



**LIGON
DUNCAN**
1 & 2
**THESSALONIANS
FOR YOU**

the**goodbook**
COMPANY

1 & 2 Thessalonians For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *1 & 2 Thessalonians For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

ESV: English Standard Version (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)

NIV: New International Version

INTRODUCTION TO THESSALONIANS

Have you ever had a conversation with someone in which they said, “You know, Christianity is all about escape. It’s all about ‘pie in the sky by and by’. You Christians think that what’s here doesn’t really matter”? I’ve read this kind of charge more in recent times than I used to 20 or 30 years ago. The theory goes that until we Christians jettison our escapism—our thinking about the future, the promises of heaven, the return of Christ—we’re really not going to be able to do a good job of living *this* life. If our faith is all about heaven, we Christians will fail to invest ourselves in this world, to care for the needy and for the poor, and to serve in such a way as to truly help our fellow humans. Until we give up our ‘pie in the sky by and by,’ the charge goes, we’re never really going to be any earthly good.

That charge misses the entire point of all of the teaching in the Bible about the end of this world and the return of Jesus. Scripture is written not so that we do not care about this life but to enable us to live this life well. That’s what we find in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. The writer, **Paul**, spends a lot of time in these two letters talking about the future—and in every chapter, we also see him showing how this future relates to our daily lives now. Paul’s point is that our eternal confidence does not rob us of the capacity to care; it empowers us to care. In fact, you cannot live this life well if you’re not living it in light of the resurrection and of the second coming of Christ.

Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonian church is one of the very earliest parts of the New Testament (it is probably Paul’s first letter, though that may have been Galatians), with his second letter following a matter of months later. They were written less than 20 years after Jesus died and rose again. And they are filled with references to the second coming of Jesus Christ. That should not surprise us. After all, faith in Jesus doesn’t make sense without the resurrection of Jesus and his future return. In fact, without those things, Paul says that he and his fellow Christians would be “of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19). And so, here, Paul is telling some of

his earliest readers how important it is for them to hope in the return of Jesus.

The letters were written to a young church plant, set up by Paul during his missionary trip to the Roman province of Macedonia (in modern-day Greece) in AD 49 or 50. Thessalonica was the capital of and largest city in Macedonia, and was a busy seaport numbering around 200,000 inhabitants. Acts 17:1-10 tells us the story of how Paul preached in the **synagogue** there, “explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ’” (Acts 17:3). As is the pattern in Acts, some believed, and many did not. Before long, Paul and his companions were forced out of the city as a result of a riot stirred up by some of those synagogue members who had rejected the gospel. Paul’s time with this fledgling church was therefore short; and, having passed through Berea and Athens and on to Corinth, he awaited news of these new believers with some anxiety (1 Thessalonians 3:5). So when Timothy returned to Thessalonica and then came to Paul in Corinth to report that the Thessalonian church was holding firm to the faith and remaining loyal to the gospel he had taught them, despite facing persecution from its inception, Paul was overjoyed:

“In all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.” (1 Thessalonians 3:7-9)

Paul’s love for the churches he had founded by God’s **grace** is on full display in his first letter to the Thessalonians as he explains his abrupt departure (1 Thessalonians 2) and encourages these Christians to live to please God—that is, to grow in godliness—in their relationships, their work, their mourning, and their honoring of their leaders (chapters 3 – 5). His second letter, presumably sent in response to the news he had received from those who took his first to Thessalonica, implies

that the persecution had worsened and had become unremitting; Paul felt the need to explain why Christians face such suffering and how to continue in faith and love in the face of it. Again, his exhortation is centered on the coming return of the Lord Jesus, along with an assurance that that day has not already occurred, and on how to endure such trials and live life in light of Jesus' certain future coming.

So, as John Stott describes, these letters open a window onto a newly planted church in the middle of the 1st century—telling us “how it came into being, what the apostle taught it, what were its strengths and weaknesses, its theological and moral problems, and how it was spreading the gospel” (*The Message of Thessalonians*, p 20). It is striking how these two letters speak to our churches in the 21st century too. We, too, need to heed the call to remember that we are waiting for Jesus, the risen Son of God, to return from heaven. We, too, need to remember that church leadership and church membership are first and foremost about love—love for God and love for his people, in deed as well as in word. We, too, need to be exhorted to live to please God in our lives, whether in the home or at work. We, too, need the gospel to shape us such that Paul could say of our fellowships what he said of this young, persecuted Thessalonian church:

“You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word ... with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers ... Not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you ... but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.” (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8)

Ligon Duncan and Carl Laferton (Series Editor)

1. LIFE-DEFINING

The first four verses of this letter contain a greeting (**1:1***), a summary of a prayer (**v 2-3**), and a truth (**v 4**). In his greeting, Paul explains in a brief set of words who the Thessalonian believers really are—and it’s a life-defining salutation. In his prayers, he thanks God for the way God has transformed their lives. And then in the truth, he lays out how they got here: how they went from being **polytheistic pagans** to being living, breathing believers in the one true God.

A Life-Defining Greeting

In **verse 1**, after greeting them in his own name and in the name of his partners, Paul addresses his recipients: “To the church of the Thessalonians.” That’s not too surprising—this is the gathering of believers in the town of **Thessalonica**[†]. But then he says something key: “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is a life-defining greeting that tells them who they are.

I normally don’t pay much attention to the greetings in letters I receive, but there are some letters that repay such attention. For instance, the start of a love letter oftentimes contains a greeting that tells the reader where they stand. If I received a letter starting with “To the love of my life”—well, it would have my full attention! And Paul begins here in a way that deserves our full attention too: *You’re in Thessalonica, he says, and you are also in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. You are united to God by the Spirit in Jesus Christ. You are in him. You’re under his protection. You’re close to his heart.*

* All 1 & 2 Thessalonians verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

† Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 209).

You're underneath his gaze. You're the apple of his eye. You're in him. You're connected to him. You're with him. You're his. That's who you are, believers.

One of my now-retired colleagues at the seminary I serve, in Jackson, Mississippi, Dale Ralph Davis, used to sign his notes, "In Christ in Jackson, Dale." That was how he conceived of himself. He was in Christ, and he was in Jackson. He was in Jackson geographically, and he was in Christ spiritually. Paul wants the Thessalonians in the very first verse of his letter to them to remember that what defines them is not what street they grew up on, not who their parents are, not what groups they were a part of in high school and college, nor what they spend their time doing now—it's that they are "in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ."

Then, still as part of his greeting, Paul gives a blessing. "Grace to you and peace"—these are glorious, big words. Grace is not just unmerited favor, nor is it just favor from God; it is special favor from God—saving favor from him that we did not earn or deserve. In fact, it is a saving favor that we demerited. We positively did not deserve for that favor to be shown to us. We rebelled against God. We did not believe in his word. In our pride, we rose up against him and worshiped idols, loving, trusting, and serving other things as our **functional** gods. We followed our own wills and walked in our own ways—and yet, in his love and mercy and grace, he saved us. This grace is what defines a Christian. Fundamentally, the Thessalonian Christians are recipients of grace.

They're also recipients of the peace that comes from that grace. This is not just about a cessation of hostility but total well-being. God's grace has as its design that you would experience total well-being as you worship him.

This is who the Thessalonian church is: believers in Christ, full of grace and peace. This is who we are as believers today too. It should hit us every once in a while. This is us! This greeting is life-defining. It shows us, as it showed the Thessalonians, who we really are.

Prayers of Thanksgiving

Next Paul describes how he prays in thanksgiving to God (v 2-3). These verses reveal an expression of gratitude to God for the grace-transformed lives of the Thessalonians. “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.” **Verse 3** tells us what he is thanking God *for*: “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Don’t miss the significance of the phrase that comes before that, though: Paul remembers these things “before our God and Father.” *Our*. This Jewish **apostle** is reminding the residents of this Greek city that their Christian life is a life together: it is about “our”—not “my”—“God and Father.” Paul was a Jewish **Pharisee** and persecutor of Jewish Christians; but now he is the apostle to the **Gentiles**. Greeks and Jews may have been historically divided, and they may have been culturally very different, but now, in Christ, they were on the same team and in the same family. God is *our* Father.

How can Paul be so confident that the recipients of his letter are fellow believers with him? (After all, he was with them in Thessalonica for only a brief time.) Because he sees evidence of God’s grace in their lives—and he sees it in three ways.

First, he knows about their “work of faith.” Here’s a truth that undermines the charge that Christianity makes us no earthly good. What does true faith result in? Work! Faith moves the believer to care—to care for others, to care for those in need, to care for those who are in times of trial and difficulty, and to care in sharing the gospel. Paul will come back to this in verses 6-10.

Second, Paul knows of their “labor of love.” Labor means toil. It is hard work; it is obedience. And it results from the love of God, which is implanted in our hearts by the Spirit of God. Love moves us to toil in obedience, to toil for the gospel—not grudgingly, because we have to, but joyfully, because we get to. We are laboring for the Lord we love.

Third, Paul has noted their “steadfastness of hope.” These folks hope in Jesus Christ. They hope in his resurrection and in his return,

and that gives them endurance as they face (as we shall see) problems and persecutions. Resurrection hope is what keeps believers walking forwards when following **the Way** proves hard and broader roads look tempting.

Every church minister wants to see God's grace at work in the hearts of people. And here the apostle Paul is effectively saying to this church, which by God's grace he was able to found, *I see the work of God's grace abundantly evident in you—in your faith and love and hope, and in the work and labor and steadfastness it issues into. It gives me such joy, and so I thank God because that's him at work in you!*

The Truth of God's Electing Love

In **verse 4**, Paul moves on to teaching his readers a truth. The question is: how did these Thessalonians go from being pagan idolaters to being people whose lives were transformed by grace and who so clearly evidenced faith and love and hope? The answer is this: "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you..." Paul knows that the Thessalonians are elect—chosen by God. He knows this not through some apostolic **word of knowledge** but because he sees their faith and love and hope. Faith that works, love that labors, and hope that stands firm: these are marks of those whom God has chosen.

This language of "elect" or "chosen" is language which was first used of Israel in the Old Testament. Out of all the nations, God chose Israel to be his own people. They were to bear witness to his name. Further to that, in the Old Testament we see some individuals who are spoken of as being chosen by God. Aaron was specially chosen by God as high priest (Numbers 17:1-8). No one could be a priest in the Old Testament who was not of Aaron's tribe because God had chosen Aaron. Then there were the kings of Israel—Saul and then David and his descendants. These were the kings chosen to rule over God's people. God specially set his love on David and told him that he would

never lack a descendant to sit on his throne (2 Samuel 7:11b-16). David's family had been chosen.

God chose a people, a priest, and a king. In the New Testament, all of that glorious language of God choosing is applied to believers in our Lord Jesus Christ—whether they are Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28). If you read this as a believer in the Lord Jesus, you are one of the chosen of God. What that means is that trillions of years ago—before there was an earth, before there was this solar system, before there was this expanse of space that is 13.8 billion light-years across, before there was time—God set his love on you. *He chose you*. Paul writes 1 Thessalonians **1:4** because he wants these 1st-century believers to take that in: “Brothers loved by God ... *he has chosen you*” (my emphasis). It's the same as what he does in Ephesians 1:4-5: “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world ... In love he **predestined** us for adoption to himself as sons.”

Paul wants the Thessalonian Christians to understand that their salvation began with the love of God. It didn't begin with them being better than other people. It didn't begin with them being more deserving than other people. It didn't begin with them figuring out these spiritual realities so that they placed their faith in Christ. It began with the love of God, before the world began. Paul wants them to be awash in that reality. He wants us to marvel at it too.

There's an old hymn by Isaac Watts called, “How Sweet and Awesome Is the Place,” which helps us do just that. Watts drew on Jesus' **parable** of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-10). In the parable, there's a royal wedding feast for the heir to the throne, but the invited guests won't come. So the king sends out his servants to go and gather folks from the highways and byways to come in and sit down



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at the marriage feast. It's a picture of the ultimate marriage feast: the wedding banquet of the **Lamb**, the Son of God, to which you and I are invited.

Watts' hymn helps us to stand in awe of the truth Paul has stated in 1 Thessalonians **1:4**. He poses a question:

*Why was I made to hear thy voice,
And enter while there's room,
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?*

And the answer?

*'Twas the same love that spread the feast
That sweetly forced us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.*

Paul wants the Thessalonians to know this. This is why they're not pagan polytheists anymore. It's because trillions of years ago God set his love on them. He had been pursuing them before time, before they were even born.

The **doctrine** of election is one that many struggle with and even reject. But here, Paul is making it clear that our experience of the love of God is rooted in an understanding that his love is an electing love. It has to be, because only electing love is unconditional love. Only electing love relies on nothing that we are or do, since it was bestowed upon us from before the creation of the world. And therefore we cannot lose it through anything that we are or do (Romans 8:37-39). God's election of his people is both the outworking of and the guarantee of his love for them.

I know a lot of godly Christians who struggle to really believe that God loves them in this way. It may be that there is some sin in the past or in the present which has undermined your confidence and your assurance of his love. You just think, "There is no way that God could love me because of what I did." It may be that your experience of human relationships has deeply impacted your ability to feel and to

receive love—to know that you are truly loved. Most of us struggle to grasp this kind of unconditional, unlimited, electing love. And so God gives much time and space in his Scripture to this issue of his people knowing how much he loves them. We need to hear it!

Specifically here Paul—and the Spirit, who was inspiring his every word in this letter—knew that the Thessalonians needed to hear it. Before Paul even gets out of his greeting and his opening prayer, he wants you and me to go back and realize how much the Father loves us: because when we just begin to understand this world-preceding love, it is life-defining.

Questions for reflection

1. Our identity is tied up lots of things—what we do, where we're from, what we look like—but we've seen that the most important thing is that we are "in Christ." Why is that so liberating? How will it affect your day-to-day to remember that this is your most fundamental identity?
2. Where do you see the work of God's grace in those around you? How could you encourage them with that? What about in your own life?
3. What makes you doubt God's love for you? How does it help to remember that God chose you before the world began?