



LESSON 1

Getting a Letter



BIBLE READING

1 Thessalonians 1:1–5:28



TEACHING POINT

To listen to the letter as it was intended.



LEADER'S PREPARATION

Thessalonica was a free city and the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. It was a prosperous seaport and was on the main trade route from Istanbul. It was also an important communication and trading centre, being located at the junction of the Egnatian Way and the road leading north to the Danube. The city had a population of about 200,000, making it the largest city in Macedonia. Since Paul began his ministry in the Jewish synagogue (Acts 17:1-9) it is reasonable to assume that the new church included some Jews, but 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 and Acts 17:4 indicate a large Gentile membership.





INFORMATION BOX

Background from Acts

1. Paul and Silas left Philippi and went to Thessalonica where they stayed for around 3 weeks, after which they were forced to leave by the Jews. Since Timothy is not mentioned, it is possible he stayed on in Philippi, joining Paul and Silas later in Berea (Acts 17:14).
2. Paul fled to Athens from Berea, leaving Silas and Timothy there.
3. Paul sent word back to Berea, instructing Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.
4. Silas and Timothy must have rejoined Paul in Athens (see 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 3:1-2). Timothy was then sent back to Thessalonica to strengthen the new converts. Silas is not mentioned so it is possible he went back to Philippi when Timothy went to Thessalonica.
5. Paul went to Corinth where Silas and Timothy joined him. 1 Thessalonians was written from there, followed by 2 Thessalonians about 6 months later in (AD 51/52).

The first letter is generally dated as AD 51 and is one of Paul's earliest letters to the churches. (Some commentators suggest that Galatians may have been written earlier in approximately AD 48-49 shortly before the committee of enquiry met at Jerusalem to resolve the issue of the need for Christians to be circumcised (Acts 15:1-2).) It was written to encourage the early church in its trials and to reassure them about their future in Christ.



When Paul fled from Thessalonica after his brief stay, new converts from paganism were left in a time of persecution with little support. Paul wrote to encourage the Christians in their difficulties (1 Thessalonians 3:3-5), to give instructions about living as a Christian (4:1-8) and to reassure them of the certainty of Christ's second coming. The latter runs throughout the letter; every chapter ends with a reference to it and chapter 4 majors on the theme.

When the Thessalonian church received this letter it would have been read out to them. In order for the group to understand the impact of this get them to listen to a recording of the whole letter. It may need to be listened to more than once in order to pick up some of the themes running through the letter.





PLANNING THE SESSION

Welcome

Introduce yourselves

Start the meeting with prayer

Getting to Know You

Look for someone whose name starts with the same letter of the alphabet (or as near as possible) and ask them how they get a message to a friend.



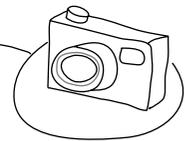
Talk Time

Chat about how people keep in touch today. Take a poll to ascertain the favourite way of keeping in touch and of getting a message to someone.



Focus Time

The Letters Game. This is played like Consequences. Sit in a circle (or number of circles, depending on the size of the group). Give each person a piece of paper and a pen and ask them to complete a series of statements (see below). The statement is written at the top of the paper, then folded over to hide the writing and passed to the person on their left, ready for the next statement. They must avoid using rude words. At the end of the exercise the papers are unfolded and the resulting letters read out to the group.



Dear

I am writing because

I was surprised to hear

I am now feeling very





Please could you

Yours

Link into the Bible passage by pointing out that today they will be listening to a letter.



Bible Time

Start with an introduction to Thessalonica (see pages 18-20). If possible have two maps, one showing the area in the time of Paul and one showing it today.

If possible record the whole of I Thessalonians onto a CD prior to the session. Explain that the church at Thessalonica would have heard the letter read out in its entirety, and that is what you are going to do. Ask the group to listen carefully to try and work out why Paul was writing this letter. Play the recording.

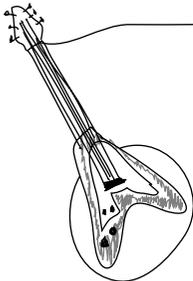
If you are unable to get a recording of the letter ask a leader to read out the entire letter.

Ask the group to say why they think Paul wrote the letter, recording their answers on a flip chart. Keep the pages for use the following weeks.



Prayer Time

A leader closes in prayer, picking up on one or two things from the letter.



Praise Time

Musical groups – general songs (see www.kingswaysongs.com or www.emumusic.com for words and music).

Non-musical groups – read Psalm 100 as an antiphonal reading (two groups reading the verses turn and turn about). The first group reads verses 1 and 3, the second group verses 2 and 4, and both groups read verse 5.





Extra Ideas

Make a recording of the letter as a group.

Before listening to the letter ask the group to spot one or two big things that Paul raises in the letter for discussion afterwards.

