



# I THESSALONIANS

## “STAND FIRM IN THE LORD”

### LESSON #1 — I THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

#### INTRODUCTION

Right now our country, community, and congregation are going through some trying times. Imagine looking back on this period of your life in a year, 5 years, and 10 years. What would you want to be able to say about the way you handled these challenges?

#### I THESSALONIANS 1:1,2

In the opening greeting Paul introduces himself only by name, not by title, along with his co-workers. Determine the advantages and disadvantages of using titles for God's servants.

Paul refers to the church in Thessalonica as “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Explain why it is important to remember that phrase when it comes to any church.

The word “grace” in our usage refers to a gift that gives joy and light. Examine why this is a good word to express the rich meaning of God's redemptive love and action in Jesus.

Express how peace - peace within us and peace with others - is a result of grace.  
(cf Ephesians 2:13-17)

Paul felt a responsibility toward the new believers in Thessalonica even after he had to move on to Berea and Athens. Summarize the responsibility you and your church has for new believers. Brainstorm some things you can do to help new Christians in their work with the Lord.

#### ACTS 17:1-10

Thessalonica: capital of the province of Macedonia; an important port; population of close to 200,000 people; boasted a strategic location on the Via Egnatia, the main highway connecting Rome to the East. Evaluate this city's importance to the spread of Christianity in the area.

Summarize the planting of the Christian church in Thessalonica:

- a) Initial Success
- b) Opposition

Assess the accusation that Paul was causing trouble.

Based on what you know about this fledgling congregation, predict some challenges and strengths they might face in the future.

Challenge Question:

Paul used the Scriptures to explain and prove that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. Compose a list of passages from Scripture you could use to explain and prove this same truth today:

### 1 THESSALONIANS 1:3-10

For each pair of words in verse 3, tell how the second word produces the first. Then explain why each is essential to the Christian life.

work - faith

(Romans 3:22,28)

labor - love

(1 John 4:16-21)

endurance - hope

(Hebrews 6:18-20)

Pick out the things from the rest of this chapter that make the Thessalonian church a model congregation.

One Bible scholar suggests “God’s Word changes people” as the theme for this book. How has the Gospel changed you?

Who provides an inspiring and encouraging example for you to imitate in your Christian life?

For whom do you hope you are providing an example and model for living a Christian life?

### CONCLUSION

Borrow from the list of things that made the Thessalonians a model congregation. Come up with your top 3 characteristics you would want to be known for as a member of Christ the Rock Lutheran Church.

## I THESSALONIANS I

Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

**2** We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. **3** We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

**4** For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, **5** because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. **6** You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. **7** And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. **8** The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, **9** for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, **10** and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

## ACTS 17:1-10

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. **2** As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, **3** explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. **4** Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

**5** But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. **6** But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, **7** and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." **8** When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. **9** Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

**10** As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.



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# ANCIENT THESSALONICA

St. Paul's first experiences in Thessalonica were not especially promising. Forced out of the city by persecution, the apostle left behind new Christians who needed strengthening as well as additional instruction. This led to his writing the two letters that have survived in the New Testament. But neither the letters nor the account of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica in the book of Acts tells very much about the city itself or explains why it was an especially good idea to preach the Gospel there.

In the days of the apostle, Thessalonica was an important city in the Roman Empire. The Romans had made it the capital of their province of Macedonia, and it was a significant center for commerce. Many people came and went, while many others lived there permanently. So starting a church *there*—in spite of the challenges—provided tremendous opportunities for reaching people with the Good News.



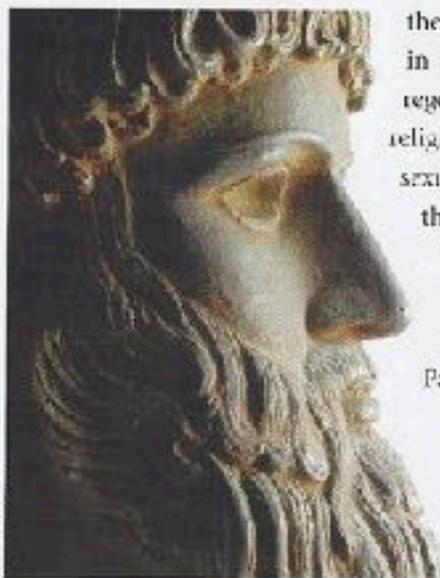
### Thessalonica in the Greek and Roman Worlds

The story of Thessalonica goes back to the time of the ancient Greeks, not long after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC). At that time, Alexander's generals divided up his empire. The one who eventually established himself as king of Macedonia and ruled most of Greece was Cassander. It was he who founded Thessalonica and named it after his wife—who was also a sister to Alexander. This new city (although there were probably inhabitants there earlier) became one of the most important settlements in that part of the world, especially when the Romans conquered Macedonia in 168 BC. Within a few years, they had made Thessalonica one of their regional capitals and so a center for Roman military and civil administration. Then, during the civil war that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar (42 BC), rival armies fought in Macedonia, but Thessalonica aligned itself with the winning side that included Caesar Augustus! This enhanced the city's prestige and importance within the Roman Empire.

The city was also well placed for trade and commerce, since it possessed a fine harbor that offered access to the rest of the Mediterranean world. Besides the harbor, Thessalonica was also located on an important Roman highway, the *Via Egnatia*, that connected the Adriatic and Black seas. By the time of St. Paul, the city perhaps had a population of around 200,000 and was a thriving, cosmopolitan center with people coming and going from all other parts of the empire.

As one might expect in this era, a variety of peoples meant also a variety of religions, and Thessalonica exhibited many. For one thing, as a Roman center for governance, Thessalonica embraced the cult of the emperor. A large temple of Roma was built; and from the days of Julius Caesar, he and his imperial successors were honored as gods and probably addressed with titles like "savior," "benefactor," and "god manifest." This religion appealed very much to the ruling elite, whose position and prosperity depended in part on favorable relations with Rome.

The mystery religions were also prominent in Thessalonica as elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world. These forms of idolatry worshiped different gods, such as Serapis from Egypt and Dionysus from Greece, by means of ceremonies and rituals, including meals and dances. In carrying out the specific forms of their religion, members of



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the mystery cults sought to reenact significant parts of their god's "story" in order to receive supernatural blessings like immortality, regeneration, and forgiveness. In practice, however, these religions provided occasions for gross self-indulgence and sexual promiscuity. Thus, while promising great things, the mystery religions left their initiates worse off than if they had never heard of these cults at all.

In spite of the various forms of paganism, there was also a Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica when Paul first visited the city (see Acts 17:1). This is not really surprising. As early as the Babylonian Captivity (587 BC), significant numbers of Jews began to live outside of Israel. This situation did not change even after the return from captivity, since many Jews decided to stay put. Then, during the ascendancy



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of Alexander and the Greeks, Jews also settled throughout the Greek-speaking world. For example, there was a huge Jewish community in Alexandria in Egypt in the period before the birth of Christ; from this community came the Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint.

Because there were so many Jewish residents in the major cities of the Mediterranean world, their synagogues were natural places for Paul and other early Christian missionaries to preach when first presenting the Gospel—it was, after all, the fulfillment of God's Old Testament Word.

But not all the Jews were willing to accept the Gospel, any more than all the Gentiles were. Thus, Thessalonica might offer wonderful opportunities for reaching people, but what if these people did not want to be reached? When Paul first preached in the synagogue there, some of the Jews became jealous of the rapidity with which Gentiles were embracing the new teaching and so set the Roman authorities against the Christians by claiming that the latter were proclaiming Jesus as king instead of Caesar (Acts 17:5-9). Obviously, such charges threatened the imperial cult and the good relations of Thessalonica with the empire.

Then, too, Paul and his colleagues called on their converts to give up their lives of self-indulgence. Paul wrote the Thessalonians, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). Clearly, Christianity meant separation from the rites of paganism.

Not everybody in Thessalonica wanted to become a Christian. Nonetheless, God brought His apostle to the city, and the apostle preached the Word. Some believed, and a church began. It wasn't large, and it wasn't easy. But it was a start.

### God's Providence and God's Work

Today Thessalonica (Thessaloniki or Salonika) is still a very important city of Greece, with a population second only to Athens. Its history since the days of St. Paul reveals many ups and downs for the Christian population there, including several centuries as a part of the Ottoman Empire. But then again, the very first Christians did not find it all that easy either. Life for God's people in this world is not always pleasant.

But God knows what He is doing. By leading St. Paul to Thessalonica, He provided opportunities for the people then and there to hear His Word and subsequently for countless others likewise to come to faith. This is because God wanted the Thessalonians and all others to believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. He still does. That's why we still have the Gospel today.

