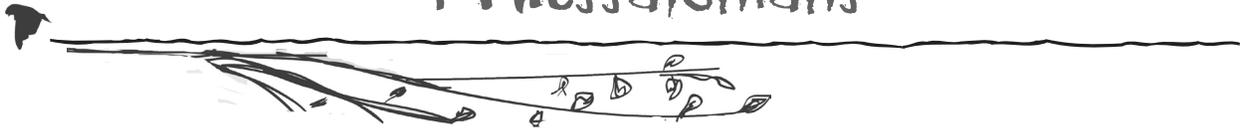


santa barbara community church
winter ❁ spring 2010



1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians



Sources & Abbreviations

Bruce	F. F. Bruce, <i>1 & 2 Thessalonians</i> , (Word, 1982)
Calvin	John Calvin, <i>1 & 2 Thessalonians</i> , (Crossways Books, 1999)
ESV	English Standard Bible
Fee	Gordon Fee, <i>NICNT The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians</i> , (Eerdmans, 2009)
Hendrickson	William Hendrickson, <i>New Testament Commentary, Exposition of 1 & 2 Thessalonians</i> , (Baker, 1955)
Hiebert	Edmond Hiebert, <i>The Thessalonian Epistles</i> , (Moody Press, 1971)
Holmes	Michael Holmes, <i>The NIV Application Commentary 1 & 2 Thessalonians</i> , (Zondervan, 1998)
MacArthur	John MacArthur, <i>1 & 2 Thessalonians</i> , (Moody Press, 2002)
NIV	New International Version of the Bible
Stott	John Stott, <i>The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians</i> , (IVP, 1991)
Thomas	Robert Thomas, <i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary</i> , volume 2, (Zondervan, 1978)
Wright	N.T. Wright, <i>1 & 2 Thessalonians</i> , (IVP, 2009)

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The study guide was written by Steve Jolley (introduction and studies 1-7) and Reed Jolley (studies 8-14). Original artwork was created by Ryan Ethington. Bonnie Fearer, Susi Lamoutte, and Mike Willbanks proofread the studies and Carolee Peterson designed and published the final guide book.

1 Thessalonians

Introduction

Introduction to 1 Thessalonians

It was on Paul's second missionary journey, AD 49 or 50, that apostle and his band of missionaries, Silas, Timothy and Luke arrived in the Greek town of Thessalonica. Situated about 100 miles from Philippi, Thessalonica (modern day Thessaloniki) was the largest and most important city of Macedonia. The great Roman highway, the Via Egnatia, connected Rome with its eastern provinces and made Thessalonica a significant center of trade.



Like many Macedonian cities of its day, it had something to offer to almost every religious persuasion or interest. In Thessalonica you could find traditional Greek cults, philosophic traditions, mystery religions, the cult of Roman emperor worship, a sanctuary of Egyptian gods (Isis & Osiris) and a Jewish population large enough to support a synagogue. There was also a local cult to the *highest god* that in Thessalonica was identified with Cabirus. With so many religious options there was strong tendency to mix and match. Syncretism was unavoidable.

It is into this context that Paul and his co-workers introduce Christian faith. The almost immediate response was a combination of acceptance, rejection, hostility and persecution. The church was born. The church was persecuted. The church grew and stood firm. In reading 1 Thessalonians

modern readers must constantly remind themselves of the real life, *on the ground*, situation the recipients of this letter are facing. This church was young in their faith, initially small in number, taught for only a period of somewhere between two to four months, and suffering the trials of persecution. It is into this context that the loving apostle Paul writes to this young church. Thessalonians is one of the earliest of all the New Testament letters.

1 Thessalonians is a loving letter where the heart beat of Paul is on display. It exudes warmth, affection, pastoral concern, and practical instructions for Christian living. Of particular concern is the timing of the return of Christ and the fate of those who had *fallen asleep*. The young church was confused and Paul writes, in part, to assure and comfort the church concerning these matters.

What about us? What does 1 Thessalonians have to say to Santa Barbara Community Church in 2010? We are a local church and 1 Thessalonians is a local church. While the cultural situation in first century Macedonia is different from that of twenty-first century Santa Barbara, the basic hopes, fears, and questions of God's people have not changed all that greatly. As we study this letter together we can anticipate that God himself will shape and

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Introduction



sharpen our faith, just as he used this letter in the faith of those early Christians. The local church, while looking different in various locations and times, is still the family of God in a given locale. It is through local churches that God will accomplish his will in the world.

When we affirm (as we should) that the church is central to the historical purpose of God, we are not referring to only to its universal aspect, but also to its concrete, local, and colorful manifestations. But what is to be our vision for the local church, and how is its life to be developed? Paul's letters to the Thessalonian church throw valuable light on such aspects as its continuous evangelism, pastoral care, ethical standards, reciprocal fellowship, public worship, obedience to apostolic teaching, and future hope. I cannot imagine how any church member or leader could fail to find both **direction and inspiration** in these letters for the life of their local church. (Stott, p. 10, emphasis added)

This study guide is written with the hope that SBCC will find, as John Stott said, both *direction and inspiration* in studying 1 Thessalonians. The goal is not simply to gather more information but to have changed lives. It is important to remember that this is a guide. We are not studying the study guide, but the Bible, and in particular 1 Thessalonians. The commentary and questions in this guide are meant to drive us back into the Scriptures.

When studying the Bible we always want to ask three simple questions of any passage. Leave any one of these question unanswered and you have not really studied the Bible.

What? (What does it say?)

So What? (What does it mean?)

What now? (How do I apply it to my life?)

May God bless, shape and challenge Santa Barbara Community Church as we spend fourteen weeks in Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica.

1 Thessalonians

Study One

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Beginnings... Acts 17:1-9



As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said.

Any church has a beginning. In our day most new churches are *planted* when a small group of mature believers give birth to a new local expression of the church. They hope the church will grow as the gospel is shared and people find faith in Jesus. These church planters begin this new church equipped with free Bibles to hand out, of worship songs to teach, a strategy for evangelism, and a vision statement that expresses their hopes. Churches in the first century began in a much different way.

Paul and his traveling companions, Silas, Timothy, and Luke arrived in Thessalonica in AD 49 or 50. It was during Paul's second missionary journey, described for us by Luke in the book of Acts, that this missionary team came to this beautiful seaport city. The three missionary trips described in Acts are like any good adventure story. We read of success and failure, joy and pain, the expected and the unexpected. The roller coaster of emotions quickly becomes evident in Acts 17:1-9.

As we begin our study of Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica it is important that we understand the circumstances of how this church began. In the process we will learn something of Paul's heart for the believers in Thessalonica, some of the problems that existed, and the reasons that this letter was written. Just as it is vital to know someone's background and personal story if you are to understand them, it is essential that we know the background of the founding of this church if we are to understand the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

The story of the second missionary journey begins in Acts 15:36. To get us up to speed for what transpired in Thessalonica read Acts 15:36-16:40.

When did Timothy join Paul and Silas? Acts 16:1-3

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When did Luke join Paul, Silas and Timothy? Acts 16:11 (Notice the “we” sections begin here. Luke wrote the book of Acts.)

What were they doing as they traveled from city to city?

The efforts of this band of brothers in Philippi meet with remarkable success that resulted in a long and warm relationship between Paul and this church. As was often the case these itinerate missionaries were beaten, put in jail and then run out of town. Philippi was close to 100 miles from Thessalonica. Beaten, bruised and joyful Paul, Silas and Timothy (Luke stayed behind) traveled along the Via Egnatia, the great Roman road that connected Rome with its eastern provinces.

With this background in mind, read Acts 17:1-9 that describes the founding of the church at Thessalonica.

Does anything stand out to you in these nine verses? What initial questions do you have of this story?

What do you learn about the city of Thessalonica from these verses?

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A quick reading of Acts 17:1-9 would lead you to think that Paul and his friends stayed in Thessalonica for 3-4 weeks, having gone to the synagogue on *three Sabbath days*. Most likely they stayed much longer. Most commentators estimate that they were in Thessalonica for somewhere between two to five months.¹

It was Paul's habit to initially look to the synagogue for a welcoming place to teach. As a learned traveling rabbi, Paul would be invited to speak to the Jewish worshippers. In Thessalonica this itinerant preacher only lasts three Saturdays.

Notice the language of verses 2-4. What does this tell you about the nature of how Paul presented the gospel message?

reasoned with them from the Scriptures

explaining and proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead²

This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.

Some of the Jews were persuaded

How does Paul's presentation of the gospel compare to how you might talk to friends and neighbors about the good news found in Jesus? Do you *reason, explain, prove and persuade* when you talk to the non-Christian? Why or why not?

¹ Luke, however, often "telescopes" his narrative by skipping over intervening events (compare his relatively brief and episodic account in Acts 18:1-18 of Paul's initial visit to Corinth, which lasted eighteen months). Thus a month or two (or even three or four) may have elapsed between the two episodes narrated in 17:1-4 and 17:5-9. A stay of two to five months would correlate well with impression given by Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians of his activities during this time, and also with his comment that the Philippians contributed to his support during this time, perhaps (but not necessarily) more than once (Phil. 4:15-16). (Michael Holmes, The NIV Application Commentary, p. 20)

² Such a revolutionary teaching would be at odds with the prominent Jewish view that saw the Messiah as a political and military leader who would rescue Israel from her oppressors.

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Study One

As a homegroup talk about evangelism. Is this a strong part of your life? Is evangelism a strength of SBCC? What do you think of Paul's methods here in Thessalonica?

What holds you back from being more aggressive in sharing your faith? Why do you think Paul and his fellow team members were so aggressive?

If you were to reason and prove from the Scriptures that Jesus was the messiah who died for the sins of the world what passages from the Bible would you turn to? Use this time in your homegroup to share crucial passages that explain the gospel. Take notes and help each other to be prepared.

List the three groups of people who initially responded to the gospel message.¹

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

From the very beginning this new church faced persecution. What a way to begin. Think about it. The synagogue would have been incensed at the loss of members to this new cult. The conversion of some *prominent women* would have made civic leaders aware and wary of the cult. This fledging church was born in opposition and hostility.

¹ *God fearing Greeks* were Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism and attended the synagogue services, but did not become full converts to Judaism.

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How do you picture the ensuing riot that breaks out?¹ Have you ever witnessed a riot? What do you envision when the *crowd and city officials were thrown into turmoil*?

Jason was probably hosting the first homegroup in Thessalonica. The last thing on their minds was whether or not they should have dessert before or after the study. How do you imagine the first century church experience from our own today?

This is the beginning of the church at Thessalonica. After just a few months of teaching and training these young believers, Paul is run out of town making his way first to Berea and then to Athens and eventually Corinth. The first impulse of these missionaries was to get back to Thessalonica and check on the health of the church. Paul points out that he tried several times (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18). In Athens Paul is so frustrated with not knowing the situation in the church that he sends Timothy back to Thessalonica. It is in Corinth that Timothy finally catches up with Paul and brings encouraging news from Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:6). It is in Corinth, after a face-to-face report from Timothy, that Paul writes one of his earliest letters, 1 Thessalonians.

With all this background in mind, read 1 Thessalonians—five short chapters that won't take you long. How does knowing the tumultuous beginnings of the church, the relatively brief time that Paul was in Thessalonica, and the culturally and religiously mixed group of people that made up the church help you to understand this letter?

Respond to the statement below from John Stott. How do you see this working out in your commitment to the local church? What implications does this have for evangelism?

What is of particular interest, because it applies to Christian communities in every age and place, is the interaction which the apostle portrays between the church and the gospel. He shows how the gospel creates the church and the church spreads the gospel, and how the gospel shapes the church, as the church seeks to live a life worthy of the gospel. (Stott, p. 20)

¹ The *bad characters* of verse 5 are colorfully described in the KJV as *certain lewd fellows of the baser sort*.

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Study One

sermon notes 🐦

1 Thessalonians

Study Two

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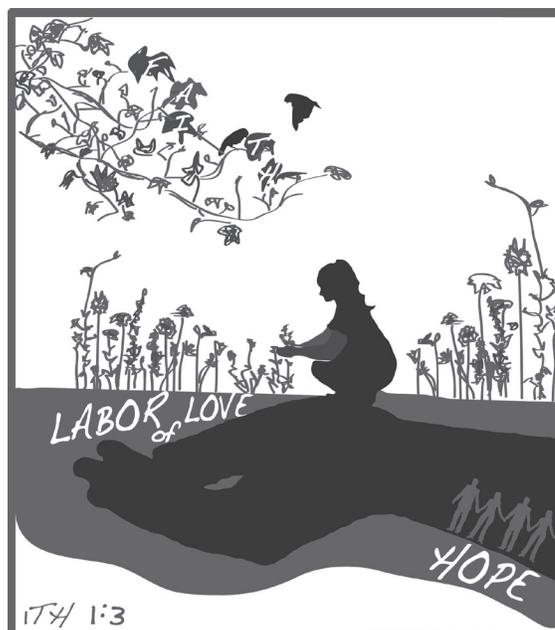
The Church of God... 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4

The church in Thessalonica is only a few months old. Its members are very young in their faith, coming from either Judaism or paganism. Everything is new. Fresh moral standards, hope in the return of Jesus, being joined together with other people in a *church*, and of course persecution, were being experienced for the first time. As John Stott says, *You would expect this to be a very wobbly church in a very precarious condition.* (Stott, p. 27)

At the very beginning of his letter Paul is going to remind the Thessalonian believers of their new identity as Christians. These opening four verses are packed with practical truths about what it means to be a part of God's church and what in particular are the distinguishing marks of faith.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. While we will take two weeks to cover this material, read all of this first chapter as a unit.

What initial questions do you have of verses 1-4? Does anything jump off the page and grab your attention?



The traditional greeting in the first century world when writing letters was *chairein*, which simply meant *greetings*. As Paul does in all his letters, he changes this common introduction to *charis*, which means grace. When combined with the traditional Jewish greeting of *shalom* (*peace* in the sense of *wholeness* or *well being*) the letter begins with a distinctly Christian greeting, *grace and peace to you*.

The letter is addressed *to the church of the Thessalonians* (v. 1). The word *church* (*ekklesia*) was a common first century term that now, in the pages of Scripture, took on special significance. Gordon Fee explains the history of this term.

Its origin in the Greek city-state as a designation for the assembly of citizens gathered to deal with city affairs, as well as a term for "societies" of people who shared common beliefs, made it the happy choice of the Greek translators of the Old Testament, where it was regularly used to render the Hebrew *qahal*, referring to the "whole congregation"

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Study Two

of Israel. The choice of this word for the community of believers in any given locale was thus a natural one. And by the time of this letter, it had already begun to designate all the believers in a given community . . . (Fee, p. 14)

Think about the situation at Thessalonica for these new Christians. Why would it be important for them to understand themselves as a *church*? Why is it important in our own day to understand our faith in the context of the *church*?

The apostle begins many of his letters with some mention of prayer and thanks for those to whom he is writing. Compare this sentence, *We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers* (v. 2), with other similar statements Paul makes about his prayer for his churches.

Philippians 1:3-4

Colossians 1:3-4

2 Timothy 1:3

How do prayer and thankfulness go together? Why do you think Paul often begins by mentioning his prayers? Does Paul's example encourage you to change your habits of prayer?

Respond to this statement by John Stott. How can you help your memory?

He tells the Thessalonians that he, Silas and Timothy - when together, separately or both - 1) always thanked God for them all, 2) mentioned them in their prayers, and 3) continually remembered them before God. Thus memory, thanksgiving and prayer belong together. Perhaps we need to pray and work for better memories. For it is when we remember people (their faces, names and needs) that we are prompted both to thank God and to pray for them. (Stott, p. 29)

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Study Two

What Jonathan Wilson calls the *Gospel Virtues* of faith, hope and love come into sharp focus in verse 3b.¹

your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.²

Michael Holmes says that these three words, faith, hope and love, *function almost as a shorthand summary of the essentials of Christianity* (Holmes, p. 48). The French Reformer John Calvin said much the same thing calling this a *brief definition of true Christianity* (Calvin, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, p.19). This triad of faith, hope and love show up often, with varying degrees of clarity, in many of Paul's letters. They also are found in 1 Peter and Hebrews. As we unpack these weighty words examine these other New Testament passages. Each of the passages listed below make mention of faith, hope and love. Begin to take notes as to what you are learning about faith, hope and love.³

1 Corinthians 13:13

Ephesians 4:2-5

Colossians 1:4-5

Romans 5:1-5

1 Peter 1:3-8

Hebrews 6:10-12

Hebrews 10:22-24

1 Jonathan Wilson, *Gospel Virtues: Practicing Faith Hope and Love in Uncertain Times*, IVP, 1998.

2 Translators have some difficult decisions with verse 3. The ESV and other literal translations opt to render these phrases more abruptly, *your work of faith, labor of love, steadfastness of hope*. Gordon Fee points out that, *Unfortunately a literal rendering of these three phrases has also led to further misunderstanding on the part of many readers. . . Thus the NIV — and a few others have turned all three of them into meaningful phrases that capture the “result / reason” of the three genitives.* (Fee, p. 24)

3 In many ways these passages are not similar. What is interesting about them, however, is that these three themes of faith, hope and love show up in each of them. While not always in the same way or in the same order, they nevertheless tell us something central about the Christian life.

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Study Two

Christians are people who are distinguished by the marks of faith, hope and love. Think about your own life and spiritual journey with Christ. Answer each of the questions below thinking about yourself and how these characteristics have worked themselves out in your life.

What *works* have been produced in your life by *faith*? (be specific)

What *labor* have you seen in your life *prompted by love*?

How have you experienced spiritual *endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*?

In our last verse to be considered in this study Paul encourages the Thessalonian believers with the twin truths of God's love for them and his choosing of them.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you . . . (v. 4)

For some, the biblical teaching on God's choosing or election can be troubling. Ironically, whenever the subject comes up in the Bible (and it does often) it is meant to be an encouragement for the believers. Once again John Stott helps to clarify.

Moreover, the topic of election is nearly always introduced for a practical purpose, in order to foster assurance (not presumption), holiness (not moral apathy), humility (not pride) and witness (not lazy selfishness). But still no explanation of God's election is given except God's love . . . That is, he chose us because he loves us, and he loves us because he loves us. He does not love us because we are lovable, but only because of his love. And with that mystery we must rest content. (Stott, p. 31)

How might verse 4 have been of tremendous encouragement to the believers in Thessalonica?

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Study Two

Examine the verses below that speak of God's sovereign choosing of you. How do these verses encourage you? If they trouble you, explain why.

John 15:16

Ephesians 1:4-5, 11

Titus 1:1

1 Peter 1:1

Take a step back and consider 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4. Paul's main intent in these verses is to instill confidence in this very young church. Do you think he accomplished his goal? How have these verses given you spiritual confidence?

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14 Study Two

sermon notes 🐦

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The Gospel of God... 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10

Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica began with an affirmation of the church. They were God's chosen people characterized by faith, hope and love. The apostle now turns from God's church to God's gospel. In 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10 we learn about the *Lord's message* (v. 8 NIV) or the *word of the Lord* (v. 8 ESV). The gospel message came to the believers in a certain way and was received by them with appropriate attitudes. In turn the reception of *Lord's message* resulted in concrete steps of faith that changed the daily life of these new believers.

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, focusing your attention on verses 5-10. Before going on in this study jot down any initial thoughts or questions you have. What do these verses tell you about the *Lord's message*?



Messages usually don't come in a vacuum. Verse 5 describes how the gospel came to the inhabitants of Thessalonica. List the **four ways** that this good news came to Thessalonica.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

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Study Three

The gospel came with *words*. *Not simply with words*, but with words nevertheless. The good news has specific content that is communicated in words and sentences. As we have seen Paul came to Thessalonica and *reasoned with them from the Scriptures* (Acts 17:2). How important is it that we choose our words carefully when talking to people about Jesus? Can someone find salvation in Christ without hearing the words of the gospel message?

The gospel came with power and with the Holy Spirit. Power and the Holy Spirit cannot be separated. When people hear the good news about new life in Jesus Christ words are not enough. Power in the person of the Holy Spirit is needed. Stott puts it succinctly.

We must never divorce what God has married, namely his Word and his Spirit. The Word of God is the Spirit's sword. The Spirit without the Word is weaponless; the Word without the Spirit is powerless. (Stott, p. 34)

Think back to your own conversion. What role did the Word and the Spirit play in your repentance? How did the Holy Spirit enable you to understand the message and inwardly confirm the truth of this message?

Read 1 Corinthians 2:10-16 where Paul more fully explains the relationship between the Word and Spirit. How does this passage help you understand this relationship? How do you understand and apply verse 14 to your life?

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Corinthians 2:14

The gospel came with *deep conviction*. What does this tell us about Paul's confidence in proclaiming the gospel? How would you rate your conviction when talking to others about Jesus? Why?

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17

Study Three

These Thessalonian believers responded to the gospel joyfully and in the process learned to live the Christian life by imitating the Lord as well as Paul, Silas and Timothy. The word in verse 6, *imitators (mimetai)*, is the word from which the English term mimic derives. It simply means to copy. Look at the verses listed below and remind yourself of this core Biblical teaching. The Christian life is learned as we follow the example of Jesus and other believers.

Therefore I urge you to imitate me. 1 Corinthians 4:16

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you . . . 2 Thessalonians 3:7

I plead with you, brothers, become like me . . . Galatians 4:12

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. Philippians 3:17

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children. Ephesians 5:1

Alongside of God, are you consciously imitating other believers? Would you feel odd encouraging a new Christian to look at the patterns of your life and imitate you? Why or why not?

Look at verse 6 again. These believers, *in spite of severe suffering, welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.* Joy in the Christian life is one of the certain hallmarks of genuine faith. But suffering is also often, sadly, a part of the Christian's experience. Ironically the New Testament often talks about joy and suffering in the very same context.¹ Consider and respond to Fee's statement on verse 6.

Thus we find here the remarkable collocation of joy and suffering found throughout the New Testament. The early church understood suffering to be part of its lot, and believers were not surprised by it (1 Thessalonians 3:2-3); yet because they had experienced their new life as the indwelling of the Spirit, they also lived with great joy. In the midst of suffering, their experience of the eschatological Spirit had given them a foretaste of the life to come. (Fee, p. 39)

What does it say about American Christians when they are completely surprised when suffering comes their way?

¹ See 2 Corinthians 8:2; Romans 5:3-5; Acts 5:41; James 1:2; 1 Peter 1:6.

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Study Three

It seems that the faith of this fledging church was the talk of the town, in Macedonia and Achaia and *everywhere* (v. 8). The *Lord's message* rang out from them so that everyone was aware of this gospel. This is the only place in the New Testament that the Greek word *rang out* (*execheo*) is found. The word is derived from *echos* where we get the English word echo or noise. It could refer to a sound, ring, or boom. Whatever Paul has in mind this gospel was having such an impact it was reverberating through the landscape of Greece.

According to verse 8 exactly what was the news that was spreading *everywhere*?

One has to wonder what Jews and pagans in the area were hearing about these new Christians. How did this news spread? What was being said? Stott helps us look behind the scenes at the types of conversations that may have been going on.

There is an important lesson to learn here. We are a very media-conscious generation. We know the power of mass media on the public mind. Consequently, we want to use this media in evangelism. By print and tape, audio and video cassettes, by radio and television we would like to saturate the world with the good news. And rightly so . . . Nevertheless there is a different way, which (if we must compare them) is still more effective. It requires no complicated electronic gadgetry; it is very simple. It is neither organized nor computerized; it is spontaneous. And it is not expensive; it costs precisely nothing. We might call it 'holy gossip.' It is the excited transmission from mouth to mouth of the impact the good news is making on people. 'Have you heard what happened to so and so? Did you know that such and such a person has come to believe in God and has been completely transformed? Something extraordinary is going on in Thessalonica: a new society is coming into being, with new values and standards characterized by faith, love and hope.' (Stott, p. 38)

Think about our own city. How do you think the average non-believing Santa Barbaran would describe Christianity/Christians?

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Study Three

Our passage for this study ends with two verses, 9b-10, that give the marks of the Christian life. List them. Reflect on how each of these marks is being manifest in your life right now. Be prepared to give concrete examples to your homegroup.

1.

2.

3.

To *turn from idols* would mean a lot more to a first century person from Thessalonica than it does for most of us today living in Santa Barbara. Thessalonica was only fifty miles from Mount Olympus, where the Greek gods supposedly lived. On a clear day one could see Mount Olympus from Thessalonica. The place was crawling with idols. To *turn from idols* became almost a synonym for the Christian life, especially in the book of Acts. Idolatry is no less real in our day, just less tangible.

How would you define idolatry from a modern context? From what idols have you *turned* since you followed Christ? What has that turning looked like? From what idols do you need to turn today?

Our passage ends with a waiting church, trusting in a God who *rescues us from the coming wrath* (v. 10). How might it be helpful for you to think more about being rescued?

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20 Study Three

sermon notes 🐦

Spiritual Parenting... 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Every parent wants to do a good job of raising children. Probably no task in life is as important, fulfilling, challenging, frustrating, and full of hope and disappointment. As any parent knows, these cute little bundles of joy come into our lives and then the real work begins. Children grow and change. They either mature and grow into productive adulthood or stagnate and stay mired in childhood or even worse, adolescence.



Much of 1 Thessalonians has to do with raising spiritual children. The parallels between raising our own children and guiding baby Christians toward spiritual maturity are pronounced. Paul and his band of missionaries had only been in Thessalonica a few months before they were run out of town and this young church was left on its own. They were almost spiritual orphans. In our passage for this study, Paul is reflecting on his own spiritual parenting and at the same time continuing to raise his spiritual offspring while physically absent.

1 Thessalonians as a whole, and chapters two and three in particular, are some of the more intimate passages of the New Testament. We see much

of Paul's emotion, as he bares his soul in concern for the church. Before reading recall the context of this letter. Paul has left town suddenly due to persecution. His critics no doubt took full advantage of his absence and did everything they could to discredit both the apostle and the gospel. In our passage we will see something of Paul's self-defense and in the process we will be able to reconstruct what must have been a malicious smear campaign.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Read it several times slowly. What key words stand out to you? What initial questions come up as you read?

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In these twelve short verses how many times is *God* mentioned by name? What does this suggest?

In verses 1-6 Paul is defending not so much the gospel message as he is his ministry and the time spent in Thessalonica.¹ In examining more carefully verses 1-6 try and look behind the scenes. What types of accusations were Paul's detractors bringing against him? How were they questioning his motivations in coming to Thessalonica?

Itinerant religious teachers were common in the first century. Thessalonica, situated on the main Roman road, the Via Egnatia, had no doubt seen their fair share of charlatans. Traveling teachers were more often than not looking for financial gain, sexual prey and the ego boost of adulation.

Outline the ways in which Paul defends himself against those who were slandering him in verses 1-6.

What is at stake is Paul's integrity, which of course is a reflection on the integrity of the gospel message itself. From what you have seen and heard in our world, describe the damage done to the gospel when the messengers are hypocritical, immoral, or in it for the money.

¹ When Paul says, *We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi (2:2)*, it is helpful to visualize what actually happened. Stott paints the picture. *He and Silas had been stripped, beaten, thrown into prison, and their feet fastened in stocks. It had not only been an extremely painful experience, but humiliating as well, since they were flogged naked in public, without trial, and in spite of their Roman citizenship.* (Stott, p. 48)

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Study Four

How can we help to guard our integrity? What must we do to insure that we are a church that is above reproach?

At the end of verse 6 Paul says, *As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you*, referring to financial support of his ministry. He goes on in verse 9 to make the point that he was not a financial burden to anyone, but rather, *worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone*. We know that Paul at times supported himself by the trade of tent making (see Acts 18:3, 20:34-35). In Thessalonica he probably preached and taught by day and made tents by night. In addition we know that he received gifts from the church in Philippi while he was in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:16).¹

In verses 7-12 Paul goes on to describe his spiritual parenting and likens himself to both a mother and a father.²

In verses 7-8 we see Paul as a spiritual mother. List three characteristics that Paul mentions were a part of caring for the Thessalonians as a spiritual mother.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Have there been people in your life who have cared for you as a spiritual mother? Can you give examples of how people have been a part of your spiritual parenting and lived out these attitudes found in verses 7-8.

1 Paul is often uneasy about receiving support from some of his churches. He does, however, strongly defend the necessity of financial support for teachers and pastors, even while reluctant at times to take it for himself. See 1 Corinthians 9.

2 Paul will often use parenting metaphors referring to his *children*, sometimes maternally and other times paternally. 1 Corinthians 4:14-16; 2 Corinthians 6:11-13; Galatians 4:19; Philippians 2:22; Philemon 10.

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Have you tried to be a spiritual mother to other believers? If so describe this.

Respond to the statement below. How can you cultivate an attitude of spiritual mothering in your Christian relationships?

It is a lovely thing that a man as tough and masculine as the apostle Paul should have used this feminine metaphor. Some Christian leaders become both self-centered and autocratic. The more their authority is challenged, the more they assert it. We all need to cultivate more, in our pastoral ministry, of the gentleness, love and self-sacrifice of a mother. (Stott, p. 52)

In verses 9-12 we see Paul as a spiritual father. List three characteristics that Paul mentions were a part of caring for the Thessalonians as a spiritual father in verse 12.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Give examples of what these three characteristics might look like at a practical level in spiritual parenting. In other words, what would it be like for you to be a spiritual encourager, comforter, and stimulator toward godliness?

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Study Four

It goes without saying that we are not apostles as Paul was. Yet, at the same time all Christians are called upon to nurture other believers, helping them come to spiritual maturity. We use words like: discipleship, pastoral concern, mentoring, encouraging, and fellowship to describe this process. The passage before us is an excellent model for us to copy.

How have you been encouraged in your spiritual parenting? How has 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 helped you sharpen your spiritual parenting skills?

Try to pull your thoughts together on this passage and the topic of spiritual parenting. How have you been encouraged to be a spiritual parent in the lives of other believers? How have you been encouraged to receive spiritual parenting in your own life?

Spend time celebrating as a homegroup the benefits developing our Christian lives in the context of relationships with other believers!

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Receiving the Word... 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Can you remember the first time you heard the gospel message of the forgiveness and new life that was available in Jesus? Some of us heard this message many decades ago. For others it may have been just a matter of months or even weeks. Do you remember your first thoughts when you heard the story of Jesus, the cross and the resurrection?

For most people in the West there is usually some background information we have heard. The name Jesus is usually not new and the broad outline of the gospel somewhat recognizable, even if vaguely. We are used to

seeing crosses on buildings or worn around people's necks. Even the most ardent secularist is aware that Christians have a certain set of beliefs in a man called Jesus.

It wasn't like this in the Greek city of Thessalonica in AD 50. When Paul and his band of missionaries arrived many, if not most, had never heard the name Jesus. The cross was a symbol of shame associated with the power of Rome and not jewelry to be worn. To those who first heard Paul proclaim this good news they must have initially understood it to be just one more of the very numerous religious options available in the first century.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 Paul reflects on how the Thessalonian believers first heard the gospel, how they received it and some of the struggles that ensued. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16. Read it slowly and in several translations if possible. Take notes. What is clear in these four verses? What troubles you? What questions do these verses bring up?

1 Thessalonians

28 Study Five



As we begin this study focus on verse 13. Paul begins by being thankful for how the Thessalonians received the *word of God*. What is *the word of God* he is referring too?

Fee gives us some help in understanding this phrase, *word of God*.

. . . one should show caution about Paul's referent, "the word of God." Here is a place where the English phrase "word of God" needs to be "translated" so as not to be confused with Scripture as such. Paul's gratitude has to do with the Thessalonian's hearing his preaching for what is was intended to be: God's own message of redemption and hope to a people who had been without God and hope in the world. (Fee, p. 89)

Those who believed first *heard* the story of redemption and then *accepted* it. What does verse 13 tell us about how they *accepted* this gospel message?

The contrast in verse 13 is between the *word of God* and *the word of men*. What is the difference? What is Paul saying about his preaching of this message when he makes this distinction?

This gospel message not only changed these missionaries lives, it also changed the lives of those who believed in Thessalonica. Think back to your own conversion. How has this message changed you since you believed? Be ready to share your stories with your homegroup.

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Study Five

Some reading this study guide may be in the process of hearing and understanding the gospel for the first time. The message may sound strange, confusing or even alienating. You are surrounded by people in your homegroup who have faith in Jesus Christ. What questions do you have for them?

Elsewhere in the New Testament this gospel message is explained. Reflect on these verses. What do these verses tell you about this message that is the *word of God*? What other verses could you share with your homegroup that help you understand and appreciate the gospel?

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. Romans 1:16

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. 1 Peter 1:3

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. John 3:16-17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

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Study Five

According to verse 14 how had the church in Thessalonica become like other churches in Judea?

One of the first things that happened when some at Thessalonica believed and accepted the word of God was that they became the focus of hostility from those who lived around them. There was almost immediate ostracism from the local populace. Not a great way to start a church. Commentator Michael Holmes says, *The clearest evidence of the Thessalonians' acceptance of the gospel as the word of God was their willingness to suffer for it (2:14).* (Holmes, p. 81)

What type of faith is required for someone to continue to believe in spite of hostility and persecution? How do you think your faith would stand up under persecution?

The harsh tone of verses 14b-15, about the *Jews*, have lead some to accuse Paul of anti-Semitism.¹ Consider John Stott's defense of Paul.

. . . we need to remember that he himself was a patriotic Jew, as we learn particularly from Romans 3:1-4 and 9:1-11:36. He gloried in his Jewish ancestry. He longed with anguish for the salvation of his people . . . Paul is simply stating bald facts. Many of his Jewish contemporaries were rejecting Christ, opposing the gospel and hindering Gentiles from being saved. In consequence, God's wrath had come upon them, as Jesus himself had warned. (Stott, p. 59)

¹ Stott comments. *These two verses, sometimes called 'the Pauline polemic against the Jews', have been described as 'violent', 'vehement', 'vindictive', 'passionate', 'intemperate', 'bitter', and 'harsh.'* (Stott, p. 55)

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Study Five

Opposition to the gospel message is nothing new. The *word of God* created hostility in the first century and indeed still does in our own time. Recently, America and Europe have seen a resurgence of anti-Christian rhetoric. What has been called the New Atheism has given rise to aggressive attacks on the faith of Christians.¹ An evangelistic secularism seeks to establish itself in the public square. It seems that the world our children will grow up in will be much less accepting of Christian faith.

Think about hostility to Christian faith. What is it about the *word of God* that makes some angry, upset, and antagonistic to those who believe?

What sort of opposition to Christian faith do you see in our society? Have you personally experienced any anger, hostility or antagonism to your faith in Christ? How?

What comfort can we take from the example of the Thessalonian believers?

Spend time as a homegroup thanking God that you, *received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God.*

¹ Popular writers such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens have sold an astounding number of books that attack the foundations of theism in general and Christian faith in particular. Albert Mohler has written an excellent discussion of the New Atheism in *Atheism Remix*. In it he warns; *The New Atheism is not just a reassertion of atheism. It is a movement that represents a far greater challenge to Christianity than posed by the atheistic movement in previous times . . . The New Atheists are, in their own way, evangelistic in intent and ambitious in hope. They see atheism as the only plausible worldview for our times, and they see belief in God as downright dangerous—an artifact of the past that we can no longer afford to tolerate, much less encourage.* (Albert Mohler, *Atheism Remix*, Crossway Books, 2008, p. 12)

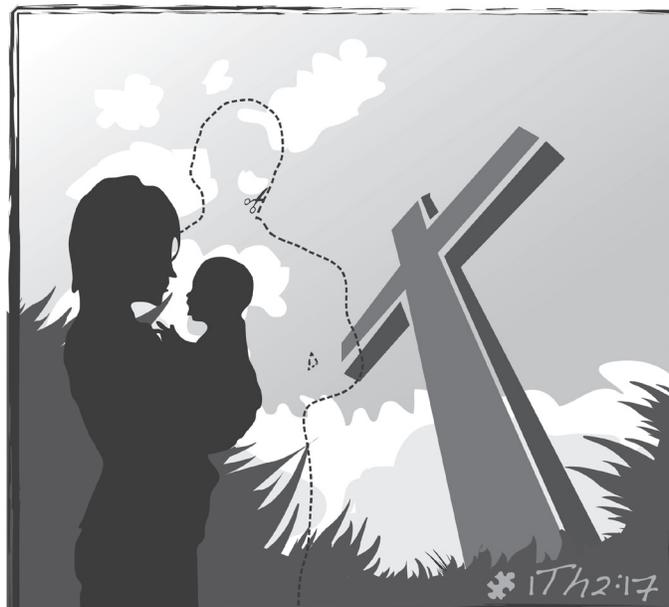
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The Intimate Connection... 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

As any parent knows if you are out of touch with your children and have not spoken to them in some time you worry. If you are unsure how a friend or roommate is doing in life you cannot help but be concerned. This is Paul's situation. After establishing the young church in Thessalonica, Paul was chased out of town. He knows the church he loves is suffering persecution but he is unsure how they are handling their circumstances. Because of his affection for the believers in Thessalonica Paul is distraught. He longs to hear how his spiritual children are faring.



The anguish of this separation would be increased by the presence of detractors in Thessalonica who Paul knew were busy criticizing him. His motives, conduct, sudden departure and failure to return were, no doubt, the subject of gossip.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:17—3:5. This passage speaks of Paul's intimate connection with the church in Thessalonica. What stands out to you? What questions do you have about this passage?

Examine this passage looking for language that speaks of Paul's intimate and emotional connection with this church. How do these verses speak of Paul's deep feelings for these believers? Write down phrases or words that point to Paul's affection for this church.

1 Thessalonians

34 Study Six

We often see Paul's affectionate relationships with his churches in the New Testament. Think of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you are all partakers of grace with me. For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:7-8

Think about your relationships with other Christians. No, you are not the apostle Paul, and no you have not given birth to a church in Greece. But hopefully you have Christian friends, and even spiritual children that you care about deeply. You may teach Sunday school and love those you have the privilege of leading. Possibly you work with junior or senior high students at SBCC and have experienced a deep spiritual affection for them. Maybe you have invited a younger believer to join you for coffee each week to discuss what it means to follow Jesus. Most Christians have spiritual relationships with people they long see to be successful in their relationship with Jesus.

What role should an emotional connection with other believers play in our lives? What place does spiritual affection have in your life and relationships?

When you think about other believers at SBCC what comes to mind? Are you affectionately drawn to them in spiritual love? What could you do to enhance your intimate connection to other Christians?

In verse 19 Paul uses three metaphors to describe how he feels about the believers at Thessalonica. List these word pictures that Paul uses. What are these images meant to convey about this relationship?

1.

2.

3.

1 Thessalonians

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Study Six

Paul wanted badly to come and visit his friends in Thessalonica. In verse 18 he adds a rather cryptic statement, *but Satan stopped us*. There are several options as to what this means. The summary below is adapted from John Stott. (Stott, p. 62)

1. Some think it was continuing Jewish opposition, possibly even a plot.
2. Some think it was because of Paul's *thorn in the flesh* and that this was a debilitating illness which he later called a '*messenger of Satan*.'
3. Others ponder the possibility that a legal ban by the civic leaders of Thessalonica had been placed on Jason and his household. See Acts 19:9.
4. Another possibility is that Paul was referring to a sin or scandal that detained him in Corinth and made it impossible to make the trip.

The bottom line is that we are not sure what stopped Paul from making the trip. Paul, however, does attribute it to the work of Satan.

Have you ever had a sense that *Satan* has hindered you from doing something you desperately wanted to do? How did you respond?

Frustrated by his inability to go himself, Paul sends his young understudy Timothy in his place. The picture painted in these verses is touching and urgent. Paul says, *when I could stand it no longer I sent to find out about your faith* (3:5). A central component of Paul's concern was the persecution the believers were experiencing.

In 3:1-5 what phrases or words point to persecution in Thessalonica?

1 Thessalonians

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Study Six

According to 3:2, Timothy's role is not only to bring back a report to Paul and Silas, but to *strengthen* and *encourage* the church in their faith. Stott comments that, *Timothy had been sent on both a nurturing and fact finding mission.* (Stott, p. 65) We are left to wonder exactly how Timothy would *strengthen* and *encourage* these young believers.

Think about how Timothy might have *strengthened* and *encouraged* his friends in Thessalonica. What forms could this nurturing have taken? What type of *strengthening* and *encouraging* do you think they needed?

Consider this comment by Holmes. How does it help you understand this passage?

Timothy's task was to *strengthen* (or perhaps *firmly establish*) and *encourage* (v. 2; the same combination occurs in 2 Thessalonians 2:17) the Thessalonian converts. The first verb (*sterizo*) likely focuses more on their spiritual condition, while the second verb (*parakaleo*) probably focuses more on their attitude. Essentially Timothy is to continue the process of socialization that Paul himself had begun—that is, helping them to understand and live out what it means to be members of God's people. (Holmes, p. 98, emphasis added)

This theme of believers building each other up and encouraging one another is found throughout the New Testament. Consider just a few of numerous passages of this nature listed below. What do they tell you about the service of encouragement and strengthening?

Romans 15:4

Galatians 6:1-2

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Hebrews 3:13

Hebrews 10:23-25

1 Thessalonians

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Study Six

Think about your own discipleship. What is it that encourages you spiritually? How are you built up and strengthened in your following of Jesus? How have believing friends practically done this in your life?

What role has your homegroup played in spiritual encouragement? Don't be afraid of this question. Be honest with your homegroup. How could your homegroup do a better job of strengthening you in your Christian journey?

Our passage ends in verse 5 with Paul being concerned about the possibility of these converts leaving the faith because of the efforts of the *tempter*. Can believers apostatize and lose their salvation? Paul certainly seems concerned. (taken from Holmes, p. 105) What Fee says about the related passage in Philippians 2:16 is relevant here as well:

The question as to whether [Paul's labor] could really be in vain, of course, is much debated . . . The answer seems to be twofold. On the one hand, such an expression as this only makes sense if such a potential really exists; on the other hand, Paul has such confidence in God regarding his converts that it would be unthinkable to him that the potential would ever be realized. (Fee, p. 250)

Gather up your thoughts from this study. What are one or two main ideas that will impact your life this week? What practical application can you make to life drawn from this passage?

1 Thessalonians

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Standing Firm... 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

After an agonizing separation from the church in Thessalonica, Timothy finally arrives back in Corinth bringing an encouraging report. The saints are *standing firm in the Lord*. As Holmes says: *Almost audible in 3:6 is the sense of relief that Paul felt when Timothy returned with the welcome news that the Thessalonians had indeed successfully resisted Satan's temptations.* (Holmes, p. 99)



Our passage from *beginning to end simply breathes gratitude.* (Fee, p. 121) In *standing firm* (ESV *standing fast*) these young believers are showing that their faith had taken root. Perseverance is a mark of true discipleship. In verses 6-10 we learn something of what it means to stand firm in the faith. Then, in verses 11-13 Paul prays for his friends in Thessalonica that God would strengthen them so that they would continue to stand firm.

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13. Move slowly through this passage. Read it in several translations. What words or phrases stand out to you? What are some preliminary questions you have of this text?

In verse 6 we find that Timothy brought three pieces of information back from his visit to Thessalonica. What are they?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

1 Thessalonians

40 Study Seven

Timothy's report was so encouraging that Paul calls it *good news*, which literally means *evangelized*. John MacArthur points out that every other occurrence in the New Testament [of this word] refers to the gospel message of salvation by grace through faith. (MacArthur, p. 81) The *good news* that Timothy brought was about the *faith and love* (v. 6) of the believers. The 16th century French Reformer John Calvin says that this phrase, *faith and love, should be carefully observed because of the frequency with which Paul uses it. In these two words he comprehends briefly the sum of true piety.* (Calvin, p. 39)

How are these two words, *faith* and *love*, a good summary of the Christian life?

Focus on verse 8. The NIV translates this, *since you are standing firm*. In doing so it hides what is really a conditional statement. The ESV, NRSV, and NASB get it better when they translate it, *if you continue to stand firm*. In this statement Paul is acknowledging that the Thessalonians are in fact standing firm, and at the same time giving an implicit exhortation (*if*) to continue to stand firm.

Consider this often used phrase to *stand firm*. This phrase comes from a military term meaning not to retreat in the face of an enemy attack. What additional insight do the verses below give you to this idiom? How is the believer to *stand firm*?

Philippians 1:27

Philippians 4:1

1 Corinthians 16:13

Galatians 5:1

Think about your own life. What has helped you to *stand firm* in your faith? Are you standing firm in this season of your spiritual journey?

1 Thessalonians

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Study Seven

Have there been times in your Christian life when you have **not** been standing firm? What were the circumstances of your life?

In verse 10 Paul, the non-stop pray-er, says that *night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith*. Then, in verses 11-13, Paul prays. Often times in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters, we find examples of actual prayers.¹ These prayers tell us about the Christian life, give us insight into the pray-er's heart, and are instructive for our own prayer life.

In verses 11-13 Paul expresses three requests of God. What are these three petitions?²

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Notice how Paul begins his prayer in verse 11. Paul describes God as *Father*. This is the most frequent description of God in the New Testament. Paul alone refers to God as *Father* forty-two times. For some who have had a difficult or non-existent relationship with their earthly father this description of God can be a stumbling block.

How would you encourage those who struggle with the *Fatherhood* of God? How is the fact that God is our *Father* helpful to you?

1 For an instructive and uplifting personal study, read the prayers of Paul. Here is a list of just some of Paul's prayers. Romans 15:5-7,13; 1 Corinthians 1:4-7; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5; Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philippians 1:8-11; Colossians 1:9-12; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12; Philemon 4-6.

2 The answer to the first request, that God would make a way for the apostle to come and visit the believers at Thessalonica, was answered (as far as we know) about five years later. It was on Paul's third missionary journey that he again visited the churches of Greece (Acts 20:1-3).

1 Thessalonians

42 Study Seven



How would a correct understanding of God as *Father* help a believer to *stand firm*?

Paul's prayer is addressed to both our *God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus Christ*. This linking of the Father and Son in the New Testament is common and points to divine nature and relationship they share. Consider the quote below from John MacArthur. How does it help your prayers?

By calling God our . . . Father, an address emphasizing personal relationship, and Jesus *our Lord*, an address emphasizing personal rulership, Paul switched the usual popular ideas about God being the ruler and Christ being the one with whom the believers have a relationship. The use of *our* before both *God* and *Jesus* underscores the relationship Paul and the Thessalonians enjoyed with both Persons of the Trinity. God came down to be intimate with them as their gracious, loving, and forgiving Father, and Jesus ascended to heaven's throne to be their sovereign Lord. (MacArthur, p. 87)

Verse 13 highlights Paul's foremost motive for his prayer. He wants the faith of his friends in Thessalonica to be strengthened and for them to grow to spiritual maturity so that they will be able to *stand firm*. Paul uses the phrase, *May he strengthen your hearts*.

How would this prayer be answered? What does it mean to have your hearts strengthened?

1 Thessalonians

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Study Seven

Paul's prayer goes on to ask God for the believers to be *blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with his holy ones*.¹ Commenting on this verse Stott says; *There is no greater stimulus to holiness than the vision of the Parousia [second coming] when Jesus comes in glory with his holy ones.* (Stott, p. 67)

Do you agree with this statement? Does the return of Christ stimulate you to live a holy life? Why or why not?

End your homegroup study by using the prayer in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 as a model of how to pray for each other. Allow the entire passage for this study to shape how you pray for one another to *stand firm* in your faith.

¹ Commentators have struggled with the meaning of this phrase, *holy ones*. There are two options. 1) Angels or 2) Christians, *saints* as the ESV translates it. Gordon Fee believes the correct understanding is Angels because verse 13 is an intertextual use of Zechariah 14:5 where the context is clearly Angels. We will have to wait and see for the final answer. (Fee, p. 134-136)

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44 Study Seven

sermon notes 🐦

From Pornicia to Pleasing God (part 1)...

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Perhaps one of the forgotten lessons of present-day American evangelicalism is an emphasis on living so as to *please* God. We love the doctrine of grace and the notion that God makes much of us in the sending of Jesus to die for our sins. We delight in the experience of worship. We enjoy a variety of good Bible translations, study Bibles and study aids. We have our favorite Christian authors and can download our favorite preacher's sermons on to our iPod, and listen to our heart's content. But what about Christian living?

Ludwig Wittgenstein, possibly the most important philosopher of the 20th century, once said, *If you want to know what a person believes don't ask him, observe him.* Or, as a popular expression has it, *The proof is in the pudding.*

When we get to 1 Thessalonians 4 we are coming to the second half of Paul's letter to this fledgling church that he loved. The NIV and ESV introduce this chapter with the English word *finally*, as if Paul is drawing his letter to a close. In Greek, Paul uses an adverb which is best rendered *furthermore* (see the KJV). Paul is not wrapping up his letter, he is getting to the instructions he wants the Thessalonians to receive.

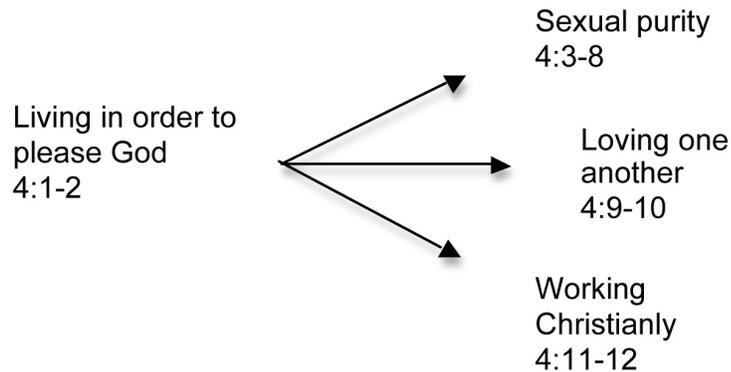
Before going on in this study, read all of 1 Thessalonians 4. Make notes of those things which stand out or raise questions as you read.



1 Thessalonians

46 Study Eight

The chapter should be thought of as a call to live lives that please God (4:1-2). From this general call, Paul mentions three areas of special concern:



4:1-2 Pleasing God

Paul's point in these verses is that the believer can actually live in such a way so as to please God.

What do you think of when it comes to *pleasing God*? How would/should this concept affect your behavior?

What is the alternative to pleasing God with the way in which we live? Compare Romans 8:8.

Think about your life. What actions or habits of your life might be pleasing to God? What actions / habits are not pleasing to God?

Paul urges his readers to *live in order to please God*. Literally the verb is to *walk*. *Walking* in Christian obedience to God is one of Paul's favorite metaphors for Christian discipleship.¹

¹ Most of the time the NIV interprets Paul's Greek word for walk (peripateo, περιπατεω) rendering it with the word *live*.

1 Thessalonians

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Study Eight

What does the imagery of *walking* convey? Why is this a good metaphor to describe Christian living? Interact with some of the verses listed below.

- 2 Corinthians 5:7
- Galatians 5:16, 5:25
- Ephesians 2:2, 4:1, 5:8
- Philippians 3:17

4:3-8 Sexual Purity

It is probably difficult for us to understand the depth of sexual depravity that was common in Paul's time. In our society when a sports star or politician is found to be involved in extra-marital relations he (and usually it is a *he*) is temporarily scandalized and scorned. For the people of Thessalonica, sexual relations outside of marriage would have been considered normal. Such activity was expected. Demosthenes, the ancient Greek orator, is often quoted to this effect when he said, *Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children.*¹

In such a context most of Paul's letters have admonitions toward sexual abstinence outside of marriage and to sexual faithfulness within marriage.

For people for whom sexual activity outside of marriage was considered not only not "immoral" but in fact a cultural norm, Paul's regular returning to this matter in his letters makes a great deal of historical sense. (Fee, p. 143)

William Lecky, a historian from the 19th century, wrote a book entitled, *History of European Morals* and claimed that the era of the Caesars was probably the most extravagant and uncontrolled period of sexual indulgence in Western history.² Clearly what we would call sexual vice was the norm in Greco-Roman cities and its pervasiveness certainly crept into the early church. Accordingly, Paul's strong instructions would have shocked some new believers.

1 A man might have a mistress (*hetaira*) who could provide him also with intellectual companionship; the institution of slavery made it easy for him to have a concubine, while casual gratification was readily available from a harlot. The function of his wife was to manage his household and to be the mother of his legitimate children and heirs. (Bruce, p. 82)

2 See Stott, p. 81.

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4:3 Two words in the Greek text of this verse deserve explanation:

First, we need to see the radical break with sexual license Paul is commanding. The NIV understates the force of the verse. Paul is not advising the Thessalonians to *avoid* sexual immorality, as if he is advising moderation. To the contrary he is commanding that they stay away from it entirely. The Greek word means to abstain from *sexual immorality* completely.

Second, we must ask, what, specifically, is Paul commanding them to stay away from? The Thessalonians were to stay away from, in Greek, *porneia* (πορνεία). The Greek word was an umbrella term encompassing all sex outside of marriage. Interestingly, *porneia* was not a negative term. *Porneia* was not thought to be *immoral*. Our English translations usually render this single Greek word with the words *sexual immorality*. But the pagans in Thessalonica, had they been able to read our English translations, would be surprised. *Why is porneia immoral*, they might have asked? Again, this was the radical, counter-cultural, call to please God with a holy life. In coming to God through Christ, these new converts were called to newness of life.

Reflect on these two clarifications of 4:3. Where are we today in our culture with regard to *porneia*, sex outside of marriage?

How can/should the church teach new converts in these areas?

(For personal reflection.) Take an inventory of your own relation to sexual purity. What are the primary trigger points where you might be tempted toward sexual lust or *porneia*?

4:6 Read this verse carefully.

What is the rationale Paul gives against *porneia*? Why shouldn't the Thessalonians indulge freely in this area? What are the consequences of *porneia*?

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Study Eight

4:4 The first clause of this verse is very difficult verse for Bible translators and, perhaps, embarrassing for interpreters, preachers and homegroup discussions. In the NIV it reads,

. . . that each of you should learn to control his own body. . .

The question surrounds the translation of the word that appears in the NIV / ESV as *body*. The Greek word *skeuos* (σκευος) is the word for *vessel*. Most English translations assume this is an intended metaphor for either *body*, or *wife*. If Paul intended this word to be a substitute for *body*, the NIV, ESV, etc. have it right. If Paul intended this word to be a substitute for *wife*, the Revised Standard Version is correct when we read, *that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor. . .*

Gordon Fee, among many others, is unsatisfied with either option. He points out that Paul is not squeamish about either the word *body* or the word *wife* in his other writings, and suggests there is no reason for him to employ a figure of speech here. So what does Paul have in mind with the word *vessel*? Brace yourself. Fee argues (over 6 pages of commentary!) that Paul is not using a metaphor but a euphemism¹ for the male sexual organ. With this in mind, consider the very literal New American Standard translation of 4:4.

. . .that each one of you know how to possess himself of his own vessel in sanctification and honor. . .

In any event, Paul's point is abundantly clear. Respond to John Stott's summary of this section.

Paul's first principle, then, is that heterosexual and monogamous marriage is the only context in which God intends sexual intercourse to be experienced, and indeed enjoyed. The corollary is that it is forbidden in every other context, whether with a heterosexual partner before marriage ('fornication') or outside marriage ('adultery'), or in a homosexual relationship. (Stott, p. 84)

Compare one other passage on sexual morality from the pen of Paul. Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. What hope does Paul offer to those who have failed in the sexual arena?

¹ A metaphor is a word-picture where one word stand for another. A euphemism is a polite way of saying something which might be offensive.

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In verse 18 of this passage Paul advises the Corinthians to *Flee sexual immorality*. What does this mean to you? How do you, or can you take steps to flee sexual immorality?

Spend time together as a homegroup praying for one another. Pray that those in your group will please God with lives of purity and holiness.

sermon notes 🐦

From Purity to Philadelphia (Pleasing God part 2)... 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Recall the chart on page 44 of study 8. There we see the flow of Paul's concerns for the Thessalonian church. Paul urges them to *please God* by the purity of their lives, by loving one another and by working hard. As we will see, these second two concerns are closely connected in Paul's mind. At the outset, Paul points out that the church is, indeed, saturated with brotherly love, but he urges the church to love one another *more and more*.



The reason there are so many exhortations in the New Testament for Christians to love other Christians is because the church is made up of natural enemies. The church of Jesus Christ is not made up of natural friends it is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accent, common jobs or anything else of that sort. Those are the things

that bind other groups of people together. Christians come together not because they form a natural collocation, but because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and because they owe him a common allegiance. In this light, then, we should understand the church to be a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.

Don Carson

One clear, non-negotiable mark of Christian faith is a deep love for other believers. Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is a spiritual barometer, it reveals what is in our heart. Jesus says the world will judge the sincerity of our profession of faith by the love we have for one another (John 13:35). The apostle John says, *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death* (1 John 2:14).

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 from as many translations as you have available. Notice how this paragraph fits into the flow of chapter four.

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Before going on in this study write a summary sentence or two describing Paul's concern. What two concerns does Paul have in this paragraph? Read this to your homegroup.

4:1 At the outset we should notice what Paul is recommending. In the Greek text he speaks of *philadelphia*, or, *brotherly love*.

4:9-12 The backdrop of this paragraph seems to be a tendency among some in the church to drift toward idleness. In 5:14 Paul urges the leaders of the church to warn those who are *idle*. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6 we read,

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.

Notice how 4:9-12 concludes. Paul lays his concern for *brotherly love* next to the reputation some in the church had with *outsiders*. Gordon Fee explains:

... in light of all the evidence of the two letters, we may assume that some people (men presumably) who could work for a living have for some reason chosen not to do so. They are thus (apparently) living off the largesse of others in the newly formed Christian community, householders who probably do in fact have the wherewithal to help them. (Fee, p. 157)

We are not told exactly why some are prone to idleness¹, but the evidence of both letters clearly shows that this was a problem (see all of 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

With all of this in mind, it is not too much to say that Paul is asking the church to love one another by working hard.

¹ Some suggest there was unemployment in the city. Others see a *rapture fever* that had developed in the church with the logic that said, *Since Jesus is coming again, and soon, why work?* Still other commentators see a cultural distaste for manual labor (and thus Paul advises working with their hands). At the end of the day, we cannot be sure why there was a problem of idleness.

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Study Nine

In what ways would a strong work-ethic be an expression of brotherly love? Compare Ephesians 4:28. List specific examples of what this would look like in our time and place.

How could a person who is unemployed or retired exhibit a diligent work-ethic?

4:9 Paul's choice of words is unique in this verse. When he says, *you yourselves have been taught by God* he uses a Greek word found nowhere else in the New Testament, *theodidaktoi* (θεοδιδακτοι). Literally this word would read, *God-taught*. The Thessalonians have be *God-taught* to love one another. Read the following verses carefully.

How have believers been God-taught to love one another?

Romans 5:5

Galatians 5:22

Describe your experience of Romans 5:5. What evidence do you see of God's love being poured into your heart?

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4:11 Here Paul tells the reader to *Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life*. . . F. F. Bruce translates the Greek text, *be ambitious to be quiet*. The notion is an oxymoron. Paul is calling the church to be ambitious and to be un-ambitious.

With what is this ambition to be quiet to be accompanied?

1.

2.

Evaluate yourself in this area. Where do you fall on the calm/chaotic scale? How might you grow in this area?

4:12 Read this verse.

What two reasons does Paul give as a motive for working hard?¹

Notice the call to Christian growth in this chapter. We are to please God *more and more* (4:1), and we are to love one another *more and more* (4:10). Describe, as best you can, the *more and more* of your love for God and for your family in Christ.

Take a moment and think about your spiritual growth-curve since becoming a believer. In what ways is the present time a season of growth?

¹ Stott points out that these verses shouldn't be applied to those seeking work who cannot find it. *We have no liberty to apply Paul's teaching about work to the unwaged who are drawing unemployment benefit or living on welfare. The contemporary problem of unemployment is both a symptom of economic recession and a traumatic personal experience. What Paul is condemning here is not unemployment as such (when people want work but cannot find it) but idleness (when work is available but people do not want it).* (Stott, p. 90)

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Study Nine

Respond to the following:

It is a wonderfully liberating experience when the desire to please God overtakes the desire to please ourselves, and when love for others displaces self-love. True freedom is not freedom from responsibility to God and others in order to live for ourselves, but freedom from ourselves in order to live for God and others. (Stott, p. 91)

Pray for one another in these areas. Pray that our lives of discipleship will be anything but static. Pray for the *more and more* of Christian discipleship.

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56 Study Nine

sermon notes 🐦

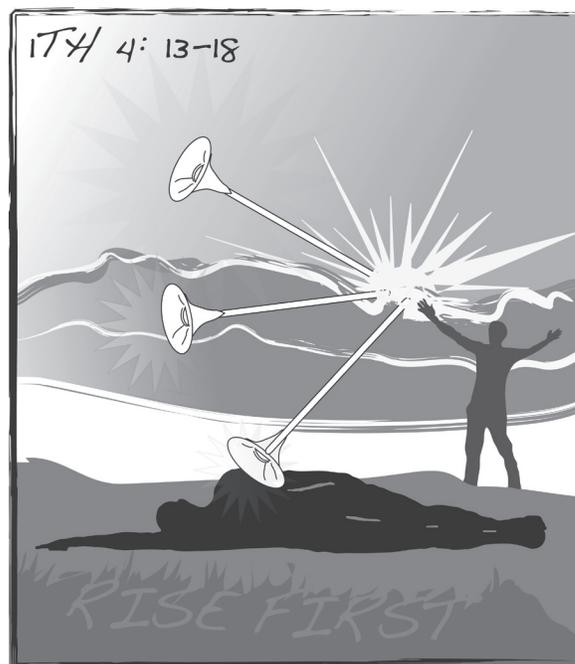
The Problem of Bereavement... 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

What happens when we die? The question is as old as death itself and is asked by children, senior citizens, religious thinkers and philosophers alike. Is death the end of all things? Does anything survive the grave? And what of a person's body? When a man stops breathing and his heart stops beating does his body have any meaning, or any future?

The Greeks and Romans had a very low view of the human body, and most of them saw death as the end of all personal existence. You live and you die. That's all there is. One ancient epitaph read, *I didn't exist. I did exist. I don't exist. I don't care. . .*

Another pagan poet put it like this,

The sun can set and rise again
But once our brief light sets
*There is one unending night to be slept through.*¹



Without Christ, the Greco-Roman Thessalonians would have shared in this cynicism about the meaning of life. But the apostle Paul had introduced them to Jesus and everything changed.

Read the verses for this study. Compare translations if you have more than one. Before going on in this study, pretend that these nine verses are all you have to go on. Explain the answer to the enormously important question, What happens when I die? Be as specific as possible. Have someone in your homegroup explain his or her answer. Remember the answer can only come from these verses!

¹ Catullus, cited in Bruce, p. 96. Not all Greek thinkers held that death was the end of everything. Some believed there was a shadowy existence after life on earth.

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Study Ten

Paul's encouragement falls into a very coherent outline. Re-read the passage with the following in mind¹:

The principle: Believers grieve in a different way than non-believers grieve. (4:13)

Because of the resurrection of Jesus (4:14-15)

Because of the return of Jesus (4:16a)

Because of the resurrection of the dead (4:16b)

Because of the rapture of the church (4:17a)

Because of the reunion of the living and the dead (4:17b)

The practical conclusion: encourage one another (4:18)

4:13-14 The Principle

Paul begins this section with a principle: Christians will grieve in a different way than non-believers.

Evidently some in this new church were confused with regard to the believer's hope for the future. While Jewish converts would have had a vague sense of future resurrection (see Daniel 12:2), pagans would not. Paul wants to teach the church so as to alleviate some people's grief. Stott clarifies,

What Paul prohibits is not grief but hopeless grief, not all mourning but mourning *like the rest of men, who have no hope*, that is like the pagans of his day. (Stott, p. 94)

Notice the use of a euphemism for death. Paul refers to those who sleep². What is the parallel Paul is bringing out here? Sleep is followed by waking up. Death, he writes, will be followed by what?

How should this give comfort to those grieving over the death of loved ones?

1 This outline is adapted from Stott, pp. 93-106.

2 We use, perhaps unknowingly, the same euphemism. We bury people in a place called a *cemetery*. The word comes from the Greek word *koimeterion*, a *sleeping place*.

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Study Ten

4:14-15 Because of the resurrection of Jesus

4:14 Notice the awkwardness of the grammar in this verse. Paul is excited to the extent that he is unable to finish his sentence. We expect him to say, *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, we also believe*. . .

Instead he says what?

What is the significance of the resurrection of Jesus in these verses?

4:16a Because of the return of Jesus

The second coming, the return of Jesus is the blessed hope of every believer (Titus 2:13). How does Paul describe this event? What three noises accompany the return of Jesus?

4:16b Because of the resurrection of the dead

Paul has already made this point (v. 14), but here he wants to leave no doubt, *the dead in Christ will rise first*. Death will not have the final word, and the resurrection of the body is a part of the believer's eternal life. The point is not that believers will float around in heaven for eternity, but that God's people will be resurrected, re-embodied, to live in what the biblical writers call *the new heavens and the new earth*.¹

How does it make you feel that as a believer you will one day live in this unimaginable place? Has knowing this ever helped you cope in a time of need or tragedy?

¹ See Isaiah 65:17, 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13.

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What do you think it would be like not to believe this, and not to have a hope for the future? How would your outlook on life change if you didn't have Christian hope?

How would you incorporate this point of the Christian faith into a conversation with a non-believer regarding death and what might lie afterwards? Compare notes on this with your homegroup.

4:17a Because of the rapture of the church

Much ink has been spilt, and many Christian celebrities have been created speaking and writing about the *rapture* of the church. Interestingly, the New Testament says very little about the rapture of the church, but this is perhaps the most clear text on this subject.

The English word rapture comes from the Latin *rapere* (to seize, to snatch up). It's Greek equivalent is found here in the word *harpazo*. Commentators point out that the word implies violent action. One example is found when Paul was rescued from the rioters in Jerusalem (Acts 23:10). He was *taken away* (raptured) from the rioters.

What are we to think of when we think of this meeting with Jesus in the clouds? We need to be careful not to press this language too literally. Stott writes,

. . . it is not clear how literally we are to understand our being *caught up*. . . *in the clouds*. We know from Jesus himself that his coming will be personal, visible and glorious, but we also know from him that it will not be local ('There he is!' 'Here he is!') but universal ('like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other'¹). (Stott, p. 104)

1 See Luke 17:23-24

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Study Ten

Some readers have wondered why the church would be raptured only to do a u-turn and come back to earth with Jesus. The imagery is taken from life in the first century. When the emperor would return to Rome, or visit a distant city, the inhabitants would go out to meet him and then welcome him as they proceeded into the city together.¹

N.T. Wright is helpful when he writes,

So when Paul talks of Christians “being snatched up among the clouds,” he is again not thinking of a literal vertical ascent. The language here is taken from Daniel 7, where “one like a son of man” goes up on the clouds as he is vindicated by God after his suffering—a wonderful image not least for people like the Thessalonians who were suffering persecution and awaiting God’s vindication. And their “meeting” with the Lord doesn’t mean they will then be staying in midair with him. The image and language Paul uses would remind his readers of the way Roman citizens in a colony would go out of the city to meet the emperor as he approaches the town to pay them a state visit. Then the citizens would accompany the emperor back to the city itself. Likewise we will meet Jesus and then accompany him back to the new earth over which he will reign. (Wright, pp. 32-33)

How does this picture encourage you as you look forward to the second coming of Christ?

4:17b Because of the reunion of the living and the dead

The Christian dead (about whom the Thessalonians were worrying) will be separated neither from Christ (since God will bring them *with him*, 14) nor from the Christian living (who will be caught up *with them*, 17a). On the contrary, we will all be always *with the Lord* (17b). (Stott, p. 105)

¹ Fee points out that Paul’s interest is not in the believer’s geography, but in the believer’s presence with Christ. He says, *In fact, even though Paul speaks often and in a variety of ways about the final glory awaiting believers, there are only two passages where he explicitly “locates” believers’ final destiny as “in heaven,” 2 Corinthians 5:1 (certainly) and Colossians 1:5 (probably). The reason for this is simple: Paul has almost no interest whatever in our final eschatological “geography”; rather, his interest is altogether personal, having to do with there being “with the Lord,” whose “abode” is regularly expressed as “in heaven.”* (Fee, p. 181, emphasis is Fee’s)

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62 Study Ten

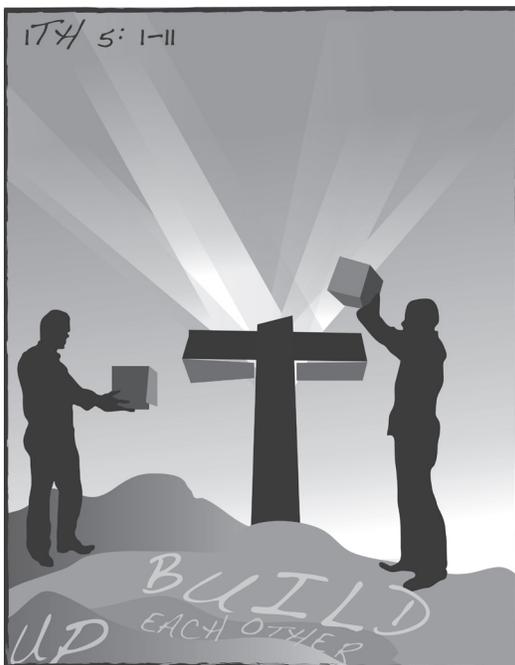
How do, or should, these verses affect our lives? Obviously, Paul's concern is to offer sober comfort to the bereaved. What is the importance of these verses for those not enduring a season of grief? How should the second coming of Christ affect our lives today?

4:18 The practical conclusion: encourage one another

The context of this paragraph is suffering and death. The Thessalonians are grieving, and the apostle wants them to grieve appropriately. He wants them to grieve against the backdrop of eternal hope.

Reflect on this aloud as a group. How can we encourage one another in our pain and suffering with the truths of this passage? What potential abuses should we avoid as we seek to offer comfort?

sermon notes 



The Problem of Judgment... 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness? Amos 5:18-20

In these paragraphs of Paul's letter (4:13—5:11) the apostle is answering two of the larger questions of life. *What happens when someone dies, and, Is there a judgment day coming at the end of history?* In the last paragraph of chapter 4

Paul dealt with the former question and here he turns to the problem of judgment. Evidently some in the church were wondering if they would be subject to God's judgment and wrath.

The second coming of Christ is the *blessed hope*¹ for believers and it will be a day of God's judgment for the entire world. Old Testament writers often spoke of *the day of the Lord* as a coming day when God would step into human history and reward the righteous while punishing the wicked (see the Amos passage above). Here Paul sees the day of the Lord fulfilled in the second coming of Jesus. The day of the Lord and the day of Jesus are one and the same.

Read 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 in its entirety. Make note of any thoughts and questions that come to mind.

Now look more closely at 5:1-11. Make a list of all the word-pictures and images that Paul uses to teach the Thessalonians how they should prepare for the coming of Jesus.

¹ Titus 2:13.

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Study Eleven

How would you summarize Paul's main concern in these verses? What does he want to communicate with this church?

Consider the following outline of Paul's thoughts:

5:1-3 Being prepared

5:4-8 Being alert

5:9-11 Being confident

5:1-3 Being prepared

Evidently the Thessalonians were no different than many believers of our time. They seemed to have a fascination with the timing of the second coming of Jesus. Paul wants to turn their concern over the timing of the return of Christ to a concern over their preparedness for that return.

5:1 speaks of *times and dates*. The first word, *chronos* (from which we get our English word chronology) possibly refers to a period of time, while the second word *kairos* may refer to a particular point in time.¹ Paul's point is that the Thessalonians need not trouble themselves trying to figure out either. In other words, Paul advises against trying to find a precise answer to the very question that peaks our curiosity, *When will the end come?*

If we are not to know *the times and dates*, what do we know? What is Paul's logic?

5:2-3 Paul uses two word pictures to describe the timing of Christ coming. He will come *like a thief in the night*, and *like labor pains* on a pregnant woman.

What is the difference of emphasis in these two word pictures? How are the two word-pictures the same?

¹ On the other hand, many commentators say that the two words are essentially synonymous. See Fee, p. 186.

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Study Eleven

Thief in the night. Here Paul uses familiar imagery for the second coming of Christ. He will come like a *thief in the night*. Compare the following verses that use this image.

What is the emphasis of each of these passages? Does Paul make the same point in 1 Thessalonians 5?

2 Peter 3:8-14

Matthew 24:36-44

As labor pains on a pregnant woman. Notice how Isaiah uses this same image. Read Isaiah 13:6-9. It is very possible that Paul, steeped in the Scriptures as he was, had these verses in mind.

5:4-8 Being alert

These verses get to the heart of Paul's concern. He has a sustained contrast between night and day, light and darkness, drunkenness and sobriety (translated as *self control* in the NIV).

For the unbeliever, Paul's point is that God's coming judgment will be a surprise, like a thief in the night. Thinking themselves to be safe they will suffer *sudden destruction* (5:3).

But for believers the situation is different. The church in Thessalonica is to live in light of the certainty of the coming day of the Lord.

Read these verses again. Does Jesus come *as a thief in the night* for everyone? John Calvin clarifies.

Christ's coming will surprise those who are living indulgent lives; because they are enclosed in darkness, they see nothing, for no darkness is as dense as ignorance of God. We, on the other hand, on whom Christ has shone by the faith of his Gospel, differ greatly from them. The saying in Isaiah is truly fulfilled in us: "See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his Glory appears over you" (Isaiah 60:2). The apostle admonishes us, therefore, that it would be wrong for us to be caught by Christ sleeping, as it were, or seeing nothing when the full blaze of light is shining upon us. (Calvin, p. 52)

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Study Eleven



What is a part of your daily, and weekly routine to help you stay alert for the second coming of Jesus?

Think about your expectation of the second coming of Jesus. Are you *asleep* (v. 6), or are you *awake* and *sober* (ESV)? What contributes to your sobriety? What keeps you awake to the second coming of Jesus?

Consider someone you know who is a gainfully employed, committed Christian in Santa Barbara. Now imagine another believer in an AIDs infested village in Haiti where there is little to eat and no clean water. As a homegroup discuss the difference in how these two people might anticipate the second coming of Christ. What can we learn from this comparison?

5:9-11 Being confident

5:9-10 may be among the most precious verses in the Bible. Notice how the entire gospel is summarized in these two sentences.

The Greek word for *wrath* is *orge*. It is the normal New Testament word for God's final retributive judgment on those who have rejected God (Fee, p. 196).

God's wrath is neither an impersonal process of cause and effect (as some scholars have tried to argue), nor a passionate, arbitrary or vindictive outburst of temper, but his holy and uncompromising antagonism to evil, with which he refuses to negotiate. One day his judgment will fall. (Stott, p. 42)

But notice the assurance of these verses. Believers are *not appointed*, or *destined* for wrath but to salvation! We saw this same teaching in 1:10. It is Jesus who *delivers us from the wrath to come*.

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Study Eleven

Again, these verses are precious beyond price.

The coming wrath of God, and the biblical teaching that those who are alienated from Christ will spend an eternity in hell is either embarrassing to 21st century north American Christians, or ignored by them. Contemporary preachers rarely present the gospel as an escape from God's coming wrath. Instead, *belief in God* is held forth as a gateway to a better life.

Why do you think this is the case? The message of the Bible assures us that God is coming to judge. It also teaches that surrender to Christ is the only way to avoid his wrath. How should these parallel teachings shape our evangelistic zeal? How should they shape the message we share with our friends? How should these 11 verses inspire Santa Barbara Community Church?

Probably the most famous sermon preached on American soil was preached by Jonathan Edwards in 1741. It was entitled, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. In the sermon, Edwards preached to those in his church whom he feared were unconverted. Respond to the following excerpt from this famous sermon.

Almost every natural man that hears of hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security; he flatters himself in what he has done, in what he is now doing, or what he intends to do; everyone lays out matters in his own mind how he shall avoid damnation, and flatters himself that he contrives well for himself, and that his schemes won't fail. They hear indeed that there are but few saved, and that the bigger part of men that have died heretofore are gone to hell; but each one imagines that he lays out matters better for his own escape than others have done: he don't intend to come to that place of torment; he says within himself, that he intends to take care that shall be effectual, and to order matters so for himself as not to fail. But the foolish children of men do miserably delude themselves in their own schemes, and in their confidence in their own strength and wisdom; they trust to nothing but a shadow.

Let us take care that we trust in the death of Christ for our salvation and not in the *shadow* of our own strength.

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Pastors... 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

North American believers swing wildly from one side of the spectrum to the other with regard to their view of pastors, clergy, church governance, denominations, and what is sometimes snidely referred to as *institutional religion*. On the one hand, even in the evangelical church, we have a cult of celebrity. Well-known preachers and authors are revered, followed, quoted and doted over. Some become very wealthy and very powerful plying their trade. It is as if some leaders in the church can do no wrong. On the other hand, even in the evangelical church, are those who decry pastoral leadership, church structure and anything that smells like an *institution*. For these, it is *Me and my Bible*, or *Me and a few friends and our Bible*. It is as if the Christian faith is a faith for individuals rather than the Body of Christ.



Beginning with 5:12 we come to the conclusion of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. As is the case in most of his 13 letters, Paul offers the reader what appear to be scattered thoughts and exhortations. In this last section, the unifying theme is that of Christian family. Five times he uses the word *brothers* (verses 12, 14, 25, 26 and 27) to address the entire church. His concern is that the church act like the family they have become in Christ. They are, indeed, a company of committed people, committed to God and committed to one another.

First, Paul brings up the church's relation to her leaders, or pastors.¹ Read these two verses. Notice at the outset that Paul does not claim there is a problem in the church in this area. There may have been, but the reader wouldn't know this from Paul's words.² Stott explains.

We do not know . . . what prompted Paul to write verses 12 and 13. Probably some church members had been disrespectful towards their leaders. On the other hand, some leaders may have provoked this reaction by their heavy-handed or autocratic behavior. Paul rejected both attitudes. For it is God's will, he taught, that every local church should enjoy pastoral oversight, but not his will that pastors should dominate and organize everything. They are not meant to monopolize ministries, but rather to multiply them. (Stott, p. 119, emphasis added)

¹ Paul never names these leaders, but we may assume that he is speaking of the office of *pastor*, *elder* or *overseer*. These terms are synonyms in the New Testament.

² Some guess that perhaps there was a rift between the idle in the church and the pastors who were encouraging the very work-ethic that Paul espoused.

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The passage contains three verbs (participles) that describe the role of the pastors in Thessalonica.¹ Pastors *work hard*, they are *over* the congregation and they *admonish* the church. Let us look at each of these in order.

First, pastors *work hard*. Caring for the church of God is a demanding task. Paul uses the Greek verb *kopiao* (κοπιᾶω) which refers to manual labor, hard work. The word means *to toil, to strive, to struggle*. This word is somewhat common in Paul's letters. Notice how the apostle uses this word in other contexts.

What do we learn about the meaning of *kopiao* from the following verses?

1 Corinthians 15:10

1 Timothy 4:10 (*kopiao* = *toil*)

2 Timothy 2:6

Colossians 1:26

What reasons can you think of that would make a pastor's work *hard*?

John Flavel (1627 - 1691) was an English puritan who had a huge interest in pastoral ministry. In one of his books he said of the work of pastors,

The labours of the ministry are fitly compared to the toil of men in harvest, to the labours of woman in travail and to the agonies of soldiers in the extremity in battle.²

Second, pastors are *over* the congregation. The translation of this word is not without controversy. The Greek verb is *proistamenos* and could be translated *care for* instead of *over*. The verb is used in 1 Timothy 3:5.

If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church.

1 Paul never calls these leaders *pastors* specifically, but this is strongly implied. We even know two of their names, Aristarchus and Secundus. They are mentioned in Acts 20:4, 27:2.

2 From *A Puritan Golden Treasury*, 1975, p. 191.

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The verb means, literally, *to stand out in front of*. We should note that in 1 Thessalonians 5 this verb comes between two other caring verbs (*working* and *admonishing*). Perhaps both meanings are in Paul's mind. The pastors of the church are *over* the church in the same sense a father is *over* his family. Not with heavy-handed authoritarianism but with caring, sacrificial love.

This fits nicely with what Jesus says in Mark 10:42-45. Leaders are to be characterized by servanthood. They are to be at the bottom of an upside down pyramid, caring for, serving and equipping the congregation to do the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16). But servant-leadership still has an element of authority.

Compare Hebrews 13:7,17. Read these verses carefully (they are rarely preached on for obvious reasons). How do you measure up to the instruction in these verses? Do you produce *joy* or *groaning* (ESV) in the soul of your pastors?

Cite one or more examples you have seen of a pastor or pastors experiencing joy or groaning with sorrow and/or frustration due to someone they were ministering to or caring for. What do these things look like?

Third, pastors are those who *admonish* the congregation. Perhaps this English word sounds like the equivalent of scolding, but that is not the case. The Greek word means to warn against bad behavior and to encourage good behavior. The Thessalonians had recently come to Christ and with that came an entirely new ethical structure for life. The pastor-teachers of the church had the job of teaching new converts.

Compare Colossians 3:16. There Paul sees teaching and admonishing as the responsibility of every believer in the church. Who has filled this role in your life? What have they done?

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Describe the responsibility you feel and the way you practice this call to teach and admonish. How have you followed through on this? Is there is something that impedes you in this area? How can you grow in order to minister to those you may feel compelled to care for?

From the pastoral perspective, such *admonishing* happens in a variety of ways in the local church, but it takes place primarily through preaching and teaching.

Describe for your homegroup what role preaching and teaching has played in your Christian growth.

If the pastors of the church are responsible to *work hard, exercise authority over* and *admonish* the church, what responsibilities does the apostle lay on the congregation? Look at our verses. The people of the church are to *respect* their pastors and *hold them in the highest regard*.

They are neither to despise them, as if they were dispensable, nor flatter or fawn on them as if they were popes or princes, but rather to *respect* them . . . (Stott, p. 121)

In other words there should never be a war between the elders and the congregation. Again, Stott,

. . . happy is the church family in which pastors and people recognize that God calls different believers to different ministries, exercise their own ministries with diligence and humility, and give to others the respect and love which their God-appointed labour demands! They will *live in peace with each other*. (Stott, 121)

Santa Barbara Community Church has been deeply blessed over the years with a mutual love and respect between the elders and the congregation. Our pastors have governed lovingly and faithfully and our congregation has expressed gratitude that flows from glad hearts. This is nothing we should take for granted. Many churches experience the pain of harsh leadership or the pain of rebellion among those who are led. God has blessed us beyond measure in this area of our church life.

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Spend time as a homegroup praying for the pastors of our church. Bring their names before the Lord and ask God to give them all they need to lead and care for his church. May God grant us many more years of love, respect and joy as we continue to seek and serve him together!

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One Another ... 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15

They walk in humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them and they love one another. They despise not the widow and they grieve not the orphan. He that has, distributes liberally to him that has not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof and they rejoice over him as if he were their brother. For they call themselves brothers, not after the flesh but after the Spirit and in God. But when one of their poor passes away from the world and any of them see him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability. And if they hear that any of their number is in prison or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs. And if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy and they have not an abundance of necessity, they will fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with his necessary food.

—Aristides (second century Athenian statesman)



The Christian faith is anything but a spiritual additive to one's life. When God calls us to himself he calls us into the community of believers who live for him. The church is anything but an institution. Instead, it is an organism, an inter-related family of brothers and sisters who live with and for one another. The church, Paul says elsewhere, is a *body*, with various parts that work together flawlessly (or at least they are supposed to work together in this way).

Toward the end of his letter, Paul addresses some family concerns he has for the Thessalonian church. As we observed in our last study, these final paragraphs of 1 Thessalonians are a staccato assembly of

commands and instructions from the apostle to a church he loves. Robert Thomas offers a good outline of the conclusion of the book. (Thomas, p. 289-298)

- 5:12-13 Responsibilities to the leaders
- 5:14-15 Responsibilities to the whole church
- 5:16-22 Responsibilities to public worship
- 5:23-27 Benediction and concluding comments

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Read 5:12-27 with the previous outline in mind. Put yourself in the shoes of a first-century citizen of Thessalonica. How do you think you might have responded to these exhortations?

What picture of Paul's expectations for church-life emerge from these verses?

How does the contemporary church in North America measure up to the apostle's directives?

How does Santa Barbara Community Church measure up to Paul's instructions?

5:14-15 Responsibilities to the Whole Church

In these verses Paul's words are both strong and corporate. **5:14** contains a stronger verb than we saw in 5:12. There the apostle *asked* something of the church, here he *urges* them. Some say we should translate the verse, *we exhort you*. This is Paul's way of saying, *Pay attention, this is important!*

These verses are also corporate. The Greek text of 5:15 reads, literally, *always seek to do good to one another and to everyone*. Paul is talking about the whole church's responsibility to the whole church. In these two short verses he gives no fewer than six directives.

5:14 The Idle

The members of the church are to *warn*, or *admonish* the idle. As we have seen at various points in this study, idleness was perhaps the main concern Paul had for this fledgling church.

The Greek word here is *ataktoi*. It means, literally, *to be out of line*. The KJV translates this, *the unruly*.

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Fee points out that in light of the above it is interesting that most translations use the English word *idle* to render *ataktoi*.

At some point in the history of English translation it was apparently assumed that the believers who were not work (refusing to work?) in Thessalonica were “out of line” in the sense of being “idle”; so they became “the idlers” instead of “the unruly,” even though there is not a single piece of literary evidence to support such an understanding. Given the rest of the evidence of these two letters, they were most likely “out of line” not simply by not working, but also by their depending on others to take care of them; and in this sense, then, they were also being disruptive of the “shalom” that should otherwise exist within the community. (Fee, pp. 209-210)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:6-12. This is the most thorough section of the two letters that deals with idleness in the church. From 1 Thessalonians 5:14 and from this passage, what can you say about the believer’s call to work?

What is the difference between idleness and rest?

Some in the church are prone to be idle. They are better at channel surfing on the couch than they are at cutting deals in the office. Others are career driven. Work is often their idol of choice. If the opposite of idleness is the idolatry of over-work, where is your temptation? What is Paul’s message to you in these verses?

5:14 The Timid

The timid (NIV) is probably not the best choice of English words to translate the Greek. Timid conveys shyness. Paul’s word is usually rendered *fainthearted*, or the *disheartened*. Most commentators think Paul is referring to those whose faith has been shaken by the death of others and the confusion they have that was addressed in 4:13-18. Here Paul says people in the church should *encourage* the disheartened.

In a similar way, Santa Barbara Community Church has *the disheartened* in our congregation, those whose world has been deeply shaken by death, disappointment and unfulfilled expectations. How do you, and how can you, *encourage the fainthearted*?

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What encouragement have you experienced in our church during times of faintheartedness?

5:14 The Weak

Paul probably has in mind helping those who are weak from sickness. The church is to be a community of care-givers.

Paul concludes this staccato list of instructions with a call to unilateral patience in the body of Christ. Everyone is to be patient with everyone. A nice state of affairs, to be sure.

5:15 The law of un-retribution

Paul echoes Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-42. No longer are believers to exact an *eye for an eye*. They are to be people who don't keep score, who don't take revenge.

Respond to the following quotation:

As long as you are tangled in wrong and revenge, blow and counterblow, aggression and defense, you will be constantly drawn into fresh wrong. Only forgiveness frees us from the injustice of others.¹

How is it with you? What do you do when you feel wronged by another person? Share with your homegroup how you have endeavored to grow in this area?

¹ Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, 1954, p.302.

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Paul's conclusion to 5:15 serves as a fitting conclusion to our study, and as a noble goal for life in the church.

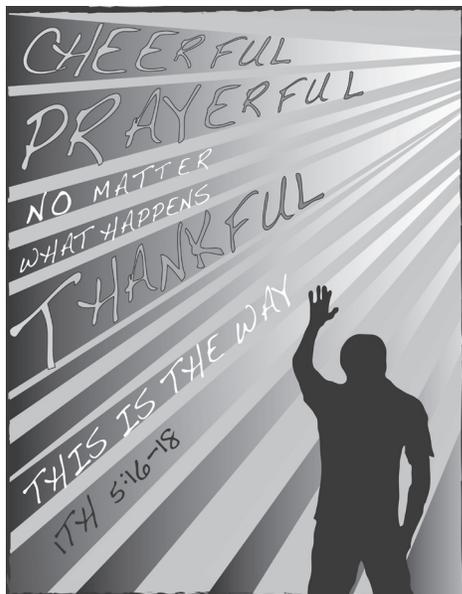
. . . always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

May we do no less as we live our lives together as the church of Christ.

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Elements of Worship... 1 Thessalonians 5:16-28

Paul is nearly finished with his letter to the Thessalonian church. He concludes in his typical style, that is, with a series of staccato instructions. These instructions are followed by one of Paul's famous benedictions.

5:16-22 Responsibilities in public worship

Read these verses. The verbs are all in the plural. Paul is not addressing individuals, but rather, the church as a whole. Paul appears to be instructing the church on their practices of corporate worship.

5:16-18 What are the three key commands in these verses?

How can a corporate worship service incorporate these three commands? More specifically, how can Santa Barbara Community Church incorporate the call to *be joyful always, pray continually* and *give thanks in all circumstances*? Let us consider each of these commands.

First, the church is called to *be joyful always*. Read and memorize 1 Thessalonians 5:16.

The NIV is somewhat misleading. Literally this is a command, *Rejoice always!* (ESV) While we might not be able to be joyful, we can, nevertheless, *rejoice*. Fee clarifies.

... Paul's emphasis here is not so much on the *experience* of joy, but on the *expression* of it. They are to "rejoice always," which, as Philippians 4:4 bears out, means not simply to express joy in general, but specifically to "rejoice *in the Lord*." This is not a sugar-coated call for putting on a happy face in the midst of difficulties. Here is a church that is undergoing severe hardship because of its faith in Christ. God's will for such a community, both as individuals and as they gather for worship, is that as a matter of first importance they continue to exalt Christ by rejoicing, with him as the focus. (Fee, pp. 214-215, emphasis is Fee's!)

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In what ways is the corporate worship of Santa Barbara Community Church marked by rejoicing? Where could we make improvements in this area?

What does this command say to you personally? How are you to participate in 1 Thessalonians 5:16?

Second, the church is to *pray continually*.

Thomas sees Paul urging *incessant prayer*. This *does not mean some sort of nonstop praying*. Rather it implies *constantly recurring prayer, growing out of a settled attitude of dependence on God*. (Thomas, p. 291)

Respond to the following quotation.

. . . if praise is one indispensable element of public worship, prayer is another, especially in the form of intercession. Each congregation should accept the responsibility to engage in serious intercession, not only during the Sunday services but at a midweek prayer meeting as well. We should be praying for our own church members, far and near; for the church throughout the world, its leaders, its adherence to the truth of God's revelation, its holiness, unity and mission; for our nation . . . and government. (Stott, p. 125)

How and where does this happen in the life of Santa Barbara Community Church?

Evaluate your homegroup's devotion to prayer.

Evaluate your own devotion to *continual prayer*. What are your habits of prayer? How would you like to see them change?

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Continual prayer is the ongoing reminder that God's children are always and wholly dependent on their heavenly Father for all things. (Fee, p. 215)

Explain how prayer works in this way.

Third, the church is to *give thanks in all circumstances*.

E. J. Bicknell says in his commentary on 1 Thessalonians that the Christian life is to be *an unceasing eucharist*.¹

Obviously there are times and seasons in our lives when thanksgiving is the least natural Christian discipline we can imagine. Nevertheless, Paul commands thanksgiving. Why? What is Paul's logic? See verse 18b.

Indeed, one mark of unbelief is the refusal to give thanks. See Romans 1:21. Have there been times when you have *refused* to give thanks to God? What were the spiritual results of this refusal?

Dissect and respond to the following quotation by Ellen Vaughn. Have you found this to be true in your experience?

What I have found is that the rhythm of divine renewal beats in the pulse of a purposefully grateful human heart. Our spiritual power depends on a moment-by-moment bond with God. And most simply, we build that bond by *thanking Him* in all things.²

5:19-22 After these three positive commands Paul tells the church what not to do, *don't put out the Spirit's fire*, literally, *Do not quench the Spirit*. The verse could be translated, *Stop quenching the Spirit*.

¹ Cited in Stott, p. 126.

² Ellen Vaughn, *Radical Gratitude*, 2005, p. 202.

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Read these verses. What is the apostle's emphasis?

What are some ways we might *put out the Spirit's fire* in Santa Barbara Community Church?

Paul instructs the Thessalonians to *test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.* What does this mean in your life? Be specific.

What does this mean for Santa Barbara Community Church corporately? Whose responsibility is this and how should it be carried out?

5:23-27 Benediction and concluding comments

Use this benediction as a template to pray for one another in your homegroup. Pray for the larger church body of Santa Barbara Community Church with this same template. Ask that God will keep us, *spirit, soul and body* until he comes again.

5:26 Practice this verse before concluding your homegroup!

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