PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

The King's Return

1 Thessalonians, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King's Return: Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, Unfiltered

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All Scripture quotations in this book are from the NIV. Some are abridged, with omissions marked by ellipses; paraphrases are not placed in quotation marks.

Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. It's not leaving now.

1 Thessalonians might be the oldest book in the New Testament. Some scholars think Galatians came first, but either way, this short letter was written only about twenty years after Jesus died and rose again. It's like opening a time capsule from one of the very first churches and finding out what they were worried about, what they believed, and how they lived.

The church in Thessalonica was brand new. Paul had been there only a short time before a mob ran him out of town. The believers were young in their faith, many of them had just walked away from worshiping idols, and they were being harassed by their neighbors for following Jesus. Paul was worried sick about them. When he finally got good news, he wrote this letter, and you can feel his relief and love in almost every line.

They also had questions. Big ones. Some members of the church had died. What happens to them when Jesus comes back? Will they miss out? When is He coming, anyway? Paul's answers include some of the most famous, and most debated, verses in the Bible about the return of Jesus.

If you've ever lost someone you love, wondered what happens after death, or been told the world is about to end, this letter is for you. It's also for anyone who just needs to hear how to live a normal,

faithful life while waiting for Jesus: work hard, love people, keep your body holy, rejoice, pray, and give thanks. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through all five chapters of 1 Thessalonians, in order, one chapter of this book for each chapter of the letter. Each one explains what Paul is saying in plain language and adds background about the city of Thessalonica, the Roman world, and the questions the church was asking.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene tells the story of how the church began, why Paul had to leave so suddenly, and what happened next. It also explains why this letter matters so much for understanding the earliest Christians. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

This book quotes 1 Thessalonians sparingly and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each chapter of the letter first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. Like the earlier books in this series, on the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters from Romans to Colossians, it's written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

This book follows the letter format of the earlier volumes, walking through 1 Thessalonians chapter by chapter. Because the letter is short, I've quoted it sparingly and relied mostly on paraphrase and explanation, with extra background and discussion material. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

Paul's teaching about the return of Jesus in 4:13–5:11 is understood differently by sincere Christians. I've presented the main views, including pretribulation, midtribulation, and posttribulation readings, and amillennial readings, briefly and fairly, without choosing among them, and I've highlighted what Christians across these views agree on. You may want to share your own church's view with your teen and talk through why you hold it.

Paul's words about some of his Jewish opponents in 2:14–16 are sharp. I've explained them in context: Paul was Jewish himself, he

was speaking about particular people who opposed the message, and these verses must never be used to support contempt for Jewish people. I've also noted that a minority of scholars think the passage was added later.

The letter also addresses grief and death, and sexual holiness, directly. I've handled these honestly and gently. Some readers may have recently lost someone they love; the chapter on 4:13–18 is written with them in mind.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will find real hope in the face of death, and learn to live each ordinary day ready for the King's return.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

The City

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, in what is now northern Greece. It was founded around 315 BC by a Macedonian general named Cassander, who named it after his wife, Thessalonike, a half-sister of Alexander the Great.

It was a busy port, with a harbor on the Aegean Sea, and it sat on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway across northern Greece. Ships, soldiers, merchants, and travelers came through all the time, which meant news traveled fast, in every direction. That's one reason Paul says the report of the Thessalonians' faith had spread everywhere.

The city had sided with the winners in Rome's civil war, Mark Antony and Octavian, and was rewarded by being made a free city, allowed to govern itself. Its leaders were called politarchs. Acts uses that exact title for the city officials, and inscriptions found in the city use it too. Thessalonica was proud of its loyalty to Rome and to the emperor, who was honored there with temples and coins. Today it's called Thessaloniki, and it's the second-largest city in Greece.

How the Church Began

Acts 17 tells the story. Paul, Silas, and Timothy arrived in Thessalonica on Paul's second missionary journey, right after they had been beaten and jailed in Philippi. Paul went to the synagogue, as he usually did, and for three Sabbaths he explained from the

Scriptures that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that Jesus was the Messiah.

Some of the Jewish listeners were persuaded, along with a large number of God-fearing Greeks, Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel, and quite a few prominent women. And from the letter itself, it's clear that many in the church were Gentiles who had turned to God from idols. So the church was a mix, but mostly made up of former pagans.

Run Out of Town

Then trouble came. Some of the local Jewish leaders became jealous. They gathered some troublemakers from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot. They rushed to the house of a man named Jason, where Paul and Silas had been staying, looking for them. When they couldn't find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials.

Their accusation is famous. They said these men had caused trouble all over the world and were now here, and that they were defying Caesar's decrees by saying there is another king, one called Jesus. In a city proud of its loyalty to the emperor, that was a dangerous charge. Jason had to post bond, and that night the believers sent Paul and Silas away to the town of Berea.

We don't know exactly how long Paul was in Thessalonica. Acts mentions three Sabbaths, but Paul's letters suggest it was longer, perhaps a few months. He worked to support himself, and the Philippians sent him gifts more than once while he was there (Philippians 4:16). Still, it was a short time to start a church.

Worried Sick

From Berea, Paul was forced to move on again, this time to Athens. He was desperate to know how the young church in Thessalonica was doing. Were they still following Jesus? Had the persecution crushed them? He tried to go back, more than once, but something blocked him.

Finally, he sent Timothy back to check on them, while he stayed alone in Athens. Later Paul moved on to Corinth, and there Timothy returned with good news (Acts 18:5). The Thessalonians were standing firm. They loved Paul and wanted to see him. Paul was so relieved that he wrote this letter.

When Was It Written?

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth, probably around AD 50 or 51. We can date Paul's time in Corinth fairly precisely, thanks to an inscription found at Delphi that mentions Gallio, the Roman official Paul stood before in Acts 18. That makes this one of Paul's earliest letters, and possibly the earliest surviving Christian document of any kind.

That's amazing for a few reasons. It shows that within about twenty years of Jesus' death and resurrection, Christians were already calling Him Lord, praying to Him alongside God the Father, expecting Him to return from heaven, and believing He had died for them. These weren't ideas that developed slowly over centuries. They were there from the start.

Who Wrote It?

The letter is from Paul, Silas, and Timothy. (The NIV footnote explains that the Greek says Silvanus, a form of the name Silas.)

Much of the letter uses we, though Paul sometimes speaks for himself. Almost all scholars agree that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. It's one of the least disputed of his letters.

The one exception is a short passage in chapter 2, verses 14 to 16, where Paul speaks harshly about the Jewish leaders in Judea who opposed Jesus and the apostles. A minority of scholars think these verses were added later by someone else. Most think Paul wrote them, in a moment of frustration about the people who had driven him out of city after city. Either way, it's important to read them carefully, as you'll see in chapter 2.

Why Paul Wrote

Paul had several reasons for writing. He wanted to encourage the believers who were suffering for their faith. He wanted to answer critics who said he was just another traveling preacher out for money and attention, of the kind who were common in the Roman world. He wanted to remind them how to live holy lives, especially in sexual matters and in their work. And he wanted to answer their questions about believers who had died and about the return of Jesus.

The Coming of the King

Every chapter of 1 Thessalonians ends with a mention of Jesus' return. Paul uses a Greek word, parousia, which means coming or presence. In the Roman world, it was used for the official visit of an emperor or important official to a city. When the emperor came, the city would prepare, and leading citizens would go out to meet him on the road and escort him back into the city with celebration.

The Thessalonians knew all about honoring Caesar. Paul tells them that the true King is coming, and they should be ready. That's why this book is called The King's Return.

The Map

Chapter 1: Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope, and for how they turned from idols to God.

Chapter 2: Paul remembers his time with them and defends his motives. He was like a mother and a father to them.

Chapter 3: Paul explains why he sent Timothy, and rejoices at the good news Timothy brought back.

Chapter 4: Instructions on sexual holiness, love, and work, and comfort about believers who have died.

Chapter 5: The day of the Lord, living as children of the day, and a rapid-fire list of instructions for church life.

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CHAPTER 1

A Faith People Talk About

1 Thessalonians 1

Paul begins with three names, his own, Silas, and Timothy, and a short greeting to the Thessalonian church, which lives in the Father and in the Lord Jesus. Notice how naturally Paul puts the Father and Jesus side by side. Only about twenty years after the cross, Christians were already speaking of Jesus in the same breath as God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Silas**
>
> Silas, called Silvanus in the Greek of this letter, was a leader in the Jerusalem church who became Paul's partner on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40). Like Paul, he was a Roman citizen. He was beaten and jailed with Paul in Philippi, where the two of them sang hymns at midnight in their cell. Later, he seems to have worked with Peter too (1 Peter 5:12). He's one of the unsung heroes of the early church.

Then Paul tells them how thankful he is. Every time they pray, he and his friends thank God for the Thessalonians. And Paul remembers three things about them: their work that came from faith, their hard labor that came from love, and their endurance that came from hope in Jesus.

That's the famous trio again: faith, love, and hope. But notice that Paul connects each one to action. Real faith gets to work. Real love does the hard labor. Real hope keeps going when things are tough.

These weren't just feelings for the Thessalonians. They were showing up in their lives.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Faith, Love, and Hope**
>
> Paul uses these three together in several letters, most famously in 1 Corinthians 13. In 1 Thessalonians, they show up at the beginning and again near the end (5:8), where faith and love are a breastplate and hope is a helmet. Some think 1 Thessalonians is the earliest place in Christian writing where the three appear together. Hope gets special attention in this letter, because the Thessalonians needed it.

Paul says he knows God has chosen them. How? Because when the gospel came to them, it wasn't just words. It came with power, with the Spirit at work, and with deep conviction. Something real happened. And they had watched how Paul and his team lived among them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Not Just Words**
>
> In the Roman world, there were lots of traveling speakers who made money giving impressive speeches. Paul says his message was different. It wasn't just clever talk. God's Spirit was at work, changing people's lives. The proof that the gospel is true isn't only in good arguments, though Paul could make those. It's also in lives that have been transformed.

The Thessalonians had followed the example of Paul and of the Lord. They accepted the message even though it brought them a lot of suffering, and they did it with joy that came from the Holy Spirit. Suffering and joy at the same time. That's not something people can fake.

And as a result, they had become an example to believers all over Macedonia and Achaia, the two Roman provinces that made up most of Greece. In fact, Paul says, news about their faith in God had

spread everywhere. Paul doesn't even need to talk about it. Other people bring it up first.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Word Gets Around**
>
> Remember that Thessalonica was a port on a major highway. Travelers, merchants, and sailors passed through all the time. When something unusual happened there, people talked about it, and the news spread up and down the road and across the sea. A group of ordinary people who had given up their gods to follow a crucified Jewish teacher, and were joyful even while being persecuted, was definitely news.

What were people saying? They were telling the story of how the Thessalonians had welcomed Paul, and how they had left their idols behind and turned to God, to serve the real, living God. That was a huge change. In Thessalonica, like every Roman city, the gods were everywhere: in temples, in homes, in the marketplace, at festivals, at dinner parties, in the trade guilds that people depended on for their jobs. Walking away from them meant walking away from much of normal social life.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Idols**
>
> An idol was a statue or image of a god, but the idea was bigger than the statue. Worshiping the gods was woven into every part of Roman life. Families had shrines in their homes. Trade groups held feasts in honor of their patron gods. Cities honored the emperor with sacrifices. If you stopped joining in, your neighbors might think you were rude, disloyal, or even dangerous, since many believed the gods would punish the whole city if they weren't honored. That's part of why the Thessalonian believers were persecuted.

Today, most people don't bow down to statues. But we still have idols: anything we look to for the security, happiness, or identity that only God can give. Popularity. Money. Success. A relationship.

Our phones. Turning to God from idols still means choosing a different center for your life.

And the Thessalonians weren't just turning away from something. They were turning to something: serving the real God, and waiting for His Son to return from heaven. Paul describes Jesus as the One God raised from the dead, who saves us from the judgment that's coming. That's the first time the return of Jesus shows up in this letter. It won't be the last. Every chapter ends with it.

KEY VERSE

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:3 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says the Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope showed up in action. Where do yours show up in your everyday life?
2. The Thessalonians had joy even while they were suffering. Have you ever experienced joy in a hard time? What was it like?
3. What are some idols people your age are tempted to live for?
4. If people talked about your faith, what would they say?

TRY THIS *Make a list of three things that compete with God for first place in your life. Pick one and give it a smaller place this week, like turning off your phone during a certain time each day, and use that time to talk to God.*

CHAPTER 2

Not Just Words

1 Thessalonians 2

In chapter 2, Paul looks back on the time he spent in Thessalonica. He reminds them that his visit wasn't a failure. He and Silas had just been beaten and humiliated in Philippi, and yet, with God's help, they had the courage to keep preaching in Thessalonica, even though they faced strong opposition there too.

Then Paul begins to defend himself. Apparently, some people in Thessalonica were saying bad things about him. Maybe they said he was a fraud who had run away when things got tough, and that he was only in it for the money.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Traveling Preachers**
>
> The Roman world was full of wandering teachers, philosophers, and religious salesmen. Some were sincere. But many were known for flattering their audiences, collecting money, and moving on before anyone could catch on. Some would take advantage of followers in other ways too. So Paul's critics had an easy target. Paul needed to show that he was nothing like those people.

Paul says his message didn't come from error or wrong motives, and he wasn't trying to trick anyone. God had approved him and trusted him with the gospel. His goal wasn't pleasing people. It was pleasing God, the One who examines our hearts.

He never used flattery, he says. He never hid greed behind a mask. God knows that's true. And he wasn't looking for praise from anyone, though as an apostle he could have demanded respect.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Flattery**
>
> Flattery means saying nice things to someone, not because they're true, but because you want something from them. It's the opposite of honesty. Paul never told people what they wanted to hear just to win them over. You've probably met people who flatter, maybe to get invited somewhere, to get a better grade, or to be liked. Real friends tell you the truth, even when it's hard.

Instead, Paul says, he and his friends were gentle among them, like a mother nursing her children. They loved the Thessalonians so much that they were glad to share not only the gospel but their very lives.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Infants or Gentle?**
>
> The NIV text says Paul and his friends were like young children among them, but the NIV footnote says some manuscripts read gentle instead. The two Greek words differ by just one letter, so copyists could easily have mixed them up. Scholars debate which is original. Either way, the point is the same. Paul didn't throw his weight around. He came alongside them with tenderness.

That's a beautiful picture of what ministry, and friendship, should look like. Paul didn't just preach at the Thessalonians and leave. He shared his life with them. He was like a nursing mother, caring for them, and also, as he says a few verses later, like a father, encouraging, comforting, and urging each of them to live in a way that honors God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Mother and Father**

Paul uses both a mother picture and a father picture in this chapter. In the ancient world, mothers were known for tenderness and nourishing care, while fathers were known for training and guiding their children. Paul says he was both. Good spiritual leaders, and good friends, know when to comfort and when to challenge.

Paul also reminds them how hard he worked. He and his friends worked night and day so nobody would have to support them while they preached. Paul was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), probably working with leather and cloth, and he likely set up shop in Thessalonica, talking with customers about Jesus while he worked. He didn't want anyone to think he was preaching for money.

They had seen how Paul lived: holy, right, and without blame. And they had received his message not as a human idea, but as what it truly is, God's own word, which was at work in them.

Then Paul says something about suffering. The Thessalonians had suffered at the hands of their own people, just as the churches in Judea had suffered at the hands of some of their own people. And then Paul says some very harsh words about the Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus and the apostles.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Hard Passage**

In verses 14 to 16, Paul speaks sharply about some of the Jews in Judea, saying they had killed Jesus and the prophets, drove out the apostles, and tried to stop the gospel from reaching the Gentiles. It's important to read these verses carefully. Paul was Jewish himself, and he loved his people deeply (Romans 9:1–5). He wasn't talking about all Jewish people, but about particular leaders and groups who had opposed the message, just as the Thessalonians' own Gentile neighbors were opposing them. The NIV footnote on verse 16 also shows a translation question about God's judgment coming on them at last or fully. A minority of scholars think these verses were added

later. Sadly, words like these have been twisted throughout history to justify hatred and violence against Jewish people. That is a terrible misuse of Scripture, and it has no place among followers of Jesus, who was Himself Jewish.

Paul ends the chapter by telling them how much he missed them. He says he felt orphaned when he was torn away from them, even though it was only for a short time and only in person, not in heart. He tried to come back more than once, but Satan stood in the way. We don't know exactly what that means. It might have been a legal ban, ongoing danger, or illness.

But Paul says the Thessalonians are his hope, his joy, and the crown he'll boast about when Jesus comes. They're his glory and joy. That's how much Paul loved them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Crown**

The crown Paul mentions isn't a king's crown. It's a wreath, like the ones given to winning athletes at the games or to people honored by a city. Paul says his reward, when Jesus returns, won't be fame or money. It will be the people he helped bring to Jesus. That's the best kind of prize.

KEY VERSE

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says his goal was pleasing God, not people. Where are you most tempted to please people instead of God?
2. Why is flattery so dangerous in friendships?
3. Paul shared his life, not just his message. What does it look like to share your life with someone?
4. Who has been like a spiritual mother or father to you? What did they do?

TRY THIS *Think of someone younger than you, a sibling, a neighbor, or a kid at church. Find a way to spend time with them this week, not to preach, but to share your life with them.*

CHAPTER 3

Now We Really Live

1 Thessalonians 3

Paul picks up where he left off. When he couldn't stand the worry any longer, he decided to stay behind alone in Athens and send Timothy to Thessalonica.

Think about what that meant. Athens was a huge city, full of temples and philosophers, and Paul didn't know anyone there. He chose to be alone in a strange city, so that the Thessalonians could have Timothy's help. That's real sacrifice.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Paul in Athens**
>
> Acts 17 describes what Paul did in Athens while he waited. He was upset by all the idols in the city, so he talked with people in the synagogue and in the marketplace every day. Eventually, he was invited to speak to the Areopagus, a council of leading thinkers, and he gave a famous speech about the unknown god. A few people believed, including a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris. But it seems Paul's heart was still back in Thessalonica.

Paul sent Timothy, whom he calls his brother and God's coworker in the gospel, to strengthen and encourage their faith, so their troubles wouldn't shake anyone. Paul reminds them that they knew this would happen. When he was with them, he kept warning them that they would be persecuted. And that's exactly what happened.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Destined for Trials**
>
> Paul says that believers are destined for trials. That might not sound like good news. But Paul wanted the Thessalonians to know that suffering didn't mean God had abandoned them. Jesus Himself said His followers would face trouble (John 16:33). Hard times aren't a sign that you're doing something wrong. Sometimes they're a sign that you're doing something right.

Paul was afraid that the tempter, Satan, had somehow tempted them to give up, and that all his work had been wasted. He didn't know if he'd return to find a church or an empty room.

But then Timothy came back with good news. The Thessalonians were still trusting God and loving each other. They had good memories of Paul and longed to see him, just as he longed to see them.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Good News**
>
> The word Paul uses for Timothy's good news is the same word he usually uses for preaching the gospel. It's the only time in his letters he uses it for something other than the message about Jesus. That's how happy he was. Hearing that the Thessalonians were still standing firm was like hearing the gospel all over again.

Paul says that in all his distress and persecution, he was encouraged by their faith. And then he says something remarkable: now we're truly alive, because you're standing firm in the Lord. Paul's own well-being was wrapped up in theirs. When they were doing well, he felt alive.

How can he thank God enough for them, he asks, for all the joy they bring him? Night and day, he prays as hard as he can that he'll see them again, and that he'll be able to fill in what's still missing in their faith.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What's Lacking?**

Paul says there are still gaps in the Thessalonians' faith. That's not an insult. They were brand-new believers who had only had a few months of teaching before Paul was forced to leave. They needed more. That's why Paul wrote this letter, and why he answers their questions in chapters 4 and 5. Every Christian has things they still need to learn. Growth never stops.

Paul ends the chapter with a prayer. He asks God the Father and Jesus to clear the way for him to come back. He prays that the Lord would make their love grow and spill over, toward one another and toward everyone, the way Paul's love spills over toward them. And he prays that God would strengthen their hearts, so they'll be blameless and holy before God when Jesus comes back with all His holy ones.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Love That Overflows**

Paul prays for their love to overflow not only toward each other but toward everyone else. That includes the neighbors who were persecuting them. Christians aren't supposed to love only people inside the church. Their love should spill out onto everyone. That's what Jesus taught when He told His followers to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44).

And notice, once again, the chapter ends with the return of Jesus. Paul is constantly looking ahead. He wants the Thessalonians to live today in light of that day.

KEY VERSE

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

1 Thessalonians 3:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul gave up his own comfort to help the Thessalonians. When has someone made a sacrifice like that for you?
2. Why do you think Paul warned new believers that they would face hard times?
3. Paul says he's truly alive because they're standing firm. Who do you care about that much?
4. What would it look like for your love to overflow toward someone who isn't easy to love?

TRY THIS *Write a short note or message to someone who has helped you grow in your faith. Tell them, like Paul, what they mean to you.*

CHAPTER 4

Hope When Someone Dies

1 Thessalonians 4

Paul now turns to some practical instructions. He says, in effect: you're already living in a way that pleases God, and we taught you how. Now keep doing it, more and more.

The first topic is sex. Paul says plainly that God's will is for them to be holy, or sanctified, and that means staying away from sexual immorality. Each of them should learn to control their own body in a way that's holy and honorable, not driven by lust like the people around them who don't know God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sanctified**

To be sanctified means to be set apart for God, made holy. It's both something God does and something we take part in. When you trust Jesus, God declares you holy and puts His Spirit in you. Then, over your whole life, He keeps shaping you to become more like Jesus. Paul says that's God's will for you. If you've ever wondered what God's will for your life is, here's a clear part of the answer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Body or Your Wife?**

The NIV footnote shows that Paul's wording in verse 4 is unclear. The Greek literally says something like to possess your own vessel. That could mean to control your own body, as the NIV text says, or to live with your own wife, or to take a wife, as the footnote suggests. Either way, Paul's main point is the

same: God's people should treat sex as something holy and honorable, within God's design, not as something to grab whenever they want.

In the Roman world, sexual behavior that Christians considered wrong was common and widely accepted, especially for men. Many people saw nothing wrong with sex outside marriage, especially with slaves, prostitutes, or at religious festivals. So Paul's teaching was countercultural then, just as it is now.

Paul adds that nobody should cheat or exploit a fellow believer in this area. Sexual sin isn't just private. It hurts other people. It breaks trust, damages families, and treats people as objects. The Lord takes it seriously, Paul warns, and anyone who rejects this teaching isn't rejecting a person, but God, who gives His Holy Spirit.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Grace and Purity**

If you've already made mistakes in this area, Paul's words aren't meant to crush you. The whole gospel is about God forgiving and restoring people. Jesus treated people who had sinned sexually with great compassion, while still calling them to a new life (John 8:11). Purity isn't about being perfect. It's about starting fresh with God's help, today. And if anyone has ever hurt you or pressured you sexually, that wasn't your sin. Please tell a trusted adult.

Next, Paul talks about love. He says he doesn't really need to write about loving each other, because God Himself has taught them. They're already loving believers all over Macedonia. But he urges them to do it more and more.

Then he adds something unexpected. Make it your goal to live a quiet life, he says, take care of your own affairs, and do honest work. That way, outsiders will respect you, and you won't have to depend on anyone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Quiet Life**

Why would Paul need to say this? Some members of the church may have stopped working, perhaps because they thought Jesus was coming back any day, so what was the point? Or perhaps some were depending on wealthy believers to support them, as many people in the Roman world depended on patrons. Paul says faithful Christians work hard, pay their own way, and don't stir up drama. That might not sound exciting, but it's a powerful witness. A quiet, faithful life gets noticed.

Now Paul turns to a question that was breaking the Thessalonians' hearts. Some believers in the church had died. Maybe they were killed in the persecution, or died of illness. The Thessalonians were worried. Would those who died miss out when Jesus returned?

Paul says he doesn't want them to be uninformed about believers who have died, which he describes as falling asleep. He doesn't want them to grieve like people who have no hope.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Hope**

Many ancient tombstones show how hopeless people felt about death. One saying was so common that it was sometimes carved in shorthand on Roman graves. It went something like this: I was not, I was, I am not, I don't care. Some Greek and Roman thinkers believed in some kind of life after death, but many ordinary people had little hope. Into that world, Paul brings a stunning message: for those who belong to Jesus, death is not the end.

Notice Paul doesn't say don't grieve. He says don't grieve like people who have no hope. Grief is normal, and it's good. Jesus Himself wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus (John 11:35). Christians cry at funerals too. But our tears are mixed with hope.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Falling Asleep**

Paul describes Christians who have died as asleep. That doesn't mean they're unconscious or that death isn't real. It's a gentle picture that says death is

temporary, like sleep. You go to sleep expecting to wake up. Early Christians called their burial places cemeteries, from a Greek word meaning sleeping places. For believers, death is a bed, not a final grave.

Here's the reason for hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. And because He rose, God will bring with Him those who have died trusting in Him. They're not left behind. They'll be part of the celebration when He comes.

Then Paul explains what will happen, based on the Lord's own teaching. Those who are still alive when Jesus comes won't go ahead of those who have died. Jesus will descend from heaven in person, with a shout of command, an archangel's voice, and the sound of God's trumpet. Believers who have died will rise first. Then those still living will be snatched up along with them, in the clouds, to meet Jesus in the air. And from then on, we'll be with Him forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Caught Up**

The phrase caught up translates a Greek word that means to snatch or seize suddenly. When the Bible was translated into Latin, the word used was rapiemur, from which we get the English word rapture. So when Christians talk about the rapture, this is the passage they mean. The word rapture itself doesn't appear in English Bibles, but the idea of being caught up to meet the Lord does.

BACKGROUND CHECK **To Meet the Lord**

The Greek word for meet in verse 17 was often used for a special custom. When an emperor or important official came to visit a city, a group of citizens would go out of the city to meet him on the road, and then escort him back into the city with celebration. Some scholars think Paul has this picture in mind: believers rise to greet King Jesus and then accompany Him as He comes to reign on earth. Others point out that the word doesn't always carry that meaning, and that Paul doesn't say where believers go next.

Paul ends with a simple command. Encourage each other with these words. Paul isn't trying to start an argument about the end times. He wants grieving people to have comfort and hope.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **When You've Lost Someone**
>
> If someone you love has died, you might be reading this chapter with a heavy heart. It's okay to feel sad, angry, confused, or numb. Grief doesn't follow a schedule. Talk to God honestly about it; He can handle your questions. Talk to a parent, pastor, youth leader, or counselor too. If the person you lost trusted Jesus, Paul's words are for you: you will see them again. And if you don't know where they stood with God, you can trust Him to be perfectly good and just. He loved them even more than you did.

KEY VERSE

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

1 Thessalonians 4:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Paul says God's will for you is to be holy. What makes that hard for people your age? What helps?
2. Why do you think Paul tells Christians to live a quiet life and work hard? How does that help people outside the church respect the gospel?
3. What's the difference between grieving with hope and grieving without hope?
4. How does knowing that Jesus rose from the dead change the way you think about death?

TRY THIS *If you know someone who is grieving, find a simple way to encourage them this week: a note, a text, a hug, or just sitting with them. You don't need the perfect words. Just be there.*

CHAPTER 5

Children of the Day

1 Thessalonians 5

Paul keeps going with the topic of Jesus' return. The Thessalonians probably wanted to know when it would happen. Paul says he doesn't need to write about times and dates, because they already know: the day of the Lord will arrive like a burglar at night.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Day of the Lord**
>
> In the Old Testament, the day of the Lord was the time when God would step in to judge evil and rescue His people (Amos 5:18; Joel 2:31). The New Testament connects that day with the return of Jesus. A thief doesn't send a text before breaking in. Jesus used the same picture in Matthew 24:43. The point is that nobody knows the date. Jesus Himself said that no one knows the day or hour except the Father (Matthew 24:36). That's a good reason to be suspicious of anyone who claims to know exactly when the world will end.

While people are saying "Peace and safety," Paul says, sudden destruction will come on them, as suddenly as labor pains hit a woman about to give birth, and there will be no escape.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Peace and Safety**
>
> Peace and security was a popular slogan of the Roman Empire. Coins and inscriptions celebrated the peace of Rome, the Pax Romana, and the safety the emperor provided. Some scholars think Paul is pointing at that propaganda. People trusted Rome to keep them safe. But no empire can protect anyone from God's judgment. Only Jesus can rescue us.

But you're not in darkness, Paul tells the believers, so that day doesn't need to catch you by surprise. You belong to the light and the day. So don't sleep like everyone else. Stay awake and alert, and stay sober.

Paul uses a soldier's picture. Because we're people of the daytime, he says, let's wear faith and love as body armor, and our hope of being saved as a helmet. That's faith, love, and hope again, just like chapter 1. And it's an early version of the armor of God that Paul describes later in Ephesians 6.

Then Paul gives one of the clearest promises in the letter. God didn't choose us to suffer His anger, but to receive salvation through Jesus. Jesus gave His life for us so that, whether we're alive or have died when He comes, we'll live together with Him. So, Paul says again, encourage each other and build each other up, as you're already doing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How Christians Read 4:13–5:11**

Christians agree that Jesus will return. But they understand the details of this passage, and others like it, in different ways. Here are the main views, briefly and fairly.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pretribulation**

Many evangelical Christians, especially in North America, believe Jesus will catch up His church to meet Him in the air before a seven-year period of great trouble on earth called the tribulation, described in passages like Daniel 9, Matthew 24, and Revelation 6–19. Then, after the tribulation, Jesus will return to earth with His people to reign for a thousand years. This view was developed in the 1800s, especially by John Nelson Darby, and became widely known through the Scofield Reference Bible and, more recently, books and movies like the Left Behind series. Supporters point to 1 Thessalonians 5:9, which says God didn't appoint us to suffer wrath.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Midtribulation and Prewrath**

Some Christians believe the church will be caught up partway through the tribulation, often at the midpoint, before the most severe judgments begin. A related view, called prewrath, places the rapture later in the tribulation, just before God pours out His wrath. Supporters connect Paul's trumpet with trumpets in Revelation and emphasize that believers may face persecution but not God's wrath.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Posttribulation**

Other Christians believe the church will go through the time of tribulation, and that believers will be caught up to meet Jesus at His single, visible return at the end of it. In this view, believers rise to greet the King in the air, like citizens going out to meet a visiting emperor, and then return with Him to earth. Supporters note that the early church generally expected to face trouble before Jesus' return, and that this passage describes a loud, public event.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Amillennial Readings**

Many Christians, including much of the Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions, hold an amillennial view, which goes back to early church leaders like Augustine. They believe the thousand years in Revelation 20 is a symbolic picture of Christ's reign now, not a future earthly kingdom. In this reading, 1 Thessalonians 4 describes one great return of Jesus at the end of history, when the dead are raised, living believers are caught up to meet Him, and He judges the world and makes all things new. There is no separate rapture before His return. (A related view, postmillennialism, expects the gospel to spread and influence the world greatly before Jesus returns.)

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Christians Agree On**

Across all these views, Christians agree on what matters most in this passage: Jesus will really, personally return. Believers who have died will be raised. Believers who are alive will be transformed and gathered to Him. We'll be with the Lord forever. Nobody knows the date. And until then, our job is to stay awake, live as children of the light, and encourage one another. Paul

wrote this passage to comfort people, not to divide them. It's fine to have a view and discuss it. It's not fine to treat Christians who see it differently as enemies.

Paul finishes the letter with a rapid-fire list of instructions for church life. Respect the leaders who work hard among you, care for you, and correct you. Honor them highly and love them for the work they do. Live at peace with each other.

Warn the lazy troublemakers. Encourage those who are discouraged. Help those who are weak. Be patient with everyone. Don't get even when someone wrongs you, but always try to do good to each other and to everyone else.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Different People, Different Needs**

Notice that Paul doesn't treat everyone the same. Some people need a warning. Some need encouragement. Some need help. Everyone needs patience. Wise friends learn to tell the difference. If someone is discouraged, a lecture won't help. If someone is being careless, a hug might not be enough. Love pays attention.

Then come three of the shortest commands in the Bible. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances, because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pray Continually**

Paul doesn't mean you have to be on your knees twenty-four hours a day. He means a life that's always open to God, like a phone line that's never hung up. You can pray while walking to class, playing sports, doing homework, or lying in bed. Short prayers count. Help. Thank You. Show me what to do. Be with my friend. Over time, prayer becomes less like an appointment and more like breathing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **In, Not For**

Paul says give thanks in all circumstances, not for all circumstances. You don't have to thank God for something terrible, like a friend getting hurt. But even in the worst situations, you can thank God for who He is, for His presence, and for His promises. Gratitude doesn't deny pain. It holds on to God in the middle of it.

Don't quench the Spirit, Paul says, like throwing water on a fire. Don't look down on prophecy, but examine everything. Hold on to what's good, and reject every kind of evil. The early church valued spiritual gifts, but it also knew some people claimed to speak for God when they didn't. Christians should be open to God's Spirit, and also wise enough to test what they hear against Scripture.

Paul ends with a prayer. May the God who gives peace make you completely holy, and keep every part of you, spirit, soul, and body, blameless when Jesus comes. And then a promise: the One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **He Will Do It**

After all these instructions, you might feel overwhelmed. How can anyone live up to all this? Paul's last word on the subject isn't about you. It's about God. He's the One who will make you holy. He's faithful. He finishes what He starts. Your job is to trust Him and keep walking. His job is to get you home.

Paul asks them to pray for him and his team. He tells them to greet all the believers with a holy kiss, a common greeting in the ancient world, like a hug or handshake today, that showed they were family. He insists that this letter be read to the whole church, because it was for everyone, not just the leaders. And he closes, as always, with grace.

KEY VERSE

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Jesus said no one knows the day or hour of His return. Why do you think people keep trying to predict it?
2. Which view of Jesus' return have you heard most? What questions do you have about it?
3. Paul tells us to warn, encourage, help, and be patient. Which of these do your friends need from you right now?
4. What would it look like to pray continually in your everyday life?

TRY THIS *For one week, set three random alarms on your phone each day. Every time one goes off, stop and pray a one-sentence prayer and thank God for one thing.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just walked through Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. It's a letter full of hope: hope that death isn't the end, that Jesus is coming back, and that we'll be with Him forever.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He's calling you.

Paul says God calls people into His kingdom and glory. You were made to belong to Him.

2 We've all turned away.

Like the Thessalonians before they met Jesus, we've all put other things in God's place. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus died for us.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again, so that we could live with Him forever.

> *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.* **1 Thessalonians 5:9–10 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from whatever you've been living for, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. He's coming back, and He wants you to be ready.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been living for other things, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. I believe Jesus died for me and rose again. I'm turning to You. Forgive me. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to*

follow Him as my King. Thank You for the hope that death isn't the end. Help me live ready for His return. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read 1 Thessalonians straight through. Then read 2 Thessalonians, the next letter in the New Testament, which Paul wrote to the same church soon afterward.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Encourage one another and build each other up. Ask about being baptized.

Talk to God every day. Rejoice, pray, and give thanks, Paul says. Be honest. He can handle it.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Talk to someone you trust. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Paul is right, the King is coming back, and it's worth finding out for yourself.

The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

1 Thessalonians 5:24 (NIV)