

# THESSALONIANS & PHILEMON Bible Reading Schedule

## 2 Weeks

### WEEK 1

The next two weeks are dedicated to the Apostle Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. The underlying theme is about Christ's return which is always interesting to us because of what is happening in our day. Even so, the main message in 1 Thessalonians to this new church tells us how Paul encourages these believers to remain strong and hopeful despite opposition. As Timothy returned to his mentor, Paul, he was overjoyed to discover that the Thessalonians were exhibiting the character of people truly converted to Christ. Their lives were marked by faith, love, and hope. The Thessalonians continue to be used by God to encourage us when we feel the pressure from the world as followers of Christ.

#### DAY 1 – 1 Thessalonians 1 to 5

My encouragement to you is to do what I have done and read the whole letter in one setting. Do you appreciate the optimism and accommodation that Paul shares with the Thessalonians? The sincerity of their faith is affirmed throughout. The situation is far from easy as these new believers face significant adversity. But the evidence of the Good News taking root in their lives helps them to stand strong. Even though they were young in their faith, separated from their church founders, and suffering for their allegiance to Christ, God was at work in them. The first three chapters were a spiritual "pat on the back." But Paul was concerned for their moral character and their growth in understanding the faith. He warned them about sexual immorality as well as the importance of being a loving spiritual family so that the people would notice the integrity of their faith. Another topic that Paul addressed concerned "last things." The Thessalonians embraced the truth of Christ's return but this generated several questions and concerns. From 4:13 to 5:11, the Apostle Paul gives some of his most profound instructions concerning Christ's return. This is the clearest presentation in what is known as the "rapture." Then he tackles the Biblical topic, "The Day of the Lord." We will want to investigate what the Bible teaches about this "Day" of culmination as we read this chapter later on in the week. Finally, his exhortations in the final section are some of the most repeated ones still today. I hope this overview stimulates your anticipation of reading each chapter with eagerness and contemplation. What did you notice as you read this Letter?

#### DAY 2 – 1 Thessalonians 1

Paul's mention of faith, hope, and love in verse 3 reminds me of his words to the Corinthians: "Faith, hope, and love remain, but the greatest of these is love." (1 COR 13:13) This launches us into an introduction that is so affirming and highlights the impact that these new believers are having on the people around them. The seed of God's Word has been planted in the fertile soil of their hearts as I recall Jesus' parable about the four soils in Matthew 13. It was no small matter for the Thessalonians to turn away from their idols which would have been a part of their ancestral obligation. Immediately they

longed for Christ's return which is such a positive indication of what mattered most to them. They were so sure of Christ that they would easily give up their earthly connections so they could be united with Jesus Christ when he returned. (V10) Verse 8 is my favorite and challenges me to ask myself, "Is this true of me?" "And now the word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere, even beyond Macedonia and Achaia, for wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God." There are numerous phrases of accommodation in this chapter. Which one(s) are you drawn to? Who in your life might you share similar words of encouragement and uplift? How would you feel if those words were written to you? I want you to believe that the Lord also has similar words for you as his child.

#### DAY 3 – 1 Thessalonians 2

Paul and his companions courageously shared the Good News with the people of Thessalonica even though they had just suffered greatly in Philippi. I noticed that fact because it showed that, no matter what, Paul's missionary heart was to proclaim the Good News as long as he had breath. You can read about what they experienced in Philippi in the Book of Acts (16:19-40). People with less determination would have packed their bags and headed home. But not Paul and his team! Their perseverance was rewarded as the Thessalonians received the Gospel with sincerity and faith. However, the approach of Paul & others was especially tender as they shared their very lives, "We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God's Good News but our own lives, too." (V8) Their relational approach was fruitful and genuine. This has to be an example for us as well. "People don't care about what you know until they know how much you care." Paul earned the right to be heard because of how gentle and genuine he was to them. I think the encouragement and affirmation that Paul shared with these new converts had to be very meaningful to them. Verse 19 says it well, "After all, what gives us hope and joy, and what will be our proud reward and crown as we stand before our Lord Jesus when he returns? It is you!" The blessing of connection and fruitful response from the Thessalonians is what made Paul rejoice. He did not glory in his accomplishments but in the changed lives that the Holy Spirit produced through his witness. How would that approach affect you and your priorities? What does it mean to you to "earn the right to be heard?"

#### DAY 4 – 1 Thessalonians 3

My impression is that Paul thought of these new believers as his children, in a very honorable way. His concern reminds me of how I felt when I wasn't sure if my children were safe or doing well. The Thessalonians were his spiritual children and his love for them is like a parent. He also was concerned about spiritual warfare and how the tempter might deceive them. This also reminds me of how often I prayed for my kids that the Lord would protect them from the evil one (John 17:15). Paul has a similar posture in verse 5. As I read the final words of this chapter, they sound like a love letter as he can't wait until they can be together again. Timothy had told Paul that the Thessalonians missed him and that made him miss them all the more. But these words are a prayer for God to continue his work in this new church. Both chapters 2 & 3 mention the return of Christ at the conclusion of the chapter. It says, "When our Lord Jesus comes again," becomes a theme that Paul uses as the focal point of the final two chapters (4 & 5). The return of Christ was as interesting and hopeful for them as it is for us 2000 years later. I would suggest that they faced more opposition and difficulty than we do but nonetheless, believers long for Christ to come again. I know that was an issue of interest and confusion for the Thessalonians and so

Paul references it several times in the letter. Do you notice Paul's parental heart for the Thessalonians? Do you sense his deep and genuine affection for them? What lesson might you learn from Paul's example in this chapter?

#### DAY 5 – 1 Thessalonians 4

This chapter has two distinct topics that are especially important to Paul. The moral character of the church is essential to our Christian integrity and the second coming of Christ is the hope of every believer. These are two aspects of our Christian lives that deserve our close attention. We might be drawn to verses 13 to 18 more than verses 3 to 8, of course. But let's not scoot over Paul's warning about sexual sin. The temptation of sinful sexual behavior is part and parcel of human nature. If you read the story of Judah in Genesis 38, you can be reminded of how persuasive the pull of sexual sin can be and how it has ruined lives from the beginning of history. But Judah's story gives us hope because he repented and he changed as we see in Genesis 44. If you or someone you know is giving into the temptation of sexual sin, please be warned, that it is completely contrary to God's plan. But there is still hope and forgiveness for anyone who repents! Our second topic in this chapter is Paul's most thorough presentation on the last things and Christ's return. It begins in verse 13 but it continues into chapter 5 which we will look forward to tomorrow. It is interesting to read verse 15 because it seems clear to me that Paul believed that the Lord would return while he was still alive. But he also knew that the final event would come at an unpredictable moment as we will read in 5:2, "like a thief in the night." The words of Paul in verse 17 have been referred to as the rapture. Jesus used similar words in Matthew 24:31 announcing the gathering of God's chosen people when he returns assuring us that all believers, from the "farthest ends of the earth and heaven," will be united with Christ. Paul gave the Thessalonians encouragement as he assured them of being reunited with fellow believers when Christ returned. This could still leave the Thessalonians wondering about the condition of those who have died. Are they in the ground waiting for the end to take place? Paul tells the Philippians clearly that to die as a believer means to be with Christ, "My desire is to depart (from this life) and be with Christ, for that is far better." (Phil 1:23, ESV) How do these verses on the Rapture encourage you? Why?

#### DAY 6 – 1 Thessalonians 5

Again, this chapter has two compelling topics that deserve our thoughtful attention. The "Day of the Lord" is a prevalent subject throughout the Bible which Paul addresses in verses 1 to 11. But the exhortations of the final verses in this chapter are some of the most repeated words believers share with one another. Verses 16 – 18 are the most noteworthy, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (NIV, because that is how I memorized it) Those are profound statements that have life-changing power. To praise God and thank him no matter what is happening in your life can be so sustaining. The idea of praying always reminds me of Jesus' parable in Luke 18 which begins with this introduction, "One day Jesus told the disciples a story to show them that they should always pray and never give up." I am sure these three concise exhortations are encouraging and challenging to you at the same time. But what about the "Day of the Lord?" You might want to read a few of these references in the Bible about the Day of the Lord: Joel 2:1-11; Zechariah 14; Isaiah 13:4-12; 2 Peter 3:10-12... Paul tells them they won't be surprised. Why? Because they will be spiritually ready and aware of what is happening around them so that they are clearheaded and alert. In

fact, Christ's return is the anticipated hope for every believer. The Bible gives us enough information about Christ's return so that we won't be surprised. What do these words of instruction from Paul about Christ's return tell you? If you are eager to read more, the Lord Jesus gives the fullest and most understandable teaching on his return in Matthew 24. Why might we be living in the last days? Are you ready?

## WEEK 2

“The Christian view of history... is linear, and neither circular nor cyclical. We believe that it will come to a planned end, a grand finale, consisting of the Parousia, the Resurrection, the Judgment, and the Kingdom. That these events are history’s goal is plain in both Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians.” (John Stott)

The believers in Thessalonica had faced persecution since their conversion, but now it was even more severe. A false teaching declared that the day of the Lord had already come, and some believers even quit working. What do you say to people whose lives move from bad to worse? Paul’s second letter to this new church addresses their troubling problems. We believe that Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians in 50AD and one short year later he is sending them this “follow-up.”

### DAY 7 – 2 Thessalonians 1 to 3

As is my practice with these shorter letters, I invite you to read all three chapters before we look more closely at the specifics for personal application. I find this letter to be especially relevant as many in our day talk about the end of time and Christ’s return. Plus, the problems we face can cause believers to shrink back and be tempted to give up. Such is the situation in Thessalonica, 51AD. Wars are often fought on multiple fronts. This was certainly the case with the conflict in the church at Thessalonica. With persecutors assailing the church, false doctrine circulating, and unruly members refusing to work, the battle lines were numerous. In Paul’s response, he never embraces despair or exasperation. He is clear in his teaching and correction. He intends for his words to strengthen the troubled church, stop the false teaching, and correct the errant members. This letter is much more than figuring out how things will unfold at the end of human history, as intriguing as that is to us. Paul’s pastoral heart intends to provide hope and confidence in God even when the world has gone mad. “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you his peace at all times and in every situation. The Lord be with you all.” (3:16) What thoughts do you have after reading this letter from start to finish?

### DAY 8 – 2 Thessalonians 1

Verses 7 through 10 give a summary of hope and anticipation for God’s people as “He will come with his mighty angels...” (V7) A significant event in the Bible is the prediction of Christ’s Second Coming. Paul gives extra emphasis here because the people were confused. False teachers have said that the Day had already arrived. This would be incredibly disappointing because these believers had missed it. Tomorrow Paul will describe a disappointing aspect to the close of time known as the great rebellion (2:3), which must proceed with Christ’s coming. But the promise in this chapter tells us that Christ will destroy the enemies of the Good News and rescue persecuted believers. So, those who obey the Good News can have confidence of rescue. In the meantime, “...live a life worthy of his call.” (V11) So why do we aspire to live a life honoring to Christ? Verse 12 tells us clearly, “...our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live.” Oftentimes I will hear people talk about being godly so that God will be happy. It is important to live a life that pleases God but the reason is tied to our impact for Him. We are not trying to measure to a standard that is impossible for us to reach but rather live in such a way we might be able to touch those who need Christ. It is all connected to the mission. How do you respond to this first chapter

that reminds us of Christ's certain return and our role until he does? What word or phrase jumped out at you? Why?

#### DAY 9 – 2 Thessalonians 2

As we read the last couple of verses in this chapter, we might think that the letter is coming to an end. It sounds like a benediction and it also affirms his purpose in writing with these words, "comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say." (V17) Have you ever written a letter and decided to add a few more thoughts even though you presented a conclusion? I think that is what is happening here. Chapter 3 is like a "PS" after Paul finishes his words on the topic of concern: The Last Days. This chapter gives us 12 verses about the time for the Day of the Lord. We are like the Thessalonians because we are often wondering if Christ will return soon. After all, the days are evil. What Paul writes is very illuminating and yet quite focused because he highlights the great rebellion and the man of lawlessness as the primary indicators of when the Lord will return. Jesus does the same thing in Matthew 24:15, "The day is coming when you see..." But Paul gives much more detail to this man who will desecrate the temple than even Jesus did in Matthew 24. The wording is often associated with the antichrist mentioned several times in 1 John: "Dear children, the last hour is here. You have heard that the Antichrist is coming, and already many such antichrists have appeared. From this we know that the last hour has come." (2:18) He will build his reputation on deception and much of the world will believe him. Jesus, Paul, and John make this the most decisive event telling us the fact that the last days have arrived. There have been many times in history when believers felt like the times that they were living in must be close to the end. But God has delayed the close of history as it says in verse 6, "And you know what is holding him back, for he can be revealed only when his time comes." The Lord is waiting patiently for every last person to place their faith in the Son. (2 Peter 3:8-10) What aspect of the man of lawlessness got your attention? Why? These verses close with the assurance of God's justice, "Then they will be condemned for enjoying evil rather than believing the truth." (V12)

#### DAY 10 – 2 Thessalonians 3

The unique topic in this last chapter pertains to working and doing good for others. This subject is referred to in some of Paul's letters but I think this is the strongest and most extensive rebuke about being idle. The reason behind their avoidance of work is the belief that Christ is coming back soon. We know of "cults" that have convinced their followers to sell everything and head to the highest mountain because Jesus was returning on May 18, 1988, for example. These false teachings about Christ's return may continue but they will always be wrong since no one knows the day or the hour. Paul mentions living idle lives twice with the command to stop living that way. Paul set an example for the Thessalonians by being self-reliant. While he was among them, he supported himself. He could have done it differently because he believed that the servants of the Lord who ministered to the people were deserving of financial support. But the subject had become a point of tension and it wasn't worth it to him to ask for their financial help. Paul wanted them to know that he did not come to them as a smooth talker hoping for monetary gain. He wanted them to understand from his example how they should live. "As for the rest of you, dear brothers and sisters, never get tired of doing good." (V13) This sounds very much like Paul's words to the Galatians (6:9-10). What do you take away from Paul's final comments to the Thessalonians?

## DAY 11 – Philemon

I think this is an ideal week to read one more letter that is interesting and very relevant. Paul is asking Philemon to forgive his run-away servant, Onesimus. The idea that Onesimus was a slave is foreign to us. However, slavery was widespread in the Roman world as well as for much of history. Captured runaways had to be returned to their owners by law. If caught, the punishment could be very severe, even execution. However, Philemon was a well-respected Christian leader who had the potential to set a positive example of forgiveness and reconciliation. Paul put himself on the line for Onesimus which is Christlike. There's an interesting possibility that some fifty years later a man named Onesimus surfaces as a highly regarded bishop of the province of Asia. A letter written by the Christian martyr Ignatius named Onesimus as a leader in the church. We cannot be sure it was the same person, but it is quite possible that, because of his close association with Paul, the young slave rose to prominence in the church. This would affirm the beauty of the church as traditional class distinctions are of no significance in the Body of Christ. Forgiveness is highlighted by Jesus when he says, "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:14-15) Have you freely forgiven others as Christ has forgiven you?