

GOSPEL of *Grace*
FELLOWSHIP

1 & 2 Thessalonians
**Jesus Christ, the Coming One, Our
Returning Lord**
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F - L - I - G - H - T

F – The first verse of each book identifies the apostle Paul as the author. Paul helped establish the church at Thessalonica on his second missionary journey (AD 49-52). He taught the church for only about a month, then was forced by a group of unfriendly Jews to move on to Berea, Athens, and Corinth (Acts 17). After Paul was driven out, he wrote these two letters to address the issues the Thessalonian Christians faced.

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F - L - I - G - H - T

F – Paul wrote the first letter to the Thessalonians sometime during his second missionary journey, possibly from the city of Corinth, where Silas and Timothy had met up with him (Acts 18:1-5). First Thessalonians dates from between AD 50 and 51. Second Thessalonians was written very shortly after 1 Thessalonians, possibly within a month, sometime in AD 51 or 52.

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Dating of 1 Thessalonians

The date of 1 Thessalonians can be pinpointed by the following facts:

- An inscription in Delphi, Greece, dates the beginning of Gallio's office at circa AD 52.
- Paul was at Corinth 18 months before this (Acts 18:1-11).
- Paul came before Gallio, but it was after he was in Corinth (v. 12).
- 1 Thessalonians was written after Timothy returned to Corinth from visiting Thessalonica, a city in Macedonia (1:1; Acts 18:5), near the start of the 18 months – about AD 50-51.

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L – Written in the early days of the church, halfway through the first century, both 1 & 2 Thessalonians focus on things of the future. Because of that focus they are called eschatological epistles, or letters about the last days. First Thessalonians is about the Lord's return, and 2 Thessalonians is about the Lord's retribution.

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L – First Thessalonians is about the day of Christ, another euphemism for his coming for the church – called the rapture of the church, our gathering together unto him. Second Thessalonians is about the day of the Lord, an often used phrase in Scripture referring to a period of judgment we call the tribulation. Paul wrote both letters to encourage the young believers in the hope of Christ's return and to educate them about the nature of the end times.

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I - 1 Thessalonians

- Personal Commendation (1-3)
 - An edifying hope (1-2)
 - An enduring hope (3)
- Practical Exhortation (4-5)
 - An edifying hope (4)
 - An escaping hope (5)

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I - 2 Thessalonians

- Expectation in Adversities – Revelation of Christ (1-3)
- Explanation to the Alarmist – Revelation of Antichrist (4-5)
- Exhortation to the Apathetic – Revelation to Christ-ones (3)

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G - Paul summarized the power of the gospel by describing the three tenses of the Christian life: past, present, and future.

*“They themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and 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, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come**” (1 Thess. 1:9-10).*

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G -

*“**You turned to God from idols**” (v. 9): This describes your past. At one time you served the obsessions and distractions of this world-but then you turned and paced your faith and belief in God, trusting in Jesus’ death and resurrection.*

*“**To serve the living and true God**” (v. 9): When you received Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you also decided to make God first in your life. In response to his love and salvation, you now love and serve him through worship, obedience, and service.*

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G -

*“**To wait for His Son from heaven**” (v. 10): This describes our future expectation. Jesus will come back for us one day-first to take his church to be with him, and then to establish his kingdom on earth.*

These three tenses of the Christian life show up earlier in chapter 1, when Paul spoke of “remembering without ceasing [the Thessalonians’] work of faith [the past], labor of love [the present], and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ [the future] in the sight of our God and Father” (v. 3).

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G -

Notice the key words in that verse: faith, love, and hope. **Faith** looks back to a crucified Savior. **Love** looks up to a crowned Savior. And **hope** looks ahead to a coming Savior. It’s a wonderful way to summarize the work of Jesus Christ and all that he **has done, is doing, and will do** for his church.


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H – Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was a seaport city, located on a major trade route to the East. Founded in 316 BC and named after Alexander the Great’s sister Thessalonike of Macedon, it became the capital of the region in 148 BC. In the first century BC, it then became a free city – and a prosperous one at that. Sometime after AD 50, Paul visited Thessalonica with Silas, Timothy, and Luke during his second missionary trip (Acts 17). The pair of letters he wrote to the Thessalonians shortly afterward are among the earliest of all NT writings, which also shows that the doctrine of Christ’s return was paramount to the early church.


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Roman Empire



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Thessalonica



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F - L - I - G - H - T

T – **Keep your dependence on God fresh and authentic.** In only three weeks, Paul unleashed the power of the gospel and trusted the Thessalonian believers to hold tightly to it. When problems and challenges arise, especially as you do God’s work, they represent an opportunity to depend on him and continue in your work the same way you began: on your knees in prayer, reading his word, and trusting him as you watch him move.

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F - L - I - G - H - T

T – **Learn to live in anticipation of Jesus’ return.** Nobody knows how long it will be till he returns, but you can be sure that every single day it draws closer, and it will happen. Don’t be led astray by those who deny that the Lord will return; know what the Word says, know your church history and your current times, and most importantly, know by the witness of the Holy Spirit within you that Jesus is coming soon.

Everybody has faith in something. For the believer, growing in faith in God is crucial, and it takes two simple though sometimes difficult acts: immerse yourself in the Word of God, and exercise the faith God has given you. Paul praised the Thessalonians for their *“patience and faith in all [their] persecutions and tribulations that [they endured]”* (2 Thess. 1:4).

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Theme of 1 Thessalonians

- Expectation in Christ

Key Verse of 1 Thessalonians

- *“Remembering without ceasing your...hope [expectation] in our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1:3).

Emphasis of 1 Thessalonians

- Emphasis on Christ’s Coming: Each chapter has a verse on the return of Christ (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:16; 5:23). It is the only book to use the word *rapture* (meaning “catching away”) of Christ’s coming for his saints (4:17), though numerous other texts refer to the same event (for example, John 14:3; 1 Cor. 15:52; Phil. 3:20-21; 4:5; 1 John 3:2).

Other Characteristics

- This Epistle has a practical emphasis. It is rare in that it has commendations without much criticism. They were an exemplary young church, which Paul set forth as an example to others (1:6-8).

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Theme of 2 Thessalonians

- Glorification in Christ

Key Verse of 2 Thessalonians

- *“That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you [glorified] in Him” (1:12).*

▪ **Length of the Epistle:** Of all Paul’s epistles, only Titus and Philemon are shorter.

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Contrast of 1 & 2 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians	2 Thessalonians
coming for saints	coming with saints
rapture (in air)	revelation (on earth)
nature of Christ’s coming	time of Christ’s coming
nurse’s tenderness	father’s discipline
commendation	condemnation
coming of Christ	coming of Antichrist

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1 Thess. - Congratulations (1:1-3:13)

The first main section of 1 Thessalonians consists of congratulations to the Thessalonian believers on their conversion and on their progress in the Christian life. Their fidelity even in the midst of persecution is providing a good example to other Christians in Macedonia and Greece (Achaia). Timothy’s report about them has been very favorable.

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1 Thess. - Congratulations (1:1-3:13)

As usual, Paul combines the typical Greek greeting in a transmuted Christian form, “grace,” with the typical Semitic greeting, “peace.” The form of the word *grace* that non-Christian Greeks used carries the simple meaning of “hello,” but Paul changes the term to carry overtones of **divine favor** bestowed through Jesus Christ on ill-deserving sinners. “Peace” means more than the absence of warfare; it also carries the positive connotation of **prosperity** and **blessing**. A well-known triad of Christian virtues appears in 1:3: **faith, love, and hope**. Faith produces good works. Love results in labor, which means deeds of kindness and mercy.

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1 Thess. - Congratulations (1:1-3:13)

And hope, an eschatological term referring to confident expectation of Jesus return, generates steadfastness under trial and persecution.

In the middle of this congratulatory section, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of his loving, self-sacrificial ministry among them. Some have thought that he defends himself here against slander intended to destroy his influence. More probably, he stresses that in view of his laboring fervently among the Thessalonians, it gratifies him that they have responded well to the gospel.

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1 Thess. - Exhortations (4:1-5:28)

Paul expertly passes from congratulation to exhortation by telling the Thessalonian Christians to continue their progress. The commands to live quietly and keep working may rebuke those who believe so strongly in the immediacy of Jesus’ return that they are leaving their jobs. Paul’s unblushing advocacy of manual labor contrasts with the view typical of genteel Greeks, who held that sort of work in contempt.

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1 Thess. - Exhortations (4:1-5:28)

Rapture is the term commonly used to designate the catching up of Christians at the second coming as described in 4:16-17. *Translation* designates the **immortalizing** and **glorifying** of the bodies of Christians alive on earth when Jesus returns. Lack of need for a resurrection will necessitate such a change in their still-living but mortal bodies. The Thessalonian Christians have been sorrowing over the decease of fellow Christians, apparently because they do not realize that these fellow Christians will be resurrected at Jesus' return. Paul reassures his audience by explaining that deceased Christians will be resurrected just before the rapture in order that they may be taken up **along with** Christians who are still alive on earth.

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1 Thess. - Exhortations (4:1-5:28)

Then Paul shifts from **comfort** to **warning**. Christians must watch for the Day of the Lord ("the Lord's coming" [4:15] and following events) lest they be taken by surprise. Failure to watch is to put oneself in the category of the wicked, who *will* be caught unexpectedly. On the other hand, preparedness for the Day of the Lord consists of more than mental awareness. It includes also a mode of conduct characterized by obedience to commands such as those with which the letter closes.

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2 Thess. - Encouragement (1:1-3:18)

After an initial greeting, Paul again thanks God for the progress of the Thessalonian believers in their Christian life and for their patient endurance of persecution; but the commendation is much shorter than in 1 Thessalonians. Passing quickly to the subject of eschatology, Paul vividly describes the second coming, when persecutors will be judged and the persecuted relieved of their sufferings. His purpose is to encourage the Thessalonians to continued endurance by pointing forward to turning of the tables when Christ comes back.

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2 Thess. - Encouragement (1:1-3:18)

Then Paul begins to deal with their misunderstanding of the Parousia by saying that it is not immediate. Therefore, they should return to their jobs and businesses. Looking for Christ's return does not mean cessation of normal living. He may not return for some length of time.

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2 Thess. - Correction (2:1-5)

Paul's warning not to be deceived by false prophecy or by an oral or written report forged in his name suggests that leaders of the fanaticism in Thessalonica claimed his support. The phrase "man of lawlessness" refers to the coming antichrist. This evil figure will demand worship of himself in the temple of God. That is, he will try to force people to worship his image, which he will place in the Jewish temple at Jerusalem (Mark 13:14; Matt. 24:15; Rev. 13:1-18). Since elsewhere Paul calls Christians the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21), some suggest that the antichrist will arise as a self-deifying apostate within the church.

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2 Thess. - Correction (2:1-5)

Others seek a fulfillment in historical events. Some say that this concept of an antichrist originates in the myth that Nero had not really died but would return to Rome with a vengeance. But the concept of an antichrist long predates the reign of Nero. In order to make this idea work, 2 Thessalonians would have to be dated after Paul's martyrdom and after Nero's death! That simply is not the case.

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2 Thess. - Correction (2:1-5)

It is also suggested that Paul has in mind the unfulfilled order of Emperor Caligula in AD 40 that a statue of himself be erected for worship in the temple at Jerusalem.

Perhaps so, but Daniel's prophecy concerning the abomination of desolation (9:27; 11:31; 12:11), the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC, and Jesus' allusion to a still future abomination of desolation provide the primary background for Paul's statements.

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2 Thess. - Restrainer (2:6-12)

Paul feels it unnecessary to identify what or who restrains the antichrist from appearing at the proper time, for the Thessalonians already know from his oral teaching. The two most prevalent views are that the restraint consists: (1) in the activity of the **Holy Spirit**, keeping back the antichrist either directly or through the medium of the church or (2) in the institution of **human government** and ordained by God for the protection of law and order (the antichrist will be "lawless").

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2 Thess. - Restrainer (2:6-12)

But will those who are saved during the tribulation – those who respond to the gospel and receive Jesus Christ as their Savior – *not* receive the Holy Spirit? Will they *not* be part of the Body of Christ? It seems problematic to assert that the Holy Spirit will *not* be active on earth during the tribulation.

What will definitely not be present on earth during the tribulation is separate, competing governments – something that has persisted since the Tower of Babel. There will be an all-powerful, one-world government: *"They worshipped the beast, saying, 'Who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war with him?'"* (Rev. 13:4).

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Contribution of Thessalonians

When one thinks of the distinctive contribution of the Thessalonian letters, one thinks immediately of eschatology. And to be sure, the letters are a basic source for the eschatological teaching of Paul and the NT in general. Although eschatological teaching is concentrated in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 & 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, Paul implies its importance for the letters generally by identifying Jesus early in 1 Thessalonians as the one *"who rescues us from the coming wrath"* (1:10).

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Contribution of Thessalonians

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, as a way of comforting the Thessalonians in light of their misunderstanding of the relationship between dead and living believers at the Parousia, Paul goes into more detail than anywhere else on the precise sequence of events. At the Parousia, God will regather all the saints with Jesus. But they will be regathered in a particular order: *"the dead in Christ will rise first"* (4:16), and only then will those believers who are still alive be *"caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air"* (4:17).

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Contribution of Thessalonians

In addition to confirming the NT teaching about the resurrection of dead Christians, the text also pins down its time – at the Parousia – and teaches the doctrine of the "rapture": the "snatching up" of living Christians to meet Christ when he returns. Many scholars also find in this text an important confirmation of the idea that Paul and other early Christians believed in an **imminent** Parousia. Paul's use of "we" to refer to those who will be alive when the Lord returns does not necessarily mean that he was certain he would be alive at the Parousia. But he clearly reckons fully and even hopefully with the possibility that he might be alive when Christ returns.

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Contribution of Thessalonians

The following paragraph (5:1-11) emphasizes the idea of imminence further by comparing the Parousia to the coming of a thief in the night. Nevertheless, here it is the unbeliever, Paul claims, who will be caught by surprise when the Lord returns. Believers, knowing that the day of Christ's return is coming, will prepare themselves for it by living appropriately.

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Contribution of Thessalonians

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul confronts quite a different situation and thus focuses on a different side of his eschatology. Two important points emerge. First, Paul makes clear the reality of future judgment for those who are now tormenting the Thessalonians (1:6-10). Second, the day of the Lord, the time when God through Jesus intervenes to save his people and judge their enemies, will only occur after other preliminary events: the "rebellion" and the revelation of the man of lawlessness (2:3). Paul's language points to an outbreak of religious apostasy, focused especially on a last great "antichrist" figure.

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Contribution of Thessalonians

But it would be a mistake to think that the Thessalonian letters contribute only to our understanding of eschatology. Two other themes should especially be noted. First, 1 Thessalonians exhibits a striking emphasis on the word of God. Paul refers to the word, or message of the gospel, using a variety of formulations, nine times in chapters 1-2. And sometimes lost in the discussions of Paul's description of his own motives and methods in preaching in chapters 1-2 is the centrality of the word (1:5,6,8; 2:2,4,8,9,13) and the faith that is the natural and appropriate response to that word.

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Contribution of Thessalonians

Paul's purpose in these chapters is essentially to show the Thessalonians how he tried his best to get out of the way of the word of God – to let it loose so that it would have its full impact on their lives. It is not Paul the preacher who is important, but the message that he proclaimed. Paul identifies that message with the "word of God," and is thankful that the Thessalonians accepted it "*not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe*" (2:13). These verses remind us of the active and powerful nature of God's word, the message of the gospel. We find in 1 Thessalonians especially a strong "Word of God theology."

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Contribution of Thessalonians

A final significant contribution of 1 Thessalonians stems especially from its overall purpose: to strengthen the faith of new converts. Paul writes to nurture a young Christian community in the midst of a hostile and pluralistic environment – a situation not far off from the situation the church in our day faces. 1 Thessalonians deals with many of the problems faced by new converts, such as alienation from family and friends and the cooling of one's initial spiritual ardor. The persecution that so quickly arose was an immediate and painful sign of the alienation that they were experiencing.

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Contribution of Thessalonians

Paul reminds the church that such persecution is the norm to be expected (2:14-16; cf. 2 Thess. 1:5) and that it is their rootedness in the word of God that will keep them steadfast (1:6; 2:13). Paul therefore uses many familial images to remind the Christians that their faith in Christ has introduced them into a new spiritual and eternal family. Paul himself acted as both father (2:11) and mother (2:7) to the fledgling congregation. The Christians themselves are, of course, "brothers and sisters" (2:1,14,17; 3:7; 4:1,6,10,13; 5:1,4,12,14,25); and they need to exhibit the "love for one another" that should typify a family (4:10-28).

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