

Six ways to stand firm



Modern-day Thessalonica (Thessaloniki)

Six Bible Studies in 1 Thessalonians



Introduction – Paul and the Thessalonians

The story of Paul and how he came to write this letter to the church in Thessalonica begins in Acts 17. Paul was halfway through his 2nd Missionary Journey, and had just started evangelising Europe. Arriving in Thessalonica, Paul spent just three weeks preaching in the synagogue, converting a number of people. The reason for the short stay was that the opposition to his ministry was fierce. Under the cover of night, the newly minted believers sent Paul on his way and he arrived at Berea. The people of this town were more willing to listen, but the hostile people of Thessalonica chased him down and started causing trouble again, so Paul moved south to Athens where he gave the famous speech in the Aeropagus (Acts 17:22ff).



Even though he was in Athens, Paul was constantly thinking about the new believers he'd converted back in Thessalonica, so from Athens he sent his co-worker Timothy back to check on them. In the meantime Paul moved onto Corinth where he spent a longer period of time, arriving sometime in the year AD 50. While Paul was in Corinth, Timothy arrived back with his report on how the Thessalonians were faring. It was then that Paul wrote to them, and the letter is what we now know as 1 Thessalonians.

STUDIES IN 1 THESSALONIANS

Think about how worried Paul must have been for these guys. They were really new as Christians, and were trying to worship Christ in a town where there was a lot of opposition. It's this context that gives us the name of our sermon and study series: *Six Ways to Stand Firm*. We've taken six sections of Paul's letter and asked the question: *How is Paul encouraging these new Christians to stand firm in the faith under loads of pressure?* Christians of all ages and situations find themselves being challenged to stay loyal to Jesus, and so as we listen in to Paul's words of encouragement, we too might find some help in maintaining the faith during our own times of testing.

1 Thessalonians: Six ways to stand firm

Study 1	1 Thessalonians 1:1-10	Receive the word
Study 2	1 Thessalonians 2:1-12	Invest in each other
Study 3	1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:13	Endure persecution
Study 4	1 Thessalonians 4:1-8	Maintain sexual purity
Study 5	1 Thessalonians 4:13-18	Believe in the resurrection
Study 6	1 Thessalonians 5:1-11	Live in light of God's judgment

Study 1 - Receive the word

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1. Have you ever had a life-changing encounter? Someone or some event that has radically altered your life's path?

2. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3. How does Paul describe the life of the Thessalonian church? What might their "work...labour...endurance" have looked like?

3. Read on: vs 4-6. What has given birth to this pattern of living?

4. According to these verses, how might we know whether we're chosen by God?

5. According to vs 7-8, what other consequences have emerged from the Thessalonians' living faith?

6. How does Paul summarise the effect of his visit in vs 9-10?

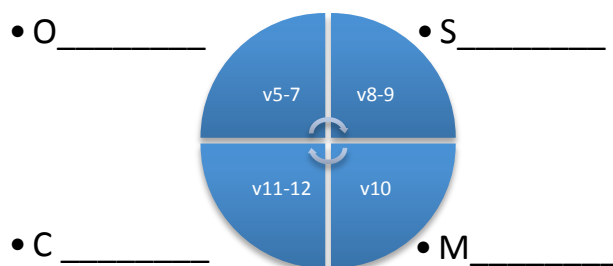
7. Why might v10 be significant for people living under persecution?

8. Would you say that you welcome the message about Christ with "joy"(v6)? What might modern Christian lives look like in terms of our "labour" and "endurance" if we are welcoming God's word in this way?

Study 2 - Invest in one another

1 Thessalonians 2.1-12

1. Have there been times in your life when you have invested heavily in someone? What is it that you have given them? What are the joys and frustrations of this kind of relationship?
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2. How was Paul investing in the Thessalonians? What risk was involved?
3. Read on: vs 3-7. In his ministry, who is Paul trying to please? How did this benefit the Thessalonians?
4. According to vs 8-9, how did Paul's care and love for the Thessalonians manifest itself?
5. And in verse 10? What does Paul say he did to help the Thessalonians here?
6. Finally verses 11-12. What investment is apparent here? How would you describe Paul's manner?
7. Looking back over vs 5-12, complete the following chart outlining the four ways Paul invested in the Thessalonians. Which quarter is your strength? Which one can you improve upon?



Study 3 - Endure persecution

1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:13

1. Can you share a story of when you've persevered through hardship? What enabled your perseverance? How did others respond to your perseverance?
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16. What is the seed that enabled the Thessalonians' perseverance?
3. How are the persecutors described in vs 15-16? Does this description do anything to help us resist those who would persecute us or have us deny the faith?
4. Read 2:17-3:5. What was Paul's fear? How did he respond? (vs 2-3)
5. How had Paul tried to prepare the Thessalonians for persecution? (vs 3-4)
6. Read through to 3:13. Reviewing the whole passage, try and sum up Paul's method in supporting the Thessalonians. What can we learn from him in supporting each other and other persecuted Christians today?
7. What is it that makes Paul joyful? (2:19, 3:8)
8. Would you say that you share Paul's concern for the spiritual well being of others?

Study 4 - Maintain sexual purity

1 Thessalonians 4.1-8

1. Is self-control something you self-consciously exercise? In which areas?
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2, and try and find at least three things that characterise the Christian life. Do any resonate with you in a particular way?
3. Can we please God simply by the goodness of our life? What other things ought we keep in mind when we read this passage? (see 1:4-5, 2:13, 5:23-24).
4. Read on, vs 3-5. What is God's will for our bodies? What difference should "knowing God" make?
5. Think of some other contexts where mastery over your body is a good thing. Why do you think people learn to master their bodies in other ways but struggle with control over their sexuality?
6. What extra dimension to this issue does the first half of verse 6 add?
7. Read on, vs 6b-8. What further motivation does Paul leave us to maintain sexual purity?
8. Summarize the motivations Paul leaves us with in this passage in terms of maintaining sexual control. Which one has the most impact on you?

Study 5 - Believe in the resurrection

1 Thessalonians 4.13-18

1. Have you ever been confused about what you were meant to do next? Either in your job or carrying out a project, perhaps in a new situation?

2. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13. What were the Thessalonians confused about?

3. What does Paul mean when he speaks about not grieving “like the rest, who have no hope”?

4. Read on, vs 14-17. Mark on the time-line the order of events concerning Christ’s’ return.

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5. How might this news have affected the Thessalonians?

6. Read the whole passage again. According to Paul, what is the key event that guarantees all of this?

7. Use the following passages to fill out our understanding of the Lord’s return: Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 23:39-43; 1 Corinthians 15:50-55. What do they add to the picture in 1 Thessalonians?

8. What other questions do you have about the Lord’s return and our resurrection? Does the group have any Biblical knowledge to share?

9. When was the last time you put verse 8 into practice? Do so now!

Study 6 - Live in light of God's judgment

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

1. Have you ever been caught out by ignoring a warning?

2. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2. What does Paul affirm about Christ's return in these verses? See also Acts 1:7. Does this always stop people trying to predict the time of the Lord's return?

3. According to verse 3, what is one potentially dangerous consequence of not knowing the time of the Lord's return?

4. In what ways are people saying "peace and safety" today?

5. Read on, vs 4-8. What effect should knowledge of the Lord's return have in our lives? How often do we find ourselves amending our behaviour because of what we know about Christ's return?

6. Do you find knowledge of the return of Jesus a comforting thing or a worrying thing? For those who worry, what assurance does verses 9-10 give us?

7. Read Luke 12:35-46. In what way does Christ's teaching match that of Paul? Would you say you are a servant who is ready for the master's return?

8. In what ways can we encourage each other to be faithful servants who remain alert for their master's return?

Leaders notes

Study 1 receive the word 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1. A question to get us thinking about radical and lasting change and what causes it. The Thessalonians had a radical change prompted by the word of God.
2. Their lives were completely shaped by their Christian belief, note v3. A glance through the rest of the letter (maybe point out some sections rather than read through the whole thing) gives us some examples. They worked hard on pleasing God because of their faith in Christ's lordship (4:1-2). They laboured (quite literally) out of their love for one another, seeking not to be a burden out of love (4:11-12). Knowing the reality of Christ's return inspired them to endure their trials.
3. The change came after they heard the word of the gospel. Through the work of the Holy Spirit they became convinced of its truth and of the radical change such a message demands of its hearers. Note the Word/message here is not simply "the Bible", but the gospel; the message about Jesus—that he is the messiah, the Lord, the one who saves, the one who will come again.
4. Maybe not the time to go off on an unending tangent about predestination, but it's interesting that a sign of our election (predestination) is our response to God's message. How seriously do we believe it? Allowing for our understandably imperfect attempts at obedience, do we take God's word to be authoritative for our lives? If so, then that's a sign of our election!
5. Others believers have heard about their faith and have been encouraged. When we take God's word seriously and allow it to shape us then others find this to be a great encouragement.
6. Faith and hope. They dropped their belief in idols and worshiped the one true God, and they were filled with the hope of Christ's return.

7. Christ's return means judgment on those who persecute us, it means a new body (important for those who have been or about to be killed for their faith). Here the focus is on rescue from the coming wrath. Knowing God as judge puts the judgment of our persecutors into perspective. Better to stay loyal to the one who saves us from the coming judgement than betray him and survive the persecution that faces us now.

8. There is a challenge here to be deeply formed by God's word and the reality of Christ's salvation and Lordship. Maybe remind people of what happens to lukewarm Christians of Laodicea in Rev 3.16. James 1:22 is also a good verse to raise and perhaps memorise.

Study 2 Invest in one another

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

1. The theme of this study concerns the relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians, in particular the way he invested heavily in them with the gospel. His life among them was such that he didn't want anything to get in the way of their hearing of Christ's message.

2. His investment was to share the gospel. He did this "in the face of strong opposition". Perhaps look at Acts 17.1-9 to see what this opposition entailed.

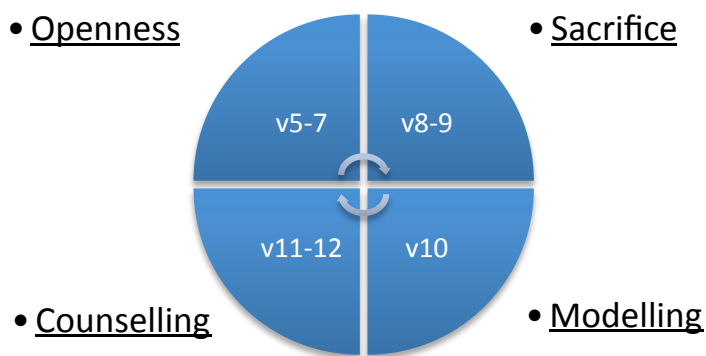
3. Paul's ministry is done to please God. This benefits the Thessalonians because it means he can be honest and open in his approach. As God is his judge (v4), he doesn't feel the need to manipulate or manage people by either flattery (v5) or force (v6). Like a child (v7) he can be innocently honest.

4. But Paul is also like a parent in that he carried out his ministry in a sacrificial manner. He worked double time to pay his own way, not relying on others to support him – which was his right as an Apostle. This was to ensure there was no relational obstacle stopping the Thessalonians from hearing the message.

5. Paul made sure he was modelling the Christian life in front of them.

6. Again like a parent, Paul ensured that he was giving godly counsel to the Thessalonians as they started out on the Christian journey. Note the gentleness with which Paul engaged with them, all while not compromising on the direction that he was pointing them in. It may be worth comparing Paul's method to those of modern counsellors. Modern counsellors will help their clients find their own direction and make their own decisions, and this is a useful service that they provide. But Paul was more certain in what the Thessalonians life should look like, urging them to live a life worthy of God.

7.



Maybe ask the group to think of some modern day examples of each: “What might this look like in our own lives?”

Note: “Sacrifice” doesn’t mean wearing yourself out. In the context of 1 Thessalonians 2 it means sacrificing some rights in order to help others hear the gospel. It means adopting an approach to church life that ensures others don’t jump to the wrong conclusions about your aims. Can the group think of any examples?

Also Note: “Counselling” doesn’t mean counselling as we understand it in clinical setting. It means encouraging and exhorting others along the road of godliness.

Study 3 Endure persecution

1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:13

1. The aim of this study is to reflect on the Thessalonians example of maintaining their faith through trials. The trick with this question will be to keep stories brief while showing some sensitivity to people's personal experiences.
2. The word of God, which is "at work" in the Thessalonians. Also note Paul's use of the "in Christ Jesus" language (v14). Christ himself is there to strengthen us through Spirit and Word.
3. They displease God and are hostile in their attempts to stop evangelism. They are heaping up sins "to the limit" (v16). They are under God's wrath. Paul uses the past tense ("the wrath of God *has* come") to emphasise the seriousness of the opposition they've already encountered. Note Paul suggests that Satan is involved the whole scenario (2:18, 3:5).
4. His fear was that the opposition would prove too much and the Thessalonians would cave in and give up on Jesus (3:5). In response he sends Timothy (vs 2-3) to strengthen and encourage them.
5. He'd warned them before hand that persecution would come.
6. Paul was obviously praying, he was keen to send someone in the flesh to help (if he couldn't be there himself), he had taught them as best he could with warnings about what would happen. But it's interesting that the gospel itself – the original message about who Jesus is and what he has done – this was the thing that kept them safe. The best thing Paul did was to speak the gospel truthfully and clearly from the outset.
7. The steadfast faith of the Thessalonians brings Paul joy.
8. You could also put the question this way: "Is the faith of others so important to us that it gives us great joy when present and great sorrow when absent?" Maybe ask why or why not? Sensitivity might be required here for those with

close family members who are not believers. It is most appropriate to end the study praying that others might remain steadfast in the faith.

Study 4 Maintain sexual purity

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

1. The aim here is to start to show that sexual purity is not actually the most difficult thing in the world. We all exercise at least some control over our wills and bodies.
2. Three things people spot might include: we live to please God (as opposed to people); we aim to find new and deeper ways of doing so (“more and more”, as opposed to being satisfied with surface level Christianity); we live under the authority of Jesus, following instructions.
3. No, we please God first and foremost by believing in the word about his Son. What Paul is speaking about here is what then comes as a consequence of salvation, the sanctified life. Note that this life can only be attempted with the help of God (5:23-24).
4. His will is for us to avoid sexual immorality by learning to control our own bodies. This should be a distinguishing marker between those who know God and those who don't.
5. Sport, maintaining a healthy weight, keeping yourself well-groomed, mastery over the intake of destructive substances like smoking and alcohol. We struggle with controlling our sexuality because sex feels good, but so do these other things! Just because something is pleasurable doesn't mean we ought to give into it or that indulging in it will be good for us. Also our society tells us that there is no need for self-control here, and that giving in is a good thing. Who are we going to listen to on this one?
6. When we give in to sexual temptation we affect others. This is not only a sin against God and ourselves, but also against those we share the experience with. Note the language of “brother and sister”. Who wants to be having such

relations with their brother and sister? But this is what is happening when we forego control in this area, especially within the church.

7. God's judgment will fall upon this sin, as it will all the others. We are rejecting God on this when we reject self-control in this area. Why continue to play with something that God will punish severely?

8. The motivations include: We want to please God, we want to live as people who know him, we want to say we have mastery over our bodies, we want to respect our brothers and sisters in the church, we are mindful of God's judgment on the matter.

Study 5 Believe in the Resurrection

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

1. The theme of this study is how the news of Christ's return is good news indeed. For the Thessalonians it cleared up some confusion as to what was going to happen next to those members of the church who had already died. Given the likely date of Paul's letter, these people would have only been Christian for a very short time before they died (a couple of months). Were they victims of persecution? Paul doesn't say, but this may be the scenario.

2. See above note. Their worry was that their dead brethren would miss out on Christ's return and therefore eternal life. It's a reminder of how confusing Christian teaching can be for those new to the faith!

3. The death of loved ones is incredibly traumatic. But for Christian people mourning the loss of Christian friends and relatives, the sadness is tempered by knowledge of the future resurrection. This is the "hope" that makes our grief different. Note Paul isn't suggesting that we shouldn't grieve (remember Jesus at Lazarus' tomb – John 11), but that our grief has the added element of hope beyond the grave.

4. Timeline:

Cross/Death of believers/Christ's return/Resurrection of dead/Rapture of the living/Eternal life

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5. They would have had clarity on their questions regarding what happens after death. They would have been comforted with the news that they would see their friends and family again one day.

6. Note verse 14. It's the death and resurrection of Jesus that is the key here. "we believe that Jesus died and rose again, *and so* we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" It's Christ's death and resurrection that guarantees all this. What happens to Christ happens to us. He dies so we have 'died' to sin (our punishment has been carried out leaving the path clear to enjoy eternal life), and he has been raised so we will be raised. This is what it means to be "in Christ".

7. Matthew: Judgment will happen at Christ's return (more of this next week); Luke: even though the resurrection won't happen until Jesus returns, we will enjoy Christ immediately after death. The way some Christians put this together is that our souls go to be with Christ straight away and wait for our bodies to be raised and renewed upon Christ's return. 1 Corinthians: For those who haven't died when Christ returns, our change from perishable bodies to imperishable will happen in an instant.

8. This is topic that many people will have questions about. As people share, try and make sure they have Biblical reasons for their opinions. You may wish to stress that it is better to be open about things rather than draw a conclusion that has no biblical backing.

9. When was the last time you put v8 into practice? Do so now!

Study 6 Live in light of God's Judgment

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

1. A question to get people thinking about the dangers of ignoring warnings, and the blessing that a good warning a head of time actually is.
2. Paul affirms that no one knows the time of Christ's return. This is exactly what Jesus said in Acts 1:7 (and also Luke 12 - see later on in the study). No, this doesn't stop people from predicting the end of the world. The most recent well-publicised example was Harold Camping in 2011 who predicted that the world would end on May 21 of that year when Christ made his reappearance in New York. People may remember a cult based in Gladesville in Sydney who predicted that the world would end sometime in the early 1990s.
3. The danger of not knowing is that people can become blasé about Christ's return and fall under the illusion that there isn't anything to worry about, that all is "safe" and "peaceful". As a consequence they can fall into un-repentant sin and in danger of God's judgment.
4. People say "peace and safety" by claiming that: God isn't real, and therefore we should "stop worrying"; all religions are the same, so we shouldn't really be pressed to consider Christ; he is so slow in coming that we needn't worry about him at all; that the culture has moved on from NT times, and so God's standards aren't nearly as strict so we can slacken off.
5. The effect this knowledge should have is that we should be maintaining our standards of Christian living; that slacking off isn't really an option. Self control, sobriety, maintaining faith and love for each other. Holding on the salvation that Christ has won for us. Challenge the group to think about Christ's return more often, and to reflect upon their behaviour in light of it.
6. Some people might find themselves afraid of the idea of Christ's return. We are told that it should be an encouragement (and this is often how the Bible presents it), but the reality of judgment can worry some. Affirm that this means they are seeing the day for what it is, and this is a good thing. But also point out Paul's confidence that the Thessalonians are not appointed for wrath

but for salvation. This is true for every believer. The work of Christ means we will survive this day if we have trusted him and wish to follow him.

7. Note Jesus picks up on the surprise element of the master's return, and on the expectation that the servants will not to be found sleeping but at the ready to welcome him. It might be a good idea to point out that Jesus and Paul agree here. Some people like to drive a wedge between the two, but they have the same theology. If people say that are not ready for Christ's return, then assure them that faith in Christ is the first step, and then affirm that now is a good time to recommit our lives before him. Perhaps there is an area of sin that the individual is unrepentant about? If a lack of assurance is still discernable, then you may have to follow this up individually.

8. Try and encourage some original ideas. What things can a church or bible study do to ensure we remain ready for Christ's return? Ask whether we are really serious about doing such things.