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# THESSALONIANS

A 12-WEEK STUDY

Matt Smethurst



**J. I. Packer**

THEOLOGICAL EDITOR

**Dane C. Ortlund**

SERIES EDITOR

“This series is a tremendous resource for those wanting to study and teach the Bible with an understanding of how the gospel is woven throughout Scripture. Here are gospel-minded pastors and scholars doing gospel business from all the Scriptures. This is a biblical and theological feast preparing God’s people to apply the entire Bible to all of life with heart and mind wholly committed to Christ’s priorities.”

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# KNOWING THE BIBLE

J. I. Packer, Theological Editor  
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1–2 Kings	Hosea	Ephesians	and Jude
Ezra and	Matthew	Philippians	Revelation
Nehemiah	Mark	Colossians and	
Job	Luke	Philemon	

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A 12-WEEK STUDY



Matt Smethurst

Knowing the Bible: 1–2 Thessalonians, A 12-Week Study

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## S E R I E S   P R E F A C E

**KNOWING THE BIBLE**, as the series title indicates, was created to help readers know and understand the meaning, the message, and the God of the Bible. Each volume in the series consists of 12 units that progressively take the reader through a clear, concise study of that book of the Bible. In this way, any given volume can fruitfully be used in a 12-week format either in group study, such as in a church-based context, or in individual study. Of course, these 12 studies could be completed in fewer or more than 12 weeks, as convenient, depending on the context in which they are used.

Each study unit gives an overview of the text at hand before digging into it with a series of questions for reflection or discussion. The unit then concludes by highlighting the gospel of grace in each passage (“Gospel Glimpses”), identifying whole-Bible themes that occur in the passage (“Whole-Bible Connections”), and pinpointing Christian doctrines that are affirmed in the passage (“Theological Soundings”).

The final component to each unit is a section for reflecting on personal and practical implications from the passage at hand. The layout provides space for recording responses to the questions proposed, and we think readers need to do this to get the full benefit of the exercise. The series also includes definitions of key words. These definitions are indicated by a note number in the text and are found at the end of each chapter.

Lastly, to help understand the Bible in this deeper way, we urge readers to use the ESV Bible and the *ESV Study Bible*, which are available in various print and digital formats, including online editions at [esv.org](http://esv.org). The Knowing the Bible series is also available online. Additional 12-week studies covering each book of the Bible will be added as they become available.

May the Lord greatly bless your study as you seek to know him through knowing his Word.

J. I. Packer  
Lane T. Dennis

# WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF 1 THESSALONIANS



## Getting Acquainted

First Thessalonians covers a wide range of themes in only five short chapters: election, friendship, Satan, sex, love, work, and death, just to name a few. Yet perhaps its most dominant theme is the end times—specifically, the second coming of Jesus. As his redeemed people, Christians ought to live lives of holiness and love as we anticipate that final day. Christ’s return will bring to completion all of God’s promises, including judgment for his enemies and salvation for his ex-enemies—those who have become his people, his friends, and his bride. Whether now deceased (1 Thess. 4:13–18) or still living (5:1–11), anyone who has in faith embraced King Jesus is eternally secure.

Interestingly, the title “Lord Jesus” appears 11 times throughout this five-chapter letter—more than in any other New Testament epistle<sup>1</sup> except 2 Thessalonians (12x) and 1 Corinthians (11x). For all of Paul’s emphasis on other important matters, then, the letter’s ultimate focus is on the one who pervades its pages—the Lord Jesus Christ. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2301–2304; available online at [www.esv.org](http://www.esv.org).)



## Placing 1 Thessalonians in the Larger Story

In fulfillment of God's millennia-spanning promises, Jesus the Messiah came to earth, lived, died, rose, and ascended in order to reconcile rebels to their Maker. After a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19), Paul was chosen and commissioned as an apostle<sup>2</sup> to broadcast that gospel and to plant churches. God blessed Paul's witness in Thessalonica so much that a church was established before the apostle's abrupt exit (Acts 17:1–11). It is to this young church that he now writes from Corinth, some 360 miles (by land) to the south, addressing the Thessalonians in light of a report from Timothy's recent visit (1 Thess. 3:6). The letter's scope stretches from eternity past (1:4) to its particular focus on eternity future (1:10; 2:19–20; 3:13; 4:13–5:11, 23–24).

## Key Verse

“Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” (1 Thess. 2:8)

## Date and Historical Background

After seeing a vision of a Macedonian man urging him to “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9), Paul embarked on a journey to that region with Silas and Timothy, “concluding that God had called [them] to preach the gospel” there (Acts 16:10). They traveled first to Philippi (Acts 16:11–40) before proceeding to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was the capital of Macedonia, a Roman province in northern Greece. Boasting a population of more than 100,000, the city was a powerful commercial center in the Greco-Roman world. It was strategically located on the coast of the Aegean Sea at a key juncture along the Via Egnatia (a major Roman east-west highway). The city, therefore, attracted a diverse array of people and philosophies. This cosmopolitan makeup shaped its religious climate as well. While primarily polytheistic,<sup>3</sup> Thessalonica included a sizable number of monotheistic Jews.

In Acts 17:1–11, Luke recounts Paul's visit to the city. He entered the local synagogue and on three consecutive Sabbaths “reasoned with them from the Scriptures” and proclaimed Jesus as the Christ (vv. 2–3). Some of the Thessalonians “were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” (v. 4). Nevertheless, a band of jealous Jews “formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd” (v. 5). Unable to find Paul,

Silas, or Timothy, they dragged Jason and some others before the authorities and charged them with sedition: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (vv. 6–7). Narrowly escaping by night, Paul and his associates journeyed west to Berea, where, Luke notes, the Jews were “more noble than those in Thessalonica” (v. 11). However, on learning that Paul was in Berea, some of the Thessalonian Jews “came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds” (v. 13). Paul again escaped, sailing south to Athens (Acts 17:16–33).

Paul’s next destination was Corinth, where he remained for 18 months (Acts 18:1–18). Paul wrote to the Thessalonians from Corinth around AD 50–51, on the back end of his second missionary journey. First Thessalonians is probably his earliest New Testament letter after Galatians (c. AD 48).

## Outline

- I. Opening Greeting (1:1)
- II. Thanksgiving and Encouragement (1:2–3:13)
  - A. Thanksgiving for the Thessalonians’ faith, love, and hope (1:2–3)
  - B. Paul’s confidence in the election of the Thessalonians (1:4–2:16)
  - C. Paul’s defense of the missionaries during their absence (2:17–3:10)
  - D. A pastoral prayer for the Thessalonians (3:11–13)
- III. Instruction and Exhortation (4:1–5:28)
  - A. On pleasing God (4:1–12)
  - B. On the second coming of Jesus (4:13–5:11)
  - C. On community conduct (5:12–22)
  - D. Prayer, assurance, and conclusion (5:23–28)

## As You Get Started

Do you have a sense of any specific themes in 1 Thessalonians? Without using your Bible, do any passages from the book come to mind? Has the book been meaningful to your Christian life in any way?

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WEEK 1: OVERVIEW OF 1 THESSALONIANS

If 1 Thessalonians could somehow be erased from the Scriptures and wiped from our memories, what would we lose? What do you think are some of 1 Thessalonians’ crucial truths for believers?

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What is your general understanding of the role of 1 Thessalonians in Scripture as a whole? What does it uniquely contribute to Christian theology? That is, how does this letter crystallize our understanding of God, salvation, the church, the end times, or any other doctrine?

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What aspects of 1 Thessalonians have confused you in the past? Are there any specific questions you hope to have answered through this study?

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**As You Finish This Unit . . .**

Take a few minutes to ask God to bless you with increased understanding and a transformed heart and life as you begin this study of 1 Thessalonians.

## Definitions

<sup>1</sup> **Epistle** – A type of letter common in NT times. Epistles typically included (1) an introduction of author and recipient; (2) greetings and expressions of thanks; (3) the body of the letter; (4) personal greetings and signature; and (5) a closing doxology or blessing. Twenty-one of the NT's 27 books are epistles, 13 of which were penned by Paul.

<sup>2</sup> **Apostle** – A "sent one." In the NT, the word is most commonly used as a technical term for eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus whom he personally chose and commissioned to represent him.

<sup>3</sup> **Polytheism** – The belief in or worship of multiple (*poly*) gods (*theism*). The Thessalonians served and revered various Greco-Roman deities, including Aphrodite, Demeter, Dionysus, and Zeus. Idolatry was rampant in the city (1 Thess. 1:9).





**1-2 THESSALONIANS** remind God's people of the salvation he has secured for those he has called. When King Jesus returns, he will deliver his people and bring justice to the earth.

Connecting Paul's letters to the Thessalonians to the lives of Christians today, this 12-week study encourages readers with assurance and hope—pointing them to God's faithfulness as they pursue lives of holiness and love in anticipation of Jesus' second coming.

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## ABOUT THE *KNOWING THE BIBLE* SERIES

Over the course of 12 weeks, these studies explore books of the Bible and:

- Ask thoughtful questions to spur discussion
- Show how each passage unveils the gospel
- Tie the text in with the whole story of Scripture
- Illuminate the doctrines taught in each passage
- Invite you to discover practical implications
- Help you better understand and apply God's Word

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*"Knowing the Bible* brings together a gifted team of Bible teachers to produce a high-quality series of study guides."

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**GRAEME L. GOLDSWORTHY**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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