). They should not pay attention to false announcements of Jesus' return, but simply be faithful in daily living and wait for Jesus' return (5:1-11). No one should ignore normal daily responsibilities while waiting for Jesus' return, but they should live peaceably and pursue the common good in the meantime (5:12-24).

Significant Things to Look For

- *Jesus' Return*: Paul talks more about Jesus' return in this letter than any other (he mentions it in every chapter), and so he demonstrates how the hope of Jesus's coming should permeate every aspect of a Christian's thinking and living: it offers hope of reward for sacrifice (2:19-20) and inspires holy living (3:12-13; 5:23-24) and rejection of idolatry (1:9-10). It also should transform how Christians grieve for the dead (4:13-17). It should not cause fear or worry or speculation (5:1-3), but should motivate a life of service to others and to Christ (5:4-11).

Continued on next page (2 Thessalonians)

Key Historical Background to 2 Thessalonians

- Paul wrote this letter shortly after 1 Thessalonians: he had received a troubling report (3:11) that certain problems in the church had gotten worse, and that their speculation about Jesus' return had increased and become out of control (2:1-2).
- In specific, some Thessalonian Christians came to believe that the "day of the Lord" (see 1Thess 5:1-2) had already taken place, and that the return of Jesus was imminent or that they had missed it (!). As a result, many of them were frightened (2:2), and were still undergoing persecution (1:4). Also, the problem of some people being "idle" and not working to support themselves had gotten worse (3:6-15, see 1Thess 5:12-14).

Summary of Main Themes in 2 Thessalonians

Paul prays that the faith of the Thessalonian Christians will endure their suffering (1:3-4). He encourages them that the return of Jesus will bring justice against those who oppose him and persecute his people (1:5-10), and so they should have courage and faith (1:11-12). They should not be afraid or speculate about the return of Jesus (2:1-2): his return will be preceded by times of great trial and difficulty (2:3), and by the rebellion of world leaders against God (2:3-4; here Paul draws on language from Daniel 11:36-37, an ancient description of the world rebellion before the messiah's coming). Whoever that leader of the world rebellion may be, God will defeat him at Jesus' return (2:5-12). This hope should foster courage and faith (2:13-17). It should also motivate Christians to work hard and pursue the common good, not to become lazy as if Jesus' return means that daily life is irrelevant (3:1-12). Hope in Jesus' return should motivate good works (3:13).

EAT THIS BOOK

