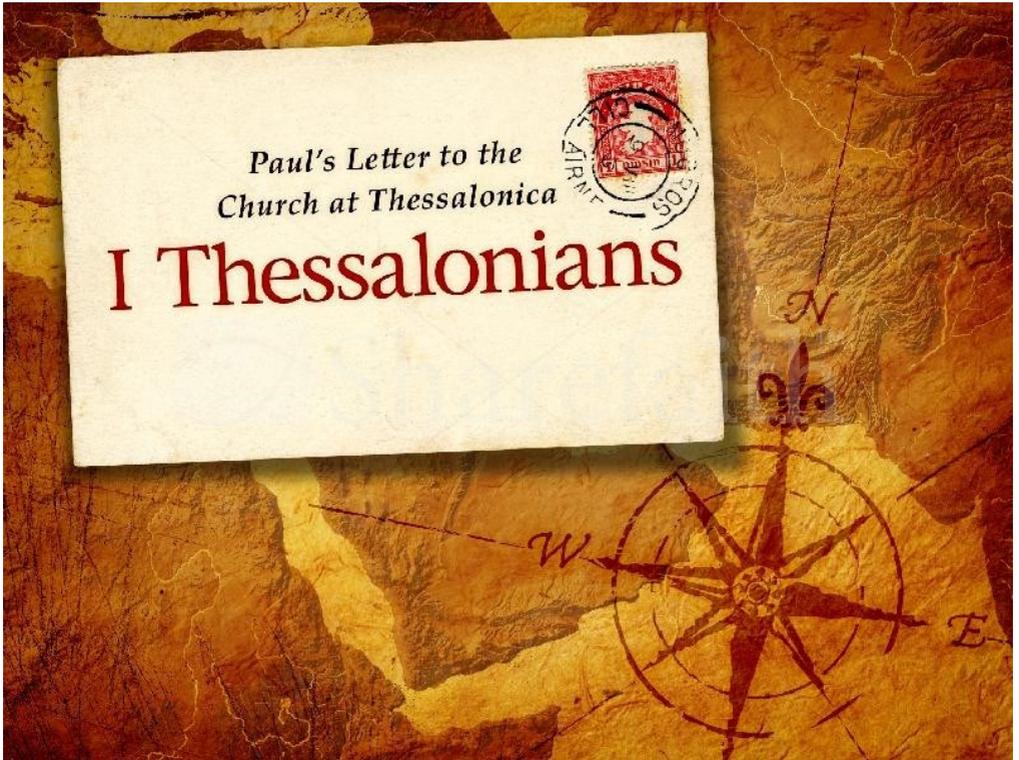


Being Disciples of Jesus



Learning from the Church of Thessalonica
how to follow Jesus today.

NightChurch @ Kew Baptist, 2014

Using this Guide

This is a pretty simple guide with no study questions as such. But we really want you to engage with the actual text of the letter, and discover and propose your own questions. So listen to the messages at NightChurch, take your own notes, and throughout the week prayerfully read the letter, and discuss it in your Small Groups or other catch-ups.

A few pointers in wrestling with the Bible are on the back cover.

An overarching question we want to ask as a church, What did mission and discipleship look like for the very first followers of Jesus? And by extension ask, How might/will this change and impact my own mission and discipleship individually, and ours as a church?

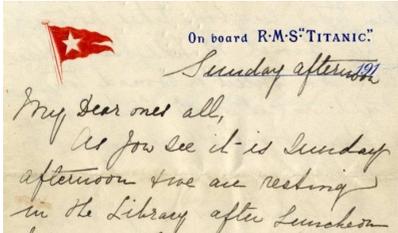
If you just keep one question front and centre as a lens with which to read the Bible: "What is God saying to me through this text and what am I going to do about it?"

Get Involved

We are also inviting you to submit questions, comments, issues about the letter and we will try and deal with them at the end of the 5 weeks we spend on the letter. No questions are off limits! Email the office info@kewbaptist.net.au or SMS Paul 0403 791 321 or Nicholas 0413 132 108.

Introduction

Even with the rise of electronic communication (email, SMS, chat, Facebook, etc) most people have received a letter at some time in their lives. The status and importance of a letter is usually dictated by who wrote it and when. A letter written to you by your mother when you are overseas and 21 will take on a different meaning once your mother has died. A letter written by an unknown 15yo South African boy named Nelson Mandela is now immensely more important than when first written.



Just recently one of the last known letters to be written on the Titanic before it sunk was sold at auction for over \$200,000 AUD. Written by a mother and her daughter, Esther and Eva Hart, its contents are hardly earth-shattering. Just a description of life on the ship such as:

“This morning Eva and I went to church and she was so pleased they sang Oh Lord Our Help In Ages Past, that is the hymn she sang so nicely, so she sang out loud, she is very bonny.”

And so we come to a little letter, but priceless, written by a Jewish man called Paul to a small group of people in the Greco-Roman city of Thessalonica. It was written in around 50 CE, about 17 years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifixion. After he died his followers saw him alive, spoke with him and ate with him, and the church was born when there was a great outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit on this small band of Jesus followers (Acts 2). They were transformed into a dynamic, world-shaking movement that transformed the Roman Empire. Paul had been called by God in a vision of the risen Lord Jesus while he was en route to Damascus to arrest and round up this heretical Jewish sect called “Christians”. In one of the most amazing turn arounds in human history, Paul eventually went from murderer of Christians and zealous persecutor and hater of the church to one of its most dynamic and influential leaders.

This letter is very important for several reasons. Firstly, the consensus and belief of the church down through the ages is that the documents of the New Testament are written by people who were inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 3:15-16). They are in one sense just documents, but in another way gifts and revelation from God to His people down through the ages. Secondly, not only did Paul receive a divine calling to be an apostle, Paul knew and associated with those who were with Jesus. These letters and the other documents of the NT are as close as we get to the very words, actions and intent of Jesus. And finally, how would we know what it means

to follow Jesus, and about other important aspects of our faith unless it were not for the witness of letters such as 1 Thessalonians? Here we have a snapshot and window into the very first church communities who were founded and influenced by those who walked with Jesus, talked with him, heard his message, saw his miracles, watched him die and ate with him when he rose. It's all very well what this particular missional writer or that particular Christian celebrity preacher says about Jesus and the church; but be careful to measure it against the pattern and principles that were given to us by our brothers and sisters of the early church, such as the Thessalonians.

As we read the letter we need to do so in order to understand the context in which it was written, but also listen to the Spirit of God for how to respond and apply what we read and hear to our context today. Thessalonians, as with all NT writings, are a call to action. They are a call to believe Jesus, follow Jesus, and share the good news of Jesus with the whole world. Bible information alone is not enough; it must be coupled with radical obedience. Very simply, when we read the Bible and prayerfully meditate and reflect on the message, we can ask: What is God saying to me through this text and what am I going to do about it?

Context and Overview

Founded around 315 BCE, Thessalonica was named after the half-sister of Alexander the Great, who was the wife of the Macedonian king, Cassander. The city was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Macedonia. By the 1st century it was a large and free city in the Roman Empire and was governed by a handful of powerful "politarchs". Acts 17 tells the condensed story of Paul's arrival in Thessalonica with his traveling companions Silas and Timothy:

When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. 2 As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said. 4 Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

5 But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, 7 and Jason

has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." 8 When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. 9 Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. 10 As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

The church begins with a mixed bag of Jewish believers, non-Jewish (Gentile) believers, and a number of prominent women. A number of converts from paganism were also part of the church. And here we need to make an important observation. Paul and his companions did not spend a long time learning the culture, values and customs of the people in Thessalonica. They went in all guns blazing beginning from day one preaching and teaching about Jesus. Keep in mind that the vast majority of people in this city, far from Israel, would never have heard of Jesus. However, there was a Jewish community and a number of "God-fearers" who were Roman and Greek citizens who believed in the God of the Old Testament. So in this sense, Paul had a starting point to argue that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in the OT. Paul preaches Jesus, but then spends time discipling the new followers and modelling by his own life what it means to follow Jesus. Discipleship 101: proclaim the good news of Jesus, live out the good news of Jesus, and invite and help others live their lives for Jesus.

But even so, it seems nowadays, in the West at least, the church has been gently but firmly bludgeoned into a resigned silence concerning Jesus. We have entered into an unspoken agreement that we will not speak of Jesus, but just look after the poor, elderly, homeless and the sick. The wider culture can tolerate a church like this. But how did it get to this and is this the example and model set down for us in the NT? Definitely not. Notice how Paul and his companions are often stirring up riots, disrupting commerce and trade, and unsettling the powers that be with their bold and passionate proclamation of Jesus as Lord. The good and compassionate deeds of Jesus must be emulated by his followers in every place they gather as church; however, Jesus proclaimed himself to be the one true King of God's kingdom and his followers proclaimed this same message. There can be no church without the proclamation of the good news of Jesus; there can be no transformation in the lives of people and a city without the proclamation that Jesus is Lord. But how timid and silent has the church in the West become? It's time to throw off our enthrallment to fear, to forsake the cowardice and begin to again name and speak of King Jesus.

So just how did Paul and his companions march into a powerful pagan Greco-Roman city and win people for Jesus, establish a church, and set in place a series of events that would see the City become a major Christian centre in just a few centuries?

1:1 Paul, Silas and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace and peace to you.

Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' Faith

2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. 3 We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

4 For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

What is God saying to me through this passage? What am I going to do about it?

Notes, Observations, Questions, Action

2:1 You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. 2 We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. 3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. 4 On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. 5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. 6 We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. 7 Instead, we were like young children among you.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8 so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. 9 Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. 11 For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 12 encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. 14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews 15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone 16 in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

What is God saying to me through this passage? What am I going to do about it?

Notes, Observations, Questions, Action

2:17 But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 19 For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 20 Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

3:1 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

What is God saying to me through this passage? What am I going to do about it?

Notes, Observations, Questions, Action

3:6 But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. 7 Therefore, brothers and sisters, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. 8 For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. 9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? 10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

11 Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. 12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Living to Please God

4:1 As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. 7 For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. 8 Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

9 Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. 10 And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, 11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, 12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

What is God saying to me through this passage? What am I going to do about it?

Notes, Observations, Questions, Action

4:13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

5:1 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

4 But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. 5 You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. 6 So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. 9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

12 Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. 14 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. 25 Brothers and sisters, pray for us. 26 Greet all God's people with a holy kiss. 27 I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Notes, Observations, Questions, Action

What is God saying to me through this passage? What am I going to do about it?

A Simple Bible Reading Plan

1. Pray: Pray before and throughout your study of the Bible

Start by praising and worshiping God. Confess your sins. Ask God for the Holy Spirit's help so you can correctly understand and apply God's Word to your life today.

2. Say: What does the text say?

Read the text carefully and study the text you chose. All observations should be based on what the text actually says. Write your observations here.

3. Mean: What does the text mean in its context?

The following questions will help you do this for your text.

What is the immediate context for the text you chose? What is the larger context? Remember that it always helps to study a larger context than is necessary, but studying too small a context can lead to error.

Now read at least the immediate context and answer the following question to the best of your ability. According to the context, what did the author intend your text to communicate to the first readers?

Briefly write down any questions you have about what the text means. These questions can be helpful for future study. God can use them to help you understand the Bible better.

4. Apply: How will I apply this text to my life today?

Whenever we study the Scriptures we should also determine what God is saying to us personally and make a plan to put that into practice. To do that, you can ask God, "What do You want me to do as a result of my study of Your Word?"

While praying, make a practical plan to apply what you have learned from God's Word to your life. To make a plan, answer the following questions:

- What will I do?
- When will I do it?
- Where will I do it?
- How will I do it?