



A PASSAGE THROUGH THE NEW TESTAMENT
PART FOUR

The Early Letters

**First Thessalonians
Second Thessalonians
James**

by Jeff S. Smith

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First and Second Thessalonians

Authorship: Paul, A.D. 51

The two letters are addressed to the saints in Thessalonica, the seaport capital of Macedonia and center of commerce, wealth and education. When Paul entered the city in A.D. 51, he found a large Greek element along with a slightly smaller population of Roman colonists. The Jews also inhabited the city and had at least one synagogue. Thessalonica had a wondrous amphitheater where gladiator contests were held, but the town's general morals have been held in doubt for most of its history. Today it is known as the Greek city of Soloniki.

According to Acts 17:1-10, the writer, the apostle Paul, helped to establish the congregation along with Titus in about A.D. 51. His tack was to remind them of the prophecies and show that Jesus fulfilled them. A few of the Jews were convinced and joined a larger number of devout Greeks and women. They were there for less than a month before a mob ran them out of town at the behest of the anti-Christian Jews.

Both of these letters were likely written not long after Paul was expelled from Thessalonica, probably months apart in A.D. 51.

Because the majority of the church had been converted out of paganism and lives of gross immorality, Paul felt it necessary to ground them further in the lessons of the cross. While applauding their steadfastness in the face of persecution, he encourages them to grow in holiness.

The first letter remarks on a report Paul had received concerning the church in Thessalonica (3:6) and goes to great lengths to correct the deep misconceptions many apparently had about the return of Christ. It seems that some saints were so convinced that Jesus would return imminently that they had quit working and were dependent upon others to care for them.

The second letter continues this theme and further encourages the

Christians to endure their suffering while laboring to support themselves in an honorable fashion. The writer goes so far as to describe events which must occur before Jesus can return, including prophecy about an apostasy.



The Epistle of James

Authorship: James, A.D. 45-50

The book is addressed to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” in 1:1. Most certainly, that makes them Jewish converts to Christianity. Judging by the overall tone of the book regarding materialism, most of his first readers were probably quite poor. The author’s frequent mention of geographical and meteorological conditions points to the strong possibility that he wrote from Palestine, from whence the pilgrims were dispersed.

The author is named James, a servant of God. The New Testament makes three men named James prominent — John’s brother, the apostle (Matt. 4:21), the other apostle named James, called the Less (Matt. 10:3) and the Lord’s brother in the flesh (Matt. 13:55, Mark 6:3).

The first James was martyred by Herod long before this book was written (Acts 12:1-2). The second is also unlikely, for he was an apostle and our author does not so identify himself.

The most likely candidate is the Lord’s brother in the flesh, who did not believe in his brother until after the resurrection (John 7:5, Acts 1:14). (Another brother of them both is credited with writing the book of Jude.) In spite of his initial disbelief, James is now pleased to call himself “the bondservant of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1).

The purpose of this epistle is to instruct and encourage a group of downtrodden disciples. The teacher exhorts them to endure the trials brought by the rich and to overcome sinful urges by employing a few basic principles. The book is sometimes called the gospel of common sense because of its practicality.

James attacks the always thorny issue of faith and works from the opposite side of Paul in Romans and Galatians, but the three books are each necessary to come to a harmonious and thorough understanding of God’s will. Where Paul emphasizes faith, because his audience tended toward self-justification by works of the Law of Moses, James emphasizes the works of faithful obedience to Christ.

Lesson 1: Joy and Defense

First Thessalonians 1:1-2:16

1. Faith, hope and love are united in First Thessalonians 1:3 as they were in First Corinthians 13. How does Paul modify each of these terms here?

2. He speaks of their election, a phrase that sends the Calvinistic mind off into fantasy. The doctrine of Calvin is that God elects certain men and women to be saved and elects others of his creation to burn in eternal hell fire and there is nothing that either class of humans can do to change that. But the Bible says differently. Regarding our election, what must the Christian do, according to Second Peter 1:10? Compare also Philippians 2:12.

3. We learn something of the conditions and attitudes that accompanied their reception of the gospel. What are they (verse 6) and what had been a fruit of them (verse 7)?

4. Because of the tremendous faith and perseverance of these Thessalonian Christians, Paul was now finding himself in the position of listener rather than speaker as he entered new communities. What was he being told?

5. Where had Paul and Silas been before coming to Thessalonica originally? Refer to Acts 16:11-40. What last single act had brought severe persecution upon the two?

6. False teachers had twisted the gospel as early as this into a wicked message that convinced sinners to remain as they were. Unlike this devilish bunch, Paul and his cohorts were not striving to please men, but God, who tests our hearts. What does First Corinthians 4:1-2 say about the responsibility of preachers?

7. We can learn two things about Paul's preaching from verse 5. He did not accommodate the sins of his listeners with words of flattery, nor did he feel tempted to mold the gospel into a financial vehicle or a cloak of covetousness. Whose praise did he seek (verse 6)?

8. In verse 9 we find out even more about what kind of men Paul and Silas were while there. What does Paul recall?

9. Verses 10-12 close this paragraph. Describe the behavior of the preachers and the method and message they employed.

10. Compare verse 13 with the parable of Luke 8:11-15. Which group describes the Thessalonians best?

Lesson 2: Paul's Concern Over Them

First Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

1. Refer to Acts 17:1-5. Why had Paul and Silas been removed from the city?
2. Satan had not left the preachers alone as they made it to Berea, though. What followed in Acts 17:12-15?
3. Paul's concern and lack of knowledge over the new church led him to send an emissary to Thessalonica. Who is he? What is his task according to verses 2-3?
4. Did Paul feel like the onslaught of persecution should be a surprise to them? Why did he feel this way?

5. What expression would describe Paul's work if the devil had enticed these Christians to succumb to the temptation to leave Jesus?
6. The suspense has built in the modern reader of this letter and is now climaxed by Timothy's report. What is it?
7. What good result had this in Paul's life and labor? What would have been the effect if Timothy's report were bad?
8. Had Paul been permitted to remain in Thessalonica to build up the church to a point at which he was "comfortable"? Why or why not?
9. Do you know if Paul apparently ever made it back to Thessalonica?
10. Toward what goal did the apostle work and encourage these Christians to seek as well?

Lesson 3: Holy Living and Hope

First Thessalonians 4:1-18

1. Chapter 4 begins the conclusion of Paul's letter. In your own words, what is Paul's exhortation in verse 1?

2. He desires to reiterate some of Jesus's teaching for them now and raises one such command in these eight verses. The basic doctrine is in verse 3 and introduces Paul's discussion that concludes in verse 8. What is that basic doctrine in verse 3?

3. Verses 4-8 give five separate "bullet" points under this doctrine. These are five details of obeying this command. List them below:

Verse 4:

Verse 5:

Verse 6:

Verse 7:

Verse 8:

4. A clue to Paul's teaching here may be found back in 3:2. What familial term does the apostle employ to describe Timothy? He uses forms of it over and again in this short passage. How should this affect the way we look at each other?

5. Comparing First Thessalonians 1:7 and 4:10, would it not stand to reason that the Christians had done enough and could now take it easy?

6. His final exhortation in this passage is that they may walk properly toward those who are outside. In verse 11, he lists three commands to facilitate such a life. What are they? In what ways do you obey them in your life?

7. Chapter 4:13-18 was written to quiet their fears about the return of Christ and the fate of their brethren who had already died. Paul's attitude toward death shows through in verse 13. How?

8. How does Paul describe the resurrection day and its order?

9. Verse 18 is a message of comfort to Christians but it is also a word of warning to those outside of Jesus. In your own words, what is that warning?

Lesson 4: On the Day of the Lord

First Thessalonians 5:1-28

1. When one learns that Jesus is coming back to execute judgment upon all of humanity, the logical query is, “When?” Can Paul answer this question? What *does* he say about the time of the Day of the Lord?

2. Who are vulnerable to a thief that appears suddenly at night? Is it they who let down their guard in the darkness or they who live in constant light? What bearing does this have upon a Christian waiting for Jesus to return?

3. What kind of life does the word “sleep” identify in verses 6 and 7?

4. According to verse 8, Christians should do what in preparation for Jesus? What two important areas are guarded by these two pieces of a soldier’s armor?

5. The word “sleep” is used again in verse 10, but the meaning is different than it was earlier. Before, it meant living in darkness and sin, but here, being asleep is not identified negatively. What does Paul mean by “sleep” in verse 10?

6. One office of men in the church is specified here—what is it? How are men in this office to be treated? What are some practical ways in which we can fulfill this command toward them?

7. This passage is one that commands patience in the church among all. It is not a verse that eliminates corrective discipline, but instead shows us how to treat different people who are having various problems. How do we treat each of these?

- Disorderly:
- Fainthearted:
- Weak:
- All:

8. If one continues to walk disorderly, the warning will have to change as Paul commands in 2 Thessalonians 3:6—what does he command there?

9. Chapter 5:15-22 is a rapid fire listing of various exhortations. A summary of them would be that good is to be pursued and held onto; evil is to be shunned and avoided in any form. How can we tell the difference?

10. What was to be the scope of audience for this letter?

Lesson 5: God's Final Judgment

Second Thessalonians 1:1-12

1. For what two attributes of his readers does Paul thank God?
2. An effective means of teaching is providing an example of the ideal you are presenting from the common world. As Paul tries to teach on perseverance, what example does he claim to employ?
3. With what two characteristics do they persevere? Discuss how these are necessary to your endurance of the trials of life.
4. For what cause or goal did they suffer? To what end did the persecutors sadly travel (verse 6)?
5. Verse 8 states that those who meet the wrath of God could easily be described in one of two ways. What are those two ways? Which would then have been primarily composed of Gentiles and which would have been Jews?

6. What is said of God's final judgment in Romans 2:6?

7. The absolute horrors of God's condemnation are described in a few words of verse 9. What is the duration of this punishment? How does it compare with a life sentence in our prisons on a murder charge? How does it compare with a recent mass murderer who was sentenced to two consecutive life sentences? Is there any way to fathom a sentence of this duration?

8. The Greek word *apo* (απο) is employed in verse 9 to denote the English word "from." This word actually signifies more in that it means "away from." Away from what are the condemned banished?

9. Who will glorify Christ in His return and what enables them to be among this group?

Lesson 6: The Great Apostasy

Second Thessalonians 2:1-17

1. Chapter two introduces the principal matter of this letter. How is it described in verse 1?
2. Verse 2 lends some understanding to the manner by which false teaching on the subject had invaded this church. What are the three means listed?
3. What must first come before Jesus's return? Who must be revealed?
4. What are his crimes, specifically enumerated in the fourth verse?
5. He is said to usurp God's position in the "temple." What is the temple emblematic of (Ephesians 2:19-22)? What is the Lord's place in it (Ephesians 1:22-23 and James 4:12)?
6. Verse 6 implies that the Thessalonian Christians were given a piece of knowledge that we are not. What is it that they know but we are not told?

7. Verse 8 jumps quickly to the destruction of the “man of sin,” but that is yet far in the future. Again, though, when will he be revealed?

8. English does not do the Greek justice in verse 9: the adjective “lying” should be attached directly to each of the three—lying power, lying signs and lying wonders. Claims of miracles and supernatural events made by the “man of sin” then are examples of what (verse 10)?

9. The “man of sin” does not preach truth, but lies. Can one be saved by the agency of lies (verse 10)?

10. What have these *already* rejected, according to verse 10? What will God permit to be sent upon them by the working of Satan after they have already rejected this? What will be the sad end of those who rejected the truth for unrighteousness?

11. “From the beginning, God chose these Christians for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. Could they have possibly believed in Jesus *before* they were born?

12. Which traditions should they hold to: those of mere men or those inspired by the Holy Spirit?

6. What two things does Paul claim about his conversation among them?

7. According to verse 9, they could have demanded such payment but did not in order to do what?

8. What fantasizing was causing some to forsake work and allow others to tend to their needs instead?

9. Again in verse 14, what is Paul's command concerning those who do not keep the apostle's words and writings? To what goal?

10. With what limit should this be accomplished, according to verse 15?

11. What is a sign in every epistle and what do you think might be the implication of noting this here?

Lesson 8: Temptation

James 1:1-18

1. After a brief greeting, James sets right to work with a passage that has become quite adored. Do you think that verse 2, if left to stand by itself, would seem paradoxical to most people? How is the paradox eliminated in 1:3?
2. The perfection sought in verse 4 is a completeness and maturity. What lack might retard spiritual growth, according to verse 5? From whence does the supply come to fill that need?
3. What should characterize the request?
4. There is a spiritual equality found in the body of Christ that erases the effects of material wealth among brothers. Refer to Matthew 6:19-21. What happens to treasure on earth?
5. A paradox similar to that of verse 2 appears in verse 12. How is temptation a blessing?

6. Since temptation can effect good, does that mean that God is our tempter?

7. Fill in the final word in this process:

Desire ... Temptation ... Enticement ...Conception ...Sin ...

8. Verses 17-18 finally establish the distinction between the tempter and God. Temptation cannot be attributed to God, for with him, there is no what?

9. By what means were we brought forth, according to verse 18?

Lesson 9: Doers of the Word

James 1:19-27

1. In a few words, explain what James 2:19-20 entails and how it would change our lives if universally applied in these situations:

parents with children:

husbands and wives:

perfect strangers:

2. What does the wrath of man produce (Ephesians 4:26, 31-32)?

4. Again, the word is described in agrarian terms as “implanted.” Does the hearer have any responsibility regarding the reception of the seed?

5. How does the passage describe a man who is a hearer, but not a doer? How did Jesus condemn such a person (Luke 6:46-49)?

6. What is the perfect law of liberty (cf. John 8:31-32 and Romans 6:16-17)?

7. How important is obedience to our discipleship?

8. What in verse 26 makes one's religion useless? What are some particular enemies of our faith in this regard then?

9. What are the two facets of pure and undefiled religion?

10. Is this an individual responsibility or one that should be passed off to the church to handle?

Lesson 10: True Faith

James 2:1-26

1. We know that God is no respecter of persons and here James forbids our being so, as well. Is the situation in this context racial, gender, or economic class?
2. How were they showing partiality in James's example?
3. What is the royal law, as stated in verse 8? What attitude or action was a transgression of it?
4. How many laws must one break to become a transgressor of the law?
5. How would you define the "law of liberty" of verse 12?
6. James 2:14-17 is the death-knell to the doctrine of salvation by faith only. Martin Luther believed that James was a false teacher because of this chapter. What is the question raised in verse 14?

7. What is the example raised here by James to illustrate his point?

8. James's attitude can be described as "actions speak louder than words." How do we show our faith? Can we show our faith without it?

9. Verse 19 introduces a group that has "faith" only. Who are they? Are they saved by "faith" only?

10. Who is mentioned as an example of the faith God wants in verse 21? The quote in verse 23 is often raised in relation to Galatians 3:6 to teach "faith only." Read the context: how did James know that Abraham believed God—by faith only or some work?

11. Verse 24 is sometimes used to separate justification from salvation. Can a man be just before God and still sent to Hell? Can a man be saved without being justified?

12. When was Rahab justified—when she believed in Jehovah or when "she received the messengers and sent them out another way"?

13. What is the condition of idle faith?

Lesson II: The Tongue

James 3:1-18

1. Why does James seem to discourage people from becoming teachers?

2. What is the member of our bodies that causes so many problems?

3. James illustrates the tongue's foibles with several metaphors:

VERSE

METAPHOR

verse 3

verse 4

verse 5

verse 8

verse 11

verse 12

4. In chapter one, James encourages us to “be doers of the word and not hearers only.” In chapter two, he told us to show faith by works. After some negative examples in chapter three’s opening, he returns to the familiar theme in verse 13; how does he state that theme?

5. What is the meekness of wisdom?

6. How is the wisdom from above described in this passage?

7. How is the wisdom from below described in this passage?

Lesson 12: Enmity With God

James 4:1-17

1. The first three verses describe the failure and despair of those who try to live outside or contrary to the will of God. For some reason, they cannot understand why they are unfulfilled in life. James offers two reasons in verses 2-3. What are they?

2. James uses the figure of adultery to describe the way some saints try to live. In the spiritual realm, to whom is a saint committed? With whom or what does he commit adultery?

3. The remedy for the spiritually sick is simple but its bitter taste causes many to refuse to be treated. In one sentence, summarize this passage in your own words.

4. What are some ways in which we speak evil of a brother?

a.

b.

c.

d.

5. Does this imply that we should not rebuke the false teacher? Does it imply that we should not rebuke an erring brother? Does it imply that we should do nothing about a divisive brother?

6. How would you respond to someone who says that he will wait and be baptized next Sunday?

7. Why is it boasting to presume the future?

8. What are some ways in which we fail verse 17?

Lesson 13: True Treasure

James 5:1-20

1. Are all rich people going to hell?
2. Is James's description of their materials literal as he writes or is it figurative? If the latter, what does the description mean?
3. Verse 7 begins with instruction for the poor and oppressed. What is that command? What illustration does he offer?
4. James says that the Lord's coming is at hand. This can be taken to mean that Jesus's return is always nigh but it might also mean a finite judgment upon the earth before his return. What event was coming in A.D. 70 that could also fulfill what is said here?
5. What "is the end intended by the Lord" of our patience in suffering, according to the example of Job?
6. Why is prayer called "the last refuge of a scoundrel?"

7. What two things do the elders do for the sick?

8. This passage appears to be about spiritual sickness. However, often, grave physical illness causes a person to begin thinking about eternity and his soul. Is there anything wrong with that? Is the sinner who becomes ill, seeks the Lord and is baptized saved?

9. Are two prayers better than one? Is there value in asking a brother to pray for you or with you? Is there value in praying for a sister we have never met?

10. Are verses 17-18 an illustration of the power of prayer or an instruction to cause droughts?

11. What should you do when you see a brother wandering from the truth?

12. Whose multitude of sins is covered?

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