

The
WORD
at work

1 Thessalonians

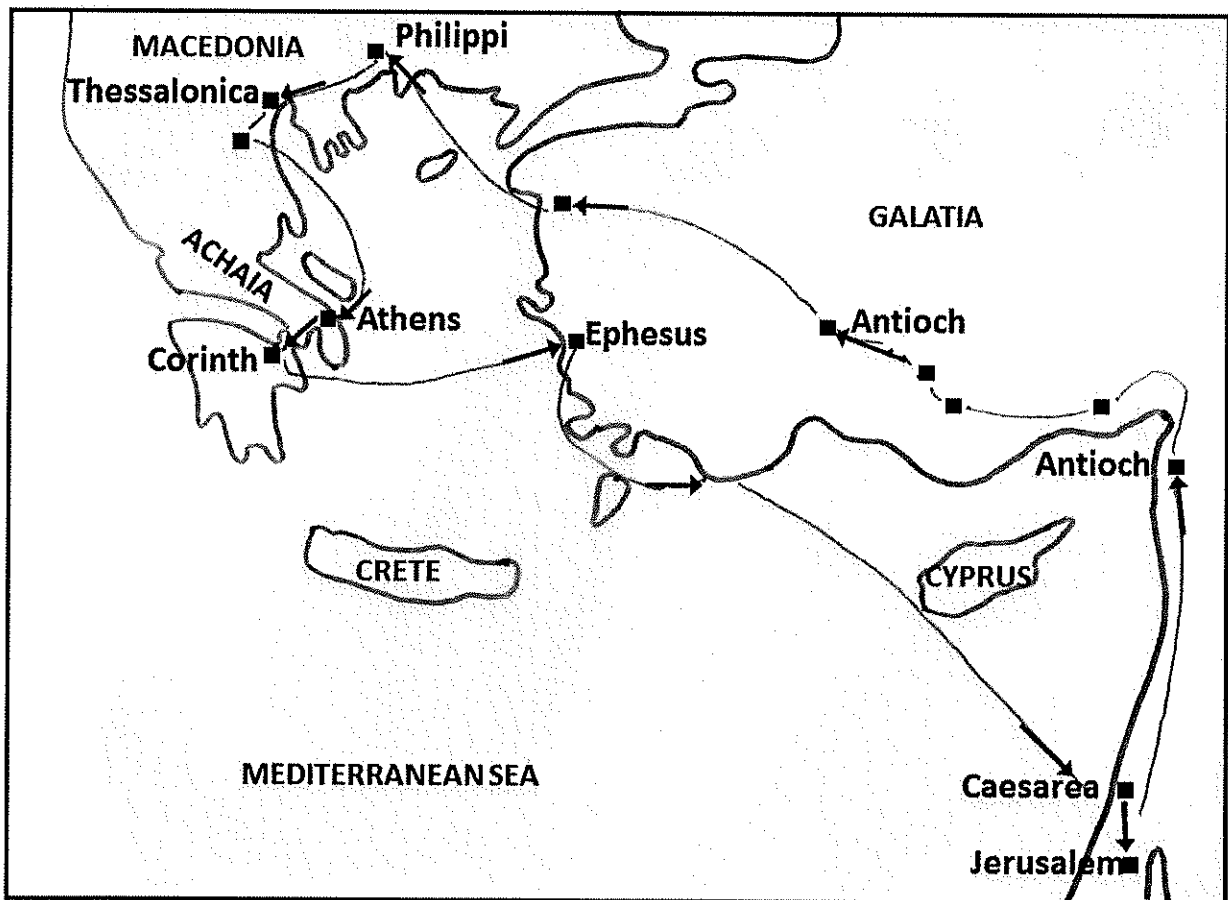
Small Group Series

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Background : The Church in Thessalonica

Thessalonica was a wealthy and influential city in Macedonia. Paul visited it in AD 50-51, on his second missionary journey. His preaching resulted in both Jews and Greeks being converted and a church planted (See Acts 17: 1-9). After about 3 weeks, Paul was forced out of the city by a mob, whipped up by the Jews who were jealous of Paul's influence. The new converts were inevitably exposed to persecution, for which they were imperfectly prepared, as Paul had not had the time to give them all the basic teaching which he thought they required. At the earliest opportunity, Paul (in Corinth, Acts 18:5) sent Timothy back to see how these new Christians were getting on. Overjoyed on hearing a good report from Timothy, he wrote this letter to them to explain his abrupt departure and to further instruct them in their faith. He particularly wanted to see them grow in faith, love, holiness and hope.



1. True Conversion

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

To Begin

Describe your present circumstances by completing the phrase "I'm in"
(E.g. *I'm in a rush; I'm in remission; I'm in the team; I'm in pain; I'm in a muddle.....*)

Setting the scene

Paul had been forced to leave Thessalonica in haste after spending only a few weeks there. Concerned for the welfare of the new believers, he sent Timothy to visit them. Timothy's report of their ongoing faith filled Paul with delight and relief. This letter was written to encourage them further and to help them to grow.

Explore further: Read through chapter 1 slowly.

1. Make a list of all the things for which Paul is thankful when he thinks about, and prays for, the Thessalonian believers.

2(a) What role did Paul, Silas and Timothy play in helping the Thessalonians to come to faith in Jesus?

(b) What role did the Holy Spirit play?

(c) What conclusions can you draw from this about how people come to faith?

3. What has happened as a result of the Thessalonians' faith? (vs 7-9)

4. According to verses 9b-10, what does true conversion involve?

Apply the Truth

5. What practical difference has the good news about Jesus Christ made to your life?

Through what actions & attitudes do you notice evidence of

- 'work produced by faith',
- 'labour produced by love', and
- 'endurance inspired by hope' ?

6. Write down the main things that you have observed about the life and character of these new believers.

Which of these do you most want to develop?

7. The Thessalonian Christians imitated Paul, Silas & Timothy. Then, in turn, they were role models for other believers in the region

- What good example does Paul demonstrate, which we should seek to imitate?
- What good example do the Thessalonians demonstrate, which we should seek to imitate?

8. How have you benefited from godly role models ? (i.e. Who are the Christians you look to for inspiration and encouragement in the faith?)

How can you in turn, be a good role model for others?

Summing Up

Whatever situations we may currently be in (refer to your answers to the 'To Begin' section) we need to remember that, first and foremost, we are 'in' God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This should change our perspective on all of life's challenges and give us the same joy from the Holy Spirit that the Thessalonian Christians

received. It means that - every day - we have his life to strengthen us, his Word to nourish us, and his Spirit to guide us.

Ideas for Prayer

- Pray for one another to take to heart and apply the lessons learnt from this bible passage
- Paul was very thankful for the evidence of faith that he saw in this church. Let us cultivate the practice of observing the fruits of faith, love and hope that are evident in our church family, and to thank God for them.
- Notice the sequence *“our gospel came to you – you welcomed it – it rang out from you”* (vs 5,6 8). Pray that the Lord will help us (individually and as a church) to wholehearted receive, and then share, the message of the gospel.

2. A Model Ministry

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

To Begin

Have you ever found yourself in a conversation where, unexpectedly, you had the opportunity to share the gospel? What happened next?

Setting the scene

The ministry of Paul, Silas and Timothy in Thessalonica had been brought to an abrupt and humiliating end by a public riot. The legal charges against the missionaries were so serious that they were persuaded to make a night flight from the city. Paul's critics took full advantage of his sudden disappearance. In order to undermine his authority and the gospel message, they launched a malicious smear campaign to discredit him and to unsettle the new converts.

Explore Further : Read 1 Thess 2:1-12

1. Paul refutes the charges against him and his team because the truth of the gospel and the future of the church were at stake. What does he declare about -
 - their actions?
 - Their motives?

2. What do the twin pictures of mother (v7) and father (v11) suggest about Paul's relationship and dealings with these new Christians?

3. When we share our faith and seek to help others grow as disciples of Jesus, what would it look like in practice to be - like a mother ?
- like a father?

4. Pick out all Paul's references to God in these verses, noting how his awareness of God undergirds all that he says and does.
To what extent do *you* face each day's tasks with the mindset, "with the help of (our) God..." (v2)?

Read 2:13-16

5. Different responses to the Word of God are mentioned here. How did the Thessalonian believers respond to the Word of God?

6. How do we tell the difference between the Word of God and the word of men (v13)?

7. What difficulties did the Thessalonians face as they accepted, and then shared, the gospel? What encouragement did Paul give them not to give up?

Apply the Truth

8. Re-read this passage, and write down all the qualities seen in a Christian who is living to please God.

From this list, identify one quality which you most lack. (Pray for God to grow this quality in you.)

9. We all have opportunities to share the message of Jesus with others.

- When this happens, how might we be tempted to “please men” (v4)?
- What can we do to make sure that we “are not trying to please men, but God.” ?

10. We have seen how Paul shared his faith with the Thessalonians, and then how they in turn began to share their faith with others. What can we learn from them about ways of sharing our faith?

Summing Up

Paul's deep love for these Christians is obvious in this chapter. His example gives us a model - to share not only the gospel, but our lives as well (verse 8).

It has been expressed this way: "The gospel is never delivered in a vacuum; it comes wrapped up in our personalities. Our lives are adverts for the gospel" (Elizabeth Mcquoid)

Ideas for Prayer

- Pray for one another to take to heart and apply the lessons learnt in this bible passage. (Perhaps refer to Question 8)
- Pray to have more of these godly parental qualities in our relationships with other believers:
 - gentleness and affection
 - self-sacrificing devotion
 - diligence in teaching
 - encouragement and nurture
- To live with a greater awareness of God's presence in all our daily activities.

3. The Pastor's Heart

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

To Begin

How would you describe your relationship with other people in your church – those in your small group, or those you serve alongside on a ministry team or rota?

Setting the scene

Paul describes his separation from the Thessalonians using the strong image of being like an orphaned child (“torn away”). His writing shows intense love and deep concern for the wellbeing of this newly formed church.

Explore Further Read 1 Thess 2:17-3:13

1. What words and phrases in this passage show Paul's love and concern for the Thessalonians?

2. How good are you at expressing your love and concern for other believers? (Do you tend do this in words, or in other ways?)

3. What were Paul's reasons for sending Timothy back to Thessalonica? (3:2-5)

- How can we teach and prepare new believers for hardship and persecution, as Paul did?

9. In what ways can we show love to people who are suffering?

Summing Up

In this section, Paul lays bare his love for the Thessalonians.

“He had left them only with the greatest reluctance, and had in fact been torn away from them against his will. He had then tried hard to see them, but all his attempts had been thwarted. Waiting for news of them, he had found the suspense unbearable and so, though at great personal cost, he had sent Timothy to encourage them and find out how they were. When Timothy came back with good news, he was over the moon with joy and thanksgiving. And all the time he had been pouring out his heart for them in prayer.

What is this extravagant language? .. It is the language of parents, who are separated from their children, who miss them dreadfully, and are profoundly anxious when they have had no recent news of them. Pastoral love is parental love; that is it’s quality.”

(John Stott, The Message of Thessalonians , p69)

Ideas for Prayer

- Pray 3:10-13 for each other and other Christian friends
- Pray for Christians facing difficulties and those who are experiencing persecution because of their faith

4. How to please God

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

To Begin

If you were to stop people on the street and ask them for their ideas of the sort of life that would please God, what answers do you think they would give?

Setting the Scene

In this section, Paul praises the Thessalonians but also corrects and instructs them. He wants them to please God in their daily lives, and explains what this will entail.

Explore further - Read 1 Thess 4:1-12

1. What does Paul commend the Thessalonians for? (vs 1-2 ,9-10)
2. Paul says, "It is God's will that we should be holy"(v3) – and then speaks in detail about sexual morality.
 - How does he define sexual immorality?
 - What reasons does he give for avoiding it?
 - How does sexual immorality "wrong" or "take advantage of" a brother?
3. If someone were to say to you that Paul's attitude towards sexual relationships is outdated, how would you reply (bearing in mind the authority he claims in verses 2 and 8) ?

4. From verses 9-12, what responsibility do Christians have towards one another?

5. It is thought that verses 11-12 were directed towards members of the church who had stopped working and were relying on the generosity of fellow Christians to provide for them. What does Paul urge them to do instead, and why?

Apply the Truth

6. In this passage, Paul has given lots of instructions about love for fellow Christians, purity in sexual matters, and purity in social matters. What can you do this week to be more pleasing to God in one of these areas of your life?

7. Paul has described a working life that pleases God.

- What might non-believers notice about the way you work which could attract them to Christ?
- What work habits or attitudes could detract from your Christian witness?

8. Do this “more and more” (vs 1, 10). Do you get tired of sustaining a commitment to love, to say nothing of loving “more and more” ? How can you help yourself, and others, live to please God more and more?

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” Galatians 6:9-10

9. “What is God’s will for my life?” - Often someone who asks this wants a particular job, role, career path, or location, to clearly open up before them. But how does Paul answer this question? (v3ff)

Summing Up

To live a life that pleases God is Paul’s ambition for himself (2:4b) and his desire for the Thessalonians. It is the basis for all the ethical instructions he gives, and the call to love.

We are never too far along in our Christian faith, too busy, or too old, to be reminded about the need for love in our church community. There is a link between the positive love which Christians have for each other, and the negative refusal to hurt each other which immorality and idleness would cause.

It is costly to love – it takes time and energy, and it interferes with our personal plans, but it is non-negotiable. It is also something that must always be on the increase amongst the people of God.

Ideas for Prayer

- Confess our failings
- Pray for God’s enabling to lead lives that please Him, and to keep doing so more and more

5. Living in hope

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Set the scene

Two distinct issues have long fascinated, and puzzled, human beings.

The first is the issue of bereavement - What happens after death?

Where are our loved ones? Will we see them again?

The second is the issue of judgement - What will happen at the end of the world? Is there going to be a day of reckoning? If so, how can I prepare for it?

The Thessalonians were grappling with these issues, and Paul seeks to answer their questions and calm their anxieties.

To Begin

Look at the questions above. Without elaborating, state which question has most troubled you (or still troubles you).

Explore Further : Read 4:13-18 (Hope in the face of death)

1. Negatively, what are 2 things that Paul does **not** want the Thessalonian Christians to do? (v13)

2. Positively, what 3 things are they to believe
 - (a) regarding Jesus

 - (b) regarding Christians who have died

 - (c) regarding Christians who are still alive

Notes: v17

In the clouds – this is a symbol of the immediate presence of God; e.g. at Mt Sinai (Exo 19:16, 24:15), filling the tabernacle (Exo 40:34-35), at the transfiguration (Mk 9:7), and the ascension (Acts 1:9).

In the air – is equally symbolic; for it was thought of as the dwelling of the devil (“the prince of the power of the air” – Eph 2:2). The fact that the Lord chooses **to meet** his people on the devil’s home ground, so to speak, shows His complete mastery over him.

To meet – was the word used of the delegation of citizens who went out of the city to meet an important visitor and escort them back into the city. There is no suggestion of an interval between believers being ‘caught up in the clouds’ and the return of Christ.

3. How might we “encourage one another with these words” (v18)?

For instance, how do the truths in these verses help you -

- As you reflect on the death of a Christian friend?
- As you pray for a sick Christian?

Read 5:1-11 (Hope in the face of judgement)

4. Look at the pictures Paul uses to describe the day of the Lord.

What truths do these pictures convey about the Lord’s return?

5. In 2 columns, contrast the characteristics of ‘night-time’ and ‘daytime’ behaviour.

As we belong to the day, “our behaviour must be daytime behaviour. Let’s not sleep or even yawn our way through life, or live in our pyjamas. Let’s stay awake and alert. For then we shall be ready when Christ comes and we will not be taken by surprise.”

John Stott, The Message of Thessalonians, p112

6. Describe some examples of ‘daytime’ behaviour.

7. What is the reason for every Christian’s confidence as we face Christ’s return? (vs 9-11; see also 1:10)

Apply the Truth

8. Do we need to think about the day of Jesus Christ’s coming again more? or less?

9. In the times when life is a struggle, (which could be due to bereavement, mental or physical health problems, poverty, difficult relationships, pressures at work, battling an addiction, or even the daily grind of mundane routines)

- how do we keep hold of the hope of these truths?
- how do we “encourage one another” at such times?

Summing Up

Paul knows that grief and anxiety are very real emotions. He writes to the Thessalonians in the grip of their fears. He sustains and comforts them with great truths about the return of Jesus, the resurrection of the Christian dead, the raising of the Christian living and the reunion of all with each other. He reminds them that the returning Christ is the One who died for us and rose again.

Ideas for Prayer

- Thank God for being *in* Christ, belonging to the day, and in a secure relationship with God based on what **He** has done.
- Pray for friends who are grieving the death of a loved one
- Pray for those who struggle with feelings of hopelessness

6. A Vision for the church

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

To Begin

In a short sentence describe

- something you find infuriating about your family
- something you find heart-warming about your family.

Setting the Scene

We not only belong to “the day” (5:8); we also belong to “the family” (5:12-28). Here, Paul rattles off lots of advice on how to live as part of this Christian family in a way that will please God.

Explore Further - Read 1 Thess 5:12-28

1. List the instructions that Paul gives regarding

(a) relating to church leaders (vs12-13)

(b) relating to church members (vs14-15)

(c) behaviour when gathered for worship (vs 16-22)

2. Which of these do you find relatively easy to carry out?

3. Which of these do you struggle with the most?

4. How much is living in this way God's work (v23,24,28) and how much of it is ours?

Apply the Truth

5. Paul doesn't just give instructions, he has also modelled what he teaches :

- he has warned the idle (in 4:11-12)
- he has encouraged the timid [the anxious] (in 4:13-18; 5:1-11)
- he has helped the weak (in 4:3-8)

Think of situations that you face, and the opportunities you have to apply Paul's various instructions. Share some practical examples with one another.

6. How is 5:16-18 linked to having faith in God's provision?

7. Paul starts his letter focussing on God and prayer, and ends in the same way. What particularly strikes you about his closing comments about God, and his prayers for the Thessalonian believers?

