

# 1 Thessalonians (September 15)

## Reading 1 Thessalonians

Just inside the door to the women's quarters, a six-year-old boy stands listening to the instruction and encouragement of his father, who stands just outside. As the boy fidgets, the father urges him to stand straight and walk with honor. His father, as head of the household, has arranged for the boy's education and introduces him to a slave who will escort the boy to school. Peeking back into the house, the boy sees his mother nursing his three-year-old sister, even though the family could afford a wet nurse. His mother smiles and nods affectionately. The boy knows that, after stepping through this doorway, he must live a new life and learn from his father and his teacher.

When Paul describes his apostolic care for the new congregation at Thessalonica, he uses expressions of parental love. Paul feels the strain of separation from his "children" in the Lord as the result of persecution, which has driven him from Thessalonica. As a result, Paul writes an earnest, fatherly letter of instruction that beautifully illustrates law discipline and gospel care.

## Author, Date, and Place of Writing

Both external and internal evidence support the view that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. Paul's known characteristics are apparent in the letter. Historical allusions in the book fit Paul's life as recounted in Acts and in his own letters. In the face of such evidence, few have ever rejected authorship by Paul. It is generally dated circa AD 51. Except for the possibility of an early date for Galatians (48-49?), 1 Thessalonians is Paul's earliest canonical letter.

## Recipients and Purpose

Thessalonica was a bustling seaport city at the head of the Thermaic Gulf. It was an important communication and trade center, located at the junction of the great Egnatian Way and the road leading north to the Danube. Its population numbered about 200,000, making it the largest city in Macedonia. The background of the Thessalonian church is found in Acts 17:1-9. Since Paul began his ministry there in the Jewish synagogue, it is reasonable to assume that the new church included some Jews. However, 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 and Acts 17:4 seem to indicate that the church was largely Gentile in membership.

Paul had left Thessalonica abruptly (see Acts 17:5-10) after a rather brief stay. Recent converts from paganism were thus left with little external support in the midst of persecution. Paul's purpose in writing this letter was to encourage the new converts in their trials, to give instruction concerning godly living, to urge some not to neglect daily work, and to give assurance concerning the future of believers who die before Christ returns.

Although the thrust of the letter is varied, the subject of eschatology (doctrine of last things) seems to be predominant in both Thessalonian letters. Every chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a reference to the second coming of Christ. Thus, the second coming seems to permeate the letter and may be viewed in some sense as its theme. The two Thessalonian letters are often designated as the eschatological letters of Paul.

## Blessings for Readers

In this letter, Paul calls the believers to live in the gospel and to fulfill their calling in the joy of the Holy Spirit. He leaves us an example to follow: know the truths about Christ's return but do not obsess about them.

As you read 1 Thessalonians, reflect on Paul's pastoral concern for these new believers and also his thoughtful and comforting instruction. He shows great concern for their care and establishment in the gospel, which is also what we need most today.