

Introduction to I & II Thessalonians

Hi. My name is Lisa Watson and I have the privilege of introducing you to I & II Thessalonians, our KYB study this term.

Did you know there are 27 books that make up the New Testament? Thirteen of these are actually letters that were written by the Apostle Paul to various groups of believers back in the 1st century. I & II Thessalonians fall into that category. These letters were written specifically to members of the early church, but you and I will find in them teaching in #4 key areas that will help us when we consider a relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul deals with these four areas in different ways, and from different angles, in all his letters. Sometimes he gives us large chunks of teaching and sometimes he gives us small bite size nuggets, but we can't miss the significance he places on them.

The first is, *Who is Jesus Christ?* Paul wants people to know, not just about Jesus, but who He is in all His fullness. The second is, *Who are we if we are in Christ?* That is, what is our position, what is our standing with God when we enter into a living relationship with His Son. The third is this, *What do we have if we are in Christ?* If we were to pick one of Paul's letters to get us started in answering that question, it would be his letter to the Ephesians. I remember reading it some time ago and thinking it was like opening a Christmas hamper; those baskets that are full of goodies and wrapped up in cellophane. It is given to us as one gift, but when we take off the wrapping, we begin to discover all the pieces, all the treasures that are ours in that gift. Paul tells us about our adoption, every spiritual blessing, a seat reserved for us in Heaven, the deposit of the Holy Spirit, an incomparably great power, a family, and armour. All of these riches, and more, are ours if we are in Christ. The fourth area Paul covers is the outworking of knowing, and understanding, the first three. Paul says, "if this is who Christ is; if this is who we are when we are in Christ; if this is what we have when we are in Christ, then **how should we be living?**"

Paul's letters are personal and were often written in answer to specific needs, but along with his focus on Christ, through each of his letters Paul weaves a truth that becomes like a theme. For instance, in Romans he deals with God's righteousness; not just His character of righteousness, but His dealing in righteousness with us. In I Corinthians, the spotlight is on God's wisdom. Right at the beginning of II Corinthians Paul tells us our heavenly Father is the God of all comfort. Because each of know the need of comfort at some time in our lives, this truth jumps off the page and straight into our hearts. It's a truth we return to again and again. Paul's letter to the Galatians highlights the freedom we have in Christ. We've already talked about Ephesians and all the gifts and resources that are ours in Christ and, Philippians speaks of joy.

So, what is the theme, the truth that we can't miss finding in I & II Thessalonians? I think it would have to be *the return of the Lord Jesus Christ for His church – for all those who know and love Him*. That's why on the front of your study book, under I & II Thessalonians, you will see a tag line that says, "the key to the future". That's what we'll be looking at this term.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson introduces these letters with the following words:

"The way we conceive the future sculpts the present, gives contour and tone to nearly every action and thought through the day. From the day Jesus ascended into heaven, his followers lived in expectancy of His return. He told them He was coming back. They believed He was coming back. They continue to believe it. The practical effect of this belief is to charge (or to infuse) each moment of the present with hope."

That was Paul's message to the Thessalonians.

I'm a parent, and I still remember bringing our eldest son home from hospital. After I placed him in the cot, I stood in the hallway and thought, "Wow! This is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, year in and year out. What a challenge." We know that it is our responsibility as parents to love, care, nurture, teach, train, correct, and guide our children. Even though we do our best, there are points along their journey when we step back and ask ourselves the question, "Have we given them all the tools they'll need to be successful in this new experience? Have we done our job well? Have we given them all the necessary resources?"

The first of those, for me, was when I dropped our son off for his first day at Kinder. I got him settled and then climbed into the car. As I drove away I wondered how he would manage this new environment. Would he remember to say 'please' and 'thank you'? Had we taught him well how to be kind and share with other children? On the practical side, was he able to tie his shoes and do up his buttons? Then there was his first job. Would he respect authority and take this responsibility seriously? Did he understand that a pay packet was not his right, but a reward for a job well done? Would he work with honesty and integrity? His move from home caused us to think about things like his ability to cook, to use the washing machine and manage his time. Would he get enough sleep, eat healthy meals and exercise? Would he understand that there would always be expenses you hadn't planned on that would eat into your bank account? Perhaps the most confronting was his wedding day. It's often a time we think about the things we wish we had known and wonder if we've prepared them well for this commitment.

Paul had no biological children, but he had a quiver full of spiritual children and he took his responsibility of parenting them very seriously. Let's look at Acts 17 and see where this relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians began. Starting at verse 1 we read,

“When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,” he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

But the 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. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who accompanied Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.”

Paul was on his second missionary journey. He and Silas had not long been out of prison in Philippi for telling people about the Lord Jesus. They had travelled through a couple of towns and come to Thessalonica where Paul did, what he always did, went to the synagogue and began preaching Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Many believed including both Jews and Greeks.

But, persecution was a part of Paul's existence. It followed him wherever he went. The fact is, that wasn't a surprise to Paul. Remember back in Acts 9 where the Lord met Paul on the Damascus Road? The Lord told a man named Ananias to go and get Paul and take him to his house. Then the Lord said to Ananias, **“I will show him (Paul) how much he must suffer for my name.”** So, Paul knew this task the Lord had given him was not going to be

an easy one. What did concern Paul was that the hatred for the message, and for him, was spilling out onto these new believers and causing them to suffer. Jason, and some of the other believers, had been dragged out before the city officials because of their hospitality to Paul and Silas. So, it was decided that it would be better for Paul to leave. Under cover of darkness, Paul, Silas and Timothy left Thessalonica and went to Berea. Their welcome there was encouraging. We read that the Bereans were eager to hear the message, and searched the scriptures for themselves just to make sure what Paul was telling them was true. But, the angry mob back in Thessalonica heard that they were in Berea and followed them with one purpose. They went to stir up more trouble.

This time Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea, while Paul went on to Athens. By the time he got there, he was nearly overwhelmed with concern for his spiritual children back in Thessalonica. He was agonizing in prayer for them. He wondered what was happening, how they were handling the ongoing persecution (some by members of their own families), and what they were thinking about the rumours and lies being told about his ministry to them. It was being suggested that he had tricked them and used flattery born out of his wrong motives.

This was when Paul, the parent, asked himself that question, “Have I given them all the tools they need to stand strong for the Lord now? Do they have the resources to hold on even in this persecution? Do they know that what I told them was truth, from God’s heart to theirs, or are they believing the lies?”

So, Paul sent for Silas and Timothy to come to him as quickly as they could. When they arrived Paul told Timothy that he must go back to Thessalonica and find out how the believers were doing. Paul wrote that he had tried “again and again” to go back to them, but “Satan had hindered him”. Paul hadn’t been able to go, but now he told Timothy, “you must”. “Go and make sure that they’re OK. Find out if they are holding onto the truth. Encourage them in the faith. Give them my love.”

Timothy went, and came back with a report that blessed Paul’s heart. Timothy told Paul that the believers weren’t listening to the rumours and evil stories about him. They were remembering Paul’s time among them with great joy and gratitude. Furthermore, they were standing strong and they were remaining faithful even under the intense persecution. However, they did have one concern.

You see, when Paul had been with the Thessalonians he encouraged them in the truth that the Lord Jesus was going to return. He spoke to them of that day when the Lord would gather them up to be with Him forever. The believers were holding onto that fact, and looking forward to it with great anticipation. But, there was a problem. Between the time that Paul

left and Timothy had come back to check on them, some of their loved ones had died. Now they were confused. They thought the Lord was going to come and take them. They thought it would be while they were still alive. So what would happen to these people who had died? Would they be forgotten? Would they be left behind? Would they miss out on this wonderful reunion with the Lord?

When I have time, I like to read. I enjoy jumping inside the story and walking around in the pages with the characters I find there. Invariably I have my favourites and I want them to be the heroes and succeed. But often, as I get into the story, their lives become complicated by choices and events. While circumstances threaten them and tentacles of danger start to surround, I begin to worry. I realize that the characters I love may not make it to the end of the book. And, I have been known to turn to the last chapter and scan the pages for the names of my favourites, just to make sure they're still there. Part of me isn't sure I want to keep reading if they aren't. That was the dilemma of the Thessalonian believers.

Paul does for them, what I do with my book. He takes them to the last chapter and says, "Look, here they are. Not one of them is missing. In fact, they're going to be first in the queue. The dead will rise first and then those of us who remain will be caught up with them. Don't worry, they won't be forgotten; they won't be left behind; they won't miss out". The Bible tells us that when we become a child of God our name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. It is safe and secure there forever. This physical death is not the end.

I'd like to look now at how Paul weaves this truth of the Lord's return all through his first letter to the Thessalonians. Every chapter of I Thessalonians ends with a focus on the Lord's return. Now, I know Paul didn't write in chapters, that was something that was done much later. But, if we think of the chapters as paragraphs in his letter, we see him punctuating each one with its relationship to the Lord coming again.

In Chapter 1, Paul is reminding these men and women how they came to know and understand the message of Jesus Christ. Then in verses 9 & 10 we read, "...they had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath". Paul says their turning from idols to God was noticeable by their response of service to Him and, it was noticeable by their expectation of His return. They were watching and they were waiting for Him to come. Paul's reminder that Jesus rescues us from the coming wrath is significant because we can look forward to the Lord's return without fear. The price of our sin has already been paid at Calvary taking away any fear of judgement. So, we can anticipate the Lord's arrival with complete joy. All fear is gone.

Chapter 2 reveals Paul's heart of love and his deep, deep longing to be with these, his spiritual children. We've already heard him say that he tried again and again to get back to

them. But he closes this chapter with the most beautiful comment. He says, “When the Lord comes and we stand before Him together, you will be my joy and the crown in which I will glory”. Paul dearly wanted to be with the Thessalonian believers at this time. Maybe the Lord would allow them to be together again on this earth but, maybe not. One day, however, they would be together again. When? When the Lord returns. As Paul reminds them of that coming day when they will stand before the Lord together he says, “you will be my joy and crown”.

Chapter 3 is Paul’s challenge to the Thessalonians to live well. He tells them to live pure, clean, holy lives; lives that are completely different from the way they had been living. Why? Because the Lord is returning and they will stand before Him. In chapter two, he has encouraged the believers that they will stand before the Lord in worship, praise and adoration when He comes. Here in chapter three he is reminding them that they will also stand before Him to give an account of how they have lived. Surely they wouldn’t want to stand before the Lord ashamed or unclean and embarrassed. Surely they wouldn’t want to look into His face and see disappointment there. So, his challenge to them is to live well because the Lord is coming.

Then in Chapter 4 Paul deals with the concern Timothy brought back to him regarding the believers that had already died. Paul understood their sorrow. He knew their grief, but I am so glad he didn’t tell them not to grieve. What he did say was, “Don’t grieve like those who have no hope”. Remember, this is not the end. You will see them again. When? When the Lord returns. For now, “comfort and encourage one another with this truth”.

Chapter 5 makes me smile. It reminds me of one of my parenting tools. Whenever our children left the house, whether to go to school, a friend’s, shopping, footy training, a job interview, or whatever, I would always stop them at the door and go through a checklist. On it were things like, have you got your books, did you feed the dog, is your dirty washing in the basket, don’t forget you have an appointment at 4 o’clock. Have you ever done that with your kids?

Chapter 5 is Paul’s reminder checklist as he finishes his letter to the Thessalonians. It’s a fairly good sized checklist with fifteen items on it, and it reads like this:

- Respect those who work hard among you and hold in high regard those over you
- Live in peace with one another
- Warn those that are idle
- Encourage the timid
- Help the weak
- Be patient with everyone

- Don't pay back evil for evil, but be kind to one another – in fact, don't just be kind to one another, be kind to everyone
- Be joyful always
- Pray continually
- Give thanks in all circumstances
- Don't put out the Spirit's fire
- Don't treat the Word of God, given to you, with contempt
- Test everything
- Hold onto what is good
- Avoid every kind of evil

Why? I *hope* you know the answer to that by now...because the Lord is coming! I Thessalonians 5:23 says, "May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ".

I think Paul gives the Thessalonians, and us, this checklist as a reminder. He wants us to know that the fact of the Lord's return is so much more than just a warm, fuzzy thought we can wrap around us like a blanket. The truth of the Lord's return ought to dictate how we live our lives moment by moment.

Remember Eugene Peterson's words, "...the practical effect of this belief (the belief of the Lord's return) is to charge or infuse each moment of the present with hope"? I would like to add a bit to that. Yes, it is to infuse each moment of the present with hope, but it is also to infuse each moment of the present with spiritual energy to live obediently, and to infuse each moment of the present with compassion to share the Gospel message faithfully.

Communication is a beautiful thing – when it works! I can say something and you will hear something. Sometimes they are the same thing and sometimes they are not.

Paul sent his letter to the Thessalonians. They read it, but some misunderstood what Paul was saying, particularly about the Lord's coming. Some heard him say that there was no need to worry. Because of their love for the Lord they could be sure that they weren't going to miss out or be left behind. Their conclusion was, "If that's the case, why should I bother struggling and slaving away at work? I'll just sit back, relax, put my feet up and let someone else take care of me". There was also another problem that had arisen. Word had come to them that a report or letter, supposedly from Paul, said the day of the Lord had already come. So, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul addresses those two things specifically.

He starts his letter, as he often did, praising and encouraging his spiritual children for what they were doing right. And, the Thessalonians were actually doing many things very well. Paul said their faith was growing, their love for each other was developing, and they were standing strong against enormous persecution.

Paul also reminds them that God is still in control. They might be questioning the injustice and struggling with the evil all around them, but Paul wants them to know there is a day coming when justice will be done and evil will be punished.

Then Paul deals with their confusion on this report about the day of the Lord. In *The Message*, II Thessalonians chapter two begins this way, “Now, friends, read these next words carefully. Slow down and don’t go jumping to conclusions regarding the day when our Master, Jesus Christ, will come back and we assemble to welcome Him. Don’t let anyone shake you up or get you excited over some breathless report or rumoured letter from me that the day of the Master’s arrival has come and gone”.

Paul clarifies for them the things that must take place before the day of Lord will come. These markers that Paul gives them are built on the foundation he had already laid in his first letter. That is, they wouldn’t miss the day of the Lord because they, as believers, would be part of the program. They would be involved. When the Lord returns, we will be with Him so we can’t miss it!

Now Paul moves on to the issue of idleness – those who had decided to just sit back and wait. Paul uses fairly strong terms about our responsibility to live active and productive lives as God’s children. Life isn’t just a waiting game, there is a job to do. Jesus gave us the example of being busy about the Father’s work, and Paul had demonstrated how to serve the Lord and provide for his physical needs so that he wasn’t a burden to anyone. But, there was also the added responsibility of knowing people were, and are, watching how we live.

Before the Lord went back to heaven, He gave us a job. He told us to go into all the world and tell them His love story. To let them know there is forgiveness, wholeness, and new life in Him. To hand out invitations to the Kingdom and share the Father’s desire for them to be part of His forever family. The Lord wanted us to be His eyes and ears; His hands and feet; His voice, so when people see and hear us, they will see and hear Him. They will see and hear His truth and know His love.

Paul had a big heart; first and foremost for his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Then, for his spiritual children. Paul wanted them to grow into maturity, understanding who they were and what was theirs in Christ. And, finally Paul had a heart for all those who had not yet heard the Gospel message; who had not yet responded, in love, to the Giver of Life.

I & II Thessalonians were written to a group of believers back around 50-51 AD, but they still speak powerfully to us today. In this parental teaching of Paul to his children in the Lord, you and I find truth we can build our lives on.

My prayer is that the Lord will open the eyes of our hearts as we go through these letters. I pray we will know the ministry of the Word of God and the ministry of the Spirit of God right at the point of our need. That we will grow in our love, our understanding, our faith, our service and our hope as we live in expectant certainty of the Lord's return.

May our Lord richly bless you, may He encourage, strengthen, and delight you on this journey together in His Word.

Thank you.