

The Heart of Paul's Theology

Lesson 3

Paul and the Thessalonians

Lesson Guide



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or manuscript versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Preparation

- Read Acts 15:1–18:22
- Read 1 Thessalonians
- Read 2 Thessalonians

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

II. Background (3:44)

A. Second Missionary Journey (4:26)

Recorded in Acts 15:36 – 18:22. Paul traveled mainly in the regions of Asia Minor before continuing on to several regions of modern-day Greece.

Paul chose Silas as his traveling companion, while Barnabas and Mark made their way to Cyprus.

- Derbe
- Lystra
- Phrygia
- Troas

In a dream, Paul saw a man who begged him to come to Macedonia. In response to this dream, Paul and his companions immediately sailed for Macedonia.

- Philippi
- Thessalonica

- Berea
Bereans received Paul's gospel message eagerly. But soon unbelieving Thessalonian Jews found out about it and aroused that city against him too.

- Athens

- Corinth

- Cenchrea

- Ephesus

- Antioch

Paul most likely wrote First Thessalonians from Corinth shortly after Timothy's arrival in order to address issues with the church in Thessalonica. Second Thessalonians was probably written a few months later, also from Corinth.

B. Problems in Thessalonica (11:36)

1. Persecution (13:00)

When Paul had first brought the gospel to Thessalonica, the believers there had become the object of violence, enduring serious life-threatening persecution.

The unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica were so aggressive that they were not satisfied simply to drive Paul and Silas out of the city, they followed them to Berea to trouble them further.

From the time Paul preached in Thessalonica until he wrote his epistles to them, persecution had been a prominent feature of living for Christ in Thessalonica.

2. False Prophets (16:16)

Suffering Christians tend to orient their lives toward the Second Coming of Christ.

When Christians are highly concerned with the return of Christ, they often become susceptible to false teachers or false prophets who have extreme views regarding the Second Coming.

a. Conflict with Paul

In 1 & 2 Thessalonians false teachers strongly opposed Paul's teaching. False prophets had entered the fellowship of believers and spoken against his teachings.

Some may have gone so far as to forge letters under Paul's name in an attempt to persuade the Thessalonians of their views.

b. False Teaching

The false prophets believed that Jesus would return almost immediately. Some had even proclaimed that Christ had already returned.

3. Christian Living (23:30)**a. Discouragement**

The Thessalonians were inevitably discouraged because Jesus had not appeared.

Paul assured the Thessalonians that although the departed saints had died physically, they were still alive with Christ, and they would accompany Christ when he returned.

b. Irresponsibility

The message of the false prophets had led to irresponsible living.

The false prophets convinced some of the Christians that they no longer needed to support themselves.

III. Structure and Content (29:34)

A. 1 Thessalonians (30:55)

1. Salutation / Closing Remarks (31:38)

The salutation states that the letter is addressed to the Thessalonians and that it comes from Paul. It also mentions Silas and Timothy as coauthors.

2. Thanksgiving (32:40)

Paul thanked God for the Thessalonians' endurance through suffering.

Paul told them how happy he was that they had seen him with their own eyes.

Paul gave thanks that the Thessalonians had recognized his authority.

3. Paul's Absence (37:05)

Paul assured the Thessalonians of his continued heartfelt concern for them. He demonstrated this concern by sending Timothy to visit them.

Paul expressed his grateful joy at the news that Timothy brought from Thessalonica: the believers were standing firm in their faith, and they missed Paul as much as the apostle missed them.

Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, asking the Father to “direct the way” for him to visit them again.

4. Instructions (40:03)

Paul commended the Thessalonians as a whole for obeying his earlier commands.

Paul mentioned a number of specific arenas in which he hoped the Thessalonian Christians would guard against sin and increase their obedience to Christ.

Paul commanded the Thessalonians to engage in meaningful labor and daily work.

Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to encourage each other with the hope of future reunion with their loved ones who had died in the Lord.

Paul wanted to make it clear that the return of Christ should motivate all believers to live holy lives.

In the remaining verses, Paul dealt with a variety of subjects:

- Warn rather than coddle those who were lazy (5:14).
- Repay harm with kindness (5:15).
- Joy in the midst of difficulties (5:16-18).
- Prophecy & teaching were to be tested (5:19-22).

B. 2 Thessalonians (50:28)

1. Salutation / Closing (51:17)

The salutation is short and direct, and it indicates that the letter was written to the church in Thessalonica. The letter comes not just from Paul, but also from Silas and Timothy.

As we look at the letter's short closing, it's clear that Paul is really the primary author. Only Paul physically signed the letter in order to authenticate it against counterfeits.

2. Thanksgiving and Encouragement (52:12)

Paul reported his thanksgivings for the Thessalonian's faith and love, especially in the face of persecution.

Paul encouraged them by telling them again how exemplary their faith was, and how he had boasted to other churches about their perseverance.

3. Prayer (53:03)

Paul explained that he constantly prayed for the Thessalonians and that they were not alone in their struggles.

4. Instructions (53:25)

Paul's instructions divide into three parts:

- Paul instructed them about Christ's return (2:1-17).
- Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray for safety and success in ministry for him and his co-workers (3:1-5).
- Paul issued a warning against irresponsibility (3:6-15).

IV. Theological Outlooks (56:30)

Paul's eschatology stemmed from common Old Testament outlooks on God's design for history.

Paul and the other apostles modified this straightforward two-age pattern of history.

The Thessalonians developed what we might call “overheated eschatology.” Many believed that the consummation of the age to come had already occurred or that it was just around the corner.

Paul responded to the Thessalonians’ problem by trying to balance their view of the end times.

A. Doctrine of Salvation (1:01:15)

Paul stressed how salvation was already a current reality for the Thessalonians, even as they waited for Christ to return.

1. Past Salvation (1:02:49)

Paul said that God “chose” the Thessalonians, meaning that before the Thessalonians came to faith through Paul’s preaching of the gospel, God had already decided that he loved the Thessalonians and was going to save them.

When Paul reminded the Thessalonians of their election, he had in mind that God had chosen them to be united with Jesus and to pass with him out of this age and into the age to come.

Paul also wrote of another dimension of the Thessalonians’ salvation that had occurred in the past: their conversion.

2. **Future Salvation (1:07:15)**

Paul drew attention to salvation in his letters by focusing on the future dimensions of their salvation.

Paul acknowledged that Christ's future return would bring salvation to its completion.

We will experience a radical and complete transformation into a state of unimaginable honor and glory as we reign with Christ in the new heavens and new earth.

3. **Present Salvation (1:09:25)**

Paul also spoke of salvation as an ongoing present reality.

Paul drew their attention to the astounding fact that they were already experiencing a measure of the inheritance they so eagerly awaited.

The ministry of the Spirit is extremely important during the time when this age and the age to come overlap.

Continual belief in the truth was an essential dimension of Christ's present saving work in their lives.

B. Morality (1:12:36)

Paul countered the overheated eschatology in Thessalonica by stressing ethical Christian living.

1. Process of Salvation (1:12:47)

God designed our past and present experiences of salvation to lead to the future stage of salvation. And without the past and present stages, future salvation cannot be reached.

2. Ethical Implications (1:15:30)

Paul wrote that professing believers who do not live righteously cannot complete the process because they have never really begun it.

Paul did not believe that it was possible for true believers to lose their salvation.

Because they had experienced salvation in the past, Paul insisted that they had an obligation to continue in salvation in the present. Christians must remain alert and sober, steadfast in faith, hope and love because our future salvation depends upon it. Our present faithfulness is the means to obtaining our future salvation.

C. Historical Position (1:19:14)

Paul reminded the Thessalonians that several events had to precede Christ's return and that these events had yet to transpire.

Four things had to take place before Christ returned:

1. Mystery of Lawlessness Restrained (1:21:59)

The "mystery of lawlessness" was already working, but it was restrained.

2. Rebellion or Apostasy (1:24:33)

The restrainer was still active when Paul wrote, so the rebellion had not yet taken place.

3. Restrainer Removed (1:25:47)

The rebellion could never take place until the "restrainer" or "restraint" ceased to hold back the mystery of lawlessness.

4. Man of Lawlessness Revealed (1:26:12)

Many suggestions have been made regarding the identity of the man of lawlessness.

V. Conclusion (1:20:10)

7. How did Paul's doctrine of salvation address the Thessalonians' overheated eschatology?

8. How did Paul's emphasis on ethical Christian living relate to the Thessalonians' future salvation?

9. Describe the historical position of the Thessalonians in terms of the events that must precede Christ's return.

10. Explain how Paul's eschatology framed his theological outlooks.

Application Questions

1. Explain how Paul's initial plans and desires were unmet in light of God's call to go to Macedonia. How did Paul respond? How should we respond when God calls us to things we haven't planned?
2. How could the suffering and persecuted Thessalonians remain joyful and faithful in the midst of their hardship?
3. In the already-not-yet historical setting, why is it important that believers demonstrate holy living?
4. Why do you think Paul and others prayed daily? Why does the church need daily prayer?
5. How does our salvation reflect already and not-yet aspects?
6. How did Paul explain the mystery of lawlessness? How does Paul's explanation give you perspective regarding our world today?
7. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?

Glossary

already and not yet – View of the end times known as "inaugurated eschatology" which asserts that the coming age of eternal salvation is "already" here in some ways, but "not yet" here in its fullness

Antichrist – A person or entity that will have great evil influence in the last generation before Christ returns; sometimes associated with the "man of lawlessness"

apostasy – Rebellion against God after a profession of faith; total rejection of one's faith, religion or principles

apostle – Special New Testament office held by someone who had been taught by Jesus, had seen the risen Lord, and had been chosen for the office by the Lord himself; from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent"

Asia Minor – A geographical area that is now part of western Turkey where Paul did the majority of his missionary work

Barnabas – Friend of the apostle Paul and cousin of John Mark (author of the second gospel) who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey

Bereans – People from the city of Berea who were praised in the book of Acts for their devotion to studying the Scriptures

Cabirus – Name of a local Greek god in first-century Thessalonica who was believed to have been murdered and would return to the world periodically; celebrations of his "return" involved sexual immorality

consummation – Third and final stage of inaugurated eschatology when Christ will return and fulfill God's ultimate purpose for all of history

continuation – Second or middle stage of inaugurated eschatology; the period of the kingdom of God after Christ's first advent but before the final victory

Corinth – Prosperous trade center in south-central Greece that had a reputation for sexual promiscuity; city where Paul planted a church on his second missionary journey and lived for 18 months

Day of the Lord – Technical expression (Hebrew: "yom Yahweh") referring to the ultimate defeat and judgment of God's enemies and to the great battle that will take place when God's people are restored to the land

doctrine – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

Epicureanism – Philosophy taught by Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) that considered emotional calm and comfort its primary goals with intellectual pleasures being superior to sensual pleasures

eschatology – The study or doctrine of the last days

Galatia – Roman province in Asia Minor where Paul planted a number of churches on his first missionary journey

Gentile – Non-Jewish person

glorification – The final stage of our salvation, when we receive a perfect eternal body and fully become what we were meant to be, having complete victory over sin and death

inauguration – First stage in inaugurated eschatology; refers to Christ's first coming and the ministries of his apostles and prophets

John – Son of Zebedee and brother of James; one of the twelve Apostles; author of the Gospel of John; 1, 2, 3 John; and the book of Revelation; sometimes called "the disciple Jesus loved"

justification – Initial declaration of righteousness when a believer is acquitted of the guilt of sin and is credited with the righteousness of Christ

latter days – Expression used by Old Testament prophets to describe the period after the exile and by New Testament writers to describe the New Testament period; also "the last days" or the final culmination of history

Macedonia – Name of an ancient Roman province located in and to the north of present-day Greece; region where Paul was told in a vision to go and share the gospel during his second missionary journey

man of lawlessness – A person or entity who is satanically empowered to perform miracles and who eventually proclaims himself to be God; thought to be either a specific political figure or a type of political figure repeated in every age

Marcus Aurelius – Roman emperor from A.D. 161-180 known for his philosophical interests and considered a symbol of the Roman Empire's Golden Age; thought by some to have been a persecutor of the church

Mark – Also known as John Mark; author of the Gospel of Mark and cousin of Barnabas; accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey

Messiah – Hebrew word meaning "anointed one"; the great King from David's royal line who would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come; translated "Christos" in Greek

Nero – Roman emperor from A.D. 54-68 who persecuted Christians; blamed the Christians for a fire in Rome in A.D. 64; executed Paul (according to tradition)

overheated eschatology – Misguided belief that the consummation of the age to come was imminent, or even that Christ had already returned, leading to the view that life in this age was largely unimportant

Philippi – Important city in the Roman province of Macedonia, located on the main road that connected Rome to the eastern provinces; city where Paul planted a church during his second missionary journey

salvation – Deliverance from the tyranny of evil and from God's judgment against sin through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

sanctification – The act of making people and things holy

Silas – Also called Silvanus; one of the leaders in the church at Jerusalem and Paul's companion on his second missionary journey; mentioned, along with Timothy, as coauthor of Paul letters to the Thessalonians

Stoicism – Hellenistic philosophy of personal virtue and well-being based on logic and living in accordance with nature

synagogue – Place where Jews assembled for worship and instruction

Syrian Antioch – Capital of the Roman province of Syria located in what is now modern-day Turkey; Paul's starting point for his missionary journeys; city where Jesus' followers were first called Christians

the age to come – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the future age of righteousness, love, joy and peace that would follow the exile; time when all of God's purposes for history would be fulfilled

Thessalonica – Prominent Roman city and cultural center in northern Greece located along a major trade route; city where Paul planted a church on his second missionary journey and where unbelieving Jews started a riot in opposition to Paul's message

this age – Phrase used by rabbis and leaders in Israel to describe the present age of sin, suffering and death

Timothy – Paul's young protégé and companion on his second missionary journey who brought Paul news from the church in Thessalonica; mentioned, along with Silas, as coauthor of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians

under-realized eschatology – View of the end times that diminished the significance of Christ's first coming and underestimated how much Christ had already brought the kingdom of God to earth