

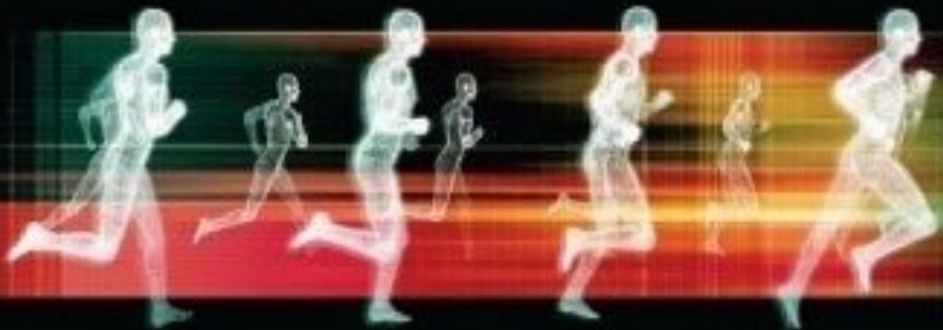
So many things compete for our attention every day.  
What is worth pursuing? What has lasting value?  
What is the ultimate goal in life?

# A LIFE WORTH LIVING

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Paul's first letter to the  
**THESSALONIANS**

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## A LIFE WORTH LIVING

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# Introduction to 1 Thessalonians

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is possibly the earliest of his recorded letters to his missionary churches. Some people argue for an earlier date for the book of Galatians, but whichever case is right, 1 Thessalonians is one of the earliest writings in the New Testament. It is a letter that doesn't expound many substantial issues of doctrine, nor does it detail any of the major problems facing the early church. It simply deals with local issues facing the Thessalonian church, namely Jewish opposition to the gospel and some confusion on the part of church members concerning the second coming of Christ. William Neil says of the Thessalonian letters that they "afford us a most valuable glimpse of a small Christian community finding its feet and facing its problems in a hostile or indifferent world. ... Above all they remind us that..... the element of hope in a purpose of God that reaches beyond the frontiers of our normal experience has been embedded firmly in the heart of the Christian gospel from the beginning."

## The structure of 1 Thessalonians

### 1. Greeting, 1:1-3

Greeting and thanksgiving

### 2. Paul's relationship with the Thessalonian church, 1:4-3:13

i] The conversion of the Thessalonians and their progress in the faith, 1:4-10

ii] Paul defends his gospel ministry, 2:1-12

iii] Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' response to the gospel, 2:13-16

iv] Paul's desire to revisit the Thessalonians, 2:17-20

v] Timothy's mission to Thessalonica, 3:1-5

vii] Timothy's report and Paul's prayer

### 3. Exhortations to Christian living, 4:1-12

i] A call to sexual purity, 4:1-8

ii] A call to brotherly love and respect, 4:8-12

### 4. Problems associated with second coming of Christ, 4:13-5:11

i] Instructions concerning the dead in Christ, 4:13-18

ii] Instructions concerning the return of Christ, 5:1-11

iii] Being prepared for the return of Christ, 5:12-22

### 5. Conclusion, 5:23-28

Prayer, final injunction and blessing

## The Date of writing

A close reading of Acts 18 and 1 Thessalonians tells us that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians soon after Timothy and Silas joined him in Corinth, (see

1Thess.3:1f, Acts18:5. Acts 18:12). Acts 18 refers to the proconsul Gallio who was the brother of the Roman philosopher Seneca. Seneca was the tutor of the young Nero who went on to cause so much of the persecution of the early church during his reign as emperor. An inscription discovered at Delphi tells us that Gallio was pro-consul of Corinth between 51 and 52AD, giving us very good evidence that this letter was written during this 2 year period.

### **The origins of the Thessalonian church**

Following his dream of the man of Macedonia Paul, with Silas, Timothy and Luke, left Asia Minor and moved westward into Europe (Macedonia). Paul preached in Philippi and after a riot he headed for Thessalonica (Acts 17:1) The city was a major centre in the empire, on the 'Via Egnatia', the Roman highway to the East, and possessed a beautiful harbour. It was therefore a key trading centre for Macedonia and was later to become the capital of the whole province. During the second Roman civil war, the city sided with Anthony and Octavian and so, following their victory, was given the status of a free city.

When Paul arrived he initially attended the local Synagogue preaching there for "three Sabbath days". In the meantime he gained employment to see him through his stay (Acts 18:3). The success of the mission prompted the Jews to seek out Paul and deal with him. A riot resulted and the home of Jason, where Paul was staying, was set upon. Only Jason was found, and he was dragged before the local authorities. They sought to accuse Paul and the Christians of treason, but as there was no proof of their guilt, Jason and his friends were freed, but ordered to keep the peace. Paul and Silas were sent quickly away to Berea.

### **Purpose of the letter**

After further troubles Paul was forced to leave Berea. Leaving Silas and Timothy behind, he went to Athens where his ministry made little impact. He then went to Corinth, by which time he was somewhat dejected. After visiting the new churches in Macedonia, Silas and Timothy came to Paul in Corinth. They brought word of the new church in Thessalonica, and reported that the new believers were standing firm. After the disappointment of the previous few weeks Paul was overjoyed and wrote to the believers affirming their progress in the faith while seeking to correct some of the problems that had emerged.

Part of the difficulty Paul faced was the slander directed towards him by the strong Jewish community in the town. They sought to align Paul with

the many wandering preachers who preyed on the gullible for a living. Thus Paul writes to refute these slanders. The believers in Thessalonica were also under pressure from elements of the secular society. He therefore writes to encourage his friends to stand firm in their trials.

On the theological front there was some confusion concerning the second coming of Christ. The members of the Thessalonian church thought that the second coming was imminent, yet some of their number had died. Did this mean that those who had died will miss out on the coming day of glory? Some believers had given up their job to wait for the coming day and were now busybodies and idlers. There was also some speculation over the date of Christ's return, a further issue that Paul had to deal with.

The enthusiasm of some of the church leaders was wearing thin and so Paul touched on the issue of respect for those over us in the Lord. He also was aware of sexual immorality in the church, and so addressed this issue as well.

# 1 Thessalonians 1

## A Healthy Church

Paul almost always begins his letters by telling his recipients that he thanks God for them. But these folks are special. Of all of his letters, he says more about why he thanks God for them than any other church. He

even goes so far as to call them a model church (1 Thess 1:7). This doesn't mean that they were perfect, as we will see—they have their share of problems and lots of room for improvement in both knowledge and practice. Despite saying in 1:8 that he doesn't have to say much about the faith of the Thessalonians, he actually goes into quite some detail about their faith, as we'll see in the rest of this series! Paul tells them that they were a model of spiritual vitality—they fit Paul's profile of a healthy church. They have the right ethos, attitudes, and priorities.

What is this profile? Not attendance numbers, annual budget, media coverage, or slick marketing techniques. Paul summarizes his profile in 1:3 - a church characterized by faith, hope, and love. Properly understood these three characteristics describe a radical, revolutionary movement of God's Spirit in and through his people. In 1:4-10, Paul supplies some content for each of these Godly attributes so we can know if we have them... and how to get them if we don't.

### **Read 1 Thessalonians 1, Chapter 1 together**

1. What do you feel motivated the Thessalonians' work and persistence?
2. What is it that motivates your work for the Lord?
3. How do we know the Thessalonians were chosen by God?
4. If people were imitators of how you live among them, how well would the Gospel of Christ be spread? Explain!
5. Compare how suffering is regarded by Christians you see today, to the way the Thessalonians handled it in verses 6-8.
6. If the Christian churches in Penarth became "model" to all the believers in Wales, what would our churches look like?
7. What do you feel you still need to do to be ready for the return of Jesus?



# 1Thessalonians 2

## Self Defence for Christians

One thing you soon become used to if you are in any form of Christian ministry is criticism. Learning to deal appropriately with criticism without becoming hard of heart is a key to long term success in ministry. More than most people, Paul had to deal with criticism, hostility, opposition and sometimes outright violence. In the chapter Paul lays out a 'manual for ministry' in which he outlines:

**His Message:** Verse 2 tells us that Paul's message was to pass on God's Gospel. This was not his own philosophy or ideas, but something he had received from God.

**His Motive:** It is a great temptation in ministry to want to please people and be liked by everyone. You soon learn that this is impossible! Paul was not motivated by what people thought of him, nor by financial gain, but only by pleasing God.

**His Manner:** Paul says that his motives were not impure or self-seeking, but rather that his desire was to be courageous, gentle, loving and holy.

In verses 11 and 12 Paul uses three words to illustrate a gospel ministry within a Christian fellowship. The words sum up Paul's ministry in the Thessalonian church and they serve as a useful guide to a ministry that seeks to shape "lives worthy of God."

**Encouragement**, in the sense of directing others and showing them the way. The Christian ministry we are called to involves being a signpost both by the things we say and by the things we do. Discipleship is a difficult business and therefore, we all need help and encouragement to persevere and keep going.

**Comfort**, in the sense of consoling, giving words of cheer and inspiration in the face of trouble. Because discipleship is no easy business, we will all feel discouraged or downhearted from time to time. Again, Christian ministry involves consoling one another and being there for each other in difficult times.

**Urging**, in the sense of giving strong words to slackers. From time to time we all fall back in our dedication to cross-bearing discipleship. We sit down on the side of the narrow way, or we even head off on the broad way that leads to destruction. It is when we drift that we need a strong word from those who minister to us. We don't need condemnation or criticism, rather we need to be stirred up to be what we are called to be.

## **Read 1 Thessalonians 1, Chapter 2 together**

1. Describe what you feel "strong opposition" is to the Gospel.
2. Paul says, "We were not trying to please men, but God." How does this compare with your experience of ministers or other Christians,

today?

3. Paul describes his ministry as sharing "our lives." Sometimes we are told that leaders need to be strong and should not show when they are feeling weak or that they have failed in some way. How important do you feel that to be?
4. Paul worked night and day to support himself in order "not to be a burden" to the believers. Is it right that we pay our pastors and ministers today, or should they also get a paid job?
5. How do you feel your life would be different if you fully accepted the Bible as "words from God, working in you" (verse 13)?
6. In verse 14-16 Paul says the Word of God is shown in the Thessalonians because they endured the sufferings of the churches of Judea (beatings, executions, murders, threats). How much of our modern churches do you feel would endure such suffering? Would you endure it?
7. In verse 14 onwards Paul says the wrath of God has come upon the Jews. Can anyone offer from Jewish history what might be happening at the time Paul is writing this letter? There is quite a lot of sensitivity about criticising Jews or Israel in the modern world. How do you feel about Paul saying that God's wrath has fallen on them?

## 1 Thessalonians 3

# Longings and Encouragements

The bulk of chapter 3 deals with Paul's response to Timothy's report. Paul is overjoyed at hearing how well the church is going (v6-10) and takes a moment to pray for the Christians at Thessalonica (v11-13.)

At verse 6 in his letter, Paul begins a new section. He speaks of the arrival of Timothy and of Timothy's positive news concerning the Thessalonian church. Paul makes three points: i] the church members continue in faith; ii] they continue in love one toward another; iii] they continue to hold a positive view toward Paul. Paul goes on to express how he is uplifted by this good news. In the midst of his troubles, this positive news gives him renewed strength. He rejoices at what has happened, but it is a joy which

is focused on God. The Lord has done his work and Paul is driven to respond in thanksgiving.

This joy prompts Paul to pray for the church. "Night and day" he does this. That is, he continues in prayer for them, constantly bringing them before the Lord. He asks that he might again see them to "supply what is lacking in (their) faith." He desires to exercise a continuing ministry with them, remedying any defects that may still exist in their Christian life. As such he prays that God will "clear the way" for him to come and minister to the Thessalonians.

In verse 12 he prays that they may love one another. This is the great command of Christ for his disciples and as such is clearly a prayer according to the will of God. Paul prays that their compassion for each other will increase, and not just for each other, but for the wider Christian fellowship.

In concluding his prayer (verse 13), Paul prays that the Thessalonians may stand firm in their Christian lives right up to the coming of Jesus. Again, this is a prayer according to the will of God. It is similar to the Lord's Prayer where we ask that we not be put to the test such that we are overcome by the Evil One. Paul asks that they remain faithful in Christ until the last day.

### **Read 1 Thessalonians 1, Chapter 3 together**

1. Go back and read to 2:17-20. What do you feel it means when Paul says Satan prevented him from visiting the Thessalonians?
2. In Acts 17, it says the Bereans were more noble and receptive than the Thessalonians. What do you feel changed from the time the Gospel to the time of this letter, which calls the Thessalonians "our glory and joy?"
3. In your opinion, is 2, above, an example of Paul politely lying, proof the Bible is fallible, a different perspectives of the same events, or a genuine change? Explain your choice!
4. Paul says we were destined for persecution. How does that differ from modern Christians' belief about God and struggles in life?

5. Paul describes the ability to stand fast in the face of persecution as faith. Some now preach that absence of struggle, even personal health and wealth are examples of faith. Are these two teachings in conflict? Explain.
6. Look at verse 8, how do you feel Paul's "living" is linked to their standing firm in the faith?
7. Consider other places in the world, today. Are there any places where you know of Christians standing firm in the face of torture, poverty and death at the hands of enemies of Christ? What should our response be to the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Christ?

## 1 Thessalonians 4 Living to please God

Do you know what it means when a preacher places his watch on the lectern or pulpit? Absolutely nothing! He is going to keep on going whatever time it says on the watch! In the same way many preachers say, "and finally." This doesn't necessarily mean anything either!!! In chapter 4 Paul begins to wind up his letter. However, it will take 2 full chapters to accomplish it.

The apostle begins chapter 4 by saying 'Finally, live to please God.' As he makes his final points he says that faith and believing are important, but we must live out that faith with our actions. Paul encourages the believers in Thessalonica to apply themselves "more and more" to their Christian "walk", in line with the instructions he gave them when he first ministered to them. Instead of serving their own interests, they should seek to "please God", or more rightly, serve God, as in fact they have been doing. (The Greek word translated "please" would be better rendered "serve".) In the end, the only act that is pleasing to God is repentance and faith. Trusting Christ pleases God far more than our compromised

behaviour.

In our society sexual immorality is a constant temptation. Greek society of the first century virtually encouraged sexual immorality. It was "excused by parents, commended by moralists, and consecrated by religion", (Wordsworth) "Almost every form of sensual indulgence beyond the limits of marriage was permitted" (Lecky). Today, affluent Western societies parallel Greek society of the first century and so believers need the same warning that Paul gave the Thessalonians all those years ago. "Avoid sexual immorality", "control your own body." However, Paul goes on to say that just as important as sexual purity in 'pleasing God' is the way we treat one another.

The chapter finishes with a discussion of the coming of the Lord. It appears that some of the new Christians in the infant church at Thessalonica were confused about Jesus' final coming. Some were being confused by the death of believers, some were losing faith and others were giving up work as they sat around idly waiting for Christ's imminent return. Paul writes to address these issues. It is interesting to reflect that the Church at Thessalonica was troubled by being overly expectant of the imminent return of Christ, whilst the modern Church is probably concerned too little!

### **Read 1 Thessalonians 1, Chapter 4 together**

1. What do you feel it means to live in order to please God?
2. What do you feel it means to be sanctified? Does this happen all at once or is it gradual?
3. If God calls us to live a holy life, what happens if we "sin" as a Christian? What other scriptures might help us with thinking about this?
4. What do you feel might be the difference between "sinning" and "rejecting" the instruction to live a holy life?
5. How does Paul's instructions for Christians to work hard and "not be dependent on anybody" square with ideas about charity and generosity? Should Christians, for example, take state benefits?

6. What do you feel it means that the Lord will bring with Him all who have fallen asleep in Him?
7. Vs 16-18 describes what people call the rapture. Paul and those of his day believed it was possible for the Lord to return at any time. If this is true, how does this suggest we should live between now and then?

## 1 Thessalonians 5 He's coming soon!

At the end of Chapter 4 Paul had outlined what will happen at the return of the Lord. Now he turns to thinking about when it might happen. However, for those looking for the time and date, he has bad news. We don't know exactly when it will be, he says, only that when it happens is will come upon us 'like a thief in the night.' However, we should not be surprised when it happens, because we know that the return of Christ will definitely happen at some point in time. In light of this certain hope, he says, live lives that look into eternity rather than ones which focus on worldly comfort and concerns.

As he draws his letter to a close Paul gives some final instructions about those in leadership and general advice about living as followers of Christ. The main theme continues from the first half of the chapter: "We are different from those who live in the darkness of the world, so act differently!"

### **Read 1 Thessalonians 1, Chapter 5 together**

1. What does Paul say about conditions in the World before the Lord returns? What warning signs are there today?
2. On one hand Paul says that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. He then immediately says that we who believe shouldn't

be taken by surprise. What does he mean by this?

3. When Paul says, 'God did not appoint us to suffer wrath" was he speaking about wrath as the punishment of God or the persecution from man?
4. Whether Jesus returns today or 10,000 years from now, how should we prepare for Him?
5. Who do you feel Paul was referring to being "over you" in the Lord?
6. According to Paul, do you feel there is a difference between how we treat other Christians as opposed to everyone else? What are the differences, if any?
7. How does your last month compare with Paul's instruction in verses 16-18?
8. What do you feel it means to "test everything and hold on to the good?" How would you do that with respect to what others are telling you at church and elsewhere? How do you do this?









