



CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

SWINDOLL'S
LIVING
INSIGHTS

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

1&2 THESSALONIANS



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

For more than sixty years I have loved the Bible. It was that love for the Scriptures, mixed with a clear call into the gospel ministry during my tour of duty in the Marine Corps, that resulted in my going to Dallas Theological Seminary to prepare for a lifetime of ministry. During those four great years I had the privilege of studying under outstanding men of God, who also loved God's Word. They not only held the inerrant Word of God in high esteem, they taught it carefully, preached it passionately, and modeled it consistently. A week never passes without my giving thanks to God for the grand heritage that has been mine to claim! I am forever indebted to those fine theologians and mentors, who cultivated in me a strong commitment to the understanding, exposition, and application of God's truth.

For more than fifty years I have been engaged in doing just that—*and how I love it!* I confess without hesitation that I am addicted to the examination and the proclamation of the Scriptures. Because of this, books have played a major role in my life for as long as I have been in ministry—especially those volumes that explain the truths and enhance my understanding of what God has written. Through these many years I have collected a large personal library, which has proven invaluable as I have sought to remain a faithful student of the Bible. To the end of my days, my major goal in life is to communicate the Word with accuracy, insight, clarity, and practicality. Without informative and reliable books to turn to, I would have “run dry” decades ago.

Among my favorite and most well-worn volumes are those that have enabled me to get a better grasp of the biblical text. Like most expositors, I am forever searching for literary tools that I can use to hone my gifts and sharpen my skills. For me, that means finding resources that make the complicated simple and easy to understand, that offer insightful comments and word pictures that enable me to see the relevance of sacred truth in light of my twenty-first-century world, and that drive those truths home to my heart in ways I do not easily forget. When I come across such books, they wind up in my hands as I devour them and then place them in my library for further reference . . . and, believe me, I often return to them. What a relief it is to have these resources to turn to when I lack fresh insight, or when I need just the right story or illustration, or when I get stuck in the tangled text and cannot find my way out. For the serious expositor, a library is essential. As a mentor of mine once said, “Where else can you have ten thousand professors at your fingertips?”

In recent years I have discovered there are not nearly enough resources like those I just described. It was such a discovery that prompted me to consider

becoming a part of the answer instead of lamenting the problem. But the solution would result in a huge undertaking. A writing project that covers all of the books and letters of the New Testament seemed overwhelming and intimidating. A rush of relief came when I realized that during the past fifty-plus years I've taught and preached through most of the New Testament. In my files were folders filled with notes from those messages that were just lying there, waiting to be brought out of hiding, given a fresh and relevant touch in light of today's needs, and applied to fit into the lives of men and women who long for a fresh word from the Lord. *That did it!* I began to work on plans to turn all of those notes into this commentary on the New Testament.

I must express my gratitude to both Mark Gaither and Mike Svingel for their tireless and devoted efforts, serving as my hands-on, day-to-day editors. They have done superb work as we have walked our way through the verses and chapters of all twenty-seven New Testament books. It has been a pleasure to see how they have taken my original material and helped me shape it into a style that remains true to the text of the Scriptures, at the same time interestingly and creatively developed, and all the while allowing my voice to come through in a natural and easy-to-read manner.

I need to add sincere words of appreciation to the congregations I have served in various parts of these United States for more than five decades. It has been my good fortune to be the recipient of their love, support, encouragement, patience, and frequent words of affirmation as I have fulfilled my calling to stand and deliver God's message year after year. The sheep from all those flocks have endeared themselves to this shepherd in more ways than I can put into words . . . and none more than those I currently serve with delight at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Cynthia, for her understanding of my addiction to studying, to preaching, and to writing. Never has she discouraged me from staying at it. Never has she failed to urge me in the pursuit of doing my very best. On the contrary, her affectionate support personally, and her own commitment to excellence in leading Insight for Living for more than three and a half decades, have combined to keep me faithful to my calling "in season and out of season." Without her devotion to me and apart from our mutual partnership throughout our lifetime of ministry together, Swindoll's Living Insights would never have been undertaken.

I am grateful that it has now found its way into your hands and, ultimately, onto the shelves of your library. My continued hope and prayer is that you will find these volumes helpful in your own study and personal application of the Bible. May they help you come to realize, as I have over these many years, that God's Word is as timeless as it is true.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isa. 40:8, NASB)

Chuck Swindoll
Frisco, Texas

THE STRONG'S NUMBERING SYSTEM

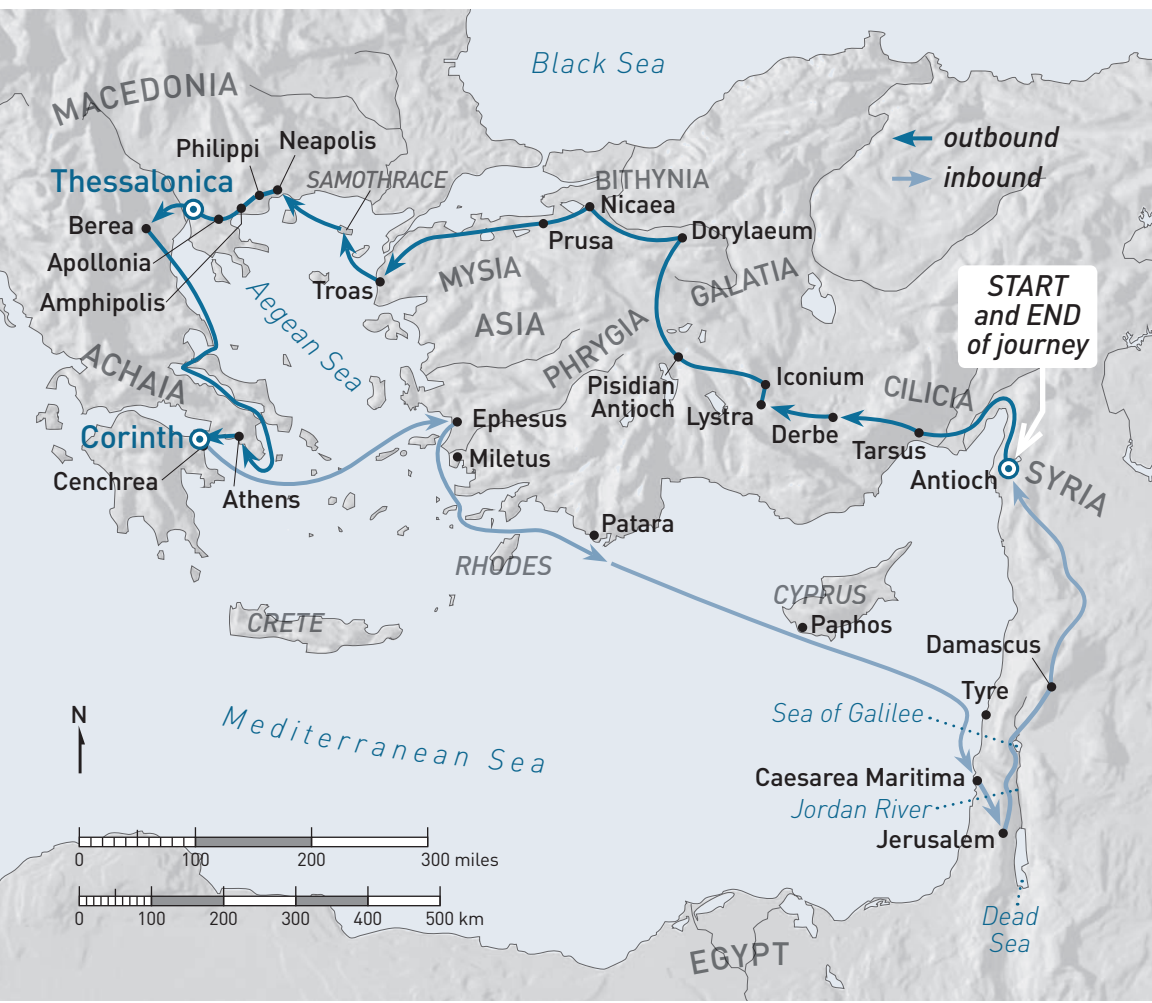
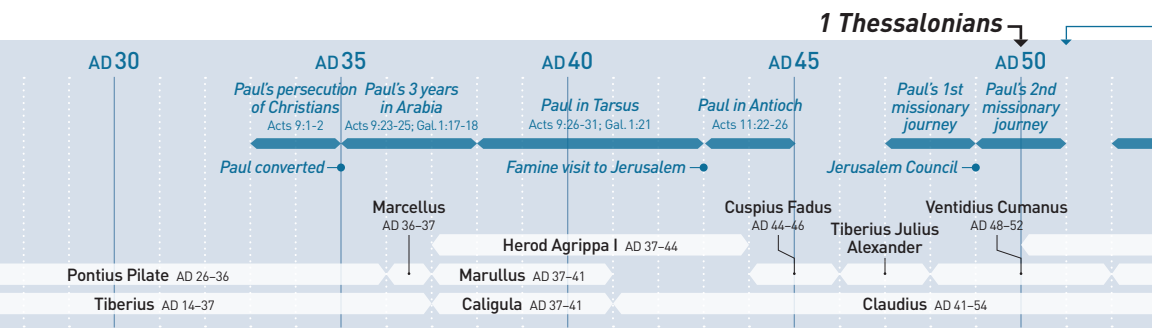
Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary uses the Strong's word-study numbering system to give both newer and more advanced Bible students alike quicker, more convenient access to helpful original-language tools (e.g., concordances, lexicons, and theological dictionaries). The Strong's numbering system, made popular by the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, is used with the majority of biblical Greek and Hebrew reference works. Those who are unfamiliar with the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek alphabets can quickly find information on a given word by looking up the appropriate index number. Advanced students will find the system helpful because it allows them to quickly find the lexical form of obscure conjugations and inflections.

When a Greek word is mentioned in the text, the Strong's number is included in square brackets after the Greek word. So in the example of the Greek word *agapē* [26], "love," the number is used with Greek tools keyed to the Strong's system.

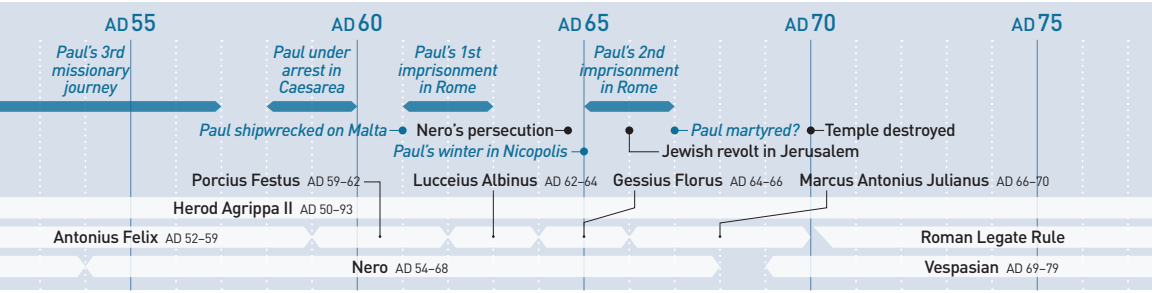
On occasion, a Hebrew word is mentioned in the text. The Strong's Hebrew numbers are completely separate from the Greek numbers, so Hebrew numbers are prefixed with a letter "H." So, for example, the Hebrew word *kapporet* [H3727], "mercy seat," comes from *kopher* [H3722], "to ransom," "to secure favor through a gift."

INSIGHTS ON 1 THESSALONIANS

We need to make sure we don't paint a picture of Paul's life and ministry that bears no resemblance to the way it actually was. It's a classic case of the tension between idealism and realism. If the road of Christian life and ministry is paved with hardship, suffering, struggle, and anxiety, we need to describe it that way. If we, instead, imagine it as an ideal of constant success, comfort, happiness, and tranquility, how hard it will be to deal with the real thing!



Paul's Second Missionary Journey. Paul and Silas preached in Thessalonica during their second major journey around Asia Minor, which extended into Macedonia and Achaia (present-day Greece). Some of the Jews there attacked the believers in Thessalonica because of Paul's message, so Paul and Silas escaped and continued on their journey. Later, they would write to the believers in Thessalonica from Corinth.



1 THESSALONIANS

INTRODUCTION

I believe if the apostle Paul could be transported from the first to the twenty-first century and appear on television, the interviewer would introduce him with a résumé that would go something like this:

We’re thrilled to have with us today the apostle Paul, a man who probably needs no introduction. He’s the apostle of apostles, a church-planting entrepreneur who has founded thriving ministries all over Europe, an expert on healthy marriage and family relationships, an author of numerous best-selling books, and a sought-after speaker whose messages have inspired millions!

All the while Paul’s face would turn from the ashen color of revulsion to the crimson of embarrassment. Then, as the camera zooms in on Paul himself, his look of dismay would give way to a polite smile. He’d dismiss the flattering introduction with a wave of his hand and set the record straight:

I’m the last—and *least*—of the apostles. Not even worthy of the title, if you ask me. I am no church-planting entrepreneur (whatever that is). In fact, I couldn’t have done any of it without my co-laborers at my side . . . and I probably have broken more ministry leadership rules than all of them put together. And I don’t know where you get that “marriage and family” expert thing—I’m not even married and prefer the single life. As far as authoring numerous books, I almost always have had help; I wrote letters, not books, and if somebody made money off of them, it sure wasn’t me! And that thing about being a sought-after speaker? Well, my preaching has gotten me kicked out of town, beaten, arrested, and stoned! In fact, I’ve been called “unimpressive”

THE BOOK OF 1 THESSALONIANS AT A GLANCE

SECTION	TURNING FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT	LIVING IN THE PRESENT FOR THE FUTURE
PASSAGE	(1:1–3:13)	(4:1–5:28)
THEMES	←Looking Back	Looking Ahead→
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thanksgiving • Remembering • Affirming • Reporting <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pastor before the flock • The flock’s response to the pastor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal concern • Comfort and relief <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual purity • Prophetic urgency <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay alert! • Encourage one another! • Live in peace!
KEY TERMS	Wrath . . . Faith, Hope, Love . . . Coming . . . Encourage	
	Imitator Labor	Sanctification Seize

and “contemptible” in my speech. Sir, I don’t know who you’re introducing, but it doesn’t sound like me!

Clearly, before we launch into Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, we need to put things in the proper perspective. We need to make sure we don’t paint a picture of Paul’s life and ministry that bears no resemblance to the way it actually was. It’s a classic case of the tension between idealism and realism. If the road of Christian life and ministry is paved with hardship, suffering, struggle, and anxiety, we need to describe it that way. If we, instead, imagine it as an ideal of constant success, comfort, happiness, and tranquility, how hard it will be to deal with the real thing! In 1 Thessalonians, Paul deals with life and ministry the way they really were for both his ministry team and the Thessalonians, the way they are for all faithful Christians, and the way they ought to be as we overcome trials and temptations that come our way.

KEY TERMS FOR 1 THESSALONIANS

***orgē* (ὀργή) [3709] “wrath,” “anger”**

When people hear the word “wrath,” they often think of God’s angry disposition against sin or of ultimate eternal punishment of the lost (1 Thes. 2:16; see also Rom. 1:18). However, in the other two instances in 1 Thessalonians, Paul tends to use the term “wrath,” *orgē*, in reference to temporal, earthly judgment, especially the final judgments leading up to the second coming of Christ (1 Thes. 1:10; 5:9). Oftentimes we refer to this specific period of wrath as “the Tribulation” or “end times.”

***pistis, agapē, elpis* (πίστις, ἀγάπη, ἐλπίς) [4102, 26, 1680] “faith, love, hope”**

Commonly called the “theological virtues,” this trio forms the foundation of the Christian life in Paul’s writings. In 1 Corinthians 13:13, he notes, “Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love” (NLT). Several years earlier, when he wrote to the Thessalonians, these three also played a central role in his letter (1 Thes. 1:3; 5:8). In Paul’s writings, *pistis* refers to faith, confidence, reliance, or trust—not only the starting point of the Christian life (Eph. 2:8), but especially in 1 Thessalonians, the foundation of Christian living (1 Thes. 1:3, 8; 3:2, 6, 7, 10; 5:8). Love (*agapē*) in 1 Thessalonians is associated with faith and characterizes the relationship between believers in the Thessalonian church and the nature of the work they do as a result of their knowledge of Christ Jesus. The concept of hope (*elpis*) has particular significance for Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, as it turns attention upward and forward to the return of Christ and the ultimate realization of our blessings (1:3; 2:19; 4:13; 5:8).

***parousia* (παρουσία) [3952] “presence,” “coming,” “advent”**

The second coming of Christ is a major theme revisited directly or indirectly in every chapter of 1 Thessalonians (1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23). Though the term *parousia* can have a neutral sense of physical “presence,” when Paul uses it in reference to Christ, it is used “of his Messianic Advent in glory to judge the world at the end of this age.”¹ Though the *parousia* of Christ is an object of fear for the wicked, it is an object of hope and joy for Christians.

***parakaleō* (παρακαλέω) [3870] “encourage,” “comfort,” “console,” “help”**

Prior to His crucifixion, Jesus promised His disciples that when He ascended to heaven He would send a “Helper” (*paraklētos* [3875]), God the Holy Spirit, who would teach them (John 14:26), bear witness about Jesus (John 15:26), and be with them forever (John 14:16). In Paul’s understanding, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is worked out in the church through the believers He indwells (1 Cor. 12:4-11). It should be no surprise, then, that Paul uses the verb *parakaleō* throughout his letter, connected with other words for “imploring,” “exhorting,” “strengthening,” and “building up” (1 Thes. 2:11; 3:2; 5:11). As the community of the Spirit, the Great Encourager, a primary purpose in Spirit-filled ministry is to encourage one another (4:18).

THE THESSALONIAN STORM AND ITS LASTING EFFECTS

About a year had passed since a storm of persecution had swept Paul, Silas, and Timothy from the city of Thessalonica. In the wake of the storm, the budding church in that city was left bent, weary, and underdeveloped. They needed more light from the Son to dry their weary and weathered leaves, to strengthen their wilting limbs, and to bear healthy fruit.

Here’s what happened. Following the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1–14:28), a council of apostles and church leaders met in Jerusalem to discuss *and soundly reject* the false teachings of the Judaizers, who were legalists extraordinaire (Acts 15:1-35). Between the first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council, Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians from Antioch, encouraging the young churches he and Barnabas had planted to stand strong against the threat of such legalism. After the council, with its written decision firmly in hand, Paul determined to retrace his steps and revisit the churches: “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36). However, when Paul and Barnabas

A SNAPSHOT OF ANCIENT THESSALONICA

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1

In 315 BC the Greek general Cassander, who later became king of Macedonia, founded Thessalonica. It later developed into a major commercial seaport and military launching point.

At the time of Paul's second missionary journey (around AD 49–52), Thessalonica was the capital and most populous city of Macedonia, boasting over two hundred thousand people. Situated on flourishing trade routes both by land and sea, the city was a bustling center of commerce. William Barclay points out the strategic importance of such a city for the spread of the gospel: "If Christianity was settled there, it was bound to spread East along the Egnatian Road until all Asia was conquered and West until it stormed even the city of Rome. The coming of Christianity to Thessalonica was crucial in the making of it into a world religion."²



The ruins of the *agora*, a Roman shopping center, in Thessalonica, built around the first century.

As a free city in the Roman Empire, Thessalonica enjoyed some level of self-governance of its affairs without constant interference by the emperor. Such a prized status, however, could have been lost if the city's leaders failed to maintain peace and security . . . or if the Romans suspected sedition and rebellion. Both of these charges were leveled against Paul and Silas by the raucous mob that the Jews had stirred up against the Christians (Acts 17:6-7). In that episode, Thessalonian politics, economics, and religion were turned against the Christians, leaving the young church in a state of uncertainty.

had a falling out over whether to take John Mark, the two decided to part ways (Acts 15:37-39). Instead of taking Barnabas with him on the second missionary journey, Paul chose Silas (also called “Silvanus”) as his right-hand man in ministry (Acts 15:40).

Along the way, Paul and Silas met a young man named Timothy in Lystra. As the son of a family of faith, Timothy enjoyed an excellent reputation among the believers (Acts 16:1-2). Obviously impressed by him, Paul invited young Timothy to participate in their missionary ventures. Though Paul seems to have originally had in mind a modest journey of edifying already-established churches, the Spirit had something else in mind. As their attempts to enter various regions were frustrated by the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:6-8), they were pushed farther and farther west through Asia Minor until they reached the coast of the Aegean Sea. (See the map “Paul’s Second Missionary Journey” on page 2).

At that point, something unexpected happened. At night, Paul received a vision instructing him to cross the sea into Macedonia and to preach the gospel there (Acts 16:9-10). Sailing from Troas and through Neapolis, they reached the city of Philippi, where the Lord softened the hearts of many to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 16:11-15). However, in Philippi the closed, hardened hearts of spiritual opponents turned the city leaders against Paul and Silas, eventually leading to their arrest, beating, and imprisonment (Acts 16:16-24).



www.holyandphotos.org

Luke uses a unique term, *politarchēs* [4173], for the rulers of Thessalonica, a word which appears only in Acts 17:6, 8. In 1877 an inscription (pictured here) was discovered in excavations of ancient Thessalonica that used this same term in reference to the city rulers.³

After a miraculous deliverance from jail that resulted even in the salvation of the Roman jailer and his family (Acts 16:25-40), Paul, Silas, and Timothy left Philippi and traveled to Thessalonica in order to proclaim the coming of the Messiah at the Jewish synagogue in that city (Acts 17:1). The truth of the gospel won over more and more people, especially among the God-fearing Gentiles who had been hanging around the synagogue for years but had not officially converted to Judaism. When the Jewish synagogue leaders saw both Jews and righteous Gentiles converting to Jesus as the Messiah, they became jealous (Acts 17:5). In response, the opposing Jews mustered a pagan posse from the marketplace but searched in vain for Paul and Silas. So they rounded up a handful of new Thessalonian believers and played the game of guilt by association: “These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7). After this frightening episode, Paul and Silas were forced to leave the city by night, having been banned from Thessalonica (Acts 17:9-10).

After several months away from their fragile church plant, Paul and Silas “could endure it no longer” (1 Thes. 3:1). They sent the young Timothy to Thessalonica to check on the believers’ welfare. But if Paul and Silas were so concerned with that fledgling church, why didn’t they just put their ministry in Athens or Corinth on pause and take a trip back north to Macedonia to provide some assistance? Why send Timothy—the youngest and most inexperienced member of their ministry team?

The fact is, a legal pledge Jason made on behalf of the church in Thessalonica (Acts 17:9) likely involved the promise that Paul and Silas, as the named perpetrators of unrest, would not return to the city. And in all probability, it likely included a substantial sum of money in the form of a bond that would have been forfeited had Paul and Silas returned to town. In any case, when Timothy returned from his trip to Thessalonica, Paul and Silas were thrilled to hear of their spiritual

QUICK FACTS ON 1 THESSALONIANS

When was it written? Around AD 50, during Paul’s second missionary journey.

Where was it written? In Corinth (province of Achaia) and sent to Thessalonica (province of Macedonia).

Who wrote it? Paul wrote the letter with Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy as co-authors.

Why was it written? To provide encouragement to believers to continue in faith, hope, and love as they endure hardship while waiting for the Lord’s return.

health even in the midst of persecution. In response, the three of them wrote a letter to the church in Thessalonica from Corinth to affirm their steadfast faith, to exhort them to excel even more, and to inform them about what to expect in the future as they awaited the Lord's return.

OVERVIEW OF THE LETTER

Although rather brief, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is one of the most positive and insightful portrayals of a first-century congregation. The faith, love, and hope of the Thessalonian Christians were downright contagious. In Paul's desire to encourage believers, his basic message spanned all the tenses of salvation: from the past, into the present, with a view toward the future. In fact, the basic message of 1 Thessalonians might be summed up this way: Live in faith, love, and hope in light of the past and in view of the future.

The book can be divided into two major sections.

Turning from the Past to the Present (1:1–3:13). In this section Paul mentions the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope in Christ (1:3), recalling crucial events in their past: their powerful reception of the gospel (1:5), their imitation of the apostles' life and ministry (1:6), and the example of faith, love, and hope they had become for the whole region of Macedonia (1:7-10). By reminding them of his own ministry style among them (2:1-12), Paul encourages them to endure suffering in the work of ministry just as he did (2:13-20). To Paul's relief, the Thessalonians' past seeds of faith and love had not only endured persecution and hardship, but had actually grown and blossomed in the present beyond his expectations (3:1-13).

Living in the Present for the Future (4:1–5:28). In the second part of the letter, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to continue to live holy lives in light of their hope in Christ's return. Beginning with straight talk about moral purity (4:1-8), he moves on to encourage them to love one another and to live properly among outsiders as outworking their faith and love (4:9-12). Then, in a powerful passage on the second coming of Christ, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of the hope they have of rescue from wrath, resurrection from death, and reunion with fellow believers when the Lord Jesus returns from heaven to live with His church forever (4:13–5:11). Yet this reminder of Christ's return wasn't given simply to inform them about the future, but to transform them in the present. So Paul ends this brief but glorious epistle with rapid-fire exhortations to live in faith, love, and hope in light of the past and in view of the future (5:12-28).

TURNING FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT (1 THESSALONIANS 1:1–3:13)

These first three chapters of the book reveal Paul’s pastoral heart, setting forth his style of ministry and emphasizing diligence to the Christian calling not only as believers but also as ministers. As such, it’s especially appropriate for new converts who are trying to come to grips with their budding faith, as they look back on the lives they left and look at the new life they’re supposed to be living while they await the Lord’s return. It also provides crucial insights for young pastors and anybody involved in church ministry, as Paul reveals ministry strategies worthy of imitating.

KEY TERMS IN 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1–3:13

mimētēs (μιμητής) [3402] “imitator,” “follower”

Before Christ ascended, He commissioned His disciples to “go . . . and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). In Paul’s teaching, discipleship involved imitation—following in the footsteps of a worthy example (1 Thes. 1:6; 2:14). In his teaching, believers are to be imitators of Paul (1 Cor. 4:16), as he was an imitator of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1), and thus they would be imitators of God (Eph. 5:1). Through this process of imitation or following the example of others, we become examples of Christ for others (1 Thes. 1:7).

kopos (κόπος) [2873] “labor,” “toil,” “weariness”

Paul is sometimes misread as pitting faith and works—or grace and labor—against each other, when, in fact, Paul saw a close relationship between faith and hard work in the Christian life. In 1 Thessalonians Paul commends the believers for their “work of faith and labor [*kopos*] of love” (1:3) and reminds them of his own “labor [*kopos*] and hardship” (2:9). Paul uses a Greek term that means “to engage in activity that is burdensome.”¹ Yes, salvation is by grace through faith alone, apart from works (Eph. 2:8-9), but true believers are exhorted to labor—even *toil*—faithfully and lovingly for the sake of the Savior who saved them at His own great expense.

A Church with the Right Stuff

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

NASB

¹Paul and Silvanus and Timothy,
 To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.
²We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; ³constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and ^asteadfastness of hope ^bin our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; ⁵for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we ^aproved to be among you for your sake. ⁶You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. ⁹For they themselves report about us what kind of a ^areception we had ^bwith you, and how you turned to God from ^cidols to serve ^da living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from ^aheaven, whom He raised from

NLT

¹This letter is from Paul, Silas,* and Timothy.

We are writing to the church in Thessalonica, to you who belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

May God give you grace and peace.

²We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly. ³As we pray to our God and Father about you, we think of your faithful work, your loving deeds, and the enduring hope you have because of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴We know, dear brothers and sisters,* that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people. ⁵For when we brought you the Good News, it was not only with words but also with power, for the Holy Spirit gave you full assurance* that what we said was true. And you know of our concern for you from the way we lived when we were with you. ⁶So you received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. In this way, you imitated both us and the Lord. ⁷As a result, you have become an example to all the believers in Greece—throughout both Macedonia and Achaia.*

⁸And now the word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere, even beyond Macedonia and Achaia, for wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God. We don't need to tell them about it, ⁹for they keep talking about the wonderful welcome you gave us and how you turned away from idols to serve the living and true God. ¹⁰And they speak of how you are looking forward to the coming of God's Son from heaven—Jesus,

the dead, *that is* Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

1:3 ^aOr *perseverance* ^bLit *of* 1:5 ^aOr *became*
 1:9 ^aLit *entrance* ^bLit *to* ^cOr *the idols* ^aOr *the*
 1:10 ^aLit *the heavens*

whom God raised from the dead. He is the one who has rescued us from the terrors of the coming judgment.

1:1 Greek *Silvanus*, the Greek form of the name.
 1:4 Greek *brothers*. 1:5 Or *with the power of the Holy Spirit, so you can have full assurance*.
 1:7 *Macedonia* and *Achaia* were the northern and southern regions of Greece.

Balance has been wittily defined as “the brief moment of equilibrium we experience as we’re swinging from one extreme to another.” I can’t think of many things more damaging to a believer’s spiritual growth and a church’s spiritual health than a lack of balance, or going to extremes. It seems Christians and their congregations are constantly wavering between ornery pessimism and naïve idealism . . . dwelling stubbornly in the past or careening aimlessly into the future . . . idolizing their leaders to the point of worship or criticizing them to the point of rebellion.

Realism is the key to a balanced perspective when it comes to the Christian life and ministry. And this balance is exactly what Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians provides. Following the example of their founders and first teachers—Paul, Silas, and Timothy—the church in Thessalonica maintained an astonishing Christian witness without going to silly extremes. How did they keep this balanced perspective on the past, present, and future? By a constant commitment to a triad of balancing virtues: faith, love, and hope.

— 1:1-2 —

Though we frequently—and rightly—refer to this book as Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, its opening words reveal corporate authorship: “Paul and Silvanus and Timothy” (1:1). As we saw in the introduction, Silas (referred to as Silvanus in this letter) took Barnabas’s place as Paul’s right-hand ministry partner after Barnabas and Paul parted ways over ministry strategies.

We’re told in Acts 15:40 that after the rather explosive confrontation between Barnabas and Paul, “Paul chose Silas and left” Antioch on what became known as the second missionary journey. Clearly, Paul is portrayed as the pilot in this second journey, while Silas is his copilot. So when we read that the letter to the Thessalonians is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy, we rightly regard it as a letter from Paul, the primary authority behind the letter, with Silas and Timothy as lending their assent and support of the letter. All three of these men, though, enjoyed a

close relationship with the believers in Thessalonica. It must have been quite an encouragement to them to hear from all three men.

Notice what Paul says about the church. They were “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes. 1:1). Regardless of their earthly circumstances, “in God” and “in Christ” was their true identity. They were safe in the hands of both Jesus and the Father. That’s double security and a double encouragement for a church wondering if they had the right stuff to survive in the midst of social, religious, cultural, and even political conflict. Paul’s standard salutation of “grace to you and peace” may have had special, concrete significance for the Thessalonians in light of the crises they faced. They needed grace to endure; they longed for peace that would alleviate the constant conflict.

Let’s admit it. We can’t wait to forget some people. Some people can be toxic, tearing us down instead of building us up. But other people, we couldn’t forget if we tried. They accept us for who we are; give us energy to go on; radiate authenticity; and support, encourage, and strengthen us. That’s how it was with the Thessalonians. Paul couldn’t keep them out of his mind. He constantly prayed for them (1:2). Even after their brief, intense span of ministry all those months earlier, Paul remembered the Thessalonians with fondness.

— 1:3-5 —

After thanking God for the Thessalonians, Paul remembered three fundamental qualities about them for which he was particularly grateful—qualities that could only come from the work of the Spirit in the lives of genuine believers: their “work of faith,” their “labor of love,” and their “steadfastness of hope” (1:3).

We often regard faith, love, and hope as invisible virtues, qualities of the heart invisible to those around us. But in Paul’s mind faith resulted in work, love manifested itself in labor, and hope could be seen in the perseverance of those in whom it dwelled. How beautiful and fragrant those spiritual blossoms must have seemed to Paul! He had been whisked away from his mission field before he could be sure the seeds he had planted in Thessalonica had sprouted. But Timothy had returned with an encouraging report that lifted Paul’s spirits. Because of their evident faith, love, and hope, Paul and Silas were assured of the genuineness of the Thessalonians’ relationship with God—their status as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, chosen by God (1:4).

The phrase “our gospel did not come to you in word only” reveals something of Paul’s teaching method. He didn’t simply deliver a

message and move on to the next evangelistic target. The gospel for Paul wasn't merely a carefully packaged cluster of words. He didn't just stand up in a crowd and shout, "Jesus came to die for your sins and rise from the dead. Believe in Him alone to be saved . . . Next!" Paul didn't simply deliver a message like a mailman delivers a letter.

Rather, the word came with power. Paul entered their homes, their lives, their hearts. The Holy Spirit brought full conviction (1:5). No wonder the message didn't simply enter the minds of the Thessalonians and warm their hearts. No wonder it produced outward works of faith, love, and hope! They had examples of living, active, powerful faith in Paul and his associates, who had embraced them, dwelling among them, pouring themselves into their lives.

— 1:6-8 —

Having thanked God for the Thessalonian believers (1:1-2) and having remembered them (1:3-5), Paul then affirmed them. Through his encouraging words he put his arm around their shoulders and praised the progress they had made since he was torn from their presence. He affirmed them in two ways.

First, he affirmed them for the way they responded personally to Paul (1:6). They imitated his spiritual walk and the Lord's righteous example. They welcomed the word of God with a joyful spirit even in the midst of affliction. What a miraculous reception of the gospel! When they had everything to lose from the world's perspective, they gave it all up for the sake of Christ.

Second, Paul affirmed them for the way they displayed their faith publicly (1:7-8). They became examples to both Christians and non-Christians. As Paul moved through Macedonia, where Thessalonica was located, southward into other cities of Achaia, he quickly learned that the news of the Thessalonians' great faith had preceded him. So pronounced was their faith that it echoed down the canyons, over the countryside, and into the city streets of the surrounding areas. Their Christianity was contagious and spreading faster than Paul could travel!

— 1:9-10 —

From thanking, to remembering, to affirming, Paul finally relayed the reports that had been resounding far and wide. What was it that Paul kept hearing about the Thessalonians everywhere he went? What news of their faith was paving the way for Paul and his ministry partners to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others?

First, he heard about the relationship they had enjoyed with the great apostle and his colleagues—“what kind of a reception we had with you” (1:9). The enthusiasm with which the Thessalonians had received the apostle was caught by others who became just as eager to hear what Paul, Silas, and Timothy had to say. Second, Paul heard echoes of the report concerning the Thessalonians’ turning to God from idols, committing themselves to Christ alone (1:9).

Now the Thessalonians had two purposes for their lives: “to serve a living and true God” and “to wait for His Son from heaven.” They displayed responsibility in the present yet readiness for the future. They weren’t anticipating the Lord’s return so much that they neglected the present, and they weren’t becoming so involved in their earthly affairs that they forgot the future. Instead, they balanced their past faith conversion and repentance from idolatry with their present pursuit of love and their embrace of the future hope of the return of Christ to save believers from the coming wrath that would one day be unleashed on the world (1:10).

You know what I see here in these verses? I see both responsibility and readiness. I see a group of people who took the truth to the lost and lived the truth among the saved. And I see a readiness of people who knew that Christ could come at any moment to rescue them from judgment before unleashing His stored-up wrath on the world. That’s balance—to live as though He could come before lunch but to behave in ways that acknowledge He could delay His return until long after we have lived.

The church in Thessalonica may not have had a lot of money, a large congregation, or famous teachers. But they had strong faith. They had active love. They had abiding hope.

They had the right stuff.

APPLICATION: 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

A Three-Way Commitment

The opening verses of this compact, powerful letter challenge us to a three-way commitment—to the saved, to the unsaved, and to Christ.

First, with regard to our commitment to fellow Christians, Paul’s words remind us that we must be ready to accept, support, and encour-

age one another in the family of God to excel in works of faith, in labor of love, and in perseverance of hope.

Second, regarding our commitment to non-Christians, Paul's words inform us that we must live in such a way that our actions are evidence of the word of the living God for all those who are lost. The reputation of the Thessalonians went around to all near them and beyond them (1:8-10). We need to be witnesses to the unsaved and carry the gospel by means of our reputations that match our verbal testimonies. Both the words on our lips and the works of our lives need to bear witness to Christ.

Third, concerning our commitment to Christ, Paul's words urge us to be free of any and all entanglements that pull us away from the Savior. This is freedom from idolatry, which can be anything—a thought, a priority, an object, a philosophy, a career, a dream, or a person—anything that takes our full devotion away from Christ. When we're free from such idols, we're freed to commit fully to Christ.

A Leadership Style That Works—Guaranteed

1 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

NASB

¹For you yourselves know, brethren, that our ^acoming to you was not in vain, ²but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much ^aopposition. ³For our exhortation does not *come* from error or impurity or ^aby way of deceit; ⁴but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who ^aexamines our hearts. ⁵For we never came ^awith flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for

¹You yourselves know, dear brothers and sisters,* that our visit to you was not a failure. ²You know how badly we had been treated at Philippi just before we came to you and how much we suffered there. Yet our God gave us the courage to declare his Good News to you boldly, in spite of great opposition. ³So you can see we were not preaching with any deceit or impure motives or trickery.

⁴For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts. ⁵Never once did we try to win you with flattery, as you well know. And God is our witness that we were not pretending to be your friends just

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