



## INTRODUCTION: THE LETTERS OF SAINT PAUL TO THE THESSALONIANS

*Adapted from Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*

**Author** First Thessalonians is a genuine letter of the Apostle Paul. For both epistles to the Thessalonians, Paul's name opens the epistle. A surprising number of scholars have come to refute the apostolic authorship of 2 Thessalonians. They claim instead that an admirer of Paul, hiding behind the name of the apostle, penned the epistle toward the end of the first century, but these doubters have not prevailed. Indeed, the letters are covered from beginning to end with the unmistakable fingerprints of Paul's language, style, and character known from his other writings. Internal evidence shows us that Paul is writing as the leader and spokesman (1:1).

**Date** It is widely held that 1 Thessalonians is the oldest letter we have from Paul and may be the oldest book in the entire canon of the NT. By coordinating the report in 3:1–5 with the historical record of Acts 17:1–18:5, most scholars agree that Paul must have penned this letter in the winter months of late a.d. 50 or early 51. Paul's focus on the return of Jesus in both letters suggests that 2 Thessalonians could have been written within weeks or months of the first.

**Destination** Thessalonica was a bustling commercial city founded in 316 b.c. Paganism and idolatry dominated, although it was also home to a Jewish colony with at least one synagogue. Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (1:1) founded the Thessalonian Church in a.d. 50 on the apostle's second missionary tour (Acts 17:1–9). Enraged by the missionaries' success, certain Jews from the city incited riots and forced the missionaries out of Thessalonica only weeks (or possibly months) after their arrival (Acts 17:5, 13). The community left behind remained a target of local persecution (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess 1:4). A majority of the community were Gentiles who had abandoned idolatry for Christianity (1:9).

**Purpose and Themes** First Thessalonians is a predominantly pastoral letter. Paul wrote out of a deep concern for these recent converts who were unexpectedly left alone to withstand the rising tide of persecution and the constant pressures of paganism. Absent in person and eager to return (3:10), Paul sent the epistle in his place to strengthen them through these difficult times (3:3–5), to encourage them to be chaste and charitable (4:1–12), and to console the bereaved among them with the hope of resurrection (4:13–14).

A common doctrinal component of both 1 & 2 Thessalonians is Paul's emphasis on eschatology (teaching concerning the end times). In every chapter of 1 Thessalonians, Paul makes reference to the return of Jesus Christ in glory. According to Paul, Christ will come again from heaven to deliver us "from the wrath to come" (1:10) and give us the final "salvation" for which we yearn (5:9). His prayer is that Christ will perfect the "love" of his readers (3:12). Paul challenges readers to stay awake both morally and spiritually in anticipation of the Second Coming (5:1–11).

Confusion about the timing of Christ's second coming led certain believers into strange and disorderly conduct; 2 Thessalonians contained Paul's corrections. We can infer from Paul's comments in 3:6–15 that some in Thessalonica were so convinced that Jesus would return at any moment that they had quit their jobs and stopped working for a living. Paul has nothing good to say about this behavior and seems annoyed that his readers have not heeded his earlier appeals to "work" diligently (1 Thess 4:11) and "admonish the idle" (1 Thess 5:14). The congregation is charged with addressing this problem decisively but charitably (2 Thess 3:14–15).