

1 Thessalonians

A Pattern for Disciple Making
(A BIBLE STUDY SERIES)



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Tom Petersburg 2021

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Introduction

It is easy to treat the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians as just an account of a brief road stop during Paul's second missionary journey. His time in Thessalonica was interrupted when his ministry stirred up the city leaders, who ran him out of town in short order. The letter can tend to get a comparable amount of attention from readers today. It is tempting to just pull a few applications for sanctification and end times and move on to another epistle.

Some commentaries categorize First Thessalonians as a light weight epistle, while the more substantial "meat and potatoes" of the New Testament are found in Paul's later epistles. Granted, Paul's later writings are far more doctrinal and extensive than this early letter to the Thessalonians. His later epistles focus on major doctrines of the faith, provide detailed instructions for church life and correct theological errors that crept into the church.

The historical context and Paul's purpose for writing to the believers in Thessalonica are a major factor in how we understand First Thessalonians. Rather than approaching the letter to study Paul's theology, approach the letter to study his disciple making. It is a composite of evangelism, follow-up, teaching, admonition and encouragement. It is an example of how Paul loved people who responded to the Gospel, invested in their spiritual growth and encouraged them in ministry. First Thessalonians is a record of disciple making in practice.

First Thessalonians is a primer on discipleship: the heart and concerns of a discipler, the basic spiritual needs of new converts, the purposes of discipleship and the engagement of new believers in ministry. Paul has provided an insightful and exciting example of New Testament disciple making for 21st Century disciple makers.

What Paul experienced with the Thessalonian converts is not uncommon in disciple making anywhere in the world today. While any ministry has its disappointments, there is also great joy in seeing transformed lives, friendships forged in ministry and new generations of believers reproducing their faith.

The following study is designed for you to draw your own conclusions from the Biblical account. Take your time as you study the letter. The more often you read the letter in one sitting, the more it resonates with a disciple maker. Put yourself in Paul's sandals, in the home of a Thessalonian convert, in the fellowship of a new church, under the threat of opposition, through the agony of being cut off from his beloved disciples. Raise all the questions that you can: why Paul's defense, why this teaching content, why his concerns, what is the pattern, what are the results, what is the impact, what should I reproduce?

May God use Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians to deepen and multiply our ministries.

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Historical Context

Thessalonica was founded in 315 B.C. by a general who served under Alexander the Great in the region of Macedonia, of Greece. In 168 B.C., Macedonia was conquered by the Romans. Twenty years later, Thessalonica was named its capital. Rome declared Thessalonica a “free city” in 48 B.C., making it a self-governing city within the Roman Empire.

Thessalonica was located on the main east-west highway, the Egnatian Way, making it a hub of political and commercial activity in Macedonia. It is estimated that the population in Paul’s day reached over 200,000 people. The Jewish population was large enough to support a synagogue.

Its sheltered harbor made the city useful as both a naval base and a commercial center. Thessalonica became famous for its wealth as well as its immorality, attracting a mixture of Roman upper class and pagan sensuality.

“For centuries the city remained one of the chief strongholds of Christianity, and it won for itself the title of “the Orthodox City,” not only by the tenacity and vigor of its resistance to the successive attacks of various barbarous races, but also by being largely responsible for their conversion to Christianity.”
(www.Biblehub.com, Bible Atlas)



<https://www.biblesnet.com/maps3/The%20Early%20Church.jpg> (Public Domain maps)

Paul traveled through several Greek cities mentioned in passages pertaining to this study series. The distance from Philippi to Thessalonica is about 100 miles, from Thessalonica to Berea is 50 miles, and from Berea to Athens is 260 miles.

✚ Record the events of Paul's journey prior to reaching Thessalonica (Acts 16).

(Acts 16 is the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. While revisiting churches from his first missionary journey, he received a vision to go to Macedonia, his first entrance into Europe.)

✚ Record the sequence of events in the city of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-15).

(Include the events detailed in 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:8 that led Paul to write this letter. By noting the sequence of events, you will gain a clearer picture of the context, duration and circumstances of Paul's contact with the Thessalonians.)

We can only speculate how long Paul, Silas and Timothy were in Thessalonica. From Luke's account in Acts 17:2, Paul reasoned with the people in the synagogue for three Sabbaths. Several other references give credibility to a stay better measured by a few months than a few weeks:

- Acts 17:4 – a large number of converts outside the synagogue.
- Philippians 4:16 – receiving supplies more than once from Philippi.
- 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8 – Paul's personal labor and hardship so he would not be a burden.
- 1 Thess. 5:12 – the selection of leaders who must have been appointed in the church.

The First Letter to the Thessalonians was probably written in the summer or fall of A.D. 51. It was Paul's second New Testament epistle, the first being Galatians (A.D. 49).

✚ What would it be like to travel with the apostle Paul?

General Observations

Read through 1 Thessalonians in one sitting. (You need about 8 minutes)

- ✚ **How would you describe the tone of Paul's letter?**

- ✚ **Describe Paul's attitudes and actions concerning the Thessalonians.**

- ✚ **Summarize how these new believers responded to Paul and the Gospel.**

- ✚ **If you had personally received this letter from Paul, how would you respond? What would his influence motivate you to develop in your walk with God?**

- ✚ **As you read his letter, what do you conclude are Paul's purposes for writing? (List the reference with each point)**

Recap the context.

Acts 16

God called Paul, Silas and Timothy into Macedonia where they ministered in the city of Philippi. Their ministry upset the city leaders. They were beaten, humiliated, jailed and then told to leave town.

Acts 17:1-9

One hundred miles down the road, they stopped in the seaport city of Thessalonica. Hearing the Gospel in the synagogue, a few Jews and a multitude of Gentiles responded. Jewish leaders became jealous and aroused a mob to assault the home of Jason where they stayed. Charges of acting contrary to Caesar were levied against them for exalting King Jesus in their ministry.

Acts 17:10-15

Christians in Thessalonica took Paul and Silas 50 miles down the road to the city of Berea. Paul preached in the synagogue where Jews eagerly examined the Scriptures and many believed. When the Jews in Thessalonica heard of Paul's fruitful ministry in Berea, they came to arouse the city. Some Christians escorted Paul away to Athens, where Silas and Timothy would join him later.

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:8

As Paul anguished over the welfare of the Thessalonians, he sent Timothy back to encourage them. Timothy returned with a report for Paul, who was now staying in the city of Corinth. In response, Paul wrote two letters to the Thessalonians from Corinth.

A snapshot of Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians:

1 Thessalonians 3:9-10 provides a snapshot of the whole letter—

“For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?”

Two things run through the pages of Paul's letter:

1. **Paul's joy.** The Thessalonian converts had become dear friends in their brief time together. As his children in the Lord, they were growing under his teaching and spreading the Gospel.
2. **Paul's teaching.** He was determined to complete what was lacking in their faith. He exhorted, encouraged and implored them as their spiritual father (2:11).

He reminded them of what he already taught them (4:1a), and urged them to excel even more under his continued instructions (4:1b). He did not just pass on some random spiritual truths they might need one day. This letter reflects Paul's disciple-making in practice! It began in person and continued through his letters.

With this background in mind, the following pages are designed to identify principles of disciple making based on Paul's ministry to the new converts at Thessalonica. His attitudes, motives, concerns, encouragements and admonitions serve as a pattern for us as we invest in the lives of others.

Disciple Making Principles

The Scriptures do not identify the best methods of disciple making (i.e., 1-on-1, small groups or classrooms). On the other hand, the Scriptures reveal several elements needed for effective disciple making. Three elements stand out in Paul's disciple making in Thessalonica.

Initiative

- ✚ How does Paul take the initiative in Acts 17:1-3; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:1-4; 3:2?

- ✚ What was it like to have an older believer initiate spiritual things with you as a young believer?

- ✚ What does it require of you to initiate with others? What is the cost/risk?

We are often hesitant to be the initiator. It can be misunderstood by some. Unsolicited advice is often interpreted as superiority; it doesn't feel respectful. Taking the initiative is not imposing your teaching or ministry upon others, or declaring yourself as an authority. Taking the initiative is a step of engaging others, or inviting others to join your fellowship, your study or discussion as you pursue Christ together.

In Chapter 2, Paul gives an extensive defense of his conduct while in Thessalonica. Why? Scholars agree this is not an attempt to elevate himself. Paul's concern is that an attack on his credibility in Thessalonica could potentially undermine the Gospel message the converts had eagerly received.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:3—Paul's exhortation did not come "from error or impurity or by way of deceit." Notice 3 words of his defense:

- Error referred to false teaching, or heresy. Paul was a proven guardian of God's truth.
- Impurity referred to sexual impurity. It was common among cults and religions that used religion to gain sexual favors from converts.
- Deceit referred to a trap or trick. False teachers used magic or theatrics to fake spiritual powers. *(The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, p. 36-38)*

While most disciple makers do not need a rigorous defense of their motives or conduct, Paul's careful example in ministry will serve us well.

- ✚ In the opening chapters, how did Paul describe his conduct in ministry?

Friendship

- ✚ List the words, phrases and metaphors in Chapters 1-3 that describe the friendship that developed between Paul and the Thessalonian believers.

- ✚ How do you think Paul's friendship affected these new believers?

- ✚ Note how relational Paul was in his ministry with other people and churches.
(2 Corinthians 2:4; Philippians 1:3-8; 2 Timothy 1:3-4; Philemon 1-7)

- ✚ What impact have friendships had in your spiritual growth? Who? How? When?

- ✚ What connection is there between Paul's friendship and his prayers for the believers in Thessalonica? (1:2) What are the implications for disciple-making?
(Browse through the openings in Paul's other epistles and note how often he mentions his prayers.)

Teaching

Paul's teaching in the First Letter to the Thessalonians differs from his other epistles. It is not theologically heavy like Romans or Ephesians. He is not addressing a major doctrinal issue like legalism in Galatians or the supremacy of Christ in Colossians. The letter is not instructional for church elders as found in the Book of Titus.

We can only guess that the days in Thessalonica must have been packed for Paul, Silas and Timothy as they taught groups of people, discussed new life in Christ over meals and answered unending questions from their eager converts. Several themes emerge in the letter that Paul is intent on confirming and expanding. They reveal the purposes of Paul's teaching with these young believers. He is concerned that they—

- Recognize the sureness of their salvation (1:2-10)
- Grow strong in their faith (3:10)
- Increase their love for others (3:12)
- Walk in a manner worthy of God (2:12; 3:13; 4:1)
- Endure with the hope of eternity (5:24)

Paul's focus during his initial visit to Thessalonica, and then later in his letter, could be framed as establishing new believers in their relationship with Jesus. This provides a helpful guide for determining what to teach in the early phase of disciple making. Dr. George Patterson of Western Seminary offers similar insight into the timing of our teaching content:

“Classroom instruction is appropriate and helpful for mature believers. But teaching heavy theology before one learns loving, childlike obedience is dangerous. It leaves a person assuming that Christianity is merely having scripturally correct doctrine. He becomes a passive learner of the Word rather than an active disciple.”

(Mission Frontiers Magazine, March-April, 2003, p. 15)

Some may view Paul's teaching with the Thessalonians as basic or elementary, but it was foundational to becoming an active, growing disciple. Read the letter to just observe the results in people's lives: faith, hope, love, transformed lives, strength under affliction, a testimony to the region. They must have devoured his teaching...and found it simple to apply to their lives.

Paul said that he longed to be with them to complete what was lacking in their faith. His teaching addressed issues and questions unique to their circumstances, and reinforced their commitment to remain faithful in the midst of affliction. Paul was more concerned for their sanctification than their comfort and security.

There is no question that every believer needs far more than the content of First Thessalonians to walk consistently with God for a lifetime. BUT, we need to ask ourselves if Paul's teaching in Thessalonica provides a basic pattern for disciple making.

There are a variety of approaches to discipleship in terms of content. The following chapters take a closer look at five themes in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. As you work through the content of Paul's themes, ask yourself how these truths would establish a solid foundation for a growing disciple.

[4]

Teaching—

A Sure Salvation

“...knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you;” 1 Thessalonians 1:4

The human mind has difficulty comprehending that two Scriptural doctrines are both true: that God in eternity past chose (a synonym for ‘election’) who would spend eternity with Him and that man is personally responsible for whether or not to place his faith in Christ as his Savior.

“Against all views we must insist that election, as Paul’s words imply, proceeds from the fact of God’s great love...It is not a device for sentencing men to eternal torment, but for rescuing them from it. Election protects us from thinking of salvation as dependent on human whims, and roots it squarely in the will of God...It is only because God first convicts us and enables us that we can make even the notion of wanting to turn from our sins.”
(The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, Leon Morris, p. 55)

Paul saw many reasons to be confident that his Thessalonian readers were chosen by God.

✚ In 1:2-10, list what Paul considered to be evidence of genuine conversion of the Thessalonians.

Remember the questions you had when you were new in the faith? Many believers, especially those who are young in their faith, struggle with questions: “How do I know if Christ is really in my life; can I be sure that I am going to heaven?” Slow changes, recurring sin, unmet expectations, lack of connection with other believers and shallow Biblical understanding are just part of a list that contributes to our doubts.

Seasoned believers have a significant role in helping new believers understand if their faith in Christ is genuine saving faith. We can explain God’s completed work from the Scriptures and we can encourage them by noting the changes in their lives. It is not a discipler’s responsibility to persuade a person that he or she is a believer, but we can help them seek God’s conviction of where they stand with Him. As these questions are resolved, doubts will be replaced by confidence in God’s completed work. It will result in more consistent spiritual growth.

✚ Note what these cross references reveal about our salvation.

John 1:12

John 3:16-18

John 6:37, 44

Romans 5:1-2 _____

Romans 8:1 _____
Romans 8:14-17 _____
Romans 8:29-39 _____

2 Corinthians 5:17 _____
Ephesians 1:3-14 _____

Ephesians 2:1-10 _____

Colossians 1:13-14 _____

1 Peter 1:3-9 _____

1 John 2:3-6 _____

1 John 5:11-13 _____

(See P. 27 of the Appendix for Spiritual Benchmarks of Salvation in 1 Thessalonians 1.)

At first glance, Paul’s opening comments in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 1 could be interpreted as compliments of their progress in the faith. For Paul, the disciple maker, the comments were a burst of joy as he acknowledged the work Jesus had done in their lives, bearing witness of their genuine saving faith.

**“Therefore, brethren,
be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you;”**
2 Peter 1:10a

A Strengthened Faith

“For now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.” 1 Thessalonians 3:8

Paul’s heart was burdened with the state of the Thessalonian believers’ faith. Were they trusting God in the midst of their difficult circumstances, including persecution in the city? Would their afflictions undermine their trust in Paul’s teaching? Had they wavered in their walk with God and returned to pagan practices? He commended them for the evidence of faith in their lives (3:6), but wrote that he wanted to see them in order to complete what was lacking in their faith (3:10).

✚ **What do you conclude about the faith of the Thessalonian believers described in 1:2-10 and 2:13-14?**

✚ **1 Thessalonians 3:1-10 reveals Paul’s concerns for the state of their faith. What does this imply about the process of disciple making?**

In 1 Thessalonians 3:8-10, Paul’s objective was that these new believers “stand firm in the Lord”. It implies stability. The wording served as a reminder they had a continued responsibility to stand firm, like soldiers repelling an enemy attack. It was their union with Christ that they needed to embrace. (*The Thessalonian Epistles – A Call to Readiness*, D. Edmond Hiebert, p. 149)

✚ **What do these passages teach about faith that helps us stand firm?**

Psalm 37:1-5

Proverbs 3:5-6

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Galatians 2:20

Hebrews 11:1, 6

James 1:2-8

✚ How does faith enable a believer to stand firm in the Lord?

Faith and trust can be used interchangeably. Using the term “trust” helps us understand faith as an action. Because we tend to trust God to the extent that we believe He is trustworthy, our faith increases according to how well we know Him.

✚ What do these passages tell us about God, affecting our ability to trust Him?

1 Chron. 29:10-16 _____

Job 38-39 _____

Isaiah 40-43 _____

Jeremiah 9:23,24 _____

✚ What are your conclusions about knowing God, trusting God and building faith in those whom you disciple?

✚ Additional studies that build faith in young disciples:

Studies on the reliability of the Scriptures, the deity of Christ and the resurrection.

The importance of fellowship, church life.

Knowing God – by J.I. Packer

Trusting God – by Jerry Bridges

Growing Your Faith – by Jerry Bridges

An Increasing Love

“And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for you.” 1 Thessalonians 3:12

Consider the circumstances in Thessalonica as Paul taught about loving others. He had already been beaten, jailed and rejected for preaching the Gospel in Philippi. He loved the Thessalonians enough to continue preaching in their city under continued threats. He loved his enemies; there is no evidence of bitterness toward his adversaries. Paul expected love to be evidence of God’s work in their lives. How well they loved each other could definitely affect their impact as a new church.

 Draw some conclusions from the Thessalonian passages and cross references.

Loving fellow believers—

1 Thess. 3:11-13 _____

1 Thess. 4:9-10 _____

John 13:34-35 _____

1 John 3:16-18 _____

Loving church leaders—

1 Thess. 5:12-13 _____


Heb. 13:7, 16-17 _____

Practical implications of loving others—

1 Thess. 4:11-12 _____

1 Thess. 5:14-15 _____

Paul commended the Thessalonians for their “labor of love” (1:3) and their testimony throughout the region. Their love would have affected the unity of the church, creating a stronger defense against Satan’s schemes to undermine their fellowship. Outsiders would have taken note of the believers’ commitment to one another in the midst of persecution. Their love changed lives.

 Responding to Paul’s urging, how do we “excel still more” in loving people?

The collection of new believers in Thessalonica obviously gathered as a new church. In his letter, Paul charges them to love their leaders and to live together in peace. Love is a major factor in the health and the impact of a church. Love is both experienced and extended within a fellowship of believers. Therefore, part of disciple making is helping young believers understand the importance of becoming established in a local church.

☒ Note Paul's words to the following churches about love.

To the church in Rome (Romans 12:3-21):

In a letter focused on the doctrine of justification, Paul injects some application of righteousness expressed as love in the fellowship of a church. What does this love look like?

To the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 13):

The church in Corinth was marked by immorality, disunity and conflict over spiritual gifts. Is it any surprise that Paul delivered his most recognized passage on love to this group of believers? What is love supposed to look like in the church?

To the church in Ephesus (Ephesians 4:11-16; 5:1):

Much of this letter focuses on God's purposes in establishing the church. Note the connection between the church, spiritual growth and love.

A Sanctified Walk

“Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more...For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification” 1 Thessalonians 4:1, 7

Sanctification means “to be set apart for God’s use.” The word “holy” has a similar meaning—to be set apart from that which is unholy. In the New Testament, sanctification has three aspects:

1. Positional sanctification

When we become a Christian, we are given perfect standing before God as He has forgiven us, and has declared us to be righteous, holy. (See 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 6:11; Hebrews 10:10). We are sanctified.

2. Progressive (or experiential) sanctification

As we walk by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can reject sin, yield to God and pursue holiness. As God changes us on a heart level, not just a behavioral level, He will transform us into Christ-likeness. (See 1 Thess. 4:3; 1 Cor. 6:18-20; 1 Peter 1:2; John 17:17; Gal. 5:16) We are being sanctified.

3. Ultimate sanctification

Final perfection of holiness is gained in heaven. (See 1 Thess. 5:23-24) We will be completely sanctified in our experience.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7, Paul begins (4:1) with a double emphasis: “I request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus”. He urges them to consider how they should “walk and please God”, a reference to the Christian life in general. When he appeals to them to excel even more, he is speaking in terms of progressive sanctification, of continually walking with God in a way that pleases Him.

Paul goes on to address his specific concern about their sanctification: sexual immorality. There is no indication that he was correcting a known problem among the people, but rather helping them understand God’s call to holiness as they lived in a very sexually permissive culture.

“Thessalonica was part of that debased Greco-Roman culture. The city was rife with such sinful practices as fornication, adultery, homosexuality (including pedophilia), transvestism, and a wide variety of pornographic and erotic perversions, all done with a seared conscience and society’s acceptance, hence with little or no accompanying shame of guilt.”

“Further contributing to the sexually permissive environment in Thessalonica was the influence of the mystery religions that advocated ritual prostitution. They taught that if a follower engaged with a temple prostitute, he would be communing transcendentally with the deity the prostitute represented.” (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, p. 102)

It is not unlikely that many of Paul’s new converts had come out of that legally and socially acceptable lifestyle. Paul did not seem to be concerned that he would lose a hearing with these new converts by boldly addressing sexual immorality. He was more concerned about the consequences of immorality in their lives. He loved them enough to step into their personal lives in regard to sanctification.

☒ According to 4:1-7, what does God require of us regarding sexual purity?

☒ What are the reasons that Paul gives for living a moral/holy life?

☒ Sanctification is a continual process in our walk with God. What does God ask of Christ-followers in these passages?

1 Thess. 2:11-12 _____

1 Thess. 3:13 _____

1 Thess. 4:1 _____

1 Thess. 5:15-22 _____

Romans 6:17-19 _____

1 Cor. 6:18-20 _____

2 Timothy 2:20-22 _____

1 Peter 1:13-16 _____

Sanctification is both a work of the Holy Spirit and our response in obedience. He changes our desires; He empowers us to obey. Our response could be summarized by 1 Thessalonians 2:12, to “walk worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom”. Paul issues the same charge to believers in his letters to three other churches: Colossians 1:10; Philippians 1:27; Ephesians 4:1.

To “walk worthy of the Lord” is to walk in a manner consistent with His character, to live in a way that honors His work in redeeming us for His use. We obey Him to please Him, not to earn something from Him. He has already secured our relationship with Him.

Author Jerry Bridges uses farming to illustrate sanctification. The farmer cannot cause the seeds to germinate, the rains to come or the sun to shine—he is dependent on God to do those things. Yet the farmer knows that he must plow, plant, fertilize and cultivate in order to reap a good harvest.

“We can say just as accurately that the pursuit of holiness is a joint venture between God and the Christian. No one can attain any degree of holiness without God working in his life, but just as surely no one will attain it without effort on his own part. God made it possible for us to walk in holiness. But He has given us the responsibility of doing the walking. He does not do that for us.” (*The Pursuit of Holiness*, Jerry Bridges, p. 11)

This is where the transparency of a disciple maker is indispensable. Demonstrate how to develop a consistent devotional life of Bible study and prayer. Let younger believers see how to deal with sin, temptation, confession, forgiveness, grace and obedience. Model how to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit in the pursuit of holiness.

An Enduring Hope

“Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” 1 Thessalonians 5:24

During Paul’s initial visit, he introduced the Thessalonians to the doctrine of end times (2 Thessalonians 2:1-5), giving them hope as they endured the persecution that they experienced. When Timothy brought his report to Paul from Thessalonica, it must have included a question about Christ’s return. Some of the believers had died since Paul was with them, leaving their loved ones in grief. They feared that those who died before Christ’s return would not receive the same blessings as believers who would be alive at His return.

Paul sought to comfort the Thessalonians (4:13-18) by addressing the details of the Rapture. He urged them to live in light of the coming judgment in the Day of the Lord (5:1-11) because of the hope they had in God’s promises. (The primary purpose of Paul’s 2nd Letter to the Thessalonians was to correct further misunderstanding of the Day of the Lord.)

The Scriptures include two purposes for teaching about end times. First, it provides hope, an expectation that Christ will fulfill His promises related to our future. He will never forsake His people; we can count on spending eternity with Him in heaven. Second, it provides cautions of how to live in light of the coming time of judgment. When we understand God’s sovereignty over our future, it changes how we live.

These texts in 1 Thessalonians are just a small part of the overall Biblical teaching on end times. There is disagreement among theologians about the order of events in end times. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the aspects of hoping and waiting, rather than the details of how end times will unfold.

Definitions:

Sleep (4:13): a metaphor for death, commonly understood by both Jews and Gentiles in that day. It was used by Paul to emphasize the restful nature of the death of the physical body for the Christian.

Caught up (4:17): from the Latin of this term, we get the term “Rapture.” Believers who have died will join those believers who are still living to meet the Lord in the air. The return of Christ is certain, but the time is unknown (Matthew 24:36).

Day of the Lord (5:2): mentioned 19 times in the Old Testament and 4 times in the New Testament. It is a term that refers to an extended period in end times including the tribulation, the second coming of Christ, His millennial kingdom on earth and devastating judgment.

Sleep (5:6): this comes from a different Greek word than *sleep* in 4:13. It is a metaphor for a believer’s indifference toward spiritual truths. Paul uses *sleep* here to warn them of the dangers of being spiritually apathetic, a failure to be alert to either sin or the imminent return of Christ. (Romans 13:11-12)

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 describes what is called the Rapture. What does Christ promise at His return?

✚ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 describes the beginning of the Day of the Lord. What does Paul’s imagery tell us what to expect?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11, Paul used a series of contrasts of sons of the day and sons of the night to distinguish believers from unbelievers. In Biblical language, you were called a “son” of something because you were characterized by that thing.

- Light and day – night and darkness
- Awake, sober and alert – asleep
- Obtaining salvation – destined for wrath

✚ Note how the Scriptures use the imagery of light and darkness.

John 3:19-20 _____
John 8:12 _____
Ephesians 5:7-10 _____
Colossians 1:13 _____

Paul assured the Thessalonian believers that they would not experience the judgment in the Day of the Lord (5:9). Despite being sons of light, we are still vulnerable to engaging in the deeds of the darkness.

✚ How should we live in light of the Day of the Lord?

1 Thess. 5:4-11 _____

Romans 13:12-14 _____

2 Peter 3:11-13 _____

In 1 Thessalonians 5:8, Paul likens the hope of salvation to a soldier’s helmet. The helmet protected his brain, his perspectives and thinking. The hope of salvation is the believer’s certainty, not a shakey “I hope so.”

Hope is an expectation that a certain thing will come to pass. Paul praised the Thessalonian believers for their steadfastness of hope (1:3, 10). They had hope despite the persecution in the city, because they trusted God to keep His promises. Paul confirmed their destiny in end times, reminding them of their hope in Jesus as Savior.

☒ Note in these cross references how hope affects the believer:

- Psalm 130:5-7 _____
- Psalm 31:24 _____
- Psalm 43:5 _____
- Lamen. 3:21-25 _____
- Romans 5:1-5 _____
- Romans 15:4 _____
- Romans 15:13 _____
- 2 Thess. 2:16 _____
- Hebrews 6:19 _____
- 1 Peter 1:3-7 _____
- 1 Peter 1:13-16 _____
- 1 John 3:1-3 _____

Hope is vital to every believer, but especially to the younger believer who is coming to an understanding for the first time in his life that God has secured his eternity. As we wrestle in the Christian life with discouragement, despair, frustration and continuous temptation, our hope must rest in God, His unchanging character and His saving grace.

Hope is an important topic in disciple making, whether it involves waiting for Christ's return or the fulfillment of His countless promises. Hope affects our faithfulness to Christ, our endurance through trials and our joy in life. God's promise to complete our sanctification in heaven remains a sure hope.

**For our citizenship is in heaven,
from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ;
who will transform the body of our humble state
into conformity with the body of His glory,
by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.
Philippians 3:20-21**

Appendix

✚ Bibliography

The Bible Knowledge Commentary, editors John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Victor Books
The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, by Leon Morris, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
The MacArthur New Testament Commentary - 1 & 2 Thessalonians, by John MacArthur, Moody Publishers
The Thessalonian Epistles, A Call to Readiness, by D. Edmond Hiebert, Moody Press

✚ Definitions from Discipleship.org

Discipleship – is simply the state of being a disciple. This word (like the word evangelism) is not in the Bible. Unfortunately, in the North American church, discipleship is typically seen as an educational process designed to orient new believers to the biblical and everyday practices of our churches – and so we often prefer disciple making.

Disciple – someone who is following Jesus, being changed by Jesus, and is committed to the mission of Jesus (Matt. 4:19).

Disciple making – is entering into relationships to intentionally help people follow Jesus, be changed by Jesus, and join the mission of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20).

Disciple maker – a disciple of Jesus who enters into relationships with people to intentionally help them follow Jesus, be changed by Jesus, and join the mission of Jesus.

✚ Thoughts about 1 Thessalonians and this study series:

When we take into account Paul's purposes for writing First Thessalonians and the historical context in which it was written, there is not a more concise example of disciple making in the Scriptures. At the same time, Paul's letter provides spiritual insights beyond basic discipleship. First Thessalonians could serve as a study on:

- faith, love and hope
- missions
- conduct of a minister
- sanctification
- church planting
- aims of a growing Christian

In terms of content, there is much more to include in disciple making than what we can draw from First Thessalonians, but the account is a very helpful example of foundational teaching for new and young believers.

It is tempting to come away from a study in First Thessalonians and wish that Paul had given us more detail – more on faith, more on sanctification, more on enduring affliction, more on church fellowship and more doctrine. Yet, we have to conclude that what God gave the Thessalonians through Paul (his friendship, encouragement and teaching) was just what they needed in order to consistently follow Jesus in faith, love and hope. We will do well to reproduce his ministry.

Disciple making “gems” in 1 Thessalonians

✚ Paul was an encourager.

There are 89 verses in this letter. If the letter had been written to me, I would have considered 42 of the verses as words of encouragement. Paul was picking them up, cheering them on and confirming what God was doing in and through them. Who would not welcome Paul walking alongside them in their early days and months in the faith?

Paul’s example prompted me to browse through his other epistles to see if this was a pattern. Now his words jumped from the pages – words of thankfulness, encouragement, prayers and affirmation for his disciples. Good disciple makers are encouragers!

✚ Paul focused on the individual.

1 Thessalonians 2:11 reads, “... just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children.” D. Edmond Hiebert comments on this verse:

“Each one of you,” standing emphatically forward, stresses the individual character of the work with their converts...They exercised discrimination and care in dealing with each individual convert according to his own needs...here the picture is that of the earnest father dealing with his children in education and discipline.” (*The Thessalonian Epistles, A Call to Readiness*, D. Edmond Hiebert, Moody Press, p. 103-104.)

John Calvin remarks, “Instruction given to all is sometimes of little service, and some cannot be cured or corrected without particular medicine.” (“The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians,” in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, p. 345)

People tend to process their faith issues most effectively with another person or two. The smaller the number, the more intense the process. Paul and his mission team focused on the individuals. No doubt, this contributed to the committed friendship that Paul established with the Thessalonian believers in such a short time.

✚ Paul disciplined with an unwavering purpose.

He related as a father to his converts, exhorting and encouraging them, repeatedly addressing their relationship with God—

- That they walk in a manner worthy of the God who called them into His own kingdom and glory (2:12)
- That they stand firm in the Lord (3:8)
- That God would establish their hearts unblamable in holiness (3:13)
- That they walk and please God (4:1)

The Scriptures speak to all areas of our lives, from marriage and family to work to ministry to knowing God. It is easy to become so consumed with ordering our lives according to the Scriptures that we neglect the daily consistent fellowship with God on a heart level that He intended. Paul never let go of his focus on “walking and pleasing God”.

✚ Paul urged his disciples to excel.

Paul used the same word in three verses (3:12; 4:1, 10) that means to increase, to superabound, to excel (in quantity or quality). He continued to raise the bar. Paul did not put them under a legalistic performance, but neither did he leave room for passivity or half-heartedness in the Christian life.

Disciple making principles reflected in 1 Thessalonians

✚ **The Thessalonians “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God”.** They demonstrated the definition of repentance—turning from sin to God (1:9). They also shifted their purpose in life—to serve the living God.

The overwhelming riches of God’s grace can leave believers with the perception that the Christian life is focused primarily on God’s blessings to us. Paul opens a fuller perspective: serving God.

Paul told the Colossians (1:13) that God delivered them from the domain of darkness and transferred them to the kingdom of His beloved Son. We have a new identity, new home and new King. Therefore Paul summarizes a reasonable response—

“For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)

Disciple making includes the process of helping younger believers understand that we are both the object of God’s grace and the agent of God’s grace. The Thessalonians “got it”. Even in the midst of persecution, they must have spoken boldly for Christ as the Gospel spread through the region.

✚ **The most common question in disciple making is— “what do I teach”?**

A lifetime of learning the Scriptures and knowing God comes from topics that could be sorted into several categories:

- Walking with God: salvation, sin, forgiveness, empowerment, relationship with God, grace, faith, love, hope, obedience, Bible, prayer, fellowship, accountability, transformation, ministries of the Holy Spirit...
- Equipping: Bible study methods, devotional disciplines, Old and New Testament overviews, apologetics...
- Life issues: relationships, marriage, family, parenting, work, trial, conflict resolution, worldly culture...
- Ministry: evangelism, disciple making, spiritual gifts, leadership development, church involvement...
- Theology: Christology, soteriology, bibliology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, eschatology...
- Book studies: individual books of the Bible.

The better question may be, “What do I teach to establish a person in his walk with God, to follow Jesus?” Most of the content of Paul’s letter falls in the “walking with God” category. What Paul taught in his brief stay and his following letters established them in following Jesus.

Most discipleship ministries begin with foundational material that falls in the category of “walking with God” topics. We will return to these basic truths for the rest of our lives.

A disciple maker will never teach everything a disciple needs in his walk with God. As younger believers progress in their faith, they broaden both the variety of Biblical resources for growth and the number of godly people who influence their lives. They will take responsibility for their own growth, learning at church, in small group Bible studies and through their own study.

The Scriptures do not give us a “discipleship teaching course” to follow. As young believers are equipped to handle the Scriptures, they learn to feed themselves spiritually. By addressing specific needs in a disciple’s life, he will discover that the Scriptures speak to so many areas of his life, and he will learn to seek and trust God’s guidance.

The discipler is not an expert in all things spiritual. He is a friend who points another to Jesus, engages him in learning to obey Jesus, and passes along what he is learning himself.

Paul prepared the Thessalonians for trials.

Their difficulties included living their faith in a resistant, contentious culture. In 1 Thessalonians 3:1-4, Paul reminded his readers that he previously warned them of coming afflictions. He went on to express his continued concern that they stand firm in the Lord.

While some trials can undermine a believer’s confidence in Jesus, they can also galvanize a believer’s faith. We have to assume one of the reasons for the remarkable growth and extended ministry of these young Thessalonian believers was the pressure brought by their afflictions.

Young disciples are greatly helped by learning that trials are normal, expected and beneficial to their spiritual growth. Too many begin their journey of faith with an expectation of clear sailing under sunny skies now that a loving sovereign Jesus resides in them. When their boat is swamped by an unexpected wave, they are quickly disillusioned with the voyage, and the Captain.

We must let young disciples into our own lives to see the struggles of the Christian life. Our stumbles, God’s strength and grace, a brother’s encouragement, new convictions and renewed faith are elements that they need to observe. It will encourage them to trust God in new ways.

Paul connected his new converts to a local fellowship.

While Paul gave individual attention to people, he must have also united them in a common fellowship. He urged them to read his letter to “all the brethren” (5:27). His emphasis on loving others and submitting to leaders implies that a church had been formed.

A church fellowship provides more than a personal discipling relationship. Believers become part of something bigger than themselves. They are exposed to believers of different levels of maturity and gifting, which motivates them to reach for more. Their understanding of the Christian life expands as they see what God is doing in other people’s lives. Their commitment to Christ is enhanced by loving others and being loved by others.

God never intended the Christian life to be lived alone. From mutual accountability to mutual encouragement, spiritual growth accelerates in the context of a healthy fellowship.

Hope is important for consistent spiritual growth.

Hope, the certainty of the future, was part of Paul’s repeated trio of faith, love and hope.

Disciple making is a process of shifting a disciple’s sight and heart towards his secure eternity. A study on end times can give a young believer a whole new perspective on this temporal life and God’s plans for eternity. Hope becomes an anchor in the storms of life.

Paul obviously covered a limited picture of end times for the Thessalonians. How much to teach a young believer is a matter of discussion. The desired result is hope, and motivation for righteous living, not the speculation (signs, times) or contentious disagreement it often fosters.

Spiritual Benchmarks of Salvation observed in 1Thessalonians

John MacArthur cites 10 spiritual benchmarks that reveal a person is chosen of God and saved by faith: (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, John MacArthur, p. 13-29)

1:3a A faith that worked.

Righteous deeds were being produced in their lives. Works were the result of genuine faith.

Ephesians 2:8-10; 2 Corinthians 5:17.

1:3b A love that labored

“We know we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren.” (1 John 3:14)

1 Thessalonians 4:9

1:3c A hope that endured

An enduring anticipation of seeing our eternal inheritance.

Titus 2:11-13.

1:4 An understanding of election

Beloved of God – we are recipients of His sovereign love, apart from any human merit or wisdom.

John 6:37; Ephesians 1:4-6

1:5 A reception of the Gospel in power and the Holy Spirit

The power of the Holy Spirit opened their eyes to see and respond. The Holy Spirit gave assurance to the preachers that the power of God was at work.

1:6a A genuine imitation of the Lord

New patterns of living replaced their old sinful patterns. 1 Corinthians 11:1

1:6b A joyful endurance in tribulation

Joy can be experienced in the midst of suffering. Tribulation means “intense pressure.” Romans 5:1-4

1:7 A behavior that is exemplary

They went from imitating Paul to being worthy of imitation. They were an example for even older believers.

2 Corinthians 8:1-5 – they gave liberally to the needy in Jerusalem.

1:8-9a A proclamation of the Word everywhere

Sounded forth means “to blast forth”. It is a term used of a blaring trumpet or rolling thunder, a constant sound in ever widening circles. The Gospel spread out from the city of Thessalonica.

1:9b A total transformation from idolatry

They submitted to a new Master. They turned in an opposite direction. Reversal of allegiance.

1:10 An expectant looking for the return of Christ

Sustained, patient, trusting, waiting. His coming will bring the fulfillment of God’s promises. Rescued from the eternal wrath to come. 2 Timothy 4:8; Titus 2 :11-13.

These are benchmarks of God’s chosen people. At times, believers will drift from these realities in their lives. God will draw us back to Him. Peter’s charge is timeless: “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble;” 2 Peter 1:10