



# More or Less

THE FIRST THESSALONIAN SURVIVAL GUIDE

# STUDY GUIDE

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: Welcome to the End Times. . . . . 2

WEEK ONE: More Gratitude. Less Griping. (1:1-10). . . . . 6

WEEK TWO: More Giving. Less Taking. (2:1-12). . . . . 12

WEEK THREE: More Truth. Less Lies. (2:13-20). . . . . 17

WEEK FOUR: More Rising-Up. Less Bowing-Down. (3:1-13) . . . . . 24

WEEK FIVE: More Holiness. Less Naughtiness. (4:1-12). . . . . 36

WEEK SIX: More Second-Coming. Less Second-Guessing (4:13-5:11). . . . . 41

WEEK SEVEN: More Grace. Less Grief. (5:12-28). . . . . 43

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## INTRODUCTION: Welcome to the End Times

Technically speaking, we are living in the end times. If you have the Holy Spirit and have walked with Jesus, you can see it in the world and sense it in your soul. Younger believers may not fully understand how dark our world has become because it was the world they were born into. However, if you ask any older Christian who has been walking with the Lord for many decades, they will tell you that what is celebrated in the world and tolerated in the church is so obviously evil that they are shocked and appalled. Older Christians could have never fathomed such things as the contortion of sexuality and gender, the legalization of recreational drug use, the celebration of abortion, or the normalization of divorce.

Even non-Christians can sense that we are living in the end times of the last days. A recent Pew Research Center survey says, "In the United States, 39% of adults say they believe 'we are living in the end times'...Christians are divided on this question, with 47% saying we are living in the end times, including majorities in the historically Black (76%) and evangelical (63%) Protestant traditions. Viewed more broadly, the share of Protestants who say we are living in the end times is greater than the corresponding share among Catholics (55% vs. 27%) ...The survey also explored Americans' views about a core tenet of Christianity: the belief that Jesus will eventually return to Earth in what is often called the 'second coming.' When asked if Jesus 'will return to Earth someday,' more than half of all U.S. adults (55%), including three-quarters of Christians, say this will happen. Protestants in the evangelical (92%) and historically Black (86%) traditions are more likely than other Christians to say there will eventually be a second coming of Jesus. Respondents who said they believed Jesus would return to Earth were also asked how certain they were that this would happen during their lifetime. One in ten Americans say they believe the second coming of Jesus will definitely or probably occur during their lifetime, 27% are not sure if Jesus will return in their lifetime..."<sup>1</sup>

In the Bible, the end times or "*Last Days*" are also referred to as the "*last time*" and "*last hour*." The "*last days*" refer to the period of time between Jesus' First Coming to save sinners and His Second Coming to join Heaven and Earth into the eternal Kingdom of God. The Bible refers to Jesus' Second Coming, which brings the "*last days*" to a close and ushers in the resurrection of the dead and eternal state as the "*Day of the Lord*," or simply "*the Day*."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/08/about-four-in-ten-u-s-adults-believe-humanity-is-living-in-the-end-times/>



Thus far, the “*last days*” have been a roughly two-thousand-year journey. We are living in the time between the times, in the middle of history. Looking back, we can see God’s prophecies regarding the First Coming of Jesus having been fulfilled, and we can look forward to God fulfilling the remaining prophecies about the Second and Final Coming of Jesus.

## The Sinister Six

The Bible is clear that these “*last days*” would be marked by six increased evil and demonic activities:

1. An increase in those who suffer from stress, anxiety, and mental illness.
2. An increase in those who criticize and mock the Bible.
3. An increase in those who criticize and mock Christian morality, encouraging pleasure, especially sexual sin.
4. An increase in those who love false teachers and a corresponding hatred for faithful preachers.
5. An increase in those who are anti-Christ leads to a massive counterfeit “*Christian*” apostasy, which paves the way for the Antichrist.
6. An increase in wealth, comfort, and a sense that God is not needed for a successful life or concern for eternity.

When Jesus died on a Friday, it seemed like all hope was lost. Then, everything turned around quickly and miraculously when Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday. Like Christ, at a time when it seems like the Christian Church is basically dead, gone, irrelevant, outdated, and defeated, the Lord Jesus Christ will return suddenly and unexpectedly. This will bring about the resurrection of the dead and final judgment.

This is the theme and encouragement of Paul’s letter to a local church called 1 Thessalonians and to all Christians who have also read his words:

**1 Thessalonians 5:1–11** (NLT) — *Now concerning how and when all this will happen, dear brothers and sisters, we don’t really need to write you. For you know quite well that the day of the Lord’s return will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. When people are saying, “Everything is peaceful and secure,” then disaster will fall on them as suddenly as a pregnant woman’s labor pains begin. And there will be no escape. But you aren’t in the dark about these things, dear brothers and sisters, and you won’t be surprised when the day of the Lord comes like a thief. For you are all children of the light and of the day; we don’t belong to darkness and night. So be on*



*your guard, not asleep like the others. Stay alert and be clearheaded. The night is the time when people sleep and drinkers get drunk. But let us who live in the light be clearheaded, protected by the armor of faith and love, and wearing as our helmet the confidence of our salvation. For God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive, when he returns, we can live with him forever. So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.*

## **Longing for Home**

For those who love and trust Jesus and believe in His coming Kingdom, living on this fallen, cursed planet can be very dark, discouraging, and disorienting. This longing for Home causes Christians to ask numerous questions. In the New Testament, there are parts of the Bible where the author answers questions that were sent to him by local church leaders on behalf of people in the church. One example is 1 Corinthians. Throughout the letter, Paul frequently quotes directly from the letter he received from the Corinthians. He also notifies the reader of when he is transitioning from one topic to another with the simple phrase “now” to answer specific questions they sent him in their letter that he is answering in his letter. This is precisely what is also happening in 1 Thessalonians as Paul is also answering questions the leaders in the local church were asking him. One Bible commentator says,

“The apostle’s use of ‘now about’ (4:9, 13; 5:1), which is like the way he introduces answers to points in a letter the Corinthians wrote to him (1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1, etc.)”<sup>2</sup>

Since we don’t have the letter that the Thessalonians sent to Paul, we can only try to determine their questions based on his answers. Here are some of the likely questions that they had and that many – if not most – Christians still have:

1. How long do we need to wait for Jesus’ Second Coming?
2. How will we know when human history is coming to an end?
3. What will Satan, demons, and the wicked be doing before the return of Jesus?
4. What should we do while we wait for Jesus’ return?
5. What happens to people who die before Jesus returns?
6. How do we discern who is telling the truth and who is lying to us?

When presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is common for the Christian to tell the non-Christian that if you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you go to Heaven

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, 1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 13, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 25.





## WEEK 1: More Gratitude. Less Gripping.

**Scripture to Read:** 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

### Scripture for Meditation:

1 Thessalonians 1:2–3 (NLT) — *We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly. As 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.*

### Commentary:

When I held our first child, a beautiful little brunette girl, it dawned on me that I really had no idea what I was doing. I could've read books on parenting, done Bible studies on parenting, interviewed good parents, or tried to do the opposite of my own parents. Reading about parenting or watching someone else parent is completely different, however, than actually raising another human being. By the time we had our third child, a very active dark-haired boy, I assumed that I knew a lot more about parenting by this time. I was wrong. Our third child was literally nothing like the first two. Our fourth child would be even more different! What worked in raising one child did not work for the other. This pattern continued as we raised them through to adulthood.

Pastoring a church is like raising a child – everyone is different, has their own unique personality, and no two are exactly the same. This truth explains the difference in tone and messaging between various books of the New Testament. Each is written by a leader filled with the Holy Spirit to a local church family dealing with real issues that vary.

On the far right, there were highly religious, law-based, non-relational legalistic churches that were heavy on rules and light on relationships. Entire books of the Bible, like Galatians, were written to rebuke these churches and their leaders for putting burdens on people instead of blessings.

On the far left, there were highly rebellious, arrogant, worldly churches marked by sin of every sort and kind, especially sexual. The books of 1-2 Corinthians were written as a series of stinging rebukes to the local churches in the city of Corinth as they brazenly plunged their communities into a perpetual state of Mardi Gras, abusing God's grace.

In the middle, there were all kinds of local churches with their unique strengths and weaknesses, just like in every day since, including today. Among the healthiest churches in the New Testament is the church at Thessalonica, to which 1-2 Thessalonians is written. Paul's tone is very loving and encouraging, noting:



**1 Thessalonians 1:5** (NLT) — *For 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.*

Importantly, Paul's first line reveals he is writing to "the church." The original Greek word "ekklēsia" is the most common word used to refer to the Christian community of believers. A Bible commentary says:

*"In the NT, the word ekklēsia, which can refer to a "gathering" or assembly of people, is used specifically to refer to the community of Jesus' followers." <sup>3</sup>*

Christians are supposed to be in a local church relationally connected to one another and under Bible teaching to grow in their faith and lovingly support one another. The New Testament knows nothing about Lone Ranger Christianity, and before sin entered the world, the only thing God said was not good was for us to be alone. This reality has become obvious since the COVID season in which many churches closed and people isolated at home, having ever since struggled with depression and mental health. God's people need each other, especially when the culture is against them, as was the case in the days of 1 Thessalonians, as well as our own day.

These new Christians had suffered for their faith with joy and remained fully devoted to Jesus and the Scriptures as they:

**1 Thessalonians 1:6** (NLT) — *...received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit...*

Paul also tells us they:

**1 Thessalonians 1:9** (NLT) — *...turned away from idols to serve the living, true God.*

Idols are part of powerful, counterfeit, demonic spirits, often including sin of every kind, especially sexual, which Paul speaks of in both of his letters to the church at Thessalonica. These new Christians were surrounded by the seduction of idolatry by the same spirits at work in our day in everything from entertainment to politics and government. As one Bible commentator says:

*"A variety of pagan deities were worshiped in Thessalonica. Archaeologists have discovered a temple dedicated to the Egyptian god Serapis [or Osiris the god of sexual fertility and the realm of the dead], where a board of some fourteen priests ensured that the rites of the Nile were performed diligently. Inscriptions unearthed from this temple indicate that the Egyptian goddess Isis, who is associated with*

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<sup>3</sup> Derek R. Brown, 1 Thessalonians, ed. Douglas Mangum, Lexham Research Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), 1 Th 1:1–10.



*culture and mysteries, was also worshiped here. Epigraphic evidence reveals that Dionysus, the god of wine and joy, was among the more influential religious cults in Thessalonica. The patron god of the city, however, was Cabirus... Other gods worshiped in Thessalonica included Aphrodite [goddess of sex], Demeter [sensual goddess of fertility and happiness], Zeus [supreme god of the environment], and Asclepius [the god of healing willing to save your body to damn your soul].”<sup>4</sup>*

To establish their new identity in Christ, they are told that they are “*loved by God*”, and “*chosen*” with God the Father acting much like a wonderful earthly father who adopts a child that he loves with his whole heart. The tone is incredibly warm and encouraging.

These new believers remained devoted to loving one another. There is very little correction throughout the letter, as it is instead filled with encouragement for what they are doing well and answers to questions they are struggling with. Too often, the only press that local churches receive is bad press. There have always been some truly healthy local churches, and sadly, they never seem to make the news. The church at Thessalonica is simply a wonderful local church known for:

**1 Thessalonians 1:3, 7-8** (NLT) — *...faithful work...loving deeds...enduring hope... the word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere...*

The reason Paul is writing a letter is because he could not be present. A riot that threatened his life forced him to flee shortly after planting the church. As is always the case, when God builds up ministry, Satan recruits some troublemakers to try and tear it down. Making matters worse, these liars doing anti-ministry were speaking complete lies about Paul.

One, they said he was a religious con man who lied to them about Jesus, took their money, and left town as a crook. Paul refutes this claim, saying:

**1 Thessalonians 1:5** (NLT) — *...And you know of our concern for you from the way we lived when we were with you.*

Paul further defends himself against the false charge in the next chapter (2:1-12).

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<sup>4</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 413.



Two, they said Paul did not love them and abandoned them because he did not care. Paul refutes this claim, saying:

**1 Thessalonians 1:2–3 (NLT)** — *We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly. As 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 Jesus Christ.*

Three, they wrote a false letter pretending to be Paul, which caused great confusion among the new Christians. For these reasons, Paul writes a letter, which he commands be read to the whole church. Paul’s two letters to the church were intended to correct the false teaching that pretended to be from him. Timothy is also sent on Paul’s behalf to confirm both Paul’s character and doctrine as his most trustworthy coworker and spiritual son.

Paul closes his introduction by revealing the overarching theme of his letter, which is that Christians on earth should be:

**1 Thessalonians 1:10 (NLT)** — *...looking forward to the coming of God’s Son from heaven—Jesus, whom God raised from the dead...*

This theme of the Second Coming of Jesus to raise the dead, judge the sinners, reward the saints, lift the curse, and unveil the Kingdom is consistent throughout the letter, helping God’s people have the long view of things as this is the closest we will ever be to Hell.

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## WEEK 1: More Gratitude. Less Gripping.

### Dig Deeper.

1. Imagine yourself sitting with the believers in Thessalonica when the letter from Paul was first read to them as they gathered together. Slowly read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 and highlight each thing that is said that would have been an encouragement to you.
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 and make note of what is said about God and about you as a believer in Jesus Christ.
3. Look up 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 where enemies of the gospel wrote a counterfeit letter pretending to be Paul, which was a spiritual warfare attack on the local church.

### Talk it out. Walk it out.

1. If anyone in the group is new, take some time to introduce yourselves and welcome anyone who is new to the group.
2. 1 Thessalonians is an ancient letter written to an ancient local church that is commended for being healthy, loving, and long-suffering. What are some of the most encouraging church experiences you have had? Why is it important to encourage believers rather than just criticize them?
3. What are some of the most encouraging things that stood out to you in 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10?
4. Paul talks about praying for the church (1:2). How can the group be praying for one another? Spend some time praying over the requests of each person.

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## WEEK 2: More Giving. Less Taking.

**Scripture to Read:** 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

### Scripture for Meditation:

1 Thessalonians 2:3–4 (NLT) — *So you can see we were not preaching with any deceit or impure motives or trickery. For 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.*

### Commentary:

My grandparents on my mother's side raised me for a large part of my childhood. I spent most of my days in their tiny home in La Puente, California. This was primarily a poor Mexican, working-class neighborhood. This neighborhood had zero fancy stores. Not even a Wal-Mart. I had never even heard of Trader Joe's. I remember my grandparents taking us to the Olvera Street swap meet every Sunday after mass near East Los Angeles. The entire block was filled with rows of vendors selling almost anything you could imagine. I remember seeing all the cheap knock-offs offered at traditional retailers. For example, brand-new concert t-shirts, designer handbags, luggage, shoes, along with name-brand clothing were all very cheaply priced. I asked my Abuelita why these things were so much cheaper at the swap meet, and she told me, "They are fakes; these are not genuine."

The same thing is true about Satan. Whatever God creates, Satan will counterfeit. God is the Designer. Satan is the faker. And the entire world is one giant swap meet filled with knockoffs. This simple truth is the key to understanding spiritual warfare and having discernment, or the ability to distinguish between the two. The new Christians in Thessalonica were forced to discern between the following as examples:

- People who are for God (1:1-5) vs people who are for Satan (2:18)
- Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy vs false teachers (1:1, 2:1-16)
- Paul's real letter vs false teachers' false letters (5:27; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3)
- People with the Holy Spirit vs people without the Holy Spirit (1:5, 5:12-22)
- People who believe the Bible vs people who do not believe the Bible (1:5, 2:13)
- People who turn from idols vs people who trust in idols (1:9)
- People who believe in Jesus Christ vs people who do not (1:9)
- People who suffer for Christ vs people who cause Christians to suffer (3:1-7)
- People who control desires (especially sexual) vs people who do not (4:1-5)
- People rewarded at Jesus' Second Coming vs people who will not (5:1-11)



In any battle, the ultimate goal is to eliminate the highest-ranking leader on the other side of the fight. In Thessalonica, this person was the Apostle Paul. Acts 17:1-9 is the historical record of how the church there was planted. Paul and his ministry team arrived in town and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ; many were saved in a revival, then a riot broke out trying to put down the revival, and Paul fled for his life, which explains why he sent Timothy and other leaders along with a letter – because he could not be physically present.

In Paul's absence, as is the case in every age, those who were anti-Christ were also anti-Paul. They began spreading lots of lies about him, which would have confused and concerned the new Christians who were saved under his preaching. History has confirmed that Paul is one of the most brilliant minds in human history. In this section of the letter, we also see that he has one of the most tender hearts. He is clear that the driving intent of his entire ministry is the glory of God, saying he wants "to please God."

In math class, a good teacher will not allow a student just to present an answer but also require them to show their work. In showing their work, the teacher wants to see not only what their conclusion is but why they came to that conclusion. In this section of the letter, Paul is showing his work and assuming the sovereignty of God over his afflictions, believing that everything he and the people are suffering is ultimately being used "by God who tests our hearts." Sometimes, like Paul, when we have "suffered" in "conflict" and been "shamefully treated," we can get bitter against those who wrong us or even bitter against God. Paul's example is incredibly helpful in our day when those who stand up for God get cut down by others.

Instead of using his difficulties to make him bitter, Paul uses them to make him better. His motives become purer, and his heart becomes warmer as he begins thinking more about the people who are hurting than his own hurts, trying to set an example for them as their leader. The next time you hear negative gossip about a pastor, this chapter is a good reminder that leaders are imperfect people used by a perfect God and innocent until proven guilty. Paul explains his love in terms of his head, heart, and hands so that his convictions, emotions, and service are pure in the sight of God.

- **Head** – "...God gave us the courage to declare his Good News to you boldly, in spite of great opposition...we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News..." (2:2,4)
- **Heart** – "...we were not preaching with any deceit or impure motives or trickery...we never came with words of flattery... God is our witness that we were not pretending to be your friends just to get your money! As for human praise, we have never sought it from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we certainly had a right to make



*some demands of you, but instead we were like children among you. Or we were like a mother feeding and caring for her own children...We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too...as a father treats his own children." (2:3,5-8,11)*

- **Hands** – *"Never once did we try to win you...pretending to be your friends...Don't you remember, dear brothers and sisters, how hard we worked among you? Night and day we toiled to earn a living so that we would not be a burden to any of you as we preached God's Good News to you. You yourselves are our witnesses—and so is God—that we were devout and honest and faultless toward all of you believers." (2:5,9-10)*

There is a common phrase that is helpful when trying to determine if the information you receive is true or false: *"Consider the source."* Before you can discern what to believe, you must first determine who to believe. In this section, Paul shares his testimony to other churches as he does elsewhere. A few thousand years after 1-2 Thessalonians were written, we know a lot about Paul and nothing about the enemies he faced. We know about the people saved by the Holy Spirit under Paul's preaching of the gospel, and there is no record of converts attributed to his critics. God has sustained the two letters Paul wrote as books of the Bible and has chosen to forever erase the false book penned by his foes. And, while we are aware of the church Paul planted and served in Thessalonica, there is no record of his enemies doing the same, as Paul was doing ministry and his agitators were doing anti-ministry. Today, nothing has changed. If someone is doing nothing for you but attacking the people and things God has used to bless you, consider the source.

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## WEEK 2: More Giving. Less Taking.

### Dig Deeper.

1. In addition to 1 Thessalonians 2, look up the places where Paul shares his testimony to validate his ministry (Acts 22:3-8, 15- 22; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Galatians 1:11-24; Philippians 3:1-11).
2. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 slowly and prayerfully, asking the Holy Spirit to help you see and feel what Paul is communicating from his perspective. What burden would you have felt as their founding pastor if you had to leave the young church during a crisis, knowing that they were suffering and doubting your love for them?
3. In Paul's next letter, read his request for how the people who cannot be with him can minister to him (2 Thessalonians 3:1-5). Why is praying for Christian leaders who are under attack much better than entertaining gossip or even joining the mob?

### Talk it out. Walk it out.

1. A crisis separated Paul from the church he planted and loved (Acts 17:1-9). Have you ever been part of a church or ministry where the leader(s) were suddenly removed? What did you experience, and how does that help you understand the context of 1-2 Thessalonians?
2. What lies and wrong attacks have you seen come upon godly ministry leaders that sound a lot like Paul's "conflict" in which he "suffered... shamefully" in 1 Thessalonians 2?
3. How can the group be praying for your ministry leader(s) like Paul requests later in 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5? How can you be praying for each other?

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## WEEK 3: More Truth. Less Lies.

**Scripture to Read:** 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

### Scripture for Meditation:

1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NLT) — *Therefore, we never stop thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn't think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe.*

### Commentary:

After more than 20 years of ministry, I have done counseling with a lot of people. I specifically remember one young man who came into my office, and every time I pushed back on the choices he was making, he was able to quote a Bible verse back to me each time he recognized that I was right. I couldn't believe how many verses he knew from memory. I asked him if he was a Christian, and he basically said no. When asked why he knew so many Bible verses, he explained how, as a child, every time he did something wrong, his parents would punish him by making him read the Bible. As a result, he knew the Bible and hated it. This broke my heart.

Counselors commonly talk about two powerful forces at work in shaping who you are and how you process your past and prepare for your future. The first is fear bonds. Fear bonds are negative experiences that tie pain, or even evil, to a person, place, or thing. For example, a child with an abusive parent who never hugs them but only spansks them has a fear bond with that parent. Alternatively, there are joy bonds. Joy bonds are positive experiences that tie positivity to a person, place, or thing. For example, my Grandma Phyllis (on my dad's side) had a love for the Los Angeles Dodgers that was unmatched. When I was a little boy, we would sit together, watch the games, and eat snacks. During the games, she taught me how to keep score the old-fashioned way. Every strike, ball, walk, and run was diligently accounted for. When my Grandma died, we found boxes of old spiral-bound notebooks. She had kept score and stats for every game she ever watched. When she and I kept score together, she would tell stories, ask me questions, and hug me close. To this day, every time I see the Dodgers play, it brings back joy bonds.

One of the most tragic occurrences in Christian ministry is when the Word of God is weaponized to create fear bonds instead of joy bonds. As a Bible teacher, this bothers me at a deep level. Some people have had legalistic, law-based, non-relational, hypocritical religious people treat the Bible like a hammer to pound them like a nail. If



you have had this experience from a pastor or parent, I am very sorry. If you have experienced this from me as a Bible teacher, I am doubly sorry.

**2 Corinthians 3:16** (NLT) — *But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.*

Paul is speaking about the Bible here. The letter of the law is works-based, erroneous Bible teaching about what you must do to earn God's favor and how your failure will remove it from you. Fear-based Bible teaching produces fear bonds. The Spirit of the law is healthy Bible teaching that tells you how God works for you, in you, and through you to fulfill His law in your life by the power of the Holy Spirit. This kind of healthy Bible teaching produces joy bonds. In the Apostle John's first letter, he teaches that it is God's love, not fear, that produces joy bonds,

**1 John 4:18** (NLT) — *Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.*

God loves us; His perfect love overrides our fear bonds and replaces them with joy bonds as we love Him because He loves us. This is the cycle of joy bonds rooted in a loving relationship with God.

God saved me in the middle of a rainstorm coming home from Atlanta, Georgia. Soon, I joined a very small church where kind, godly men invited me into community and poured into my life and my future as a church leader and Bible teacher. They taught me all that God had done for me at the cross of Jesus Christ – that He had now adopted me as His son to be securely loved forever, placed the Holy Spirit within me to live by His power, surrounded me with a loving church family, and gave me His perfect Word to inform and transform all of my life. At that church, these very well-educated men taught me how to study the Bible and how to apply it to my relationship with God, Shannon (my wife), our eventual four children, and everything else in my life. I was spiritually brought up on joy bonds with the Bible. I don't read the Bible because I have to; I read it because I love to. It is freedom and fun for me – like a great adventure to find the heart and will of God to live under God's blessing.

In 1-2 Thessalonians, Paul's enemies are trying to create fear bonds with the people – telling them their pastor was a con man who lied to them, stole from them, and abandoned them. Of course, these are all lies and not truth. Paul, in contrast, is focusing on joy bonds made possible by the Word of God as the source of all their joy bonds.



There is joy in this section between the people and Jesus, the people and their pastor, Paul, and the people and one another. This is because of God's Word, as Paul says:

**1 Thessalonians 2:13,20 (NLT)** — *"...we never stop thanking God that when you received his message from us, you didn't think of our words as mere human ideas. You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it is. And this word continues to work in you who believe....you are our pride and joy."*

Scripture is God speaking his truth to us in human words. The New Testament writers claim that the Old Testament is sacred Scripture, which literally means "writing."<sup>5</sup> The word Bible comes from the Greek word for book. Holy Bible means "Holy Book." It was written in three languages (Hebrew, Greek, and a bit of Aramaic) over a period of more than fifteen hundred years by roughly forty authors (of varying ages and backgrounds) on three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe).

The Protestant Canon of the Bible contains 66 separate books. The Old Testament has 39 books (approximately three-quarters of the Bible). It is a record of God's speaking and working in history from when he created Adam and Eve up until about 450 BC. In the period between the two testaments, people waited for the coming of the Messiah into human history. In the Old Testament, there are 27 books. It begins with the four Gospels, which record the life, death, burial, resurrection, and return to Heaven of Jesus, and then proceed to instruct Christians and churches about how to think and live for God. The Bible is a library of books compiled as one Book, showing divine unity and continuity. This point is illustrated by the fact that the New Testament has roughly 300 explicit Old Testament quotations, as well as upwards of 4,000 allusions to the Old Testament. In many ways, the Old Testament is a series of promises that God makes, and the New Testament is the record of their fulfillment and the anticipation of the final fulfillment of the remaining promises at Jesus' Second Coming.

The Bible is the best-selling book of all time. The Old Testament was originally written on papyrus—a form of paper made out of reeds. By the time the New Testament was written, parchments (prepared animal skins) were also used. (2 Tim. 4:13.) The pages were put together into scrolls. (Ezra 6:2; Ps. 40:7; Luke 4:17, 20.) Chapters and verses were added to provide addresses (not unlike those on our homes) that help us find particular sections. In 1205, Stephen Langton, a theology professor who became the archbishop of Canterbury, began using Bible chapters. In 1240, Cardinal Hugo of St. Cher published a Latin Bible with the 1,189 chapter divisions that exist today. Robert Stephanus, a Protestant book printer, was condemned as a heretic for printing Bibles. As he fled with his family to Geneva on horseback, he arbitrarily made verse divisions

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<sup>5</sup> (Matt. 21:42; 22:29; 26:54, 56; Luke 24:25–32, 44–45; John 5:39; 10:35; Acts 17:2, 11; 18:28; Rom.1:2; 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 15:4; 16:26; 1 Cor. 15:3–4; Gal. 3:8, 22; 4:30; 1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Tim. 3:16; James 4:5; 2 Pet. 1:20–21; 3:15–16.)



within Langton's chapter divisions. His system was used for the first English Bible (The Geneva New Testament of 1557) and became today's system of 31,173 verses.

The Bible's chapters and verses were not applied with any consistent method, and while helpful, they are not authoritative. Because the Bible was not intended to be read in bits and pieces, reading verses out of context can lead to serious misunderstanding. Thus, rightly interpreting particular sections of the Bible requires paying attention both to the immediate context and the overall context of the whole Bible.

The opening line of the Bible introduces us to its Hero, God, who is revealed throughout the rest of the pages of Scripture. In the closing line of the New Testament, we are reminded that our hope is in *"The grace of the Lord Jesus."* Thus, the written Word of God reveals to us the incarnate ("in human flesh") Word of God, Jesus Christ. Without the written Word, we cannot rightly know the incarnate Word.

The Old and New Testaments are about Jesus – anyone can read the Bible, but only someone who reads it in the Spirit comes to this rightful conclusion. Some prefer the New Testament to the Old Testament because they wrongly believe that only the New Testament is about Jesus. However, Jesus Himself taught that the Old Testament was primarily about Him while arguing with the theologians in his day:

**John 5:39–40** (NLT) — *You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.*

The Bible is not just principles to live by, but a Person to live with. Following His resurrection, Jesus opened the Old Testament to teach about Himself:

**Luke 24:27** (NLT) — *Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*

Likewise, in speaking to his disciples, Jesus said:

**Luke 24:44** (NLT) — *"When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled."*

We then read that he:

**Luke 24:45** (NLT) — *...opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*

Jesus' own words about Himself as the central message of the Old Testament are pointedly clear.

**Matthew 5:17–18** (NLT) — *"Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish*





## WEEK 3: More Truth. Less Lies.

### Dig Deeper.

1. Beginner's Guide to Studying the Bible: <https://youtu.be/uviqRUaUkfc>
2. Does God Still Speak to Us Today? <https://bit.ly/3Uvsnt1>

### Talk it out. Walk it out.

1. In your own words, discuss the difference between having fear bonds with Scripture and joy bonds.
2. Which members of the group have had some fear bonds with the Scriptures? Any examples they are willing to share might be very helpful.
3. Which members of the group have had some joy bonds with the Scriptures? Any examples they are willing to share might also be very helpful.
4. How can you pray for each other, in general, and specifically, for each person to enjoy God's Word?

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## WEEK 4: More rising-up. Less bowing-down.

**Scripture to Read:** 1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

### Scripture for Meditation:

1 Thessalonians 3:7 (NLT) — *So we have been greatly encouraged in the midst of our troubles and suffering, dear brothers and sisters, because you have remained strong in your faith.*

### Commentary:

What comes out of a...

...bottle of ketchup when you squeeze it under pressure?

▸ *Ketchup.*

...a bottle of mustard when you squeeze it under pressure?

▸ *Mustard.*

...a tube of toothpaste when you squeeze it under pressure?

▸ *Toothpaste.*

...a Christian when you squeeze them under pressure?

▸ *It depends — entitlement, bitterness, anger, jealousy, cursing, and worse come out of some Christians. Gratitude, forgiveness, joy, generosity, worship, and better come out of other Christians.*

The truth is, we often don't really know what is in us until we are squeezed under pressure. The squeezing and pressure on the outside reveal who we really are on the inside. For this reason, the worst seasons of life can be the best opportunity to grow in Christlikeness for two reasons. One, if what comes out of us is bad, we can repent, be forgiven, and be empowered by the Holy Spirit to experience deep healing and change from the inside out. Two, if what comes out is good, we can rejoice and see God use our test as our testimony to encourage others.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul is writing to new Christians who are being squeezed by the pressure of everything from spiritual warfare, false religious teachers, intense pressure from a godless corrupt culture, and their own ignorance as they are new to God's Word without a lot of Bible teaching to fall back on. The letter explains the plight of Paul as the shepherd and the people as the flock as "*affliction...[surrounded by] idols... suffered...shamefully treated...much conflict... suffered the same things from [those] who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets...Satan hindered...suffer affliction...the tempter had tempted you...distress and affliction...evil...*"



The letter also explains their response as *"steadfastness...hope in our Lord Jesus Christ... power...in the Holy Spirit...full conviction...joy of the Holy Spirit...an example to all the believers...faith...very dear... serv[ing] the living and true God...you received the word of God...faith and love...standing fast in the Lord... thanksgiving...joy...to please God...holiness...brotherly love...walk properly...children of light, children of the day... encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing...at peace..."*

Paul loved the church he planted, but he had to leave it suddenly shortly after planting it due to mobs and a riot. In his absence, critics and enemies started a somewhat successful smear campaign to discredit Paul and destroy what he had taught them. Without the kind of communication technology we have today, Paul was not getting many updates and was concerned. So, Paul sent his faithful right-hand man, Timothy, along with other godly leaders who would continue the ministry they began, lead and feed the new Christian flock, and bring back a report to Paul about how they were faring.

These Christians knew little, but they obeyed and believed what they had been taught. Today, the opposite is sadly true. Most Christians know a lot but obey and believe little. The Bible repeatedly says that **learning + obeying = blessing**.

- In John 13:17, Jesus said, *"Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them."*
- In Luke 11:28, Jesus said, *"But even more blessed are all who hear the word of God and put it into practice."*
- In James 1:22, Jesus' half-brother James said, *"But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves."*

When Paul receives the report about the church at Thessalonica, he hears how they are obeying what he has been teaching. Importantly, Paul had taught them that they were not just *"destined"* by God for salvation but also for suffering (3:3). Paul did a good job teaching them that while God loved them, Satan hated them and that while Heaven was their home, the world was their temporary residence. Until they are home with God, they will suffer a bit like Jesus in this world.

Teaching people how to suffer well is crucial, and the people were well-taught by Paul and applied what they had been told in the fires of daily trials. Paul says this very thing:

**1 Thessalonians 3:4** (NLT) — *Even while we were with you, we warned you that troubles would soon come—and they did, as you well know.*



Admittedly, how to suffer is not a popular subject and can seem dour or even discouraging. However, since we are in a cursed fallen world run by an Enemy, we need to expect some affliction and be prepared for it.

This is an amazing report from new Christians who have not seen their pastor in some time but have been suffering for what feels like a long time. The new Christians were obeying what Paul and others had taught them from God's Word, and he was overjoyed. Imagine a parent in the military who is deployed for months, unable to communicate with their family, worried sick about them as some had health struggles, and then they get the good news of a clean bill of health and that the whole family was thriving and you understand something of the tone of 1 Thessalonians 3. This explains Paul's exuberant statement:

**1 Thessalonians 3:6, 9** (NLT) — *But now Timothy has just returned, bringing us good news about your faith and love. He reports that you always remember our visit with joy and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you. So we have been greatly encouraged in the midst of our troubles and suffering, dear brothers and sisters, because you have remained strong in your faith. It gives us new life to know that you are standing firm in the Lord. How we thank God for you! Because of you we have great joy as we enter God's presence.*

As you read the entire two letters Paul wrote, you can see the themes of God's love, the Word of God, the example of Jesus, the power of the Spirit, and caring for one another as a church family as the bonds that hold them together in joy.

Despite what the Father of Lies (Satan) shouts through the media and social media, not all Christians are hypocrites and not all churches are bad. While Paul longs to visit them, in the meantime, he comforts them with triple truths that should comfort us as well.

**One**, God is present with people we cannot be present with. Sometimes, the person we love is quarantined in the hospital, living far away, deployed with the military, or we are in a season when we want to be with them but, for some reason, cannot. This is a deep comfort to the believer that when we are hurting, we are not alone, and when those we love are hurting, they are not alone.

**Two**, you can be with someone spiritually even when you cannot be with them physically. Paul does this by communicating via letter, and we can add a phone call, text, email, and other technological means we have in our day. Paul also does this by praying, saying, "*Night and day we pray earnestly for you...*" (3:10). Those who are deeply sensitive to the presence of the Holy Spirit will report that their soul can literally



feel the power of prayer from people who are not with them physically but connected to them by the Holy Spirit spiritually.

**Three**, one day, the bad will end, and good will begin and never end. Eventually, we will all die and go Home, or Jesus will return and bring Home to us. Either way, the broken world we live in has an expiration date and things won't be like this forever. Paul is telling them and us that there are some pains and perils for God's people in this life that are simply unavoidable. We cannot make life perfect on this side of glory any more than we can make ourselves perfect on this side of glory. Nothing is perfect until Jesus returns to do what only He can do – make all things perfectly new! Until that day, we need to have the long view of things and wait for the glorious day *“when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people.”* (3:13).

Too often, we can wrongly think of the end of this life as a finish line. For the Christian, the end of this life is a starting line, and everything we do and learn beforehand is to prepare us for the race that never ends. This is the long view of things made possible by Jesus' resurrection, which is the guarantee of our resurrection.

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## WEEK 4: More rising-up. Less bowing-down.

### Dig Deeper.

1. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 carefully to learn more about Jesus' Second Coming.
2. In prayer, honestly ask the Holy Spirit if there is anything you have been unwilling to learn or obey that has hindered His blessing in your life. If He brings a Scripture or example to mind, spend some time journaling out why you are stumbling in this area and how you can start moving ahead by practicing the spiritual equation:
  - **Learning + Obeying = Blessing.**

### Talk it out. Walk it out.

1. How have you seen the process of learning + obeying = blessing work practically with some very specific examples in your own life?
2. This section talks about enduring "distress" and "affliction." Distress is the emotional pressure brought on by the trials and troubles of life. Affliction is some trouble in life that feels oppressive and unsafe. Are there any things in your life currently that sound like distress or affliction? How has your response been, and how can it improve?

3. How can we pray for you?

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## WEEK 5: More holiness. Less naughtiness.

**Scripture to Read:** 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

### Scripture for Meditation:

1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 (NLT) — *Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we instructed you before. Then people who are not believers will respect the way you live, and you will not need to depend on others.*

### Commentary:

I was a very young pastor, new to ministry, and trying my best to teach the Bible to a bunch of brand new, even younger, teenage Christians. Some had grown up in church, but most hadn't. Like almost every new Christian, they had no idea what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior for a Christian or any idea where the Bible drew various moral lines. During the summers, I held an outdoor pool party so that the "cool" kids would come. We met outside, and many showed up, some with cigarettes. I had prepared a nice Bible study, and within the first minute, I got interrupted by the new Christians who wanted to know if we could do Q&A instead. I said yes, wrongly assuming that I would be answering the typical questions ministry leaders are trained to answer – creation vs evolution, whether the Bible is trustworthy, how we know there is a God, etc. Instead, pretty much every question was about sex or the end times. Mostly sex. And after a parade of sex questions, I asked the group if they were trying to make this the most awkward Bible study in history or if they were truly genuine. They sincerely wanted to know what the Bible said, both the new Christians and the non-Christians. The handful of kids at the study who grew up in conservative Christian homes pretty much blushed the entire Bible study and did not blink or make eye contact. Honestly, I don't think they even understood some of the questions.

Christianity started out largely as a Jewish movement with a handful of non-Jews (Gentiles) who adopted the Jewish language, customs, and cultures. There was little debate about what was right and wrong behavior because the Old Testament was the center of life for everything from personal morality to family systems, the legal system, entertainment, and even government. All that changed when Gentiles started worshipping the Jewish Jesus and wanting to learn the Bible. The Gentiles brought a flood of new questions to be answered, ones that had been long settled among the Jewish people. This is the backdrop for this section of Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica as he writes:



**1 Thessalonians 4:3–5 (NLT)** — *God's will is for you to be holy, so stay away from all sexual sin. Then each of you will control his own body and live in holiness and honor—not in lustful passion like the pagans who do not know God and his ways.*

The New Testament was written in the Greek language, which was a culture that predominated the Roman Empire. The sexual anarchy in that day was very much like our own. Older men were encouraged to groom young boys for sex. The cities in which Christianity spread were filled with perverted sexuality enmeshed with demonic spirituality. This included temples in cities like Corinth, where the demonic fertility goddess Aphrodite had over a thousand male and female prostitutes waiting to have sex without limits. This explains why Paul's letter to the Corinthians instructs them that Christians cannot have sex with a close relative, a person of the same sex, engage in orgies, fornicate by living and sleeping together before marriage, commit adulterous sex outside of marriage, abandon their God-given sex and gender, or return to having sex at the pagan temples. These new Christians in Paul's day were used to the same kind of gender and sexuality issues that permeate our own day.

The passion for sex is like a fire, and marriage is the fireplace that God created to contain it. Whenever it is taken out of the fireplace of marriage, sex starts burning down our relationship with God, marriage, family, health, and culture.

Some things are legal with the government but sinful with God. In the Bible, sexual sin includes homosexuality, erotica, bestiality, bisexuality, fornication, friends with benefits, adultery, swinging, prostitution, incest, rape, polygamy, polyandry, sinful lust, pornography, pedophilia, sexually touching someone else (besides your spouse) in any way with or without clothes on, and sexually viewing or talking to someone else including via technology. The Bible often uses the word "*porneia*," from which we get our English word pornography, as a bit of a catch-all category for various sexual sins. The Bible does this because sinners tend to find new ways to sin sexually, and God wants us to deal with our hearts honestly because they lead our bodies. Anything outside of one husband with one wife is contrary to God's design for flourishing.

This divine design for married sex is solely one husband and one wife. Anyone else involved in any way is ultimately harmful. God made our bodies male and female for sexual pleasure, and for the Christian, God is the authority over our bodies and what we do and do not do with them. Worship is not just the songs we sing in church but the decisions we make with our bodies. Elsewhere, Paul writes:

**Romans 12:1–2 (NLT)** — *And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new*



*person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

The Bible is not anti-sex. The Bible is pro-marriage and pro-sex within marriage. People see sex in one of three ways:

1. **Sex as god** – For some people, they lack sexual boundaries and control and their sexual urges rule over them like their functional god – what they sacrifice their body and energy to as a form of worship. In this section of 1 Thessalonians, Paul is explaining this very sin.
2. **Sex as gross** – For some people, because of prudish, unhealthy Bible teaching, an overly conservative upbringing, and/or sexual addiction or abuse, sex is seen as something gross, off-putting, and base.
3. **Sex as gift** – According to the Bible, sex is a gift from God to be enjoyed by a married couple within the confines of the Scriptures and limits of their conscience.

This gift of heterosexual married sex was given by God for six reasons:

1. Pleasure (Song of Songs)
2. Children (Genesis 1:28)
3. Oneness (Genesis 2:24)
4. Knowledge (Genesis 4:1)
5. Protection (1 Corinthians 7:2-5)
6. Comfort (2 Samuel 12:24)

Imagine if this lesson were not heeded. These new Christians would be living together before marriage, having children out of wedlock, committing adultery, and living lives of sexual addiction and brokenness. In our day, the cultural avalanche against most any restriction on sexuality has created a completely broken culture with people who are suffering because of everything from sexual addiction to sexual abuse. Consider for a moment that if everyone on the earth obeyed the Bible just with respect to their sexuality, we would have no more sexual assault, no more sexual addiction, no more out-of-wedlock pregnancies, no more need for widespread abortion, no pornography, no sex trafficking, and no more adultery. This kind of living is inexcusable for God's people, as Paul tells the Thessalonians:

**1 Thessalonians 4:8 (NLT)** — *Therefore, anyone who refuses to live by these rules is not disobeying human teaching but is rejecting God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.*



Not only are Christians called to live a countercultural life sexually, they are called to do the same in every area of life:

**1 Thessalonians 4:7 (NLT)** — *God has called us to live holy lives, not impure lives.*

Holiness means being set apart, distinct, and belonging to God, who is holy. A Bible Dictionary says,

*“The biblical concept of ‘holiness’ is grounded in the idea of being set apart and transcendentally distinctive. When the Bible claims that God is holy, it means primarily that he is radically distinctive in sphere, in character, and in requirements...As a quality or attribute of God, the term also carries the sense of ‘morally good’ and ‘ethically pure.’”*<sup>6</sup>

In closing this section, Paul encourages believers to “love” in a world filled with hate (4:9), “live a quiet life” in a world filled with conflict (4:11), “mind your own business” in a world filled with gossip and busy bodying (especially online) (4:11), “and working with your hands” instead of being entitled and a burden to others expecting them to pay your bills and provide for your needs (4:11). The goal of Christians and their churches is “people who are not believers will respect the way you live” (4:12). If we are dependent on God, and care for one another as God’s church family, the results will be freedom and health. We will be free to live our lives as God instructs and healthy because we are not following the same self-destructive patterns in the greater culture that lead to skyrocketing addiction, depression, brokenness, mental health, debt, and hopelessness. If we live as God’s countercultural people, the goal is not to look down on lost people who do not yet know Jesus but to invite them into our homes, lives, and churches to see that there is a better and healthier way of life that is made possible only by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

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<sup>6</sup> Hon-Lee Kwok, “Holiness,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).



## WEEK 5: More holiness. Less naughtiness.

### Dig Deeper.

Look up the reasons why God made sex for heterosexual marriage:

1. Pleasure (Song of Songs)
2. Children (Genesis 1:28)
3. Oneness (Genesis 2:24)
4. Knowledge (Genesis 4:1)
5. Protection (1 Corinthians 7:2-5)
6. Comfort (2 Samuel 12:24)

### Talk it out. Walk it out.

1. Paul commends this church for loving one another well. How do you feel that is going in your church or ministry? How could you help improve healthy relationships and a welcoming environment?
2. How would people simply become healthier if they followed the wisdom in this section of Scripture? Practically, in what ways would our culture and the quality of people's lives simply improve dramatically?
3. Who do you know that needs to be invited to your home or church to see the difference that life with Jesus makes? Spend some time praying for them and then invite them to do just that.

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## WEEK 6: More second-coming. Less second-guessing.

**Scripture to Read:** 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

### Scripture for Meditation:

1 Thessalonians 4:16 (NLT) — *For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves.*

### Commentary:

There are two ways and perspectives offered to us in the way of news:

**Option 1: Daily News Updates.** This means news in real-time from sources such as the nightly news or on social media. The daily news tends to create a lot of anxiety and speculation because the outcome is open-ended. When we are uncertain about what the future holds, it often causes anxiety in the present.

**Option 2: The History Channel.** This means news from the past from sources such as the History Channel. We can use biographies or historical footage to report events from the distant past that are long settled.

People tend not to get anxious watching, for example, old footage of World War II as compared to current geopolitical events that could culminate in World War III. For God, everything is the History Channel, and nothing is the nightly news. God created time and can work in time but is not bound by time. God sees everything in its finished state and invites us to trust Him for a happily-ever-after ending for all of His people. To walk with Jesus is to march in the angelic army with the God who overcomes the world. We are to believe this by “our faith” until we see it by sight, as God does.

Roughly 25% of the Bible was prophecy when it was written. Prophecy is when God, who knows and rules the future, reveals it to His people so that they can live with less anxiety because they know the end of History. The storyline of the Bible is that Jesus came once in humility to save sinners and that Jesus is coming again in glory to raise the dead, fill Heaven, defeat Satan and demons, lift the curse, and rule and reign forever and ever. When God finished creating our world and our parents in Genesis 1-2, He said everything was good and everyone was very good. Since sin entered the world, God has not abandoned His original divine design. God will return everything and everyone to the state of Genesis 1-2.

Knowing all of this helps Christians waiting for Jesus’ Second Coming to obey the most common command in all of the Bible, “fear not.” We can live by faith, not fear because



we know that Jesus is over everything and everything, is our good Lord and has a perfect plan to work out all things for the good of those who love Him.

The new Christians in Thessalonica were struggling with the same things we are. They had a corrupt government, bankrupt culture, enemies and critics, and, as new Christians, a lot of questions.

One question they had was, *“What happens to our believing family and friends who die before the Second Coming of Jesus?”* We’ve all lost people we care about, and their passing opens up a lot of questions. Paul says that believers who die before Jesus returns are not *“dead”* but rather *“asleep.”* His analogy is that their body is lying in the ground just as our body sleeps at night. Their soul, however, has gone to be with Jesus until the soul and body are rejoined at the final resurrection. Paul explains that Jesus will descend from His Heavenly throne, along with His angelic army, and believers will rise from the dead as Jesus rose from death. Paul says that knowing about Jesus’ Second Coming and how history will end allows believers to:

**1 Thessalonians 4:18** (NLT) — *...encourage each other with these words.*

To encourage someone is to pour courage into them. When we know that there is eternal life, we know that, if our life here was not that great, when we die, life really begins. If we suffer in this life, we know that we will be rewarded forever in Jesus’ Kingdom. If we are sick or unhealthy in this life, we know that we will be completely healed forever one day. If we miss loved ones who have gone Home, we have a forever reunion to look forward to. All of this should encourage us and pour courage into us to live this life fully and freely for Jesus!

Paul then says:

**1 Thessalonians 4:17** (NLT) — *Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever.*

From this and other Bible verses, some Christians teach the rapture. Just like Jesus ascended to Heaven, when He descends, we seem also to ascend to meet Him. A Theological Dictionary says:

*“The Latin verb rapio means ‘to snatch, or seize.’ The English word rapture, derived from it, has a double usage. Generally it means ‘ecstatic delight,’ but in popular theology it means ‘the catching up’ of the church to meet the Lord at His second coming.”*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Cairns, Dictionary of Theological Terms (Belfast; Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 361.



## When We Die, Our Body Goes into the Ground and Our Soul Goes to the Lord

- **2 Corinthians 5:8** (NLT) — *Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord.*
- **Philippians 1:21, 23** (NLT) — *For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better...I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me.*

## Jesus Rose From Death and Raises the Dead

- **John 11:25–26** (NLT) — *Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this..."*

## The Curse Will Be Lifted Forever

- **Isaiah 65:17** (NLT) — *"Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth, and no one will even think about the old ones anymore.*
- **Acts 3:21** (NLT) — *For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets.*
- **Romans 8:18–22** (NLT) — *Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*
- **2 Peter 3:13** (NLT) — *But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness.*

## Heaven and Earth Come Together Forever

- **John 14:1–3** (NLT) — *"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.*



- **2 Corinthians 5:1** (NLT) — *For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands.*
- **Hebrews 11:16** (NLT) — *But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*
- **Revelation 21:1–3** (NLT) — *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared...I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven...I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them...And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there...Nothing evil will be allowed to enter, nor anyone who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.*

## We Will See Jesus Face-to-Face

- **1 Corinthians 13:12** (NLT) — *Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity...*
- **Revelation 22:4** (NLT) — *And they will see his face...*

Like a kid excited to open their presents, knowing all that will happen when Jesus returns, Christians have always asked, "When is Jesus coming back?" If you want to study this more, it is called "eschatology," which is the study of the end times. There is great debate among Christians who love Jesus and believe the Bible on the details surrounding His return. Since we won't really know until He does return, it can be fun to delve into this area of Bible study, but it is nothing we should divide over. The Thessalonians had this very sort of question, and Paul's answer is that he does not know because only the Lord knows when He will return. Paul does teach, however, that there will be birth pains. Paul is quoting Jesus Christ.

**Matthew 24:8** (NLT) — *...all this is only the first of the birth pains, with more to come.*

In context, Jesus is talking about the signs of the end of the age, what the world will be like as we get closer to the persecution of God's people, and the increase of evil before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In this section of Scripture, Jesus foretells the



destruction of the Temple, which happened in 70 A.D., which would be followed by false christs that were counterfeit anti-Christ; the increase of political conflict and wars lead by evil rulers of godless nations; and physical and natural disasters referred to as 'famines' and 'earthquakes.' Following all of this will be the outlawing of the Christian faith, tribulation, martyrdom, the increasing hatred of believers, and mass apostasy as numerous people fall away from the faith...When Jesus uses the language of 'birth pains,' He is saying that history will be born again just as believers are. When we were born, our mothers experienced great pain and pressure that slowly increased until the suffering was unbearable. But, out of this suffering came birth and new life. Jesus is saying that the closer we get to the end of this age and the beginning of the age to come, the birth pains will get more frequent and intense.

Paul's encouragement is to live life prepared to meet Jesus any day. We never know if we will die today or if Jesus will return. So, we should live every day, ready to meet our Lord face-to-face.

Lastly, we do not know when Jesus will return, but the Bible does tell us what will be happening just before He does. 2 Timothy 3:1-5 summarizes the "last days," saying:

**2 Timothy 3:1-5** (NLT) — *You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!*

Our only hope is Jesus Christ. Thankfully, He is guaranteed to return before it's too late and will make all believers and all creation perfect forever!

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## WEEK 6: More second-coming. Less second-guessing.

### Dig Deeper.

Look up the reasons why God made sex for heterosexual marriage:

1. In this section, Paul answers some of the questions that the new Christians had about Heaven.
  - I preached through an entire series answering the most common questions about Heaven for free here: <https://bit.ly/3vM4T8p>
2. To learn more about what happens after we die, read 1 Corinthians 15.

### Talk it out. Walk it out.

1. Who are you most looking forward to meeting in the Kingdom of God?
2. What are you most looking forward to experiencing in the Kingdom of God?
3. The Thessalonians had a lot of questions about what happens when we die and what happens after we rise. What questions do you have?
4. How can we pray for you?

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## WEEK 7: More grace. Less grief.

**Scripture to Read:** 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

### Scripture for Meditation:

1 Thessalonians 5:16–19 (NLT) — *Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit.*

### Commentary:

When you go in to visit your doctor, say for your annual checkup, it is guaranteed that before your session ends, he will hand you a list of things that you need to put into practice so that you can be healthy. A good doctor will include hydration, nutrition, sabbath, supplements, and other very practical recommendations for healthy living.

The end of many New Testament letters is a bit like that. The author wants to give the Christians who read His words some next steps in their walk with God. The hope is that these become healthy habits, a normal and natural part of the daily routine.

Too often, we are unhealthy in our bodies because of bad habits. The same is true of our soul. For example, how many of us would not skip meals for a month but would skip Bible reading? Or how many of us would not miss a week of drinking fluid but would miss a week of praying to God? God cares about our bodies and souls. So, Paul ends this letter with some very practical and helpful healthy habits for a strong soul. Here is a summary:

1. Respect godly leaders who lead and feed you in love.
2. Live at peace together and don’t tolerate ongoing conflict, strife, division, or factions.
3. Admonish the idle to take responsibility and get activated owning their own life.
4. Encourage the fainthearted who are in a tough season and walk alongside them.
5. Help the weak so that those who are immature, addicted, discouraged, or broken are not abandoned but rather loved by God’s church family.
6. Be patient with everyone because we all have our faults, flaws, and failures and are a work in progress.
7. Don’t allow bitterness and vengeance to cause you to respond to evil with evil; be like Jesus and respond to evil with good, and let Jesus deal with the evildoers.
8. Rejoice always because no matter how bad it is, God is present, and there is grace and blessing if you look hard enough.



9. Pray without ceasing so that talking to God is a natural part of everyday life as you grow that relationship with your Father as His child.
10. Give thanks for what you are learning and who you are becoming even when the days are dark and the grief is deep because God is not punishing you but rather preparing you for the next season of life.
11. Do not resist the Holy Spirit with your traditions, legalisms, bad theology, fear, control issues, unrepentance, or unbelief, but rather set your sail for His wind to take you wherever He wants you to go.
12. Do not despise prophetic words from godly people who are filled with the Spirit and helping you learn God's Word and find God's will.
13. Do not be gullible or naïve believing everything, but instead test everything by the Word of God, the people of God, and the Spirit of God so you can toss what is bad and keep what is good.
14. Abstain from every form of evil, including your private sins, secret sins, and things you tend to tolerate or make excuses for that you know are wrong.
15. Pray for your pastors and church leaders who are doing all they can to lead and feed you in love.
16. Treat one another with love like a family.
17. Have the Bible be the center of your church meetings to hear a Word from God by learning the Word of God.

This is quite a list! If we do what Paul says, we will become healthier, stronger, more joyful, unified, helpful, and better people in every area of our lives. Everyone around us will benefit from who we are becoming, and we will enjoy our lives even on the worst days.

Importantly, these kinds of things are not our works or what we do to earn God's love and favor. Instead, these kinds of things are graces because God works for us, in us, and through us. I teach this all the time to the wonderful people at Bay Hills every Sunday. Paul established all of this in the opening lines of his letter:

**1 Thessalonians 1:4–5** (NLT) — *We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people. For 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.*



We need to remember all of this so that we do not read the last chapter in isolation and turn it into a legalistic list by which we judge one another. The list is last because if we are living under the Lordship of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, these are the things we want to do because we love Jesus and want to be more like Him by grace. I always told our kids growing up that Christianity is not about what you have to do but rather what you get to do. You don't have to read your Bible; God loves you so much He wrote a book for you and wants to meet with you to help you learn it. You get to learn from God when you read the Bible! You don't have to pray; you have a Father who is perfect and chose to adopt you as His child, and He always wants to speak to you and hear from you. You get to communicate with Him in prayer!

Do you see the difference? Healthy Christianity is a lot more about building a relationship than building a resume by keeping rules.

In conclusion, Paul encourages the original readers and every reader since to look up to Jesus, who is ruling and reigning in glory over everyone and everything. Like finding north on a compass, the key to living the Christian life is always looking up to Jesus, who is alive right now and coming at any time. He is our hope for today and our answer for tomorrow. Paul closes the book saying:

**1 Thessalonians 5:23–24** (NLT) — *Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful...May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

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## WEEK 7: More grace. Less grief.

### Dig Deeper.

1. Read all of 1 Thessalonians carefully and prayerfully in one sitting, noting anything the Holy Spirit emphasizes for you.
2. Spend some time in prayer thanking God for this book of the Bible and talking to Him about anything that you feel you need to.

### Talk it out. Walk it out.

1. Which things on the list would you say the Holy Spirit has grown you in? What things on the list do you need to invite the Holy Spirit to help you grow?
2. What have been some of your biggest personal takeaways from your study of 1 Thessalonians?
3. When you get to Heaven and meet Paul, are there any things in 1 Thessalonians you want to ask him what he meant?
4. How can we pray for you?

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