

HOPE FILLED COMMUNITY

The letter of 1 Thessalonians



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INTRODUCTION

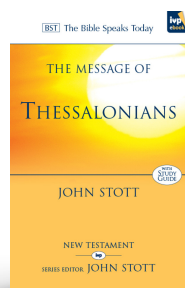
The Hope Filled Community

After a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-1), Paul was commissioned as an apostle to preach the gospel and plant churches. Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia, a Roman province in northern Greece. Boasting a population of more than 100 000, the city was a powerful commercial centre in the Greco-Roman world. The city attracted a diverse array of people and philosophies and was primarily polytheistic.

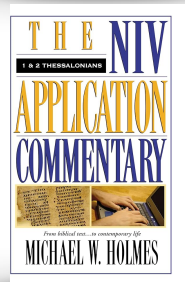
God blessed Paul's witness in Thessalonica so much that a church was established before he left (Acts 17:1-11). He writes to this young church from Corinth, addressing the Thessalonians in light of a report from Timothy's recent visit. The letter's scope stretches from eternity past to its particular focus on eternity future. Paul teaches us what it means to live as a hope-filled community.

Further resources

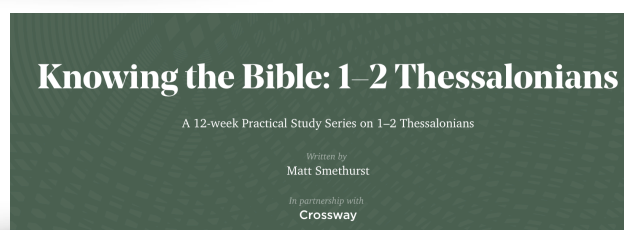
These studies have been assembled and prepared by St Mark's staff and leaders drawing heavily on the resources listed below. If you or your group would like to go deeper, the following might be helpful:



The Message of Thessalonians - John R.W Stott
(The Bible Speaks Today) - IVP



1 & 2 Thessalonians - Michael W. Holmes
(The NIV Application Commentary) - Zondervan



Knowing the Bible: 1-2 Thessalonians
-Matt Smethurst
(The Gospel Coalition & Crossway)

STUDY ONE - 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

Thankfulness for Transforming Faith

SHARE

Have you ever been the recipient or giver of a large display of gratitude? What did that look like?

Who is someone in your life that you are really thankful for? How do you express your gratitude for that person?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4

1. The Thessalonian believers were located in the city of Thessalonica in northern Greece. Yet spiritually they were 'in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Why do you think Paul begins by highlighting their 'spiritual address'?
2. Apart from the letter of Galatians, Paul begins his letters with the greeting 'grace and peace.' What might our relationships look like if we framed them in the context of the grace and peace of Jesus?
3. What do you notice about the way Paul prays for the Thessalonians? What does this reveal about how he views his ministry and gospel partnership?
4. 'Faith, hope and love' are a shorthand for some of the key elements of the Christian life (see Gal 5:5-6, Col 1:4-5, Heb 10:22-24). What three active words are these virtues connected to? What does that say about the nature of the Thessalonian church for which Paul is so thankful?
5. Do you think if a Christian visited St Mark's, they would see our work produced by faith, labour prompted by love and endurance inspired by hope? Are they at the centre of our community? How might we encourage these qualities and behaviours in ourselves and others?

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

6. How was the gospel received by the Thessalonians? How did that encourage and embolden them in the midst of severe suffering?
7. Just as the Thessalonians imitated Paul and his fellow workers, so others are now imitating the Thessalonians. Have you 'become an example' to anyone? What about St Mark's? When people observe our church life together, do you think they glimpse what it means to embrace and embody Jesus Christ?
8. In vs 9-10 Paul connects waiting (often seen as a passive behaviour) to serving (usually seen as something active). How does Christian waiting differ to worldly waiting?
9. How does the description of the Thessalonians' transformation in vs 9-10 correspond to the believer's experience of past 'justification' (ie being declared right before God, because of Jesus), present 'sanctification' (being transformed to be more like Christ) and future 'glorification' (to be fully and perfectly conformed to the image of Christ on the last day)?

NEXT STEPS

10. Many Christians today feel more comfortable/pressured to individualise and privatise their faith. How does vs 7-8 challenge this approach?
11. If the Thessalonians have turned from idols to serve 'the living and true God', what does that say about the nature of idols? What false god most distracts you from serving the living God?
12. Who encourages you in their life of faith, hope and love? Spend some time thanking God for them now.

STUDY TWO - 1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

Entrusted with the Gospel to share the Gospel

SHARE

Have you ever had to look after / protect something for a time? Why do you think you were chosen for this task? What changes did you need to make to take your responsibility seriously?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

1. On the surface it seems as if Paul is focussing on himself and his ministry in this section. However, what word appears repeatedly? What does this show about his perspective on his ministry?
2. Read Acts 16:16-24. What was Paul's 'shameful treatment' in Philippi? How did this influence his ministry in 2:2?
3. In vs 1-8, what does Paul clarify regarding his message, motives and methods?
 - a. message (the what) vs 2
 - b. motives (the why) vs 3-4, 6
 - c. methods (the how) vs 5, 7-8

What might have happened in Thessalonica if Paul sought to please people rather than God? How can we be tempted to do that in the way we speak about God or our faith to others?

4. Paul uses a variety of family relationships to describe his conduct among the Thessalonians – 'like young children' vs 7, 'a nursing mother who cares for her children' vs 7, 'a father who deals with his own children' vs 11. What does this indicate about the manner in which he is sharing the gospel?

5. What does vs 8 reveal about the nature of Paul's relationship with the Thessalonians? Does this feel like 'hit and run' evangelism or something deeper?
6. What does it mean to live a life 'worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory'? Why does the destination of the calling matter? How is living like this different from seeking to earn God's favour by doing good works?

NEXT STEPS

7. Even while defending his genuineness as an apostle, Paul's perspective is relentlessly God-centred. What about yours? When sharing your testimony or speaking about your faith, who is the main character?
8. How do you respond when you feel pressured or persecuted for your faith? How can we help one another to live to please God rather than seeking human approval?
9. What would it look like for St Mark's to be a community where people not only share God's word with one another but *their whole lives as well*?

STUDY THREE - 1 THESSALONIANS 2:13-20

A Fellowship of Suffering and Joy

SHARE

What areas of news (eg politics, crime, disaster, celebrity, sport, traffic) are you more or less likely to trust the media's reporting? Why? What would make you believe a news source is trustworthy?

Share an experience of intense longing. What did you long for and were your longings satisfied?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

1. How did the Thessalonians receive God's word?
2. Do you think the gospel is mainly for Christians or mainly for non-Christians? Paul describes the word of God as heard, accepted and still at work in believers (vs13). In what sense is the good news active in the hearts and lives of Christians?
3. Suffering for the gospel was not just the calling of the apostles but the whole congregation (vs 14-15). The Thessalonians' opponents were not enemies from afar but their 'own people'. According to vs 16, what will the end result be for opponents of the gospel?

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

4. How would you describe the way Paul feels about the Thessalonians? Why do you think he longs to see them face to face?
5. Paul describes the Thessalonians as his 'hope', 'joy' and 'crown'. What do you think he means by this? When does he anticipate he will see them face to face?

NEXT STEPS

6. What would it look like to receive the gospel as a human message rather than the word of God? What might the implications of that be for an individual? For a church?

7. In vs 20, Paul describes a beautiful picture of the Thessalonians as his 'glory and joy.' How do you view the people of St Mark's? Are you more likely to focus on their faults or their beauty? What might need to change, whether in thought, speech or behaviour, to more closely resemble Paul's perspective and heart?

8. What comes to mind when you think about the return of the Lord Jesus? Where does longing to see other believers glorified in the presence of Jesus fit within your thinking?

STUDY FOUR - 1 THESSALONIANS 3:1-13

Standing Firm in the Faith

SHARE

Share a time when either you or someone you love was sent off to face something nerve-wracking or uncomfortable (eg going for a job interview, confronting a situation of injustice, taking a child to their first day of school). How did you feel?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

1. Why does Paul send Timothy to the Thessalonians?
2. Paul describes Timothy as a 'co-worker in God's service' (literally 'God's co-worker'). Read 1 Cor 3:5-9. How does this passage help us see the meaning and significance of Timothy's title?
3. What are all Christians 'destined for' according to vs 3-4. Does this surprise you? Why does Paul 'keep telling' the Thessalonians this? (see also Acts 14:21-22)

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

4. What is the good news Timothy brings Paul in vs 6-7? How does he react in vs 8?
5. In 2:18 Paul describes Satan as hindering his plans and in 3:5 he describes him as tempting the Thessalonians to lose their faith. Christians can drift into one of two categories: not ever considering the reality of evil powers or being overly worried and concerned about Satan and the demonic realm. What does Paul's prayer in 3:11 assume about the scope of Satan's power?
6. Paul longs to see the Thessalonians so he can 'supply what is lacking in their faith'. How important is accountability and encouragement within a church community when we think about what it means to be growing as Christians?
7. What does Paul pray for the Thessalonians in vs 11-13? What can we learn from his priorities in this prayer?

NEXT STEPS

8. This passages mentions two things we are destined for:

1. Trials and persecutions in the here and now
2. Dwelling, holy and blameless, in the presence of God when the Lord Jesus returns for all eternity

How does destiny 2. help us withstand destiny 1.?

9. In vs 7 Paul is so encouraged that the Thessalonians are 'standing firm in the Lord'. What are you most tempted to 'stand firm in' besides the Lord? Why?

10. Paul's wellbeing is deeply bound up with the Thessalonian's wellbeing – their flourishing in the faith brings him comfort (vs7), gratitude (vs9), joy (vs9), even life (vs8). How can we help each other cultivate hearts that are more easily edified and comforted by reports of God's grace?

STUDY FIVE - 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-8

Called to Holiness

Paul has commended the Thessalonians for their faith and witness (1:2-10), defended his own conduct and ministry (2:1-16), explained his absence (2:17-3:5) and rejoiced in Timothy's report (3:6-13). He now turns to consider a few specific pastoral issues, beginning with holiness (1-8) love (9-10) and work (11-12).

SHARE

What do people think of when they hear the word 'holy' or 'holiness'?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

1. In vs 1-2 what is the relationship between 'instructions' and 'living (literally 'walking') to please God'?
2. Take a moment to ponder what the phrase 'to please God' (4:1 see also 2:4). What does this simple yet profound truth that we can bring pleasure to our creator's heart reveal about who he is and what he is like?
3. Have you ever wanted to know God's will for your life? According to vs3, what is God's expressed will for you? What does this mean?
4. We find ourselves in a highly sexualised culture in many different arenas, including the online space. Words like 'abstain' (vs3) and 'control' (vs4) in reference to sexual expression sound ridiculous and even harmful to many of our peers. In what ways does our culture misunderstand the Bible's sexual ethic? How is God's design for sexuality both counter-culturally beautiful and counterintuitively freeing?
5. According to vs 5, pursuing 'passionate lust' marks those who 'do not know God'. In what ways does allowing lust to take control reveal a heart far from God?
6. What is the impact on others as well as ourselves when we fail in the area of sexual purity?
7. Which persons of the Trinity make an appearance in 4:1-8? Why is this significant? Why do you think the Holy Spirit in particular is mentioned in vs 8?

8. Why is sanctification so good?

9. It can be tempting to think we need to 'sort out our sin / mess / identity issues' before we can come to Jesus. In John 4:1-30 we see Jesus' interaction with a woman caught in sexual sin. How does he treat her? How does she respond?

NEXT STEPS

10. What would it look like to show Jesus' love and grace to someone struggling with their sexuality or gender identity within our church context? Outside the church?

11. Vs 8 reminds us that when we who are in 'in the Lord Jesus' reject God's call to a life of holiness, we reject God himself. Spend time in prayer and repentance before God confessing thoughts or behaviours in your life where you haven't listened to this call.

12. Read John 1:9. How does this verse provide comfort to those of us who have struggled / are struggling with impurity?

13. How can we encourage people to share their struggles in areas of sexuality at St Mark's? What does it look like to foster a life of repentance and holy living in our church community?

STUDY SIX - 1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-12

Love, Love, Love

SHARE

Share some examples where you have felt genuinely loved in a Christian community.

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

1. Who has taught the Thessalonians about brotherly love? What is the ultimate example of this?
2. Why do you think Paul urges the Thessalonians to love more and more despite the fact that they are already doing so well in this area?
3. What should we be ambitious for in vs 11? What would the opposite of this look like?
4. What reason does Paul give for exhorting the Thessalonians to 'work with their hands' (vs11-12)?
5. What is the relationship between Paul's prayer in 3:12-13 and his instructions in 4:1-12?

NEXT STEPS

6. How is Christian love different from flattery? What would it look like for St Mark's to be a community marked by brotherly and sisterly love?

7. Paul gives specific instructions to lead a quiet life, mind your own business and work with your hands. Which of these would you like to grow in and bring before God in prayer?

8. Paul wants the daily life of the Thessalonians to 'win the respect of the outsiders'. This is also a qualification of church elders in 1 Tim 3:7. Yet Jesus also said, 'Woe to you, when people speak well of you' (Luke 6:26) and 'You will be hated by all for my name's sake' (Luke 21:17). How do we reconcile these texts?

9. Paul states that the Thessalonian believers love 'all of God's family throughout Macedonia'. How can we show love to Christians outside our local church community?

STUDY SEVEN - 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

Glorious Future Hope

SHARE

Have you ever had to wait a long time to be reunited with someone? How did you manage the waiting? What was the reunification like?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

1. Why does Paul describe death as 'sleep' for the believer?
2. This passage describes a stunning future hope for Christians. Given this hope, does Paul expect us not to grieve? Why or why not? How should hope shape the nature of our grieving?
3. Summarise the sequence of events in these verses. Does the language in 4:16 suggest that Christ's return will be a secret event (ie recognised only by Christians) or a public event (recognised by all)?
4. According to vs 16, Christians who have died will be raised to life by the Lord's 'loud command'. Read John 11:38-43 and Ephesians 2:1-10. What do these passages teach us about how we are made alive?
5. As you read Paul's description of your future, what words and images capture your heart most? Don't overlook the end of 4:17. How is this a most wonderful promise?

NEXT STEPS

6. Often it can be difficult to know what to say when someone is going through a time of intense grief or struggle. We can be (rightfully) concerned that quoting bible verses in isolation or reciting Christian platitudes could fall flat or be insensitive. What might it look like to bring genuine Jesus-shaped comfort within Christian community for those struggling?

7. In verse 18 Paul exhorts his readers to 'encourage one another with these words' regarding Jesus' return. How can we encourage one another to have an 'end-times' focus:
 - a. In times of persecution

 - b. In times of suffering

 - c. In times of prosperity

 - d. In times of grief and loss

Spend some time meditating on the majesty and the intimacy of the return of Jesus. Pray that God will keep this end-times reality front of mind this week.

STUDY EIGHT - 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

The Day of the Lord

SHARE

Have you ever anticipated a date with excitement or nervousness for a long time? (eg a driving test, a holiday, your wedding day, a medical procedure)

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1. What will the coming day of the Lord be like?
2. Read Matthew 24:36-51 and note where Paul draws his language of the day of the Lord being like a 'thief in the night'. Will this day come as a sudden surprise for believers? Why or why not?
3. For those in darkness, the day of the Lord will be sudden and surprising (vs3-4). Where in our current cultural context do you see the assumption that there is 'peace and safety' in terms of how people view their moral standing before God or before others? Do you think most Australians think they will be held to account for how they have lived their lives?
4. What will happen to the unbeliever on the day of Jesus' return?
5. In vs 4-11, Paul contrasts two types of people:
 - a. children of the day (or light)
 - b. children of the night (or darkness)

Every human being is in one category or the other, there is no third option. What behaviours and attitudes characterise each type of person? What is their future?

6. There are a number of prophecies in the Old Testament which describe the garments worn by the Messiah. Read Isa 59:17 and Isa 11:5. How does this help us understand how Christians are equipped to stand firm while they wait for the day of the Lord? (See also Ephesians 6:10-20)
7. Do you think we should feel fearful or joyful about Jesus' second coming? How does vs 11 help us understand Paul's purpose in writing this letter?

NEXT STEPS

8. Where are you most tempted to find 'peace and safety' outside of Jesus?
9. What do you think it looks like to wear the armour of faith, hope and love? How do we do this individually? How do we do it as a church?
10. Do you feel a sense of urgency about those who are lost (children of the night)? Why or why not?

STUDY NINE - 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-28

The Family of God

SHARE

What has stood out to you in our studies from 1 Thessalonians so far?
What have you been challenged by? What have you found comforting?

OBSERVE & REFLECT

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

1. How many times in this closing section of the letter does Paul address his readers as 'brothers' (brothers and sisters NIV)? Based on other New Testament references to the church as God's family (eg Matt 12:48-50, Eph 2:19, 1 Tim 3:15), what can you discern about God's design for the church?
2. In vs 12-13 what are Paul's two instructions for how church members are to relate to their pastors or elders?
3. Paul observes in vs 12 that the Thessalonians' pastors are both 'among' them and 'over' them (admonish NIV). Why is this significant and how do these two aspects of spiritual leadership counterbalance each other? What happens in a church when the 'among you' emphasis begins to drown out the 'over you' emphasis? What about the reverse?
4. In vs 13, Paul tells the Thessalonians to hold their pastors in the highest regard 'in love'. What is one way we can hold up our leaders and pastors in love?
5. What does genuine peace look like? How can we pursue it? Why is it hard to maintain?
6. Who are the commands in vs 14-15 addressed to? Read Eph 4:12-13. Who is humanly responsible for doing the 'work of ministry' in the church? Does this surprise you?
7. Paul has already answered the question, 'What is God's will for my life?' in 4:3. What is his second answer to this question in vs 18? Thinking of your own circumstances, what might it look like for you to carry out God's will based on these two verses?

8. Although bible-believing Christians disagree on the nature of 'prophecies' in vs 19-22, it is clear that we are to 'test everything' we hear, especially words claiming divine origin. According to John Stott, we ought to subject divine claims to five tests:

- i. The truth of Scripture (Acts 17:11)
- ii. The nature of Christ (1 John 4:1-3)
- iii. The gospel of grace (Gal 1:6-9)
- iv. The character of the speaker (Matt 7:15-20)
- v. The edification of the body (1 Cor 14).

Which of these tests are you most inclined to value? Which are you most inclined to overlook?

9. Paul finishes his letter in vs 23-24 by praying for the church's sanctification as if it were a gift. In 4:1-7 he spoke of sanctification as a calling. Is our increasing conformity to Christ our responsibility or God's?
10. How does verse 28 remind us of how we come in and stay in relationship with God?

NEXT STEPS

11. In vs 14 Paul encourages the church to 'warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak and be patient with everyone'. What can we learn from the breadth of ministry and the wisdom it requires from these commands? How can we encourage one another at St Mark's to build the kinds of relationships where we could be sharpening and encouraging one another in this way?
12. Of all the commands in this section, which challenges you the most? Why? How might you more deliberately cultivate a heart posture of obedience in this area?
13. Pray for God's help as you seek to conform to the likeness of Christ. Bring specific areas before him that you feel you are struggling in. Pray that we can be humble and honest with one another as we seek to grow in our holiness as a family of God.

