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Lesson 1

Background of the Thessalonian Epistles

This opening lesson is devoted to a study of the background and setting of the Thessalonian epistles. Many Christians think of these letters merely as two books hidden in the New Testament's twenty-seven—and the identification stops there. Your study of this lesson will reveal how 1 and 2 Thessalonians fill a unique place in the New Testament. Here you will acquaint yourself with such things as why the books were written, to whom and by whom, and why God made them part of the New Testament.

Your diligence in studying this lesson will be amply rewarded in the studies that follow. You will feel more at home in the letters, and this will make it much easier for you to apply the Bible text in your own life.

I. THE CITY OF THESSALONICA

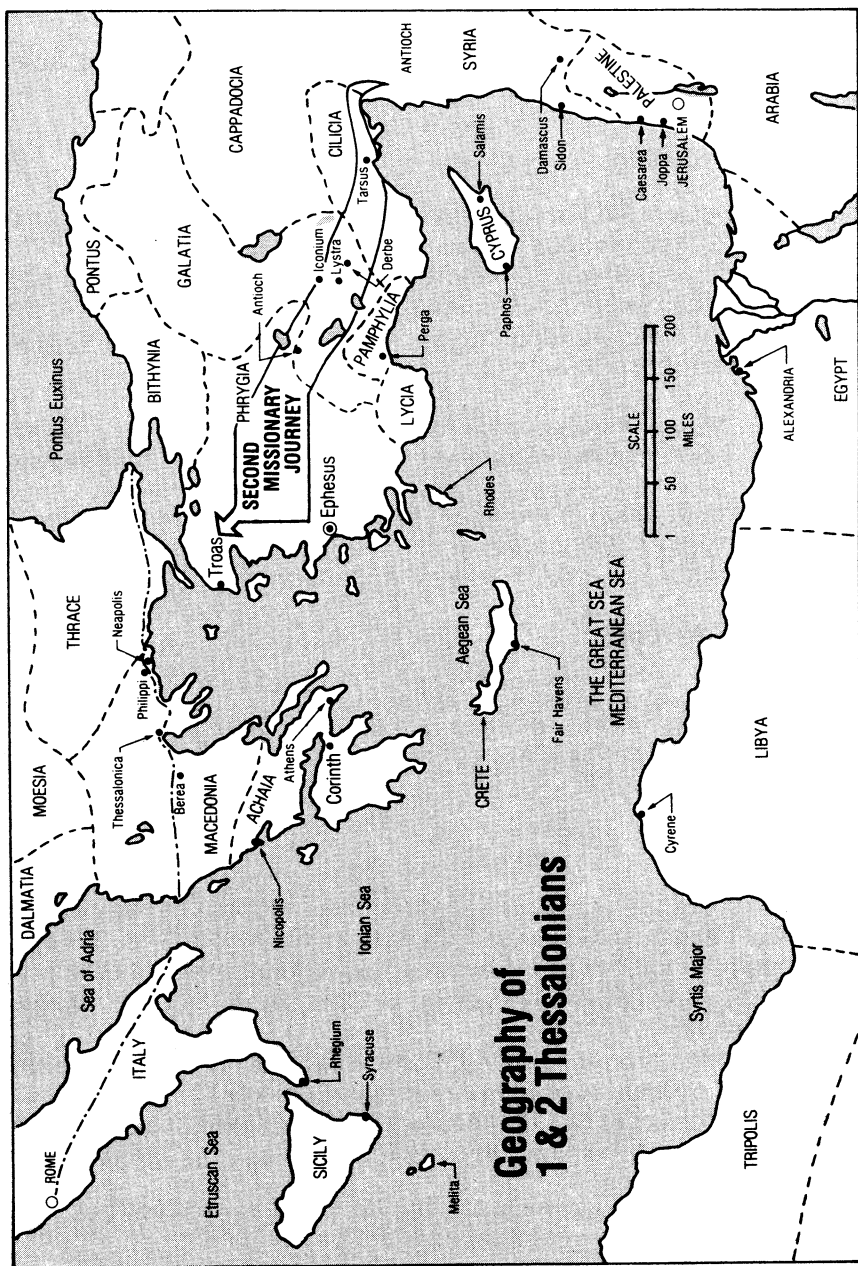
A. Name

The city was originally named Therme. When it was refounded by Cassander, around 315 B.C., he named it Thessalonica, after his wife.

B. Location

Study carefully the location of Thessalonica, as shown on the map. Note the city's strategic position as a port on the Egnatian Way, which was the principal east-west trade and military route between Rome and Asia Minor.¹ How does this strategic location shed light on 1 Thessalonians 1:8?

1. Sections of this fifteen-foot-wide paved highway remain to this day.



Observe the other two important cities of this part of Macedonia, Philippi and Berea, which Paul visited on his second missionary journey. Why did Paul concentrate much of his missionary tours in key cities of the empire?

Note the location of Corinth on the map. It was from here that Paul wrote both of the Thessalonian letters.

C. Population

The population of Thessalonica in Paul's day has been estimated at around 200,000 (about half its present population). Of this number most were Greeks, but there was also a fairly large Jewish segment in the city. From this description try to visualize Paul's impressions of the bustling city as he first entered it on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1):

With overland caravans thronging its hostelries, with its harbor filled with ships' bottoms from overseas, with old salts, Roman officials, and thousands of Jewish merchants rubbing shoulders in its streets, Thessalonica presented a cosmopolitan picture. It is very suggestive that the Jewish opponents of Paul should have called Paul and his co-workers "world-topplers" (Acts 17:6).²

D. Government

Thessalonica was made the capital of the province of Macedonia in 148 B.C. It gained the status of a free city in 42 B.C., electing its own government officials. (Note the reference to city rulers in Acts 17:6.)

F. Religion

Idolatry was the common religion of most of the Greeks. Nearby Mount Olympus, viewed daily by the people, stood as a symbol of the gods. In ancient times, it was at the summit of Mount Olympus that Zeus was believed to gather together all the gods of Greece for council.

The Jewish community of Thessalonica was either large or influential, or both, as seen from the action of Acts 17:5. The Acts account records the fact that Paul's first evangelistic preaching was done in the city's synagogue (Acts 17:1-4).

2. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Howard M. Vos, *The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), p. 457.

There was also a large Roman element, having a strong nationalistic devotion to the emperor, Caesar (cf. Acts 17:7).

II. THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF THESSALONICA

A. Paul's Evangelistic Campaign

Thessalonica was the second major city visited by Paul for an evangelistic ministry on his second missionary journey (Philippi was the first). Read Acts 17:1-10 for Luke's brief account of this ministry. Observe the following:

1. Upon arriving, Paul first told the gospel to the Jews in the synagogue. This was his customary procedure. How long did this mission continue?

2. Paul based his ministry on the Scriptures. What does the phrase "reasoned with them" (Acts 17:2) reveal about Paul's method of communicating the gospel to the Thessalonians?

3. Paul tried to establish three basic truths, in this order:

(a) Christ (the promised Messiah, Redeemer) had to suffer and die.

(b) Christ had to rise from the dead.

(c) The Jesus whom he preached was this Christ.

If you had only the Old Testament today, as Paul had then, how would you support each of the above three truths from those Scriptures? (If you are studying in a group, you may want to spend additional time discussing the subject.) For a starting point, see Isaiah 53.

4. Immediate results of Paul's ministry (Acts 17:4-5):

(a) Some Jews were converted.

(b) A great multitude of devout Greeks believed.

(c) A substantial number of leading women believed.

(d) The Jews who rejected Paul's message stirred up a riot.

(e) Paul was forced to leave the city.

5. Paul's later contacts with the Thessalonian Christians:

(a) Twice, Paul was hindered from returning to Thessalonica soon after his first visit (1 Thess. 2:17-18).

(b) He sent Timothy to minister in his place (1 Thess. 3:1-2).

(c) He wrote the two epistles.

(d) The apostle made at least two other visits to the area on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-4; 2 Cor. 2:12-13). Also he may have visited the Thessalonian church after his first Roman imprisonment.

B. Founding and Constituency of the Church

From the beginning, the newborn believers banded together in a Christian fellowship. What evidences of such a fellowship do you see implied in Acts 17:4, 6, 10? When Paul wrote to the group only a few months later, he addressed them as “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess. 1:1). No doubt the organization of the local church was simple at first. We do know the church had leaders, however, as shown by 1 Thessalonians 5:12.

Most of the church’s members were Gentiles, converted from idolatry (cf. Acts 17:4; 1 Thess 1:9). Some were Jews (Acts 17:4). From 1 Thessalonians 4:11, it has been concluded that for the most part the people were of the common working class. (See Acts 17:4*b* for a notable exception.) As young converts, the Christians at Thessalonica were a joy and inspiration to Paul, reliable and devoted followers of Christ. The bright tone of the two epistles confirms this.

III. THE FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

A. Author

Twice Paul identifies himself by name in the epistle: at 1:1 and 2:18. The title “apostle” does not appear in this letter or in 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, or Philemon. Some have suggested the reason for this is that any question of Paul’s authority does not enter into the discussions of these epistles.

Silvanus (Silas) and Timotheus (Timothy) are included in the opening salutation (1:1). Both were intimate workers with Paul. Read the following verses concerning each man:

1. Silas: Acts 15:22, 27, 32, 40; 16:19-20; 1 Peter 5:12
2. Timothy: Acts 16:1-3; Philippians 2:19-22; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 4:9, 21

B. Place and Date Written

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth, where the apostle spent eighteen months on the second missionary journey, soon after leaving Thessalonica (Acts 18:1, 11). (Refer to the Appendix and fix in your mind the chronology of Paul’s life and ministry. Note, among other things, when and where the apostle wrote each of his epistles.)

The date of writing 1 Thessalonians was around A.D. 52.³ The epistle was among the earliest of Paul's inspired writings.⁴ About how old was Paul when he wrote this letter? How old was he when he was saved? (See the Appendix.)

C. Occasion and Purposes

We have already observed that when Paul was hindered from visiting the Thessalonians (2:17-18), he partly made up for this by doing two things: sending Timothy to minister to them in his place (3:1-5); and writing this epistle after receiving Timothy's report about the church (3:6-13). (Read 3:10 for another thing that Paul did in behalf of the Thessalonians while absent from them.) This then was the occasion for writing 1 Thessalonians.

Paul had various purposes in mind in writing the letter. Some of the more important ones were:

1. to commend the Christians for their faith (3:6)
2. to expose sins (e.g., fornication, 4:3, and idleness, 4:11) and to correct misapprehensions (e.g., about the second coming of Christ, 4:13-17)
3. to exhort the young converts in their new spiritual experience (e.g., 4:1-12)
4. to answer false charges against Paul; such charges may have sounded like these:
 - (a) Paul was a money-making teacher, attracted by the rich ladies who attended his meetings. For Paul's replies, read such verses as 2:3, 9-10.
 - (b) Paul was a flatterer, with selfish goals in mind. Read 2:4-6.
 - (c) Paul was afraid to appear in person in Thessalonica again. Read 2:17-20.

Read each of the passages of this epistle in Table 1 and record the purposes Paul had in mind in writing these things.

D. Prominent Subjects

The prominent subjects of 1 Thessalonians reflect Paul's purposes in writing. Here are some of the major subjects:

1. affliction and persecutions of Christians
2. the second coming of Christ (the key doctrinal passage of the epistle is 4:13-18, the rapture of the church)
3. Some have placed the date as early as A.D. 50.
4. If Galatians was not the first to be written, as many hold, then the Thessalonian letters were Paul's first inspired writings.

Table 1

PASSAGE	PURPOSE
2:1-10	
2:14	
2:17-20	
3:6-8	
4:1-8	
4:11-12	
4:13-18	
5:1-11	
5:12-24	

3. thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' faith and endurance

4. encouragement to the church in their afflictions

5. exhortations to holy living

These subjects will be seen in the survey exercise of Lesson 2.

E. Characteristics

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians have the marks of typical New Testament epistles. They are like a doctor's diagnosis and prescription, blended together in one package. Some of the outstanding characteristics of 1 Thessalonians are:

1. It is intimate, heart-to-heart.

2. Its tone is gentle, affectionate, "a classic of Christian friendship."

3. The epistle is simple, basic.

4. There is an air of expectancy, especially concerning Christ's return.

5. The epistle gives one of the earliest pictures of the primitive New Testament church.

6. There are no quotations from the Old Testament. (Recall that most of the Thessalonian Christians were Gentiles, not Jews.)

7. There is not the usual abundance of doctrine in this epistle (4:13-18 being a notable exception).

8. Paul's style of writing is informal, personal, and direct. His style varied from letter to letter, as observed here:

The style of a letter depends largely on the occasion that calls it forth. That to the Galatians, for example, is full of force, alike of argument and feeling. In parts of the Corinthian Epistles, Paul waxes warm, becomes almost passionate, denouncing his enemies and yearning over his children. In Romans he is all logic, though he soars at times, as in ch. 8. In Ephesians and Colossians he is carried along by the very majesty and glory of his exalted theme, though he is nowhere more simply practical in any of his writings. But in this Epistle [1 Thessalonians] he is fervent, simple, natural, just talking to his beloved children in the Lord.⁵

9. Much may be learned about Paul in 1 Thessalonians from the way he wrote and what he emphasized. Tact, love, and humility are three qualities that appear often in the epistle.

F. Place in the New Testament

As noted earlier, the Thessalonian letters were among the earliest of Paul's New Testament writings. Chart A shows their place in the multicolored spectrum of the New Testament library. Study this chart carefully, and you will have a good grasp of the diversified background of the twenty-seven books.

* * *

SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS

Before leaving this lesson, it will be helpful to review what you have been studying thus far. See how many of the following questions you can answer without referring back to the lesson.

1. On what missionary journey did Paul first visit Thessalonica?

Name two nearby cities evangelized about the same time.

5. C.F. Hogg and W.E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, p. 5.

GROUPS OF NEW TESTAMENT EPISTLES

Chart A

NEW TESTAMENT						
HISTORY	EPISTLES					APOCALYPSE
MATTHEW MARK LUKE JOHN ACTS	Pauline				General	REVELATION
	EARLY	LATER			JAMES	
	during missionary journeys	after arrest at Jerusalem				
	GALATIANS	FIRST IMPRISONMENT ('prison epistles')	RELEASE	SECOND IMPRISONMENT	HEBREWS	
	1 THESSALONIANS	CHRISTOLOGICAL	PASTORAL		JUDE	
	2 THESSALONIANS	COLOSSIANS	1 TIMOTHY		1 PETER	
	1 CORINTHIANS	EPHESIANS	TITUS		2 PETER	
	2 CORINTHIANS	PHILEMON			1 JOHN	
	PHILIPPIANS	2 TIMOTHY		2 JOHN		
	ROMANS				3 JOHN	

2. What was the strategic location of Thessalonica?

3. Describe the average Thessalonian in Paul’s day.

4. What was the religious situation in Thessalonica when Paul arrived at the city?

5. What were the main points of Paul's first sermons in the synagogue?

What were the results of this ministry?

6. Where was Paul when he wrote 1 Thessalonians?

Why did he write the letter?

7. Name some prominent subjects in this epistle.

8. What are some of the letter's characteristics?

9. When did Paul write 1 Thessalonians, as compared with his other epistles?

10. What key doctrinal passage appears in this letter?
