

FIRST AND SECOND

THESSALONIANS

Living in Light of Christ's Return

L E A D E R G U I D E

THE CHURCH

BIG IDEA: The church is God's called out community in the world.

DATE: Wednesday, September 30 and Sunday, October 4, 2026

SCRIPTURE: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 (CSB)

OPENING QUESTION

Did you grow up in church? If so, what was it like? Was it an important part of your week? What do you remember about it? What are you thankful for about your home church?

SETTING THE STAGE

Two of Paul's earliest letters are 1 and 2 Thessalonians. These two letters were written to real people who were experiencing real problems in a world that was not friendly to their Christian faith. You and I can easily identify with these people, because we live in a similar world. Once you understand the background, the burden, and the blessing of these two letters, you will see how relevant they are.

The two major themes in 1 and 2 Thessalonians are the return of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the local church. First Thessalonians is a letter from a spiritual father to his children. Paul pictured the church as a family, and he reminded the Thessalonians of what God did for them through his ministry. The second letter was written to correct certain wrong ideas – and wrong practices – relating to the doctrine of the Lord's return. In these two letters, Paul balances the prophetic and the practical. He insists that the doctrine of the return of Jesus Christ be more than a doctrine – that it be a dynamic in our lives and in the ministry of our churches.

Paul did not write these letters to stir up a debate. His desire was that these letters bless our lives and our churches. The doctrine of the Lord's return is not a toy to play with or a weapon to fight with, but a tool to build with. Believers may disagree on some of the fine points of Bible prophecy, but we all believe that Jesus Christ is coming again to reward believers and judge the lost. And we must all live in light of His coming. Your study of these letters should give you assurance for the future, encouragement in witnessing and walking with the Lord, comfort in the loss of Christian loved ones, and stability in a world that is very unsure of itself.

SCRIPTURE READING

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10 (CSB)

We always thank God for all of you, making mention of you constantly in our prayers. ³We recall, in the presence of our God and Father, your work produced by faith, your labor motivated by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with full assurance. You know how we lived among you for your benefit, ⁶and you yourselves became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with joy from the Holy Spirit. ⁷As a result, you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place that your faith in God has gone out. Therefore, we don't need to say anything, ⁹for they themselves report what kind of reception we had from you: how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

DISCUSSION

READ: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Paul opens his letter with thankfulness. What does it look like today for a pastor to be thankful for a church? What are some reasons to be thankful? How does thankfulness translate into a stronger church?

From the Commentary:

The word church in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 means “a called-out people.” Whenever you read about a call in the Bible, it indicates divine election – God is calling out a people from this world. Seven times in John 17, our Lord referred to believers as those whom the Father gave to Him out of the world. Paul stated that he knew the Thessalonians had been chosen by God.

What does it mean, in practical terms, to be a “called-out people”?

How do you know if a church is serving God or itself? What kinds of letters might Paul write to the churches in America today?

From the Commentary:

From the very inception of this church, Paul looked to them with joy and gratitude as Christians worthy of the name. They were examples in several areas of their lives.

They received the Word (v. 5). The gospel came to them through the ministry of Paul and his associates. Many traveling preachers and philosophers in that day were only interested in making money from ignorant people. But the Holy Spirit used the Word in great power, and the Thessalonians responded by receiving both the message and the messengers. In spite of the persecution in Philippi, Paul and Silas had been “bold...to speak...the gospel” (1 Thess. 2:2), and the people believed and were saved. They never lost that eagerness for the Word of God.

They followed their spiritual leaders (v. 6a). The word *followers* is actually *imitators*. These new believers not only accepted the message and the messengers, but they also imitated their lives. This led to severe persecution. It is important that young Christians respect spiritual leadership and learn from mature believers. Just as a newborn baby needs a family, so a newborn Christian needs

the local church and the leaders there. "Obey them that have the [spiritual] rule over you and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls (Heb. 13:17). It is not enough for us as mature believers to *win* souls; we must also *watch* for souls and encourage new Christians to *obey* God's Word.

They suffered for Christ (v. 6b). In turning from idols to serve God, these believers angered their friends and relatives, and this led to persecution. No doubt some of them lost their jobs because of their new faith. Just as the Jewish unbelievers persecuted the believers in Judea, so the Gentile unbelievers persecuted the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

READ: 1 Thessalonians 1:5-7

We often speak in terms of "finding God," but the reality is that God came looking for us and is always seeking us. What does that teach us about God's attitude toward us?

How does the fact that God "chose" you as His child affect your view of your relationship to Him?

What kinds of persecution did the church face? Why is faith always tested? What does that testing bring? How has *your* faith been tested? What did that testing bring?

ASK: What are some of the ways today's church is persecuted? How can we grow strong in response to that persecution?

From the Commentary: Their "work of faith and labor of love" expressed itself in their sharing the gospel with others. They were both receivers (the Word came to them) and transmitters (the Word went out from them). Each believer and each local church must receive and transmit God's Word.

The verb "sounded out" actually means "to sound as a trumpet." But the Thessalonians were not "tooting their own horns" as the Pharisees did. They were trumpeting forth the good news of salvation, and their message had a clear and certain sound to it. Wherever Paul went, the people told him about the faith of the Thessalonian believers.

It is the responsibility and privilege of each local church to share the message of salvation with the lost world. At the end of each of the four gospels and at the beginning of the book of Acts, there are commissions for the churches to obey.

ASK: What contemporary concerns and culture issues make it difficult for today's church to look like the church in Paul's day?

A recent survey of church growth indicated that 70 to 80% of a church's growth is the result of friends witnessing to friends and relatives witnessing to relatives. While other methods can bring fruit, the personal contact brings the harvest.

When is the last time you shared your faith with a friend or relative? When is the last time you personally invited someone to church?

From the Commentary: Their *work of faith* made them a chosen people, for they turned to God from their idols and trusted Jesus Christ. Their *labor of love* made them an exemplary and enthusiastic people as they lived the Word of God and shared the gospel. Their *patience of hope* made them an expectant people, looking for their Savior's return.

In these verses, Paul related the second coming of Christ to their salvation. Because they had trusted Christ, they looked for His return with joyful expectancy and knew that they would be delivered "from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:10). Paul repeated this truth in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10, and he amplified it again in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10.

READ: 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

What is the ultimate result of worshipping idols? Where is hope for those who worship idols? What kind of hope did the Thessalonians find when they trusted “the living God”?

From the Commentary: The word translated “wait” in 1 Thessalonians 1:10 means “to await someone with patience and confidence, expectantly.” Waiting involves activity and endurance. Some of the Thessalonian believers quit their work and became idle busybodies, arguing that the Lord was coming soon. But if we really believe the Lord is coming, we will prove our faith by keeping busy and obeying His Word. Our Lord’s parable of the talents teaches that we must “occupy” (be busy; in this case, invest the money) till He returns.

Christians are waiting for Jesus Christ, and He may return at any time. We are not waiting for any “signs”; we are waiting for the Savior. We are waiting for the redemption of the body and the hope of righteousness. When Jesus Christ returns we shall receive new bodies and we shall be like Him. He will take us to the home He has prepared, and He will reward us for the service we have been given in His name. A local church that truly lives in the expectation of seeing Jesus Christ at any time will be a vibrant and victorious group of people.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION TIME (15 MINUTES): Have your group discuss these questions around their table or have them group up with 4-5 people:

- What do you picture when you hear “the second coming of Christ?” What did you learn about this growing up? Does it evoke fear, excitement or worry? Why is that? When is the last time you thought about Christ’s return?
- Why might some of the church members have been tempted to stop working in anticipation of Jesus’ return? What’s the difference between being anxious about Jesus’ return and living expectantly?
- What do you imagine to be God’s attitude when we discuss Jesus’ return to the point of disagreeing over the exact order of events involved?
- What are some ways you are living expectantly? Do you ever become frustrated with Jesus’ timing? What prompts those moments? How can waiting actually help your faith grow? What are some of the things that make waiting for Jesus’ return difficult?

GATHER THE GROUP BACK TOGETHER: Ask for some responses from the questions discussed.

GOING FORWARD

What every church should be is what every Christian should be: *evangelized* (born again), *exemplary* (imitating the right people), *enthusiastic* (sharing the gospel with others), and *expectant* (daily looking for Jesus Christ to return). Take an inventory of your life looking at these four elements. Going forward, where is God calling you to make a change?

Wiersbe, Warren. *Be Ready: Living in Light of Christ’s Return*. David C. Cook, ©1979

Wiersbe, Warren. *The Wiersbe Bible Study Series: Living in Light of Christ’s Return*. David C. Cook, ©2014

COMMENTARY

Near the middle of the 1st century ad, Paul wrote a pair of letters to a recently established congregation of Christians in the town of Thessalonica. The people to whom he addressed the two letters we now call 1 and 2 Thessalonians were for the most part new converts to Christianity who had grown up in, and hence were thoroughly socialized in, a Greek cultural environment.

One of Paul's major challenges was that of *resocialization* - helping these believers to learn, understand, and live by the very different social and ethical code of early Christianity.

What made this task particularly challenging was that these people were also facing intense persecution from the surrounding culture. As a result of their commitment to Jesus, they were experiencing social ostracism and isolation as well as physical attacks from society around them. As if this were not enough, Paul's task was further complicated by a high degree of apprehension, misunderstanding, and speculation about the return of Jesus. The Thessalonians knew that Jesus was to return, but they were not sure when it might take place or what it meant for them. Not knowing what to think, they had become upset rather than hopeful, unsettled rather than strengthened, by the prospect of Jesus return.

The City of Thessalonica

Thessalonica was the largest and most important city in Macedonia. As the capital of the province it enjoyed numerous civic and commercial privileges, including the right to mint its own coins. In 42 BC it became a free city, governed by its own local rulers, a group of five or six men known as "politarchs." It was situated some 90 miles west of Philippi on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway that connected Rome with its eastern provinces, next to a good natural harbor at the head of the Thermaic Gulf. Major north-south trade routes also passed through Thessalonica, further enhancing its position as a wealthy commercial center.

Religiously, Thessalonica offered something for nearly everyone. Not surprisingly for a Greek city, the traditional Greek cults and philosophic traditions were well represented, as were various mystery religions. Known for its early devotion to the cult of the Roman emperor, the city even minted coins declaring Caesar to be divine. It also boasted a sanctuary of the Egyptian gods, among whom Isis and Osiris were prominent. In contrast to Philippi, there was in Thessalonica a Jewish community large enough to support a synagogue. There is also archaeological evidence of local devotion to the "highest god" and local cults such as that of Cabirus, which during the first century A.D. was becoming the chief cult of the city. Finally, running through all this is a substantial tendency towards syncretism, a mixing of religious traditions.

Key elements of this religious activity were closely associated with civic and political concerns. In the ancient world religion was always closely linked to politics because dominant social groups realized that religion offered an effective means to legitimize and maintain their power and dominance. In Thessalonica city leaders fostered devotion to the imperial cult in order to solidify good relations with Rome. As a consequence, any perceived attack on the cult of the emperor was viewed as a serious threat to the city's economic and political well-being. The local cult of Cabirus was sponsored by the city's wealthy ruling aristocracy, not only because it reinforced to their advantage the hierarchical nature of Greco-Roman society but also because it gave to all citizens a shared sense of identity and unity. Thus to attack the cult dash by proclaiming the exclusive claims of another deity, for example - was virtually to attack the city itself. In such an environment, to preach Christianity was tantamount to treason.

Christianity Comes to Thessalonica

In A.D. 49, not long after Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Philippi, where they had "suffered and been assaulted", they came to Thessalonica. There they stopped, probably because of the presence of a sizable Jewish community and its synagogue. For the next three Sabbaths Paul in particular shared the Christian message in the synagogue, seeking to prove from the scriptures that Jesus was the predicted Messiah, who had died and risen from the dead on their behalf. The apostle was

successful in persuading “some of the Jews”, as well as a large number of “God fearing Greeks” and “not a few prominent women.”

While these converts from the synagogue apparently formed the nucleus of the new congregation, a substantially larger number of converts came to faith directly from paganism as they “turned to God from idols.” The workshop that Paul set up in order to support himself, in which he worked, as he put it, “night and day”, would have been a key place of outreach. The private homes of converts, such as Jason, would also have provided a setting for evangelism and instruction. As a result, a new, predominantly Gentile congregation came into existence. Paul, Silus, and Timothy devoted themselves to encouraging and instructing the recent converts in the basics of their new faith, becoming deeply attached to them in the process.

Almost from the beginning, however, those who accepted the gospel encountered opposition and hostility from those who were not persuaded by the preaching of Paul and his companions. This is hardly surprising. On the one hand, the synagogue would have been upset by the loss of members to a new cult. On the other hand, the conversion of leading women of the community inevitably brought the cult to the notice of civic leaders, to whom the proclamation of an alternative emperor (Jesus as the messianic King) would have sounded more than a little seditious. These two groups apparently made common cause against the missionaries in their converts, as civil charges were soon brought against them.

Luke describes the critical episode in Acts 17:5-9. After some disreputable folks from the marketplace had been instigated to start a riot, they were encouraged to locate the visiting missionaries and haul them before the civil authorities. Failing to find Paul and Silas, they instead seized Jason and some of other brothers and basically charged them with treason for their allegiance to Jesus. The city officials dealt with the resulting turmoil by requiring Jason and the others to post bond, which effectively made them responsible for any further trouble caused by the missionaries.

Given the start of events, Paul, Silus, and Timothy had little choice but to leave town. That Paul left unwillingly and sooner than he had intended is clear from 1 Thessalonians 2:17, in which he describes himself as having been “torn away” from his new friends and fellow believers. The sudden departure of the missionaries no doubt had a dramatic and shocking impact on the congregation, which unexpectedly found itself alone and facing persecutions and trials that severely tested their faith and perseverance.

Holmes, Michael W. *1 and 2 Thessalonians: The NIV Application Commentary*. Zondervan, 1998