

Preaching Pack

1 Thessalonians

Holiness and Hope in a Hostile World

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Is it possible for the Christian faith to survive and thrive in a world that's indifferent at best and hostile at worst? What does such a faith look like – at home, at work, and in other places where Christ's people find themselves? And what kind of church does it take to sustain that vision?

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians helps us with questions like these. It's likely the first letter Paul wrote to a church, and so it provides one of the earliest windows we have on the early Christian movement. It also brims over with Paul's affection for the young converts, and his delight that they are 'standing firm in the Lord' (3:8). He writes to strengthen their faith in Jesus and reaffirm the instruction he had passed on to them. Socialised in a pagan cultural environment, Paul helps them to learn the very different way of life that flows from leaving idols 'to serve the living and true God' (1:10) – where holiness is not withdrawal from the world but involvement in it in a new way, marked by faith, love, and hope.

Punching well above its weight, 1 Thessalonians gives us: a model to follow, in Paul's own commitment and service to the people of God; a vision for the church, in the call to live distinctively in everyday life; and a reaffirmation of our faith, in the foundational truths of the gospel of Christ crucified, risen, and coming again.

It's a great letter for preachers – and for congregations!

The Thessalonians were a new church, doing well in difficult circumstances, but needing instruction in some areas of how to live as Christians, and struggling with what hope in the future coming of Jesus looks like. It might sound like a church you know.

Like other letters in the New Testament, Paul is responding to very specific circumstances. This in itself is an encouragement for us to be highly local and contextual in our preaching. But what Paul says in drawing on the larger biblical story of what God has done and will yet do in Christ carries significant implications for our own contexts centuries later. For all those who have turned to God from idols, to serve the true and living God, and to wait for his Son from heaven (1:9-10), God continues to speak to us and shape us through Paul's words.

For church leaders and preachers, letters like 1 Thessalonians allow us to listen in on Paul's guidance to churches, to see something of his pastoral practice, how he seeks to shape congregations for their lives together and in the world. In spite of the differences between Paul and ourselves, and the differences between the situations of the churches to which he wrote and those of ours, there is sufficient overlap for us to recognise in him a model for how we engage with our own congregations.

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Introducing 1 Thessalonians

An excellent 7-minute animated overview of 1 Thessalonians has been produced by The Bible Project, and is well worth watching. Find the video (along with many others) at jointhebibleproject.com or click the play button to watch on YouTube.

[youtube.com/watch?v=No7Nq6IX23c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=No7Nq6IX23c)



1. Background to the letter – who were the Thessalonians?

It's all too easy to imagine that New Testament cities belong to ancient history and are too distant from us and our experience. But Thessalonica would be like a lot of cities and towns we know today – a place with a long history, built in a location with good sea and road transport links, with a thriving economy, and with everything on offer for those who could afford it.

Click this map¹ to launch in your browser or search 'Thessalonica' on a map of the New Testament world.



Thessalonica was the second-largest city in Greece, named after Alexander the Great's half sister, Thessaloniki. It was a natural port, and was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia in northern Greece, about 120 miles south-west of Philippi. Philippi and Thessalonica were connected by the Via Egnatia, a road built by the Romans in the 2nd century BC. Over 700 miles long, it stretched from Byzantium in the east to Dyrrachium in the west. Thessalonica was a free city with an independent government, and was a centre for the Roman imperial cult. It was also a site of many temples which were dedicated to the service of many deities.

As described in Acts 17:1-9, Paul, Silas, and Timothy founded the church in Thessalonica. They went there after they left Philippi, where they had been flogged and thrown into prison (Acts 16:11-40). Paul refers to this in 1 Thessalonians 2:2: 'We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the

help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.'

On arriving in Thessalonica, following his usual pattern, Paul spoke in the synagogue (17:1-3). He had some success among the Jews there, but also among *non*-Jews, as verse 4 records: 'Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.'

But all was not well, as Luke goes on to say (17:5-9). Some of the Jews in Thessalonica hired a mob to attack Jason's house where Paul was staying. Since Paul wasn't there, Jason was dragged to the local authorities with charges of treason and trouble-making. The city authorities required Jason to hand over a sum of money as a deposit which he would forfeit if there was any further trouble. So, for the sake of Jason and the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul and the others left for Berea and then Athens.

It's interesting to note that Paul's preaching was perceived as subversive, as we read in verse 7: 'They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.' Paul had obviously said enough for people to make the connection between a crucified Messiah and a reigning Lord, whose lordship encompassed every area of life. The gospel was somehow seen as a potential threat to the religious, economic, and political status quo.

Much of what Luke tells us in Acts is reflected in the letter itself. Paul writes about them being opposed, and yet preaching the good news about Jesus with boldness and power, and about the Thessalonians, mostly non-Jews (so presumably Paul spoke in places other than the synagogue), turning from their idols to God and joyfully receiving the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Via_Egnatia#/media/File:Via_Egnatia-en.jpg

good news in spite of harassment (1:4-10). There can be little doubt that their rejection of the claims of the imperial cult and their refusal to continue taking part in the city's cults and their associated guilds would mean the new allegiance of the young Thessalonians Christians would be seen as a political and social offence.

Acts 17:2 suggests their visit was only three weeks long. In reality it may well have been longer, though perhaps not by much. But it was long enough for Paul to instruct the Christians and to work among them (and Paul says in Philippians 4:16 that he received aid from the Philippians more than once while he was in Thessalonica). However long it was – three weeks or a few months at the most – after leaving for Berea and then Athens, Paul was desperate to see them, but was prevented from doing so. Eventually, he sent Timothy back to check on them (see 3:1-2). Had they left Jesus and gone back to their idols? Had they been in under persecution? Had they lost hope?

Timothy brought back 'good news' (3:8). They were suffering, yes, but their faith, love, and hope were thriving. And they were missing Paul as much as he was missing them. Paul says he wants to see them even more, but writes a letter as a substitute for visiting them. And he writes with thankfulness and joy the letter we now know as 1 Thessalonians. Having been in Corinth for a while by this point (Acts 18:1), Paul probably wrote the letter from there, in or around AD 50.

2. Structure of the letter – what does Paul write to the Thessalonians?

Paul followed the normal format for letter-writing in the first century, but modified it here and there. Like most such letters, 1 Thessalonians contains four major sections: Opening, Thanksgiving, Body, and Closing.

Opening (1:1)

Ancient letters began with the sender's name. Often Paul gives himself a designation, normally 'apostle', though he doesn't here. In this case, the letter comes from Paul, Silas, and Timothy – and we should probably take that joint authorship seriously. Most of the time in the letter, the first person plural is used. Only on a few occasions does Paul refer to himself.

Then we have the recipients: 'to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Then comes the greeting. The standard greeting in a Greek letter was *chairein*, 'greetings'. But Paul uses the similar

sounding *charis*, 'grace', and adds 'peace' (which is perhaps a nod to the Jewish greeting, *shalom*).

Thanksgiving (1:2-10)

Most New Testament letters follow the opening with a section of thanksgiving. Paul's thanksgivings often focus on the faithfulness of the church; they sometimes include a prayer report, where Paul tells them what he has prayed for them. The thanksgiving section tends to provide an introduction to some of the themes of the letter.

It's normally easy to see where the thanksgiving ends and the body begins, but in 1 Thessalonians, the writers do so much thanking for the Thessalonians (1:2; 2:13; 3:9) that some have thought the thanksgiving reaches all the way to 3:10!

Body (2:1-5:24)

In 1 Thessalonians, the body can be seen as extending from 2:1 to 5:24, although (as with the thanksgiving section) the boundaries can be fuzzy. The body carries the main message of the letter.

The main body of 1 Thessalonians contains two prayers, each of which seems to conclude a section (3:11-13 and 5:23-24), which leaves us with two main parts – 2:1-3:10 and 4:1-5:22. Within those two main sections, the writers often signal a change of topic by using the designation 'brothers and sisters'. We see that in 2:1, 2:14, and 2:17 in the first half of the letter, and the same in the second half of the letter, in 4:1, 4:13, 5:1, 5:4, 5:12, and 5:25. As you read through 1 Thessalonians (ideally in one sitting), it's worth taking a closer look at these references to get a feel for the movement through the letter.

In the first part of the letter, the writers are mostly looking back, recollecting their ministry among the Thessalonians, thanking God for them, describing their longing to see them, expressing their affection for them. In the second part of the letter, they move to exhortation. That's where all the commands are. So, if the first part is affirmations of past behaviour, the second part is exhortations to future behaviour. If the first part contains recollections, looking backwards, the second part contains instructions, looking forwards.

Closing (5:25-28)

Closings contain any greetings, final instructions, and sometimes a blessing.

3. Themes of the letter – what did the Thessalonians need to know?

The themes of holiness and hope emerge in several places across the letter, even when those specific words are not used. They come together in Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians in 3:13 which, as we have seen, concludes the first part of the main body of the letter:

'May he [the Lord] strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.'

The prayer provides a transition to the exhortations in chapters 4 and 5, where Paul calls them to live 'more and more' in the way that they have already been living (4:1). God plays a crucial role in this process, as the prayer makes clear, but they too are to live into the holiness and hope for which Paul has prayed.

We then return to those themes in the final benediction in 5:23:

'May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

It doesn't take much to spot the similarities between the two prayers, and how they put us in touch with the twin themes of holiness and hope.

Holiness – pleasing God

The language of holiness can be tricky for us, especially if it conjures up a superior or separatist attitude. But holiness is woven through the Bible. It's there when God first makes a covenant with Israel to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). The life of the people of God is to reflect God's own character: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy' (Leviticus 19:2). The sheer range of regulations in Leviticus reminds us that the

holiness in view touches all areas of life, not just the 'religious' ones; that holiness does not involve removal from the world, but presupposes daily living in the world; that holiness is not the preserve of the privileged few, but is for all God's people; that holiness is not a privatised experience, but is bound up with living in community.

Of course, the new covenant necessarily changes the dynamics and the specifics; but the vocation to be a people set apart for God remains (cf. 1 Peter 1:13-16; 2:9-10), and with it the call to do things differently from those around us. So it is that Paul draws on the biblical category of holiness for this largely Gentile community in order to portray the countercultural nature of their existence, not merely for their own sake but – in line with God's original plan for his people – for the sake of the nations.

Hope – trusting God

The word 'hope' appears a few times in the letter (1:3; 2:19; 4:13; 5:8), but the topic occurs in different ways throughout, not least in the extended treatment of Jesus' return in 4:13-5:11. In addition, most of the main sections of the letter end on a forward-looking note (1:10; 2:12, 16; 3:13; 5:23-24).

Here in 1 Thessalonians, as elsewhere in Scripture, the goal towards which the biblical story moves is not a 'spiritual' existence in heaven, but resurrected bodies and a restored creation. The good news is that what we hope for has already begun. The death and resurrection of Jesus was *the* decisive event where evil was defeated and the new creation was launched (4:14; 5:9-10). Meanwhile, this hope flows into our lives, shaping how we think, speak and live – as we embody God's all-encompassing salvation in the here and now.

So, holiness and hope are not two separate topics. It's the hope of the Lord's coming that provides the context within which we live a 'set apart' life which, in turn, speaks to others.

Preaching 1 Thessalonians

1. Preaching according to the shape of the letter

The standard sections of the letter noted above are acknowledged by most commentators. Such divisions often provide helpful 'thought units' for preachers when working through a New Testament letter. To take one example, here is how John Stott divides the book in his 'Bible Speaks Today' commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians, looking at the letter through the lens of the gospel and the church.

- **1:1-10** – Christian evangelism or How the church spreads the gospel
- **2:1-3:13** – Christian ministry or How pastors serve both the gospel and the church
- **4:1-12** – Christian behaviour or How the church must live according to the gospel
- **4:13-5:11** – Christian hope or How the gospel should inspire the church
- **5:12-28** – Christian community or How to be a gospel church

For a series of five sermons on 1 Thessalonians, you could do a lot worse than that!

For those who might want to go more slowly through the letter, Stott's outline could be expanded from five to eight sermons:

- **1:1-3 (and Acts 17:1-15)** – the Christian church
Opening the letter to a people characterised by faith, love, and hope
- **1:4-10** – Christian conversion
Thanking God for his saving work in the Thessalonians and its impact on others
- **2:1-12** – Christian ministry
Rehearsing the pattern of apostolic practice among the Thessalonians
- **2:13-16** – Christian suffering
Giving thanks for their reception of the word of God in the face of persecution

- **2:17-3:13** – Christian friendship
Renewing the bond of friendship with the Thessalonians
- **4:1-12** – Christian lifestyle
Instructing the Thessalonians on the life that pleases God
- **4:13-5:11** – Christian hope
Responding to questions that have been raised about the coming of Christ
- **5:12-28** – Christian community
Encouraging congregational life and worship

Our own outline for this preaching pack takes its inspiration from John Stott, but treats chapters 2 and 3 in two sermons rather than one. This being the case, a six-week series through 1 Thessalonians could look like this:

- **1:1-10** – Christian mission: passing it on
- **2:1-16** – Christian imitation: pleasing to God
- **2:17-3:13** – Christian friendship: longing to share
- **4:1-12** – Christian holiness: living it out
- **4:13-5:11** – Christian hope: waiting with confidence
- **5:12-28** – Christian community: walking with others

The potential danger of using titles like 'Christian ministry' and 'Christian holiness' is it can give the impression that the authors were writing a type of 'theology' where they were dealing with those areas as specific topics. We're on safer ground if we try to get to grips what the writers are doing in each section of the letter and draw inferences from that. So, for instance, we see in 4:13-5:11 that the authors appear to be responding to questions that have been raised about the coming of Christ, which then carries implications for our understanding of 'Christian hope'.

2. Preaching from a whole-life perspective

If you have not already done so, you may want to check out LICC's online resource, 'Whole Life Preaching' (<http://licc.org.uk/preaching>). This series of six short videos explores the significance of allowing a whole-life discipling perspective to inform the preparation and delivery of sermons. They start from the basis that through Scripture God shapes his people for their calling in the world, and encourage preachers to reflect on the implications of biblical passages in a way that is alert to the everyday contexts in which members of congregations find themselves. Preaching is one of the main ways for a congregation to be discipled for their frontlines, requiring attentiveness on our part as preachers to the text, the congregation, and the wider world in which we are called to live. You and your preaching team may want to reflect on 1 Thessalonians in the light of the issues raised in the videos and the accompanying material on the LICC website.

Some of the particular areas that might be worth thinking about include:

- In preparing and delivering sermons on 1 Thessalonians, how far are you aware of seeing members of the congregation as disciples of Jesus in their everyday lives?
- How might your preaching through 1 Thessalonians equip the Christians in your church to take their place in God's purposes in the world?
- What are some of the particular issues faced by people in your church – in their work, or home, or elsewhere – which 1 Thessalonians might address?
- How might the main themes of holiness and hope in 1 Thessalonians be applicable to the specific situations members of your congregation find themselves in?
- What conversations can you have with members of your congregation before you preach from 1 Thessalonians which may then shape individual sermons?
- As part of a larger commitment to discipling, how might you encourage others in the congregation – before, during, and after individual sermons – to get involved in the whole process?
- How will you pray for your congregation in the light of the way of life to which Paul calls the Thessalonians, and how will you encourage people to pray for each other?

As preachers, we recognise the distinction between the church as 'gathered' (coming together for worship, teaching, communion, etc.) and 'scattered' (in the various places we find ourselves during the week). With any part of Scripture, but especially with a letter like 1 Thessalonians written to a congregation, this means we can be alert to what might be an appropriate implication of a passage for our *gathered* life, and an appropriate implication for our *scattered* life – and the relationship between the two. For instance, some parts of 1 Thessalonians (such as chapters 2 and 3) mostly address our lives together, whilst other parts (much of chapters 4 and 5) are more applicable to our daily frontlines.

Of course, both aspects are interdependent. As laid out in letters like 1 Thessalonians, Paul's vision is that the ongoing life of the congregation when gathered shapes us to be a countercultural people when scattered across our towns and cities, extending the love of Christ beyond the body of Christ.

We live this way not only because we are empowered by God to do so, but because we are nurtured in a community which practises a particular set of virtues. Our life together and our love for each other testify to God's desire to reconcile all people in Christ. How we're shaped in our relationships within the community of faith then spills out in our interactions with others – in lives which serve others, in love which overcomes evil with good. In all these ways, we are not merely passive recipients of the gospel, but those who embody it and proclaim it, extending to others the mercies of our great God.

3. Preaching to form a missionary congregation

It's clear that Paul spread the good news as he travelled around the Mediterranean world of the first century, but did he expect non-apostles, so-called 'ordinary' Christians, to do so?

As it turns out, and perhaps to our surprise, there are very few places in Paul's letters where he explicitly calls on Christians to evangelise. But that doesn't mean he didn't anticipate it would happen. Part of the problem, perhaps, is that we expect the sharing of our faith to be tackled as a separate 'topic', when it's even more deeply embedded than we first imagine.

In the case of 1 Thessalonians, Paul begins by giving thanks for their active faith, love, and hope (1:3) and their initial reception of the gospel (1:4-5). He goes on to say that they became his imitators (1:6) – because of their

acceptance of the word, the gospel, in affliction, with the joy of the Spirit. As a result, they in turn became an example to believers elsewhere (1:7), and the word of the Lord ‘rang out’ from them, their faith becoming known ‘everywhere’ (1:8). Moreover, their conversion was more than just a change of mind or a new religious feeling; it included actions which were widely reported on because they were publicly visible (1:9-10).

Paul doesn’t specify *how* the Thessalonian believers were communicating the gospel to others. It could be any number of ways. And yet, Paul was confident and delighted that his congregations would continue the ‘missionary’ activity they’d seen him engage in, as the power of God which was at work in his proclamation of the good news continued to be active in those who had come to believe that good news for themselves.

When it comes to 1 Thessalonians, according to Michael Gorman, in *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), ‘Paul is writing a missional exhortation to a missional community’ (74). The faith, love, and hope embodied by the Thessalonians would inevitably come out in their interactions with others beyond their gathering together, through faithful living in the public sphere. As Gorman says:

‘What seems to be the case is that the Thessalonian believers not only *believed* but also *embodied* and *shared* the gospel. They did so not merely in their tight-knit community, but in their world: among their friends, relatives, associates, and so on... It seems highly likely, then, that the Thessalonian believers bore public witness to their faith, love, and hope – by what they did and did not do, and how they interpreted what they did and did not do – in various venues’ (72-73).

Seen this way, according to Gorman, ‘holiness... is not withdrawal from the world, as some might think. Rather, it is a kind of participation in the world in a radically new and different way’. So, the exhortation for a countercultural sexual and work ethic (in 4:1-12) is not just a call to be different for the sake of difference, but a plea for a life that pleases God, with an eye on the missional effect of a God-centred approach to sex and work, within the context of love for fellow believers and involvement in the wider world.

And when it comes to hope, Gorman says: ‘[H]ow they grieved and how they hoped – specifically how they hoped in the midst of grief – was a form of bearing witness to family members, friends, associates, and so on. The church’s hope was, and is, missional – again, not first of all by virtue of an intention to convert but simply by the virtue of the countercultural nature of the hope of the gospel’ (101).

Whether it’s sex or work or grief or hope, Paul reconfigures each in the light of the gospel. And living this way in Thessalonica will have missional implications. What Paul says about the Thessalonians living out their faith assumes a whole new orientation of life on the basis of what God has done and will yet do in Jesus, because the letter tells a different story about the way things really are. This means we can read – and preach – letters like 1 Thessalonians from the perspective of our missional identity as Christians in the whole of life and see how what Paul says shapes us and our congregations in our own walk of faith, love, and hope.



“This new resource from LICC is a great gift to us all.”

Dr Krish Kandiah, Founding Director: Home for Good, and author of *Twenty-Four: Integrating Faith and Real Life*



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licc.org.uk/preaching

Pointers for a Sermon Series

The way biblical passages are preached – the points made and the implications drawn – will bear some similarity in different contexts, but will also necessarily differ depending on the nature and situation of the congregations. The illustrations and stories told in one location won't work as well in another location. The encouragements and challenges which flow from the text in one place won't necessarily be the appropriate encouragements and challenges for a different place. This is because the best preaching is local and contextual. On any given Sunday, you are preaching from *this* biblical passage on *this* day in *this* part of the country to *this* congregation with *this* set of joys and challenges, *this* collection of issues and questions.

With that in mind, what follows is not so much a series of polished sermon outlines ready for preaching through 1 Thessalonians (as if they could be picked up and dropped into any congregational context), as a set of pointers for each section of the letter. Some relate to the passage itself, and some to possible implications of the passage for the everyday lives of the people to whom we preach.

They are offered not to close down conversation but to open it up – the kind of thoughts that might be shared over a coffee and an open Bible. What's missing are *your* responses, the ones that start, 'Yes that's great, but did you see what Paul says in that verse?', or 'Given where my people are, I think I'd need to emphasise this particular aspect of the passage', with the prospect of opening up further exploration.

Many churches coordinate their Sunday preaching programme with their small group activities during the week. It helps keep the congregation together on a biblical book or topic. It provides opportunities for teaching to be reinforced, and for the frontline implications of a biblical passage to be explored further in discussion with others. That being the case, also provided in a separate document is a set of questions for each passage for use by small groups.

Visit licc.org.uk/preaching

The outline for a six-week series through 1 Thessalonians could look like this:

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Christian Mission: Passing it On | 4. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12
Christian Holiness: Living it Out |
| 2. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16
Christian Imitation: Pleasing to God | 5. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11
Christian Hope: Waiting with Confidence |
| 3. 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13
Christian Friendship: Longing to Share | 6. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28
Christian Community: Walking with Others |

1

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Christian Mission: Passing it On

Paul, Silas, and Timothy thank God for his saving work in the Thessalonians and its impact on others.

Reflections

You might like to include something about Thessalonica as well as the founding of the church (Acts 17:1-9) to introduce the series (see further the introduction to this preaching pack). This introductory material could be wrapped into reflections on 1:1-3. Those preaching more slowly through the letter may want to start with a sermon on Acts 17 about the founding of the church and the background to the letter.

The opening section of the letter provides an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the *church* (1:1-3) and the difference the *gospel* makes to people's lives (1:4-10) within the context of God's overarching mission to bring salvation to all nations.

All change? A possible way in to the sermon would be to talk about our cynicism about the possibility of people changing (there is potential for some humour here!), and yet the offer of transformation at the heart of the Christian message.

The church at Thessalonica (1:1-3)

What picture comes to mind when we think of the church? What do we think a church should look like?

- The church is a gathered community of people (1:1). When the New Testament uses the word 'church', it never has in mind a building. In secular contexts the word could refer to any gathered assembly, such as a political body, where the primary focus is on the people who gather. The Old Testament uses the word in contexts where Israel is assembled together, which shows something of its significance in Paul picking it up to describe the community of Jews and Gentiles brought together in Christ.
- The church has its identity in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1). Because of what God has done through Christ, we have been brought into a community in which we are incorporated into Christ and related

to each other – not as a lifeless organisation but as a living organism.

- The church is marked by faith, love, and hope (1:2-3). These are not merely inner virtues, but are productive; not just taken out of the wardrobe on Sunday morning, but worn throughout the whole week. Faith, love, and hope crop up elsewhere in the letter, and come together again as a triad in 5:8.

The gospel in Thessalonica (1:4-10)

What do we understand by 'the gospel'? What difference do we expect it to make in our lives?

- Chosen: how did the gospel come? (1:4-5). Conversion begins with God, not us, and flows out of his *love* for us (1:4). Paul, Silas, and Timothy know the Thessalonians were chosen because the gospel came not just with words (essential though words are – see Acts 17:2-3), but (note the triad) with: (1) power, (2) the Holy Spirit, and (3) deep conviction – and by people who were a living example of their message (1:5).
- Changed: What effect did the gospel have? (1:6-8). Another triad: (1) they became imitators – not just of the apostles, but of the Lord (1:6); (2) they became a model (singular), suggesting this was true of the whole church (1:7); (3) they became heralds – not just with their lives, but with their lips too (1:8).
- Converted: What difference did the gospel make? (1:9-10). Another triad on the threefold difference the gospel brings about: (1) turning (the past dimension) – 'you turned to God from idols'; (2) serving (the present dimension) – they had become God's slaves; (3) waiting (the future dimension) – for the return of God's son.

1

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Christian Mission: Passing it On

Implications

- Thanksgiving permeates this opening, providing a prompt to ask how often we give thanks and what we're thankful for. What we give thanks for is an indication of what our heart longs for.
- Faith, love, and hope (1:3 – hope is mentioned last for emphasis, fitting in with one of the major themes of the letter) are not inner virtues, but get coupled with practices – work, labour, endurance. When Paul returns to faith, love, and hope in 5:8, they are part of the armour we need to engage in spiritual battle. How are these to be worked out in everyday life? What examples could we offer as an illustration?
- This passage could be preached by looking at the reputation of your church family. How do you want to be known? What are you known for? Are you happy with that? (Would Jesus be happy with that?) Paul sees the Thessalonians as a church with a great reputation that flows from all that God has done. Reputations are built by people who aren't always looking over their shoulder to see what others think; they are built by responses and actions that flow out of identity. What does this passage encourage you to pray for as a church?
- The passage provides an opportunity to reflect on how idolatry enslaves us, and the freedom that comes in turning to God. In *Counterfeit Gods* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009), Tim Keller helpfully reminds us of the distinction between *surface* idols and *deep* idols. *Surface* idols are the car we have, or the spouse we'd like, or the hobby we spend a lot of time on, or the extra money we think will make all the difference. It could be keeping the lawn trimmed, or making sure the house is always clean, or getting promoted at work, or being complimented on having such well-behaved children. Many of these are good things, even right things. The problem is that we want them *too* much, or for the wrong reasons – because behind each *surface* idol is a *deep* idol, the *real* need we're trying to meet – security, significance, approval, comfort, control. And that's what we *really* worship, that's what we really love. If we turn from the idolatry that we see around us and in us, how does following Jesus address our deepest needs and desires? What would people notice that was different about us?
- In his 'Bible Speaks Today' commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians, John Stott notes that two points stand out in this passage: (1) the church which receives the gospel must pass it on; (2) the church which passes on the gospel must embody it – two key features of Christian mission.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy spell out the pattern of their ministry among the Thessalonians, providing a model for them to emulate, and give thanks for the church's reception of the word of God in the face of persecution.

Reflections

Those going more slowly through the letter might choose to treat 2:1-12 and 2:13-16 in separate sermons. Doing so would allow for a more extended treatment of the riches to be gleaned from 2:1-12 and the difficult issues contained in 2:13-16. The passages are linked by the thanksgiving in 2:13 for the way the Thessalonians received the message brought to them and lived out for them by Paul, Silas, and Timothy. The passages are also linked by the theme of 'imitation' – which is at least implicit in 2:1-12, and explicit in 2:14. Both sections conclude with a reference to the future (2:12, 16).

In the light of 2 Thessalonians 3:9 (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:6; 11:1; Philippians 3:17), it seems clear that Paul's description of how he chose to live in Thessalonica functions as a model he hoped Christians would follow. Even in this passage, his claim that he didn't act with 'impure' motives (2:3) anticipates his call for the Thessalonians not to be 'impure' (4:7), his claim that he did not take advantage of anyone with greed (2:5) anticipates his desire that they not take advantage of each other (4:6), and his claim that he worked with his hands (2:9) anticipates his later instruction for them to do the same (4:11). Hence, whatever implications there may be from the passage for church leaders, there are extended implications for Christians more widely.

Integrity in lifestyle (2:1-12)

It's sometimes suggested that Paul is defending himself and his companions against accusations that have been brought against them. But that's not necessarily the case. In a context where the apostles were competing with other wandering teachers and philosophers (and where it would be all too easy to be cynical about motives), Paul makes it clear what they were like: both in *negative* terms ('we weren't like this') and in *positive* terms ('we were like this'). As he does so, there is an implicit call on the Thessalonians to live the same way.

- **Boldness:** helped by God (2:1-2). Their experience at Philippi might have destroyed their confidence, but they came to Thessalonica nonetheless, because they were made bold by God to preach the gospel.
- **Wholeheartedness:** approved by God (2:3-4). Note the 'for' at the start of verse 3, which explains why they felt bold in the face of opposition. Note the contrast: not like this... but like this.
- **Gentleness:** inspired by God (2:5-8). There is another 'for' at the start of verse 5 (though the NIV doesn't include it), which suggests that 2:5-6 explains what is meant by not seeking to please people but God. They didn't use flattery or greed (2:5), nor were they seeking praise (2:6). They deliberately refused to do things that might lead people to doubt the integrity of the message. The contrast comes in 2:7-8 with striking family metaphors: like young children (according to one way of reading 2:7b), and like a mother, they were gentle, caring, loving, and sharing.
- **Blamelessness:** worthy of God (2:9-12). Once again, verse 9 begins with 'for', with Paul explaining in more detail what he's just said. His claims that they were not a burden on the Thessalonians is confirmed by how they lived among them. They supported themselves by working rather than making financial demands on their converts (2:9, and Paul has more to say about this in 4:11-12), and their behaviour was beyond reproach (2:10). Paul individualises what he is saying: they behaved this way – not just as a mother, but as a father – to *everyone* in the community (2:11-12).

Endurance in persecution (2:13-16)

The suffering in view here is that which comes about through persecution. Paul encourages the Thessalonians to see that their experience of persecution was part of longer-term patterns of response to God's word, and to give them confidence that they can keep going despite their suffering,

because the persecution they experience now will result in their eventual vindication.

- Reception – of the word of God (2:13). Cf. 1:5. When we receive, accept and believe the word of God, and when it continues to work in us, that might bring hostility and persecution – even from those close to us.
- Imitation – of the churches of God (2:14). Our suffering of persecution doesn't mean something has gone wrong; it places us in solidarity with others – with the earliest churches, with Paul, with the Old Testament prophets, with Jesus himself.
- Vindication – by the judgment of God (2:15-16). Vindication is also part of the pattern. Note that the verses are not talking about all Jews in general, but those who did the things that are mentioned.

Implications

- The idea of 'imitation', so important in 1 Thessalonians, was introduced in the previous passage (1:6-7) and is now picked up here. Paul provided a living pattern when he was present with churches (1:5b; 2:10), and trained other leaders to do the same (1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:7). All such imitation follows the supreme pattern of Jesus (Philippians 2:5-11). Think about how imitation works in other spheres – cooking, gardening, art, sports. There is a challenge here about what way of life we're calling others to follow.
- Paul and the others not only taught the Thessalonian Christians a new way of life, but showed them how God works through those who are willing to do things in God's way, rejecting common wisdom about the way to get things done. What wisdom is there here for how God's people are to live in their various contexts?
- In his NIV Application Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Michael Holmes highlights four behaviours Paul wanted the Thessalonians to imitate: (1) Paul modeled a clear sense of priorities; (2) Paul modeled a clear sense of concern for the integrity of the gospel; (3) Paul modeled a clear sense of love and commitment to those to whom he ministered; (4) Paul modeled a clear sense of the goal toward which he worked. These points are applicable to life outside the church as well as inside the church.
- There is a danger in trying to be a certain church (a church like that described in the opening chapter of the letter) that we ride roughshod over one another or judge harshly. Paul's leadership suggests a way of being church together that builds a different sort of community. One important implication would be to explore how well we are helping one another to grow along the lines envisaged in the passage. It could also provide a moment to explain why some things (e.g., praying, preaching, small groups) are done in a certain way in our church communities, in order to encourage and promote a particular way of thinking and living.
- The section about persecution may not feel directly applicable to UK Christians today, although some of us may experience hostility because of our faith. And there are many places in the world where people do suffer persecution as a result of receiving the word of God. But maybe the church in the UK will suffer a period of more intense persecution, where those who profess Christ will suffer. This passage reminds us that, in such cases, nothing has gone wrong with God's plan. We are sharing in the sufferings of God's true people, of Christ himself, and – like him – we will be vindicated in God's good time.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy renew the bond of friendship with the Thessalonians, expressing their feelings of separation from them, their longing to see them, their joy at news of their lasting faith in the face of suffering, their desire to make up what's still lacking in their faith, and praying for them.

Reflections

1 Thessalonians is sometimes classified as a friendship letter, partly because of the language that's used in this passage, regularly found in letters written between friends expressing their feelings for each other and their commitment to each other. The section is marked by deep emotions on Paul's part, an expression of feelings for his friends that is almost intense. It allows us to plot something of what Christian friendship looks like as Paul describes his own relationship with the Thessalonians.

- **Concern:** attempting to visit the Thessalonians (2:17-20). Paul's use of family metaphors (see 2:7, 11) continues here with his description of being 'orphaned' from the Thessalonians, longing to visit but being prevented (we know not how) from seeing them, the fruit of his ministry.
- **Cost:** sending Timothy to the Thessalonians (3:1-5). Concern is one thing, action is something entirely different, but they followed through on their concern when they 'could stand it no longer' (a phrase found in both 3:1 and 3:5).
- **Consolation:** receiving good news from the Thessalonians (3:6-8). We can sense the sheer relief and delight when Timothy returns with good news.
- **Commitment:** praying for the Thessalonians (3:9-13). A commitment expressed in thanksgiving (3:9-10) and prayer (3:11-13).

Implications

- Satan is real. He tries to harm gospel work. We need discernment and protection.
- The significance of warning disciples about the road ahead, about the possibility of persecution, being prepared for difficult times, and teaching them to depend on God and find encouragement in a community that loves and supports each other, and hope in what is to come.
- As a case in point, there may be something here that connects to the experience of people in the workplace, where we need to be careful what we say and how we say it because of the potential consequences, which might meet with disapproval or even discipline. But the implications of Paul's words about persecution to Christians living in different circumstances is complex. It could be helpful to tease out what counts as real persecution, what amounts to the rough and tumble of living in a secular, pluralist society, and what might be self-inflicted through lack of tact or bad manners! This could provide an opportunity for some members of the congregation to share their own experience in this area.
- Timothy was to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonians – especially as Paul was afraid they might have been blown off course (3:1-5). Christian friendship acknowledges the reality of weakness, the possibility of failure, the likelihood of disappointment, and still draws alongside.
- But 3:6-8 reminds us in beautiful language about the strength and refreshment that good friendship brings, the consolation and comfort of friendship working well.

- Note the model Paul's prayer provides (3:10-13). It's rooted in thanksgiving, thanking God for each other. It's grounded in God himself, the God we know through our Lord Jesus Christ. It brings together past, present, and future, where Paul rejoices in what God has done in the *past*, asks for God to continue to work in the *present*, and prays for the present in the light of the *future* 'when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones'. It expresses concern for others, what is best for others – overflowing love (3:12), strengthened hearts (3:13a), and holy lives (3:13b). It's a prayer of Christian friendship.
- Think through the more general implications of this passage for Christian friendship. How can friendship equip us for whole-life discipleship – in the questions we ask of one another, the support we offer one another, the determination that we grow together as disciples?
- As a case in point, we need friends who can support us in our desire to be different in the face of pressure or even hostility to conform. Paul seemed to believe that his presence with the believers in Thessalonica would have enabled them to stand firm in the face of persecution. How does committed friendship in the church help counter the pressures we face? Our friendships in the body of Christ offer an opportunity to withstand the pressure of becoming like the rest of the world (the point of persecution?). This being the case, what sort of friend do we need? What sort of friend do we need to be to others?
- In his 'Bible Speaks Today' commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians, John Stott notes that two major responsibilities of pastoral ministry flow out of the previous passage (2:1-16) and this one (2:17-3:13) – our commitment to the word of God (2:2, 8, 9, 13), and our commitment to the people of God. As we have noted, beyond the implications for those in church leadership, the passages invite reflection about the sort of community we are called to be – in our commitment to God in living in a certain way, and our commitment to each other. How does being a part of this kind of community shape us as those called to take our place in God's mission in the world?
- Although the chapters to follow will deal more fully with holiness and hope, two major themes of the letter, it's worth reflecting on how a confidence in the future has been embedded in the letter so far (1:3, 10; 2:12, 16, 19; 3:13), and how what counts as 'holy' is redrawn in the sort of lifestyle described by Paul and commended to the Thessalonian Christians.

4

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 Christian Holiness: Living it Out

Paul, Silas, and Timothy instruct the Thessalonians on the life that pleases God – in sexual relationships, love for each other, and daily work.

Reflections

Here is a sermon for the scattered life. Sex and work are two fundamental aspects of life that were affected back in the garden of Eden. They define who we are as created-but-fallen men and women. So it's important to get a handle on both aspects and the specific temptations of each. But they are also areas where we can model a different way of living.

'As for other matters' (4:1) shows a new topic is being introduced – which is how to 'live' (literally 'walk'), mentioned at the start and the end of the passage (4:1, 12), marking it out as a distinct section.

- Introduction (4:1-2). The first two verses set the scene not just for this section, but for the rest of the letter, and highlight three aspects of the instruction about to unfold: (1) *they speak as brothers* (4:1a), which fits with the family imagery used elsewhere in the letter to describe the bond between them and the Thessalonians: the instruction comes from inside the family-circle; (2) *they speak with authority*, as the phrases 'in the Lord Jesus' (4:1) and 'by the authority of the Lord Jesus' (4:2) suggest; (3) *they speak with encouragement*, noting that the Thessalonians have *already* been doing these things (4:1)! But Paul, Silas and Timothy tell them to live this way even more.
- A holy lifestyle (4:3-8). Holiness (4:3, 7) is addressed in the area of sex, where the exhortations are: (1) *to avoid sexual immorality* (4:3), in a context where a wide range of sex before and outside marriage was tolerated; (2) *to control the body* (4:4-5; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20), possibly referring euphemistically to the genitals, or (less likely) to acquiring a wife; (3) *to honour others* (4:6a), which includes not exploiting others but looking out for their wellbeing; (4) *to fear God* (4:6b-8), so that we don't by our lives deny the Holy Spirit he has given us (the

language here is reminiscent of Ezekiel 36:27 and 37:6).

- A loving lifestyle (4:9-10). As seen already in the letter, a love that demonstrates itself in practical ways, which spreads out to others.
- A quiet lifestyle (4:11-12) – which is striking in its mundaneness – serving God and others in our jobs, minding our own business, getting on with our work.

Implications

- The word Paul uses to describe their lifestyle in verse 1 and verse 12 is the word for 'walk' or 'walking' (4:1, 12; cf. 2:12). 'Live' is a reasonable translation, but the image of *walking* is a helpful picture, because it carries with it ideas about making progress, a series of steps one after another, heading in a particular direction. Good walking is steady; there's a consistency to it. And that's what the Christian life should be like.
- In a context where anything went, the preaching of the gospel involved teaching its implications for sexual conduct. In a context where some members of the church may have been sponging off other members, or getting involved in patron-client relationships, whereby someone of a lower status would attach themselves to a person of higher status in order to benefit from that connection, the preaching of the gospel involved teaching its implications for working life.
- For us as for the Thessalonians, we are called to live faithfully not just in the home or at church, but also in the public sphere of work, among our colleagues, employees, managers, associates, clients, and so on. Now as then, the sheer amount of time we spend at work means we're more likely to witness to others by *how we work* as much as by what we say at work. Now as

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1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 Christian Holiness: Living it Out

then, holiness does not involve withdrawing from the world of work so much as participating in that world in a new and different way. According to this passage, it's a way which flows out of seeking to live a life that pleases God, within the context of love for fellow believers, and a missional concern for the wider world.

- Two important threads run through the whole passage – a 'love for God' element and a 'love for neighbour' element. The authors lay down the instructions they gave the Thessalonians 'in order to please God' (4:1-2), instructions which reflect 'God's will' (4:3), which were 'taught by God' (4:9). All told, eight times in all, God or Jesus is said to be the ground of these exhortations. But the instructions also shape relationships within and outside the Christian community. They are told not to

'wrong or take advantage' of each other (4:6), 'to love each other' (4:9), and to live and work in such a way 'to win the respect of outsiders' (4:12). Whether in our sexual relationships or our working lives, love of God and love of neighbour – like two hedges on either side of a dimly-lit road – provide the safest and best possible principles for navigating our Christian walk and witness to others.

- Work and sex are topics (along with money) that we tend to keep out of friendships (unless it's whingeing about work!). How can we be more accountable to one another in these areas of our lives? What are the particular temptations that we're likely to face? How do we live a holy life in these arenas?

'holiness does not involve withdrawing from the world of work so much as participating in that world in a new and different way'

5

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

Christian Hope: Waiting with Confidence

Paul, Silas, and Timothy respond to questions that have been raised about the coming of Christ, assuring the Thessalonians that Christ's resurrection guarantees the resurrection of believers who have died before his return, and calling them to live as children of the light in alert anticipation of the unknown day when Christ will come again.

Reflections

This is not a brand new topic – see 1:3; 1:9-10; 2:12, 16, 19; 3:12-13; 5:23-24 (in fact, most sections of the letter end with a reference to future hope).

The passage divides into two main parts – 4:13-18 and 5:1-11. Each one starts in a similar way, with an address ('brothers and sisters') and the word 'about', which introduces the topic in each case. So, 4:13-18 is 'about those who sleep in death' (4:13), and 5:1-11 is 'about times and dates' (5:1). The two sections also end in a similar way – 4:18 and 5:11 – with a call to encourage each other.

The rich metaphors and the allusive language used to describe the return of Jesus can be confusing. A loud command, the archangel's call, the sound of the trumpet, Jesus coming in the clouds from heaven – all these word pictures are, in a sense, attempting to describe the unimaginable. They highlight the importance of humility when it comes to trying to describe exactly what will happen and when.

- About death: be reassured (4:13-18). It may well be that some of the Thessalonian Christians had died (or even suffered martyrdom), and they were wondering whether they would miss out on Jesus' second coming. The writers assure them that both those who 'sleep' (4:13-14) and those who survive (4:15-17) will all be present. They use the language of a royal visit with a welcome party. In the world of Paul and the Thessalonians, when a VIP was visiting a city, a welcome party would be sent out to meet them, and then together they would all return with joy to the city. That's the image here, which implies that once the reunion has taken place 'in the air', all will come back to the earth.

- About dates: be ready (5:1-11). Meanwhile, while life continues, the Thessalonians are to live in readiness for the Lord in case he comes in their lifetime. They are to be awake (5:4-5), alert (5:6-7), armed (5:8), and assured (5:9-10). As in 4:14, so in 5:9-10, we can have this hope because of what Christ has done on our behalf.

Implications

- This is a great passage to preach about death and hope. We normally only address these issues at funerals – where people are often least able to take it all in.
- Note the need (a perennial need?) throughout the passage to introduce new converts to a proper hope and expectation about the future and how it shapes our lives here and now.
- Greek views of death varied widely, as views do today, but they were mostly characterised as being without hope. The Christian message of hope speaks directly into this context. Death remains painful. But Christians now, as then, need not grieve as others do when fellow Christians die.
- The Thessalonians were concerned whether some of their number had died in vain before the return of Jesus. We might not have that same concern, but we might go through times when we ask whether it has all been worth it. Paul's reiteration of the Christian hope was about more than comfort; it would give them a sense of resilience and purpose. Holding on to the end of the story is hugely significant if we are to keep running the race.
- The gospel doesn't promise release from the body but transformation of it – *then*, and in the way we live *now*.

5

1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

Christian Hope: Waiting with Confidence

- Living in the light of Christ's return does not mean some mystical experience or retreat from daily existence. It's shown in the concrete, everyday actions that the writers have already described in the letter.
- There are some hints about what the opposite of vigilance looks like – sleepiness (distraction from things that matter), drunkenness (not merely too much alcohol, but insensitivity towards God), reliance on government or military for peace and security, and (from the previous passage) a poor sex ethic and a poor work ethic.
- If the appearing of Jesus as Lord is central, how does that change our reaction to political situations, or environmental concerns, or personal struggles? How do we live this out without appearing to be blasé or stupid or smug? How can we be a hope-filled people in society today? The passage encourages us to reflect on how we can we demonstrate a different attitude to weakness, aging, and death. There may be possibilities here to involve members of the congregation who have a perspective on such matters (older people, nurses, undertakers).
- Paul looks *back* at what has gone before in the story of redemption – 'We believe that Jesus died and rose again' – and looks *forward* to what is to come – 'and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him'. One day Jesus will be personally present, Lord of the nations, king and judge, in a transformed and recreated earth and heaven, the culmination of God's purposes for his people and his world. Meanwhile, although God himself will bring about the new creation, we do all we can to be 'signposts' pointing to the restoration that Jesus began on the cross and will one day complete.

'Living in the light of Christ's return does not mean some mystical experience or retreat from daily existence. It's shown in the concrete, everyday actions that the writers have already described in the letter.'

Paul, Silas, and Timothy seek to nurture congregational life and worship in a way that reflects the Thessalonians' identity as brothers and sisters, in their relationships with their leaders and each other, and in their meetings – where the ultimate goal is to be found holy together at Christ's coming.

Reflections

The view of the church that emerges most strongly from this letter is that the church is the *family* of God. The language of family is used all the way through, with the writers regularly addressing the Christians as 'brothers and sisters' of each other (five times in this passage alone – 5:12, 14, 25, 26 [NIV translates with 'God's people'], 27). They have been called to love one another (4:9-10), and to build one another up (4:18; 5:11), an encouragement which now takes on some specifics.

The passage opens up what a Christian community looks like – in our relationships to leaders, to each other, and to God. It provides an important reminder that the Christian life is not meant to be a solitary life, but a shared life. We're not on our own, but in it together. That's the way it is in God's design: we can't be the church by ourselves; we need each other; we belong to each other – being together, worshipping together, learning together, witnessing together.

- A led community (5:12-13). A Christian community will respect its leaders – described here not just as a *position* of leadership, but as *people* with certain qualities – 'those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you' (5:12).
- A caring community (5:14-15). It's not just the leaders who care for the Christian community but the rest of us who are to care for one another. Pastoral care is not provided by the 'professionals' but by the people. Paul, Silas, and Timothy get specific – about the idle, the timid, the weak – and specific about the way we go about our relationships with each other.
- A worshipping community (5:16-22) – rejoicing ceaselessly (5:16), praying continually (5:17), thanking constantly (5:18), and listening wisely – (5:19-22). It's not always easy to know what the New Testament means when it speaks of 'prophecy', but we can be fairly clear that it was intended to build up the Christian community and that it was to be tested – holding on to the good, avoiding the evil.

- A holy community (5:23-24). A prayer for the Thessalonians which is reminiscent of 3:11-13, and brings together the main themes in the letter.

Even in the closing verses, we learn things about the nature of the Christian community. We're to be a *praying* community (5:25), a *loving* community (5:26, where a kiss was a mark of family unity), and a *listening* community, gathered around the word of God (5:27). Finally, we're a community which is founded on and nurtured by grace: 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you' (5:28).

Implications

- The radical significance of the church as a family, where everyone is welcomed as an essential part of the whole – rich, poor, old, young, single adults, divorced – with every single member of the church involved in its life and worship. How do we treat the children in our church? The elderly? The single? How do we welcome outsiders?
- For many of us, family provides our most significant network of relationships. As the family of God, how can the church demonstrate a richer value of family than our nuclear or even extended family?
- The passage highlights the need to care for each other in different ways at different times which sometimes may involve warning, sometimes encouraging, sometimes helping, but always and for everyone patience (5:14).
- We don't always manage to look after one another this way, and we have to acknowledge that too. There'll be faults, failings, misunderstandings. Occasionally there'll be gossip, some angry words will be exchanged, some bad words will be spoken, some promises will be broken, and there could even be a build up of resentment. What are we to do? Verse 15 tells us – no retaliation; no attempts at personal revenge; no replaying of arguments in our head where we're always the winner because the other person can't answer back.

6

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Christian Community: Walking with Others

- The significance of what's included in gatherings – rejoicing, prayer, thankfulness, opportunities to hear from God with the necessity of exercising discernment together.
- How can we ensure we stay together for the long term rather than get tired of making things work and then split away from each other or resent each other? Here's a passage which helps us get to grips with how we become – together – a community which is able to demonstrate a different way of life.
- It's encouraging that Paul closes his letter with a prayer. We can't simply muster up the effort to live the kind of life Paul describes, to be this kind of Christian community. We need God to break into our hearts and lives, to set us apart, to make us holy. We might trust that God *can* do it. But *will* he do it? Paul tells us in verse 24: 'The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.'

'We can't simply muster up the effort to live the kind of life Paul describes... We need God to break into our hearts and lives, to set us apart, to make us holy.'

Further Reading on 1 Thessalonians

The following list offers some further reading on 1 Thessalonians, written at different levels.

Exegetical Commentaries on 1 Thessalonians

These are all on a spectrum between ones at the technical-scholarly end and ones at the easier-to-get-along-with end. Some of them include helpful reflections on the implications of the letter for today, but they're mostly concerned with opening up the meaning of the text in its original context.

G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series

(Downers Grove: IVP, 2003).

John Byron, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, The Story of God Bible Commentary

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary

(Leicester: Apollos, 2002).

Nijay K. Gupta, *1-2 Thessalonians*, New Covenant Commentary Series

(Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016).

Andy Johnson, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

Terence Paige, *1 & 2 Thessalonians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary

(Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2017).

Gary S. Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

Devotional Commentaries on 1 Thessalonians

The commentaries and books listed here are more 'devotional' or 'applied' in their emphasis, seeking not only to explain the text of the letter, but also to draw out aspects of its significance for the Christian and the church today. If you're using commentaries from the previous section, you might consider supplementing it with one or two from this section.

James H. Grant, Jr., *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of Salvation, Preaching the Word*

(Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

Michael W. Holmes, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, The NIV Application Commentary

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

Daniel R. Hyde, *From the Pen of Pastor Paul: 1-2 Thessalonians*

(Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2015).

David Jackman, *The Authentic Church: A Study of the Letters to the Thessalonians*

(Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998).

Angus MacLeay, *Teaching 1 & 2 Thessalonians, From Text to Message*

(Fearn: Christian Focus, 2014).

Alec Motyer and Steve Motyer, *Discovering 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Crossway Bible Guides

(Leicester: Crossway Books, 1999).

Richard D. Phillips, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Reformed Expository Commentary

(Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2015).

John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians: Preparing for the Coming King*, The Bible Speaks Today

(Leicester: IVP, 1991).

Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*, The New Testament for Everyone

(London: SPCK, 2002).



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