

Living Word
BIBLE
STUDIES

1 & 2
THESSALONIANS

*Living the Gospel
to the End*

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON



1 & 2
THESSALONIANS

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1 & 2 Thessalonians: Living the Gospel to the End

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P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

Jesus is coming again. He is coming soon. The next big event in the story of salvation is the second coming of Jesus Christ, who will judge the world in righteousness and establish his everlasting kingdom of joy and grace. Everything else in life ought to be oriented around the sure and certain promise of our Savior's return.

As much as any other writings in the New Testament, including the book of Revelation, Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians are dominated by a concern for the imminent return of Jesus Christ. Although these warmly personal epistles also address many other important topics—such as sanctification by the Spirit, perseverance through suffering, and brotherly love in the body of Christ—the second coming of Jesus Christ is never far from the apostle's mind or heart. To study 1 and 2 Thessalonians, therefore, is to anticipate the day of the Lord at the end of the world and the everlasting life that belongs to every faithful servant of God.

It is not at all surprising that the apostle Paul wrote two epistles on the end times. To be honest, it is hard to understand everything the Bible teaches about the end of the world and what will happen afterwards. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians answered some of the questions that people usually have about the second coming, but it also raised many other questions, so a

second letter was needed for clarification. Together both epistles deepen our understanding of God's plans for the future and his call to constant preparedness for the return of our Lord.

As you read 1 and 2 Thessalonians with the help of this study guide, it is important to understand what kind of book the Bible claims to be. The Bible says that it is the very Word of God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The one true and living God speaks to us in every word on every page. Thus we should believe that as we read and study the Bible we are hearing the voice of God.

The Bible also says that this God-given Word was written by real human beings, who wrote under the direction of God the Holy Spirit (see 2 Peter 1:21). The Bible was written for people like us, by people like us. We should read the Bible, therefore, both as a divine book and as a human book. This means recognizing and understanding the conventional literary forms in which the Bible is written, finding pleasure and taking delight in the Bible's beauty, simplicity, and majesty. It also means that we should take as much care to study the Bible as Paul and the other original authors took to write it, paying close attention to every word that was carefully chosen to fit into its proper context.

The Bible claims further that the Word of God is something we need to live, as much or even more than we need our daily bread (Matt. 4:4; cf. Deut. 8:3). Therefore, we should read and study the Bible every day as if our lives depended upon it.

To be more specific, the Bible says that it has the life-giving power to bring us into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 3:15). The saving wisdom of Scripture is not limited to one part of the Bible or another, but holds true for every book in the Old and New Testaments, including 1 and 2 Thessalonians. As we read and study this part of the Bible, therefore, we come into a personal saving knowledge of Jesus Christ—the Savior who died, who rose again, and who “will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice

of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God” (1 Thess. 4:16).

The Bible is also a practical book—a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). The Bible tells us everything we need for godly thinking and holy living (2 Tim. 3:16-17). It shows us the way to go in life. In short, the Bible is the most useful book ever written. As we read, therefore, we should be looking for practical truth that will make a difference in what we think, what we say, and what we do in every situation in life.

This study guide will give you a helpful method for studying the Bible in all the right ways. It will encourage you in the daily reading, meditation, and memorization of Scripture. It will help you to be serious and systematic about studying the Bible for yourself. It will ask you questions that help you see the literary structure, Christ-centered meaning, and practical implications of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. It will give you growing skill and confidence in understanding the Bible, while at the same time helping you make progress in personal holiness and deepening your love for God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And it will help you do all of this in relationship with other members of your spiritual family—your brothers and sisters in the church.

May the same Holy Spirit who first revealed these words enable you to understand what you read, find joy in what you study, and glorify God in the way that you live as you wait for the Second Coming of the Son of God.

Philip Graham Ryken

A PERSONAL WORD

FROM KATHLEEN

I began to write these Bible studies for the women in my own church group at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Under the leadership of Kent and Barbara Hughes, the church and that Bible study aimed to proclaim without fail the good news of the Word of God. What a joy, in that study and in many since, to see lives changed by the work of the Word, by the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

In our Bible study group, we were looking for curriculum that would lead us into the meat of the Word and teach us how to take it in, whole Bible books at a time—the way they are given to us in Scripture. Finally, one of our leaders said, “Kathleen—how about if you just write it!” And so began one of the most joyful projects of my life: the writing of studies intended to help unleash the Word of God in people’s lives. The writing began during a busy stage of my life—with three lively young boys and always a couple of college English courses to teach—but through that stage and every busy one since, a serious attention to studying the Bible has helped keep me focused, growing, and alive in the deepest ways. The Word of God will do that. If there’s life and power in these studies, it is simply the life and power of the Scriptures to which they point. It is ultimately the life and

power of the Savior who shines through all the Scriptures from beginning to end. How we need this life, in the midst of every busy and non-busy stage of our lives!

I don't think it is just the English teacher in me that leads me to this conclusion about our basic problem in Bible study these days: we've forgotten how to *read*! We're so used to fast food that we think we should be able to drive by the Scriptures periodically and pick up some easily digestible truths that someone else has wrapped up neatly for us. We've disowned that process of careful reading . . . observing the words . . . seeing the shape of a book and a passage . . . asking questions that take us into the text rather than away from it . . . digging into the Word and letting it speak! Through such a process, guided by the Spirit, the Word of God truly feeds our souls. Here's my prayer: that, by means of these studies, people would be further enabled to read the Scriptures profitably and thereby find life and nourishment in them, as we are each meant to do.

In all the busy stages of life and writing, I have been continually surrounded by pastors, teachers, and family who encourage and help me in this work, and for that I am grateful. The most wonderful guidance and encouragement come from my husband, Niel, whom I thank and for whom I thank God daily.

May God use these studies to lift up Christ and his Word, for his glory!

INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul's letters to the Thessalonians form part of an exciting, complex story of the growth of the New Testament church. We live in a time increasingly like that of Paul, when the church all over the known world is quickly growing, amid all kinds of aggressive false teaching. What an encouragement and challenge to witness Paul's zeal for the gospel in the midst of missionary trips, newly planted churches, and persecution from multiple directions! How gracious of God to give us Paul's inspired words, which still speak into the church with clarity and spur it on with the hope of Jesus coming again.

First and Second Thessalonians are some of the earliest epistles, dated by most scholars around A.D. 50 and 51—amazingly, less than twenty years after Jesus' death. Paul had traveled not long before with Silas to this city of Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia—still a thriving city today. There, as we shall see in the background story of Acts 17, Paul preached in the synagogue, and many believed the gospel, including a great many devout Gentiles. The Jews became jealous and formed a violent mob—from whom Paul and Silas escaped by night. But they left behind a group of committed believers, a newly planted church. It is this new church to which Paul writes in these letters, yearning to encourage them to stand firm and grow rightly in their faith.

Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonians is the encouragement of the gospel. He takes them back to their receiving of the gospel he preached to them; he urges them to walk steadfastly according to the sanctifying power of the gospel at work in them; and he points them to the ultimate hope of the gospel—the day of the Lord when Jesus will come again. This huge theme of Jesus' return—with the related events of the resurrection, the gathering to Jesus of all believers, and the final judgment—appears and reappears in these two epistles as a constant frame of reference for every aspect of our lives. The eternal hope of the gospel should indeed, Paul teaches, light up our every step along the way. Even the more minor but significant themes of idleness and work or sexual purity, for example, are important not just in a moralistic way; they are important because of the necessary sanctification of each believer and all believers together, in preparation for meeting Jesus when he comes—and also because of the eternal fruit of gospel witness that flows from holy, obedient lives. In our preoccupied, immediate-comfort-and-success-oriented society, how crucial for us to hear this exhortation of Paul to hold on to the foundation of the gospel, especially to that gospel hope which shapes and informs every moment now, as we eagerly look for our Lord Jesus to come again.

First and Second Thessalonians are short but not simple books. They are full of Paul's love and passion for these believers and for the gospel, and they are full of weighty teaching and instruction. Careful study of the text, by the help of the Holy Spirit, brings the reward of both heartfelt encouragement and greater gospel understanding. Taking time to peer through Paul into this early New Testament congregation also brings growing insight into the church, an excitement about its spread and growth, and a challenge to live more faithfully as a member of Christ's body, until he comes again. All these benefits of studying 1 & 2 Thessalonians come wrapped in hope and a kind of urgency—the hope of Jesus coming soon, and the urgency of living and sharing the gospel to that end.

Lesson 1 (1 Thess. 1:1-10)

“OUR GOSPEL CAME TO YOU . . .”

DAY ONE—A GOSPEL LETTER

On this first day, let us begin by noting that we are reading an epistle, a letter sent from the apostle Paul to the young Thessalonian church that he had planted through his preaching of the gospel in their city, as we shall read. Paul (now in Corinth) has just received a good report from Timothy, whom he sent to see how the Thessalonians were doing (1 Thess. 3:6). The apostle Paul rejoices to hear of their perseverance in the faith and desires to guide them into a clearer understanding of that faith.

Paul opens with a customary salutation (1 Thess. 1:1), acknowledging the presence and greetings (and probably secretarial help) of his companions Silvanus (Latin for “Silas”) and Timothy, both of whom had been to Thessalonica as well.

1. In 1 Thessalonians 1:1, notice *in whom* Paul understands the church to exist. How do Paul’s words of greeting confirm from the start just who is this Jesus that Paul

LESSON 1 (1 THESS. 1:1-10)

has preached to the Thessalonians? *Note: The word “Christ” means literally “anointed one” or “Messiah.”*

2. It will be helpful, initially, to read through 1 Thessalonians as a letter should be read: from beginning to end. Do a rather quick first read, straight through the five chapters of this epistle. When you have taken it in as a whole, jot down themes and observations that stand out to you on this first reading. As you begin to grasp the shape of the letter, you may want to consult the suggested outline in the back of this study.

DAY TWO—STARTING WITH THE GOSPEL

On first reading, one large theme that emerges is the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ—the *day of the Lord*. Paul often mentions that day throughout the letter and focuses on it in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5. But that day is the culmination of the gospel story, and Paul starts not there but back at the beginning: with the planting of the gospel in the hearts of these new believers.

1. First, list all the various factors involved in the Thessalonians’ initial receiving of the gospel (1 Thess. 1:4–6).

LESSON 1 (1 THESS. 1:1-10)

3. This opening passage offers just the first in many examples of Paul as a man of prayer. Look back through 1 Thessalonians I, asking what prayers might grow in you as you read these verses. What prayers does this first chapter stimulate in your mind and heart? Write down your own prayer or prayers based on this passage.

Notes for Lesson 1

