

LifeChange

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing
encounter with God's Word*

1 THESSALONIANS

*What it means to live as a Christian
in the face of an uncertain world.*

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NAVPRESS 

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1 Thessalonians

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book.
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides.
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible.
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole.
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take sixty to ninety minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: (a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and (b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and details

The study begins with an overview of 1 Thessalonians. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lesson 1, you will lay the foundation for your study of 1 Thessalonians by asking yourself, *Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?*

In lessons 2 through 11, you will analyze successive passages of 1 Thessalonians in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you to see its purpose. Its purpose will help you to see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

Later in lesson 11, you will review 1 Thessalonians, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

Kinds of questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do You want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Study aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 105. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Another version cited is the King James Version (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as *The Living Bible* is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For group study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen’s studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some

for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called "For the group." These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each "For the group" at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Pages 107–108 list some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

Introduction

Paul and Thessalonica

Map of the Roman Empire



The poet Antipater called Thessalonica the “mother of all Macedon.”¹ Strabo, the Greek geographer of the Augustan Age, described it as Macedonia’s most populous town and the metropolis of the entire province.² Indeed, with a population of over 200,000, Thessalonica was widely considered a city to be reckoned with . . . economically, politically, and militarily.

When the apostle Paul traveled throughout Macedonia on his second missionary tour, he encountered a land of high mountains, broad rivers, and fertile valleys. This area of the world boasted rich farm land and timber, and was well known for its extensive deposits of silver and gold.

Thessalonica had flourished for hundreds of years, largely because of its ideal location on the banks of the Thermaic Gulf near the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea. It was one of the main sea ports in the provinces of Greece and Asia, and was accordingly considered a leading shipping and naval center. Thessalonica enjoyed another advantage. The Egnatian Way,

the main Roman road from Rome to the Orient via Byzantium (modern Istanbul), passed right through the city. These factors put Thessalonica in direct contact with many other important cities by both land and sea. It is no wonder that this thriving metropolis achieved commercial dominance throughout this part of the world.

A famous woman immortalized

The historical roots of Thessalonica go back to 315 BC when Cassander built it near the site of an ancient city called Therma (named for the hot springs in the area). He chose this location because of its ideal proximity to other cities. After laying the foundation of the new city, he affectionately named it after his wife, Thanica, who was a half sister of Alexander the Great. Cassander was a Greek general under Alexander.

Many years later (around 168 BC), the Romans conquered the area and divided Macedonia into four districts. They named Thessalonica the capital of the second district. Still later, when the Romans made Macedonia a province in 146 BC, Thessalonica became the seat of provincial administration. Then in 42 BC, Thessalonica received the status of a free city from Anthony and Octavian (later called Caesar Augustus) because the Thessalonians had helped them defeat their adversaries, Brutus and Cassius. From this time forward, the Thessalonians were given the privilege of ruling themselves. They did this by means of five or six “politarchs” (city rulers), a senate, and a public assembly.

Paul: a transformed missionary

Paul was a missionary for much of his life, both before and after his conversion to Christianity. He was a Jew by birth, but his education was far from what a normal Jew would have received. His learning encompassed not only the Pharisaic approach to the Jewish Law but also the Greek disciplines of rhetoric and classical literature. As a Pharisee, he believed that God had set him apart to study and live by the *Torah* (the Law of Moses), and like a good Pharisee, he expected a Man to arise who would liberate Israel from the grip of Roman domination. Accordingly, when some Jews began saying that Jesus (who obviously hadn't overthrown Rome) was this predicted Messiah, he stood against them with a vengeance!

In a sense, Saul (Paul's Jewish name) became a zealous anti-Christian missionary. His first appearance in the New Testament is that of a persecutor of the church of Jesus Christ. He officiated at the stoning of Stephen; he imprisoned every Christian he could get his hands on in Jerusalem, and he even made “missionary trips” to areas outside of Palestine to bring back believers in Christ who had fled for safety (see Acts 7:58–8:3; 9:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Philippians 3:6). His mission was to stop the spread of Christianity.

It was on such a trip to Damascus that Saul had a blinding encounter with Jesus Christ. This event, which took place around AD 35, led him to turn from Pharisaism to a devoted obedience to the living and resurrected Christ. He ended up joining those he had been persecuting! Formerly he was

a missionary against the church of Christ. Now he became a missionary par excellence for the cause of Christ.

After his conversion to Christianity, Paul engaged in three great missionary tours. His second missionary tour took place around AD 49 (about fourteen years after his conversion) and brought him to several important cities, including Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus.

Paul visits Thessalonica

Upon arriving in Thessalonica, Paul at once set himself to his usual activities of soul-winning and earning a livelihood. He found a friend in a certain Jason, who was apparently one of Paul's earliest converts in the city. Jason provided his home as a base of operations for Paul and his missionary companions. Once settled, Paul probably went to work immediately making tents to earn money as he had done in other cities, for later in his letters to the Thessalonians he reminded them that he had worked "night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you" (1 Thessalonians 2:9; see 2 Thessalonians 3:8).

When the time came to preach the gospel, Paul followed his normal custom of first going to the local Jewish synagogue, where he knew he would find people who held a great deal in common with him: a mutual respect for the Old Testament, theological concepts, and cultural practices. In his thinking, this was where he stood the greatest chance for success.

As a trained teacher, Paul was allowed to speak in the synagogue. According to Luke, his main message to the Thessalonians consisted of two points: (1) the Old Testament taught a suffering, dying, and resurrected Messiah, and (2) these predictions were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (see Acts 1:7).

Paul's mission met with immediate success, and many believed, both Jews and Greeks. First Thessalonians 1:9 indicates that many of his Greek converts were former idol-worshippers. Most people in the ancient world worshiped natural forces and human drives, conceived of as gods who could be portrayed in wood, stone, or metal. Sexuality was a strong feature of pagan worship, and Paul found it necessary to address this very issue in 4:1-8. The pursuit of religious ecstasy through sex was a hard habit to break.

The core of this young church was no doubt made up of "God-fearers," a Jewish term for Greeks who attached themselves in varying degrees to the Jewish worship and way of life without as yet becoming full converts. To become a full convert involved circumcision for males, but Greeks viewed this rite as a repugnant mutilation of the body. Paul's message included all of the attractive elements of Judaism without the unattractive ones.

These God-fearers were openly dissatisfied with pagan morality and were already drawn to Jewish ethical teaching. They were also impressed by Jewish monotheism. Yet in spite of their attraction to Judaism, they disliked its narrow nationalism and ritual requirements. Christianity did away with these objections, and provided a loftier concept of God as well as a nobler ethic centered in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul's Christ welcomed all races, in contrast to Jewish exclusivism. This group of Greeks provided Paul with fertile soil on which to plant the seeds of the gospel in this Thessalonian synagogue.

Persecution begins

Because many were converting from Judaism to Christianity, the Jewish leaders saw Paul's message as a serious threat. They hired troublemakers to spread false accusations about him and his associates. A mob ended up storming Jason's house. But failing to find the missionaries, the mob dragged Jason before the politarchs. Jason was charged with harboring treasonous revolutionaries. These revolutionaries were supposedly teaching the people to disobey Roman law and to follow a king other than Caesar.

The politarchs saw through the motives of these Jewish zealots and required only that Jason guarantee that the missionaries would not disturb the city's peace any longer. Paul and his friends chose to leave Thessalonica to avoid further trouble.

Paul's first letter to Thessalonica

Upon leaving Thessalonica, Paul, Silas, and Timothy proceeded about forty miles west along the Egnatian Way to Berea. They ministered in this area for a short time until some of the hostile Thessalonian Jews tracked them down and incited the Berean Jews to expel them from their city.

Paul accordingly headed for Athens while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea. After arriving in Athens, he immediately sent a message back to his companions in Berea asking them to join him, which they did (see Acts 17:10-15; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5).

When they met up again, Paul was so concerned about the Thessalonian converts that he decided to send Timothy back to Thessalonica in order to check on their welfare. The circumstances of his hasty departure had meant his new converts would be exposed to persecution for which they were scarcely prepared. Paul simply had not had sufficient time to give them all the basic teaching he thought they required.

After revisiting Thessalonica, Timothy rejoined Paul at his next stop, Corinth, with encouraging news (see Acts 18:1,5; 1 Thessalonians 3:6-7). In spite of heavy persecution, the Thessalonians were standing strong in their new faith. But Timothy's report also indicated that they were experiencing some problems for which they needed instruction from Paul. They sent questions back to Paul via Timothy, and Paul responded by writing a letter to them from Corinth. The letter is simply addressed to "the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

1. Jacobs, *Anthology Graecae*, vol. 2, no. 14, page 98, quoted in Merrill F. Unger, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), 226.
2. Strabo, vol. 7, paragraphs 323 and 330. Compare Harold R. Willoughby, "Archaeology and Christian Beginnings," *Biblical Archaeology*, vol. 3 (September 1939): 32-33, quoted in Unger, 226.

Overview and 1 Thessalonians 1:1

To the Church

Before getting immersed in the details of Paul's words to the Thessalonians, take an overview of the whole letter. Get a feel for the "big picture." Potentially confusing verses will be clearer later if you can see how they fit into Paul's overall frame of thought. The best preparation for understanding 1 Thessalonians is to read it several times in one sitting. Start by reading it once silently and then again aloud. Get a general impression of what Paul wants to accomplish.

First impressions

1. Would you say that this letter is more practical than doctrinal, or vice versa?

2. Did you notice many personal references as you went through the letter? If so, what does this tell you about the nature of the letter?

3. a. Describe the mood of the letter. Is Paul exhorting, comforting, describing, giving direction, persuading, warning?

b. Are there any mood changes in the letter? If so, where?

4. a. Repetition is a clue to the ideas and concepts a writer considers most important to his message. What words or concepts occur over and over again in this letter?

b. What hints does this give you as to the main focus of Paul's argument?

Broad outline

5. Reread the entire letter, preferably using a different translation than the one you've been using. This time, describe each main section of the

letter with a short sentence. Or—as an option—choose a title to describe each main section.

1:1 _____

1:2-10 _____

2:1-16 _____

2:17-3:5 _____

3:6-13 _____

4:1-12 _____

4:13-18 _____

5:1-11 _____

5:12-15 _____

5:16-24 _____

5:25-28 _____

Theme/purpose

6. What does the content of 1 Thessalonians suggest Paul wanted to accomplish with his readers?

7. Test your ability to refine by stating the main message or theme of 1 Thessalonians in one sentence.

8. What are some of the different subjects Paul discusses in supporting his main theme?

9. If you have not already done so, read the historical background in this guide. Is there any information that seems particularly helpful to you in understanding Paul's letter to the Thessalonians? Please explain briefly.

10. Based on what you have discovered so far, assign a title to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians.

Study Skill—Bible Study Aids

If you would like to study the background of 1 Thessalonians in greater detail, consult one of the sources listed in Study Aids. These and similar commentaries will also be quite helpful if you decide to study another book of the Bible on your own.

Greetings

Grace and peace (1:1). Among the early Greeks, *grace* was a common salutation and greeting. The word *peace* served the same purpose for the Jews. Paul thus combines Greek and Hebrew

salutations and attaches theological significance to them. In Paul's theology, grace signified God's unmerited favor toward humans.

For Thought and Discussion: What does the small word "in" (1:1) suggest to you about the Thessalonians' spiritual standing before God?

11. a. The letter begins, "Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians . . ." (1:1). What indications do you see in 2:18; 3:5; and 5:27 that Paul actually wrote (or dictated) the letter?

- b. If Paul was the author, why do you think he began the letter the way he did?

12. Consider the order in which Paul uses the terms *grace* and *peace*. How is one the foundation of the other?

13. Is there any part of this lesson that specifically touches upon an area of your life and moves you to respond in some way? If so, write down your insight here, along with how you want to respond.

14. In your initial readings of 1 Thessalonians, you may have come across difficult concepts that you would like clarified or questions you would like answered as you go deeper into this study. While your thoughts are still fresh, you may want to jot down your questions here to serve as a “personal objective log” for your investigation of this letter.

For the group

Unless you have already become acquainted with other members in your group, you might want to spend some time in your next few meetings establishing trust, common ground, and a sense of where each person is coming from. This should enable you to be more frank when discussing how 1 Thessalonians personally applies to you later on. At this first meeting, share something of your past with the group—for example, what you remember about first becoming a Christian. Or you might want to discuss your responses to question 13. This will help to show each other how you see yourselves. It might also be helpful to talk about what each of your personal goals are in regard to what you want to get out of this study of 1 Thessalonians.

Compare your sentence summaries (in question 5) with those in the following chart. There is no single correct answer, so discuss why you prefer one sentence summary to another. Any group members who felt successful with question 7 may

want to share with the rest of the group how they went about summarizing main themes.

Chart of First Thessalonians: Paul's Purpose

Paul writes to answer certain ethical, doctrinal, and practical questions the Thessalonians have, as well as to commend their faith, exhort young converts, and answer false charges made against him by unbelieving Jews.

- | | |
|----------|---|
| 1:1 | Paul greets the saints in Thessalonica. |
| 1:2-10 | Paul gives thanks for the faith of the Thessalonians. |
| 2:1-16 | Paul defends his ministry in Thessalonica. |
| 2:17-3:5 | Paul expresses his desire to see the Thessalonians. |
| 3:6-13 | Paul is happy about Timothy's encouraging report. |
| 4:1-12 | Paul urges the Thessalonians to live to please God. |
| 4:13-18 | Paul instructs them about the coming of the Lord. |
| 5:1-11 | Paul urges them to be ready for the coming of the Lord. |
| 5:12-15 | Paul gives instructions about life in the church. |
| 5:16-24 | Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to holy living. |
| 5:25-28 | Paul closes. |