

1ST THESSALONIANS



A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by John C. Purdy

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Author

John C. Purdy

Editor

Curtis A. Miller

Designer

Brenda L. Sullivan

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Presbyterian Publishing Corporation
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Table of CONTENTS

Introduction to the Men's Bible Study	3
Introduction to 1st Thessalonians.....	5
session <i>one</i> <i>Thanksgivings</i>	7
<i>First Thessalonians 1:1—10</i>	
<i>*Religious Language</i>	
session <i>two</i> <i>The Work of Ministry</i>	10
<i>First Thessalonians 2:1-20</i>	
<i>*Recipients of the Epistle</i>	
session <i>three</i> <i>Present Concerns</i>	13
<i>First Thessalonians 2:17—3:10</i>	
<i>*Support from Those Around Us</i>	
session <i>four</i> <i>The Moral Code</i>	17
<i>First Thessalonians 4:1-12</i>	
<i>*Translating for Modern Ears</i>	
session <i>five</i> <i>The End of Things</i>	20
<i>First Thessalonians 4:13—5:11</i>	
<i>*Death, or Sleep?</i>	
session <i>six</i> <i>Exhortations</i>	23
<i>First Thessalonians 5:12—22</i>	
<i>*Pray Without Ceasing</i>	
session <i>seven</i> <i>Blessings and Benedictions</i>	26
<i>First Thessalonians 3:11-13; 5:23—28</i>	
<i>*Hard Good-bys</i>	
the <i>writer</i> <i>Biography</i>	30

Introduction

Men's **BIBLE** Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life ...
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1) We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2) We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3) We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning. The pastor will serve as a resource for leaders in this study but may or may not be a leader, as determined by each study group.

4) We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5) We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6) We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7) We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes and answering questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing your answers with others, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the preceding seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has

been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passage. Others are intended to help the students think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword, often a story relating to the story that has just been discussed.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study God's word together in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study, the leader will find Scripture quotations. These quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout the study, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. Asterisks (*) are placed beside those sections of each lesson that may be omitted or summarized by the leader for the sake of time. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson as shown in the study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

1st Thessalonians

INTRODUCTION

The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians

Suppose that your congregation received a letter from God. Would it make any difference in your lives? What would you do with it? Would you frame it and put it on the Communion Table and invite others to come and venerate it? Would you duplicate it and send a copy to each member? Would you have it read aloud every Sunday by the minister?

We say that the Bible is God's Word to us, and in this series we will be reading and discussing Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. Evidently, that congregation regarded the letter as being something like one from God, for the letter was preserved and became part of the biblical canon. Scholars generally agree that it is the oldest document in the New Testament.

Reading the Letter Today

How should we read it today? In his little book *For Self-Examination*, Soren Kierkegaard suggests that we read God's Word as a lover would read a letter from his beloved, "written in a language the lover does not understand."¹

Since the letter is in a strange language, the lover's first task is to take the dictionary and look up every word in order to make a translation. If a friend comes in and says, "you are sitting and reading the letter you got from your beloved,"² he denies it. He says he is busy making a translation so that he may indeed read the letter. This is Kierkegaard's way of distinguishing the scholarly reading of Scripture from reading it as God's Word.

He goes on to say, "now if there is a request, a message, a command—remember the lover! Be off at once to act accordingly."³ We are to read the Bible, expecting God's Word to make demands on our lives. We are not to put off acting on those demands with the excuse that we do not understand everything that the Bible says.

Remember the lover. If in the letter there is a request, he will at once go and answer it. He will not sit and brood over parts of the letter he does not quite grasp; he will quickly go and act on what he does understand.

As If Written to You

With those thoughts in mind, address yourself to the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. There may be some scholarly work involved. First Thessalonians was written nearly two thousand years ago to a people

living in a culture quite different from yours. Some "translation" of the letter will be necessary to fit your circumstances.

Also, assume from the outset that you are going to hear some requests, commands, admonitions. The letter is from a pastor to his people, from the shepherd to his flock. There will be encouragements of various kinds, but there also will be things that the pastor wants done. Be attentive to those requests and commands.

Your Own Pastor

Since 1 Thessalonians is a pastoral letter, it will necessarily call to mind the relationship of your congregation with your pastor or pastors. You don't want to turn the study into a referendum on the effectiveness of your pastor's work among you! But there is no way to avoid some discussion of the relationship, for whatever else the epistle contains, it is fundamentally about Paul's relationship with a congregation that he himself founded (Acts 17).

You will need to make some allowances for the differences in the situation of the church in the middle of the first century A.D. and that of the church in the last decade of the twentieth century. (This is part of the "translation" that Kierkegaard talks about.) One of the major differences is that the Thessalonian Christians were an oppressed minority in their Greek city. That is an experience we can share only in our imagination. Also, Paul was not a resident pastor; he was an itinerant missionary. Nevertheless, the letter has much to teach us about the church and culture, and about the nature of the ministry.

An Entire Book

One of the obvious features of 1 Thessalonians is that it is *brief*. You have the rare opportunity to study a biblical book in its entirety. Just as a lover will pore over every word, even every comma in a letter from his beloved, so you have a chance to pore over every word in this epistle.

First Thessalonians is easily read at one sitting. You can read the entire letter before each of your discussion sessions. That lessens the danger of taking things out of context—something that often happens when we study long and complex books of the Bible.

Being able to grasp an entire book of the Bible is an invaluable experience. You can look at each part in terms

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination: Recommended for the Times*, Edna and Howard Hong, trans. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House), p. 25.

² Kierkegaard, p. 26.

³ Kierkegaard, p. 29.

of the whole, something that does not happen very often in Bible study. It's too good a chance to pass up. For example, Paul counsels his readers to "work with your hands" (1 Thess. 4:11). This is not said to praise manual labor over and against other kinds of work. The reasons he gives are two: "so that you may behave properly towards outsiders" and "be dependent on no one" (4:12). The Thessalonians have a model of such work in Paul himself; for he reminds them in 2:9—11 how he himself behaved among them. He "worked night and day" (presumably in his trade as a tentmaker, cf. Acts 18:3) so as not to be a burden on them. To have placed a financial burden on them might have raised questions about his integrity (i.e., that he acted out of greed or a desire for gain). "We never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed" (2:5). Does this mean that pastors should never be paid a salary? Of course not. But it forces reflection about the integrity of a "Professional" clergy.

Here is another example of how a single reference makes better sense in the context of an entire book. We read in 4:3: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication." That sounds at first as though the acid test of Christian conduct was chastity. What ever happened to The Great Commandments?

Chastity is certainly one of the Christian virtues. But the entire letter helps us to understand the force of Paul's appeal: The Thessalonians lived in a Gentile society that was noted for sexual profligacy. In such a society, respect and love for fellow Christians was a sign and seal of God's election. Sexual restraint was an outward sign of holiness, which was linked to the giving of the Holy Spirit.

An Invaluable Gift

Helping one another grasp an entire book of Scripture is giving one another an invaluable gift. Much of our knowledge of Scripture is of single verses or isolated passages. And that's fine. Who would not want to know John 3:16 or Psalm 23? Both are rightly regarded as keys to the rest of Scripture. But how much more useful even than the shepherd's psalm is this letter from the Christian shepherd Paul to his little flock in Thessalonica!

Don't pass up this opportunity to become familiar with an entire book of the Bible. The author of this series taped the entire book of 1 Thessalonians and then listened to it on the cassette recorder. Hearing a book of the Bible read aloud is quite different from reading it on the page. Try it!

Study Passages

These are the passages suggested for the seven study sessions:

- 1 Thess. 1:1—10 **Prayer of Thanksgiving**
- 1 Thess. 2:1—16 **Paul's Work of Ministry**
- 1 Thess. 2:17—3:13 **Paul's Present Concerns**
- 1 Thess. 4:1—12 **The Moral Code**
- 1 Thess. 4:13—15 **The End of Things**
- 1 Thess. 5:12—22 **Exhortations**
- 1 Thess. 3:11—13; 5:23—28 **Blessings and Benedictions**

The Structure of the Epistle

The usual pattern of a Pauline letter is:

**a greeting,
thanksgiving,
theological reflections, and
exhortations.**

First Thessalonians follows that pattern, with slight variations.

1:1	Greetings
1:2—10	Thanksgiving
2:1—3:13	Theological Reflections on Paul's Ministry
4:1—12	Exhortations to Purity
4:13—5:11	Theological Reflections on Christ's Return
5:12—28	Concluding Exhortations

one

THANKSGIVINGS

First Thessalonians 1:1–10

"Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, important for its location on both sea and land routes of travel. Paul founded the church in Thessalonica shortly after he left Philippi (1 Thess. 2:1–2; Acts 17:1–8). Although Acts tells us that his initial contact in Thessalonica was with the synagogue, 1 Thessalonians is addressed to Gentile believers (1:9).

"The letter reflects the life of a congregation that was devoted to its faith and strongly aware of its separation from the society in which its members had until recently found their standards and values. At the same time it was also a community that was threatened by social pressures and at times outright persecution to turn back to the life from which they had come."¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Reading a book of the Bible is a bit like overhearing one end of a telephone conversation: You know what one person said, but you have to make some educated guesses about the person or persons on the other end of the line. Be alert to—and discuss as a group—any and all clues as to the original audience for this letter from Paul. Use your imagination. Don't suppose that there are any final answers to the question of who the first readers of the letter were.

Read 1 Thess. 1:1–10. These 225 words stand in the epistle where "Dear Friends" would stand in one of ours. It was customary in the first century to follow salutation with a lengthy—and sometimes flowery—thanksgiving for the recipients.

According to the reading, who are Paul's friends and why are they dear to him?

In any Bible study, sooner or later you have to address the problem of "God language." Many church members—as an act of self preservation—have learned to "turn off" the religious language that flows over them unendingly. Here is an opportunity to face that fact with the study group.

Read the 1 Thess. 1:1–10 again, and list the ten "religious" words that it contains, such as "grace," "church," etc.

Why couldn't Paul have simply begun his letter with "Dear Friends," and then told them his concerns?

How are we, as church members, to deal with formal, sometimes off-putting religious language?

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1977), p. 10.

Religious Language

Look at 1 Thess. 1:1—10 one more time with this question in mind: How does the text itself suggest that we deal with "religious language"? Cross out any of the following that you think do not apply, and discuss your answers as a group.

- Go to scholars for help.
- Trust in the Holy Spirit.
- Look to inspired leaders.
- Look to creeds and confessions.
- Memorize words, hoping that someday they will have meaning.
- Look to living examples of Christian faith and piety.

It is helpful to remember that of any text—be it a biblical passage, a book, an essay, or an article—it is always helpful to ask these three quite different but related questions: (1) What do the words say? (2) What do the words mean? (3) What good does it do us to know that? This is a good opportunity to introduce these questions and to discover together how useful they can be. (*The leader may want to write these questions on a piece of newsprint and post them where the group can refer to them at other times during the series.*) If you think you have spent enough time looking at the actual words of 1 Thess. 1:1—10 and have some notion of their meaning, spend the rest of the hour exploring the usefulness of the text for us today. What message does God have for us in this text?

- a request?
- examples to follow?
- warnings?
- promises?
- words of encouragement?

1 . What do the words say?

2. What do the words mean?

3. What good does it do us to know that?

Afterword

(To the leader: Call special attention to this section. It contains suggestions for daily Bible reading and meditation for those so inclined. There are brief selections designed for individual reflection after the study sessions are over: stories of other men's experiences, poems, quotations, hymns, etc. Some leaders may choose to use these selections within the study session—especially if the proposed learning activities do not strike fire.)

Christmas Eve, 1943

"It is half past nine in the evening; I have had a few lovely hours of peace and quiet, and have been happy to think that you two are able to spend this day together.

"One of my greatest joys this Christmas is that we were able to keep up the tradition of exchanging the daily texts for the ensuing year. I had already thought about it, and hoped we should manage it, though I was not at all sure whether we would. And now this little book, which has been such a great help to me in recent months, will be our constant companion in the New Year, and as we read it in the morning we shall think especially of one another. Many, many thanks.

"I wish I could say something to help you in the time of separation which lies immediately ahead. There is no need to speak about its difficulties, but as I have learnt something about it myself during the last nine months, having been separated during that time from all those I love, I should like to pass it on to you.

"In the first place nothing can fill the gap when we are away from those we love, and it would be wrong to try and find anything. We must simply hold out and win through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, since leaving the gap unfilled preserves the bond between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap: he does not fill it, but keeps it empty so that our communion with another may be kept alive, even at the cost of pain. In the second place the dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude converts the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy. . . . Thirdly, times of separation are not a total loss, nor are they completely unprofitable for our companionship—at least there is no reason why they should be. In spite of all the difficulties they bring, they can be a wonderful means of strengthening and deepening fellowship. Fourthly, it has been borne in upon me here with peculiar force that a concrete situation can always be mastered, and that only fear and anxiety magnify them to an immeasurable degree beforehand. From the moment we awake until we fall asleep we must commend our loved ones wholly and unreservedly to God and leave them in his hands, transforming our anxiety for them into prayers on their behalf."²

"According to the Hebrew Bible, God made the world with words. God just spoke and the world became reality. (The Aramaic for 'I create as I speak' is *avara k'davara*, or, in magician's language, *abracadabra*.) Not only are words the instrument of creation, in Judaism they are primary reality itself. . . . This, of course, does not protect words from the numbing effect of overuse in any religious tradition. Spoken too often, even the holiest reality begins to sound hollow and lose its ability to create anew. Indeed, some of our most sacred words have come to feel like sawdust in our mouths, no longer able to instruct, inspire, chasten, or nurture. We need to dust them off, shake away the accretions, and wonder again about what they originally might have meant."³

Suggested Daily Readings

Day 1: Read 1 Thess. 1:1, Paul's salutation. Meditate on the words "grace" and "peace." What more beautiful words are there in all the world's language!

Day 2: Read 1 Thess. 1:2—5, in which Paul expresses thanks for the readers' faith, hope and love. Meditate on those three relationships as constituting the essence of Christian piety.

Day 3: Read 1 Thess. 1:6—10, in which Paul praises the readers for being examples to others in a wide region. Meditate on how the faith of a few can be like wide ripples in a pond.

Day 4: Read 1 Thess. 2:1—8, in which Paul defends his ministry among the Thessalonians. Meditate on the metaphor of the gentle nurse as appropriate for the ministry.

Day 5: Read 1 Thess. 2:9—12, in which Paul reminds his readers how he worked to support himself. Think about your own work and its relationship to your Christian calling.

Day 6: Read 1 Thess. 2:13—16, in which Paul reminds his readers of their suffering on behalf of the gospel. Pray for those who today suffer persecution for their faith.

Day 7: Read 1 Thess. 1:1—2:16, a review of the previous six days' readings. Underline in your Bible the one or two verses that have been most meaningful. Meditate on those words.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Eberhard Bethge, ed., Reginald H. Fuller, trans. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), pp. 119-121.

³ Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Words: Talking Spiritual Life, Living Spiritual Talk* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Press, 1993), p. 11.

two

The Work of **MINISTRY** First Thessalonians 2:1-20

"Early Christianity was a movement of converts. That is, Christians thought of themselves as people who had turned their lives around, from one state to another profoundly better. Turning around . . . is a metaphor that could have broad and multiple consequences for the way early Christians perceived their moral possibilities and obligations. Its generative potential is visible already in the earliest Christian document we have, the Apostle Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. First Thessalonians is a letter of moral advice. It aims to reinforce a variety of things Paul has taught the new Christians of Thessalonica about the behavior and the dispositions appropriate to people who have been 'chosen' and 'called' by God. At the beginning of the letter, he reminds them of and congratulates them for the way they first received the gospel and its messengers. Everywhere Paul has been, he says, other Christians have talked about them. They recount 'how you turned to God from idols' (1 Thess. 1:9). It is this 'turning,' then, that they are to keep firmly in mind as the letter goes on, encouraging them to persist in the new way they have taken. The letter continues the paternal admonitions that Paul and Silvanus and Timothy gave them at the time of their conversion, 'that you should walk in a way worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory' (2:12). Thus our earliest extant Christian writing wants to root the moral sensibilities of its readers in their consciousness of having turned around."¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(To the leader: Since the focus of this session will be on ministry, it will take some tact and perhaps persuasion to steer the discussion away from your particular pastor or pastors. That's why the suggestion is made that the session begin by having members identify those persons who were their "nurse" or "father" in the Christian faith.)

Read 1 Thess. 2:1-16. Make a list of those persons whom you consider to have been your "nurses" or "fathers" in the Christian faith.

Give the group a thumbnail sketch of one of the people you listed. Once everyone has had a chance to share his sketch, try as a group to identify some characteristics common to all.

Read 1 Thess. 2:1-16.

Can you determine what charges are being made against Paul by certain opponents?

Why, for example, would Paul find it necessary to remind the Thessalonians that he had not been a financial burden on them?

¹ Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 18.

What evidence does Paul offer to demonstrate his innocence of charges made against him?

What can we deduce about the nature of the opposition these Christians faced?

Do you find Paul's arguments persuasive?

The implication of 1:9 is that Paul worked at his trade of tentmaking (see Acts 18:3). That has given the name to pastors who have full-time or part-time secular work while serving small congregations. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of tentmaking ministries.

A challenge that faces every Christian group that sits down to study the New Testament is that of incipient anti-Semitism. There were fierce struggles in the first century between Christians and Jews, even though the Jesus Movement began as a wholly Jewish enterprise! We can't go through the New Testament and censor all the references to the Christian/Jewish conflicts. But we can—and must—see that these belong to a different time and place.

Paul uses the metaphors of nurse and father for Pastor Paul. Make a list of metaphors you would choose to describe the pastoral office today. Here are some suggestions to prime the pump: physician, broker, good friend, coach, teacher.

Recipients of the Epistle

Look at Acts 17:1-9. The church in Thessalonica was organized around a core of Jewish-Christian believers, who first heard Paul preaching in their synagogue. Yet the recipients of the epistle are evidently Gentile Christians (cf. 1:9).

Are there two or three metaphors that were used by more than one person? As a group, discuss which are most effective.

(To the leader: If it is your practice to close sessions with a prayer, it may be appropriate to use a prayer that thanks God for those who have been our fathers and nurses in our faith.)

Afterword

"The Rev. John Pickrell is a tentmaker and proud of it. I have the best job in the world,' he says unabashedly.

"Pickrell is a veteran in the growing ranks of Presbyterian ministers who feel the call to serve congregations but not derive their primary income from them. . . . Pickrell has served very small churches that cannot afford full-time pastoral leadership, while co-owning a company in southern Idaho that manufactures and sells hydraulic machinery.

"And he loves it. 'I learned quite a few years ago that I am a slip-in-the-back-door-and-sit-at-the-kitchen-table-with-the-members kind of pastor,' Pickrell says impishly, 'rather than the stride-in-the-front-door-and-take-my-seat-at-the-meeting-table kind of guy.'²

A Lutheran pastor in South Dakota wrote to Kathleen Norris:

"We need outsiders here but often end up repelling them, especially professionals, especially ministers. I have heard glowing praise turn into bitter fire within a few short years. Prairie people know they do this. And hidden in their rejection . . . is a seed by which they set themselves up to be exploited and then abandoned, over and over again."³

"... do you think this is your job, to meddle in these people's lives? I know what they teach you at seminary now: this psychology and that. But I don't agree with it.... How big do you think your little friends look among the billions that God sees? In Bombay now they die in the streets every minute. . . . I say you don't know what your role is or you'd be home locked in prayer. *There is* your role: to make yourself an exemplar of faith. *There is* where comfort comes from: faith, not what little finagling a body can do here and there, stirring the bucket. In running back and forth you run from the duty given you by God, to make your faith powerful, so when the call comes you can go out and tell them, 'Yes, he is dead, but you will see him again in Heaven. Yes, you suffer, but you must *love* your pain, because it is *Christ's* pain.' When on Sunday morning then, when we go before their faces, we must walk up not worn out with misery but full of Christ ..."⁴

East St. Louis, Ill, March 8 (AP)— "Four women have been charged with assault and battery here after a fight broke out over whether a former pastor had misused thousands of dollars in church money.

"At the end of church services on Sunday, about 15 women took their argument into a hallway of the First Baptist Church, where the fight broke out.

"'They all attacked us,' said Shepell Adams, a church trustee. 'The aunts, the sisters, the mamas. Everybody attacked.'"

"Witnesses said the fight was over the Rev. Albert Jones, who resigned as pastor on Feb. 26. Some church members accused him of misusing more than \$200,000 from a construction fund.

"Several of Mr. Jones's supporters were accused of making loud, derogatory noises at the sermon delivered by the Rev. Keith Pittman, an opponent of Mr. Jones. The four women arrested were also opponents of Mr. Jones.

"Mr. Adams and another supporter of Mr. Jones were treated for cuts and bruises."⁵

Suggested Daily Readings

Day 1: Read 1 Thess. 2:18, in which Paul expresses his desire to visit the church in Thessalonica. Think about the boldness of Paul's metaphors; he is an "orphan," separated from them.

Day 2: Read 1 Thess. 2:19-20, in which Paul calls his readers his "joy." If you are a parent, pray that your children shall be your joy.

Day 3: Read 1 Thess. 3:1-3a, in which Paul explains why Timothy was sent to them. Again, there is the bold use of metaphor: Timothy is Paul's "brother and co-worker for God." Who is that for you?

Day 4: Read 1 Thess. 3:3b-4, in which Paul says that they were "destined for" persecutions. Consider that few of us have suffered so for Christ.

Day 5: Read 1 Thess. 3:5, in which Paul admits to anxiety. Consider times when you have fretted that your labor might be in vain.

Day 6: Read 1 Thess. 3:6-8, in which Paul tells of Timothy's return with good news. Consider how dependent we—even the greatest among us—are on others for encouragement.

Day 7: Read 1 Thess. 3:9-10, in which Paul thanks God for the Thessalonian Christians. What might it mean to pray night and day for some outcome?

² Jerry Van Marter, "Tentmakers: Today's Presbyterian Pioneers," in *The NEWS of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, November/December, 1994, p. 1.

³ Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), p. 61.

⁴ John Updike, *Rabbit Run* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1960), pp. 142-143.

⁵ From the Associated Press News Service, as printed in the *New York Times*, March 8, 1995.

three

Present CONCERNS First Thessalonians 2:17—3:10

"The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Longingly, the imprisoned Paul calls his 'dearly beloved son in the faith,' Timothy, to come to him in prison in the last days of his life; he would see him again and have him near. Paul has not forgotten the tears Timothy shed when last they parted (2 Tim. 1:14). Remembering the congregation in Thessalonica, Paul prays 'night and day . . . exceedingly that we might see your face' (1 Thess. 3:10) . . .

"The believer feels no shame, as though he were still living too much in the flesh, when he yearns for the physical presence of other Christians. Man was created a body, the Son of God appeared on earth in the body, he was raised in the body, in the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected fellowship of God's spiritual-physical creatures. The believer therefore lauds the Creator, the Redeemer, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of a brother."¹

Where?

When?

Why?

What does Paul hope to gain from a "face to face" meeting with the Thessalonian Christians?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read 1 Thess. 2:17-3:10. These verses describe and intimate considerable activity.

How much of that activity can you reconstruct? As a guide, you may want to use the familiar questions a newspaper reporter asks when constructing a story:

Who?

What?

What are his hopes and needs?

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, John W. Doberstein, trans. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1954), pp. 19-20.

Support From Those Around Us

Members of the group may bring to this passage considerable experience with various kinds of support groups. Use the following checklist to elicit personal stories about such groups.

Family

Athletic team

Army unit

Therapy group

Choir/chorus

Fraternal Order

12-Step Group

Men's group

Work group

Study group

Discuss as a group the reasons for joining this men's Bible group.

Have you joined hoping that it would be a source of encouragement and support in the Christian life?

Why do we need support groups? Why can't we "make it on our own"?

(To the leader: One topic that all men want and need to discuss is that of their daily work. First Thessalonians offers a rare opportunity to discuss work in a biblical context. Don't let this opportunity slip by!)

Quickly scan the passages in 1 Thessalonians that you have studied up to this point, noting references to the subject of work. You should note at least these: 1:3; 2:9; 2:13; 3:2; 3:5.

Make a list of the different kinds of work to which Paul refers.

Does God's work in believers through the Word have anything in common with tentmaking?

In what sense can we say that we are "co-workers for God"?

What difficulties do men encounter in trying to make their daily work fit with their Christian responsibilities and values?

How does your congregation compare with your workplace as a support system for your hopes and aspirations?

In the closing minutes of the session, think about ways in which the two themes of this session—our need for the support of other Christians, and work—go together.

How important is it that Christians experience the mutual support that comes from working together in various church enterprises?

What do you say to church members who come to worship, contribute money—but don't want to get involved on committees or with task groups?

Afterword

"The Scriptures teach us also that when we affirm that the human being is primarily a worker, we are proclaiming that he is created in the image and likeness of God.' In the Old Testament he is ordered in the image and likeness of God' to 'work six days' so that he can 'rest the seventh.' In the New Testament we are called to be workers in the image and likeness of Christ.' God and Christ are 'one and the same thing,' the content of which is defined by Jesus Christ himself: 'My Father works and I work.' In the New Testament they go so far as to deny the right to eat—which is like denying the right to live—to anyone 'who will not work.' Idleness is the sacrilegious vice of the 'old man.'"²

"American society is very mobile. I personally have lived in four different communities in the past ten years. I have traveled the country extensively and been privileged to visit scores of churches of different denominations in different parts of the country. In general, Presbyterian churches were the least friendly... . In my last community, I visited the only Presbyterian church in town. Not a single person said a word to me. I had to check myself to make sure I was not invisible. It should have been obvious to the congregation that I was new because I was one of the few young people in a congregation of fewer than 150, and I am of a race different from the rest of the congregation. Needless to say, I did not return."³

² *Confession of Faith* of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, Cuba, 1977.

³ Rudolph Tolentino, "Is There Anyone Out There My Age?" in *Monday Morning*, February 20, 1995.

Christ came gently with a robe and crown
For Booth the soldier, while the throng knelt down.
He saw King Jesus. They were face to face,
and he knelt aweeping in that holy place. Are you
washed in the blood of the Lamb?⁴

"The Kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies.
And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the
Kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit
among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the
devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ!
If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever
have been spared?"⁵

Suggested Daily Bible Readings

*(1 Thessalonians 4:1–12 is a straightforward appeal to the
Thessalonian Christians to abstain from premarital or
extramarital sex. The moral exhortation is grounded in
theological concerns; the passage deserves careful reading.)*

Day 1: Read 1 Thess. 4:1–2, in which Paul appeals to his
readers to live so as to please God. Both the appeal
and the specific instructions to follow are given as
"in" and "through" the Lord Jesus. Meditate on
Jesus as the Lord of life.

Day 2: Read 1 Thess. 4:3–5, in which Paul tells believers
to avoid fornication (i.e., sexual intercourse other
than that between wife and husband). Consider the
threefold appeal to: (1) the will of God, (2) the
sanctification (holiness and wholeness) of the
believer, and (3) the knowledge of God. Meditate
on the connection between knowledge and purity.

Day 3: Read 1 Thess. 4:6, in which Paul warns of God's
punishment for those who sexually misuse
Christian brothers and sisters. Meditate on the
sober thought that Paul knows nothing of "free"
sex.

Day 4: Read 1 Thess. 4:7, in which Paul reminds his
readers that they were called to a life of holiness.
Meditate on what it means to be chosen by God
for a life of purity.

Day 5: Read 1 Thess. 4:8, in which Paul grounds his
moral exhortation in God. Meditate on the
breathtaking claims made by the apostles of
Christ—that they spoke for God and were
inspired by God's Spirit.

Day 6: Read 1 Thess. 4:9–10a, in which Paul takes the
sting out of his reference to God's vengeance by
saying that his readers have no need to be written
to in such a way. Consider the pastoral need to be
both stern and gentle.

Day 7: Read 1 Thess. 4:10b–12, in which Paul urges on
his readers a modest, humble, and hardworking
life. Meditate on the virtues of an ethic that calls
for such a lifestyle.

⁴ Vachel Lindsay, "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven," in *God with a Human Face*, John C. Purdy (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 77.

⁵ Martin Luther, as quoted in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1954), pp. 17-18.

four

The Moral CODE First Thessalonians 4:1-12

"In a society in which the woman's body was both indispensable and dangerous, object of desire and fear, common moral intuitions shared by the ruling, male elites served two principal concerns, which we can call economic and therapeutic, respectively. I use 'economic' in the ancient, not the modern, sense, referring to the need to maintain the good order of the household both within itself and with respect to the household's role in the larger community. . . . Two dimensions of this order were uppermost in the minds of householders: assuring continuity of name and inheritance through legitimate offspring and assuring the honor of the family and its clan. By 'therapeutic' I mean those measures that were felt to be needed to protect against the disordering, threatening powers of the female.

"It is the economic concern, in the sense just explained, that is most clearly in play in the traditional rules of marriage of which Paul reminds the converts in Thessalonica: 'For this is God's will, the way you are to be holy: you must abstain from illicit sex [*porneia*]. Each of you must know how to acquire his own vessel in holiness and honor, not in the passion of desire like the gentiles who do not know God. And he must not in this matter transgress [the rights of] his brother and be greedy for what is his'" (1 Thess. 4:3—6).¹

(To the leader: 1 Thessalonians 4:1—12 is clearly moral exhortation: Paul wants his readers to abstain from illicit sex. However, you want to keep the group from what James Sanders calls "moralizing,"—"To moralize in reading a text is to focus on and even absolutize the cultural mores and conditions thereof"² Sanders asks that first the reader "theologize." "To theologize in reading a text is to focus on what God can do with the likes of the reader mirrored in the text."³ It is not easy to keep groups from "moralizing," which is why it is so difficult to have a satisfactory discussion of sexual ethics in the church!)

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read 1 Thess. 4:1-12. Try, as a group, to figure out what was going on in Thessalonica.

What's the story lying behind Paul's appeal for sexual purity? Paul doesn't appeal to the Thessalonians not to steal, murder, lie, or cheat. Why the impassioned appeal to control their sexual appetites? See what you can reconstruct of the situation in Thessalonica from the clues provided by the biblical text. Remember the image of listening to one end of a telephone conversation. Try to imagine what may be happening at the other end of Paul's line.

What are seven separate reasons or relationships on which Paul grounds his appeal for sexual purity?

Share your answers with the group. Is there a consensus about which two or three reasons are most important to Paul's argument?

Imagine that you have been invited to speak to an audience of high school kids on "Chastity: The Best Approach to Safe and Sane Sex."

What would be the basis of your appeal?

¹ Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 142-143.

² James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 52.

³ James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community*.

How might this contrast with the arguments Paul uses in 1 Thess. 4:1—12?

If there is a big difference between your appeal and that of Paul, what is the significance of the difference?

Translating for Modern Ears

Discuss the efforts of modern translators to make 1 Thess. 4:1—12 meaningful to modern readers.

- Where the Greek text has only "brother" and "brothers," the NRSV adds "sister" and "sisters."
- Where the Greek text has "brotherly love" in 4:9, the NRSV has "love of brothers and sisters."

How do these attempts at "inclusive language" change the nature and force of Paul's appeals and arguments?

Does Paul in 1 Thess. 4:1—12 advance "an ethic of perfection"?

yes

no

Clearly Paul contrasts the kind of sexual life God wills for God's people with the "lustful passions, like the Gentiles who do not know God" (4:5).

Discuss the difficulty of maintaining a sexual ethic that is radically different from that of the surrounding culture.

How is that a problem for us today?

What resources does 1 Thess. 4:1—12 offer for dealing with it?

Perhaps the quote from Otto Piper, listed in the Afterword, can provide a focal point for the concluding discussion.

Afterword

"For the evangelical Christian, a crucial aspect of permanent commitment to marriage involves the relationship of feeling and will. Emotion alone is too unstable a base on which to build a permanent relationship, so Christians must subordinate or tame their feelings so that they follow the mind's guidance. Les Newman, a young businessman married only a few years, is an active member of an evangelical church, and already the father of two children. Describing his marriage, he says, 'Before I thought it was all heart, all chemistry. Now I know that chemistry may be a good start, but the only thing that makes it real love that will endure, and the kind of love that is taken into marriages,

is that mental decision that you're going to force that chemical reaction to keep going with each other."⁴

KORE

"How can a man know what a woman's life is? A woman's life is quite different from a man's. God has ordered it so. A man is the same from the time of his withering. He is the same before he has sought out a woman for the first time, and afterwards. But the day when a woman enjoys her first love cuts her in two. She becomes another woman on that day. The man is the same after his first love as he was before. The woman is from the day of her first love another that continues all through life. The man spends a night by a woman and goes away. His life and body are always the same. The woman conceives. As a mother she is another person than the woman without child. She carries the fruit of the night for nine months in her body. Something grows. Something grows into her life that never again departs from it. She is a mother. She is and remains a mother even though her child dies. For at one time she carried the child under her heart. And it does not go out of her heart ever again. Not even when it is dead. All this, the man does not know, he knows nothing. He does not know the difference before love and after love, before motherhood and after motherhood. He can know nothing. Only a woman can know that and speak of that. That is why we won't be told what to do by our husbands. A woman can only do one thing. She can respect herself. She can keep herself decent. She must always be as her nature is. She must always be maiden and always be mother. Before every love she is a maiden, and after every love she is a mother. In this you can see if she is a good woman or not."⁵

"Christian faith makes a new beginning possible in spite of the fact that the old basis of life has broken to pieces. My sex relationship to a person with whom I am now living can really help me attain completeness in my life. No one need be in despair, no matter how difficult and dark is the past, which burdens him. The Gospel lays bare our weakness and sin quite relentlessly, but we must not conclude as a consequence that it is only with exaggerated caution that a Christian can enter into relations with the other sex. Jesus was very far from

desiring to produce disquietude in matters of sex.... He says in effect: `You may possibly fall into sin, but you would be burdened with a greater guilt if you did not dare to live life in its fullness. For in this way you would only prove that you are hoping to live, and to attain happiness, by your own power, instead of trusting to my forgiving love. I bear the guilt of all the sins which you commit, if you will only step out into life trusting in my promises."⁶

Suggested Daily Readings

- Day 1:** Read 1 Thess. 4:13-14, in which Paul addresses questions about those who have died before the Lord's return. Meditate on what it must mean to grieve for the dead with no hope of a future that includes them.
- Day 2:** Read 1 Thess. 4:15-17, in which Paul imagines the scene of the Lord's return. Meditate on the promise that "we will be with the Lord forever."
- Day 3:** Read 1 Thess. 5:1-3, in which Paul addresses himself to speculations about just when the Lord will return. Meditate on the itch we have for "inside knowledge" about the future.
- Day 4:** Read 1 Thess. 5:4—5, in which Paul reminds his readers that the day of the Lord will come as a surprise. Meditate on the boldness of Paul's figures of speech, "Like a thief in the night," "as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman."
- Day 5:** Read 1 Thess. 5:6—8, in which Paul reminds his readers that they belong to the light; they have nothing to fear of a day of darkness and destruction. Consider what it means to live as "children of light"—in wakefulness, sobriety, and alertness.
- Day 6:** Read 1 Thess. 5:9-10, in which Paul reminds his readers that God's purpose is to save, not destroy. Meditate on God's saving purpose.
- Day 7:** Read 1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11, in which Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to encourage one another. Consider our need for mutual support and encouragement in the faith.

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 94-95.

⁵ *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, by J. G. Jung and C. Kerényi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), as quoted in *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart: Poems for Men*, Robert Bay, James Hillman, and Michael Meade, eds. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 402.

⁶ Otto Piper, *The Christian Interpretation of Sex* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 209.

five

The End of THINGS First Thessalonians 4:13—5:11

*O God, who gave us birth,
you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray.
You know our needs before we ask,
and our ignorance in asking.
Show us now your grace,
that as we face the mystery of death
we may see the light of eternity.*

*Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and
of death.
Help us to live as those who are prepared to die.
And when our days here are ended,
enable us to die as those who go forth to live,
so that living or dying,
our life may be in Jesus Christ our risen Lord.¹*

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Like Christians in every generation, Paul's readers had questions about future life. Because they lived at a time when the return of Christ was expected at any moment, they could not help wondering about those who had already died. Our questions as contemporary Christians will be phrased differently but may reflect some of the same anxiety, mixed with grief. This is a time to be gentle and patient with one another, despite the need for intellectual honesty and clarity.

Read 1 Thess. 4:13—5:11. Working as a group, see if you can reconstruct the situation to which Paul addresses himself in these verses. It seems a rather startling switch—from writing about fornication to writing about the coming of the Lord!

What was going on in the Thessalonian congregation?

Take a few moments to see if members of the group are grieving the loss of family members or friends. If so, consider as a group the prayer at the beginning of this session.

Does the prayer express what we feel at the death of those close to us? Try to explain why.

What other feelings need to be shared?

Would 1 Thess. 4:13—5:11 be appropriate for reading at a Service of Witness to the Resurrection? Why or why not?

Reread 1 Thess. 4:13-18, in which Paul describes the Second Coming of Christ. The results of a recent poll conducted for *U.S. News and World Report* found that 60 percent of Americans believe that Jesus Christ will return to earth, and more than a third of those think it will be in a few years or decades.

¹ Reprinted from *the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 916.

Share any difficulties you may have, either with the idea of a Return or with the description that Paul offers.

If the translators had retained "fallen asleep," how might that affect our reading of 5:10b, "so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him"?

Reread 1 Thess. 5:1–11 and list the figures of speech employed by Paul in this section (i.e., "a thief in the night," in 5:2.)

Discuss the notion that death is a sleep, from which one will eventually be awakened. Is that an idea with which we might encourage one another?

Share your answers with others in the group, then discuss what may seem to modern readers a curious thing: Paul uses matter-of-fact, descriptive language to describe the return of Christ in 4:16–17, but in this passage, he uses highly figurative language for proper Christian behavior in the interim between now and Christ's return. We are to "keep awake"; we are to "put on the breastplate of faith and love."

How do you account for this?

If it is your practice to close the study session with prayer, you may want to name those in your group—or in the congregation—who have recently suffered the death of a family member or friend, and then use the words from the *Book of Common Worship* as your closing prayer.

Afterword

The following questions were submitted by readers of *Presbyterian Survey* to its Question & Answer column:

"Is the second coming of Christ being delayed until we have converted all others?"

"Following the death of a member, the minister asked that we pray for the 'soul of the departed.' Does this fit into Presbyterian theology? Why did we pray for the departed soul?"

"Some denominations teach that the Judgment occurs at the moment of death; others at the End of Time as we know it. Whose opinion is agreeable to you?"

"Can you give specific Scriptures concerning the final judgment?"

"In our Sunday School class there has been a heated discussion on the subject of immediate, heavenly reward or immediate, hellish damnation at the moment of death. Some members contend that there is no reward or punishment for the soul until Judgment Day. Others contend that the moment of death is also the moment of Judgment. What is the Reformed/Presbyterian position on this matter?"

Death, or Sleep?

The original Greek of 4:13 might be more literally translated to read, "those who have fallen asleep." But in the NRSV, we read, "those who have died."

"Christ spoke of his return to earth. Why has it been so long? Will he come and when?"

"How do you feel about people sometimes talking with their dead?"

"In view of the promise of a new and perfect body at the time of the resurrection, what is the Presbyterian position on cremation rather than the burial of the body?"

"Daddy didn't come home. He isn't going to come home ever any more. He's—gone away to heaven and he isn't ever coming home again. Do you hear me, Catherine? Are you awake?" Catherine stared at her mother. "Do you understand, Rufus?"

He stared at his mother. "Why not?" he asked.

She looked at him with extraordinary closeness and despair, and said: "Because God wanted him." They continued to stare at her severely and she went on: "Daddy was on his way home last night—and he was he—got hurt and—so God let him go to sleep and took him straight away with Him to heaven."²

References in familiar hymns to the Second Coming:

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation,
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration,
And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art!³

Christians, this Lord Jesus shall return again
With His Father's glory o'er the earth to reign.
For all wreaths of empire meet upon his brow
And our hearts confess Him king of glory now.⁴

Even so, Lord, quickly come to thy final harvest home;
Gather Thou Thy people in, free from sorrow, free
from sin;
There forever purified, in Thy presence to abide;
Come, with all Thine angels, come, raise the glorious
harvest home.⁵

Suggested Daily Readings

Day 1: Read 1 Thess. 5:12-13a, in which Paul pleads for respect to be shown to pastors and leader. Pray for your pastor(s).

Day 2: 1 Thess. 5:13b, in which Paul appeals to the Thessalonians to be at peace with one another. Consider the blessing that peace is to a congregation or family.

Day 3: 1 Thess. 5:14, in which Paul asked the strong to help the weak. Pray for those in your congregation who have been weakened by illness, economic reverses, or neuroses.

Day 4: 1 Thess. 5:15, in which Paul calls for an ethic of nonvengeance. Consider how hard it is not to take revenge when we have been wronged. Pray for your enemies.

Day 5: 1 Thess. 5:16—17, in which Paul exhorts the Thessalonians always to rejoice, pray, give thanks. Consider how it might be possible in all times and circumstances to give thanks. Remember Psalm 103: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name."

Day 6: 1 Thess. 5:19, in which Paul cautions his readers not to throw cold water on the work of the Spirit. Recall times when you were among those who threw cold water on the schemes of others.

Day 7: 1 Thess. 5:20-21, in which Paul puts in a good word for preaching, but still advises his readers to be critical. Consider how hard it is to be open and enthusiastic to new ideas and yet at the same time to exercise sound judgment.

² James Agee, *A Death in the Family*, as reprinted in *God with a Human Face*, pp. 107-108.

³ "How Great Thou Art" as published in *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 467.

⁴ "At the Name of Jesus," as published in *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 148.

⁵ "Come Ye Thankful People Come," as published in *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 551.

six

Exhortations | First Thessalonians 5:12-22

"[T]he fundamental practices of early Christianity included mutual admonition and the sanctions that were applied to reduce deviance.

"The practice of admonition is most visible to us in the letters that early Christians wrote. Christians were a movement of letter writers . . . and the overwhelming majority of their letters were wholly or partly hortatory in function. They urged groups and individuals to behave in ways appropriate to the writer's vision of Christianity. Not only so, they also urged the recipients to admonish one another or to submit to the instruction of their leaders."¹

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

This passage from 1 Thessalonians presents a special challenge, for it seems to consist of a kind of "laundry list" of admonitions about a variety of subjects. Not that the subjects are trivial, but it's difficult to discuss a list—lists almost by definition are boring. Try, then, to regard these verses as clues to the nature of the audience to whom Paul writes.

Read 1 Thess. 5:12—22 aloud, having each member of the group read one verse, regarding these various admonitions as clues to the circumstances and lifestyle of the Thessalonian church.

What can we deduce about the state of affairs in Thessalonica?

Look specifically at 5:14.

Who might have been "idlers," the fainthearted, the weak?

Are these just the weak links in any chain, or were there circumstances that might account for these people? (2 Thess. 3:6—13 suggests that some saw no need to work, in view of the imminence of Christ's return!)

Does every congregation have what we used to call "weak sisters"? And is that an inevitable fact of church life? Why or why not?

¹ Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 102.

What is our responsibility for them?

Can you share a personal experience in which an admonition was particularly helpful?

Pray Without Ceasing

Consider 1 Thess. 5:17, "Pray without ceasing." It has an extraordinary history. It prompted the writing of a devotional classic, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, which features the "Jesus Prayer"—"Lord Jesus, have mercy on me." This prayer was made the focus of J. D. Salinger's short story "Fanny," which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1955. Are you familiar with the prayer?

In the suggested Service for the Lord's Day in our Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, this charge is to be given by the pastor just before the final Benediction:

Go out into the world in peace;
have courage;
hold on to what is good;
return no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted;
support the weak, and help the suffering;
honor all people;
love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.²

Compare and contrast this with 1 Thess. 5:12–22. Underline one or two phrases from that "charge" that have proved most meaningful to you—or that would be meaningful if that charge were used in their service of worship. Share your observations with others in the group, commenting on the usefulness of "admonitions."

Why do you think we tend to shrug off this kind of language?

It may be useful, as a closing exercise, to have the group read aloud in unison 1 Thess. 5:12–22 as a kind of mutual admonition to one another.

Afterword

"Keep on praying [1 Thess. 5:17] for others too, for there is a chance of their being converted and getting to God. Let them, then, learn from you at least by your actions. Return their bad temper with gentleness; their boasts with humility; their abuse with prayer. In the face of their error, be `steadfast in the faith.' Return their violence with mildness and do not be intent on getting your own back. By our patience let us show we are their brothers, intent on imitating the Lord, seeing which of us can be the more wronged, robbed, and despised. Thus no devil's weed will be found among you; but thoroughly pure and self-controlled, you will remain body and soul united to Jesus Christ."³

Idleness

"What costs nothing amounts to nothing. Nature gives man corn, but he must grind it; God gives a man will, but he must make right choices. As Goethe said, `An idle life is death anticipated.' Physical idleness deteriorates the mind; spiritual idleness deteriorates the heart."⁴

"In the *Apostolic Tradition* we see how the Roman church of the second century had evolved prescriptions for set times of daily prayer, beginning at dawn: `Let all the faithful, men and women, when they arise from sleep in the morning, before taking up any work, wash their hands and pray to God, and thus let them approach their work.' Then at the third hour of the day, wherever one might be, one ought to `pray and bless God,' for `in this hour Christ was fixed to the cross.' Also in the sixth hour, recalling the `great darkness' that fell at the crucifixion. Again in the ninth hour, recalling the

² *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 78.

³ Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, writing in the early part of the second century to Christians in Ephesus, as quoted in *Early Christian Fathers*, Cyril C. Richardson, Th.D., D.D., ed. (New York: The MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1978), p. 91.

⁴ *The Quotable Fulton Sheen: A Topical Compilation of the Wit, Wisdom, and Satire of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 139.

emission of blood and water from the side of Christ. One prayed again at bedtime. More striking is the directive to get up again at midnight, wash the hands, and pray again, together with one's wife, if she is a believer."⁵

Suggested Daily Readings

Day 1: Read 1 Thess. 3:11, in which Paul prays that he may be directed to go to them. Who is it that you long to see, face to face?

Day 2: Read 1 Thess. 3:12, in which Paul prays that his readers may increase their love for one another. Consider what it might mean for the members of your congregation to increase in mutual love. What would be the outward signs of such an increase in love?

Day 3: Read 1 Thess. 3:13, in which Paul prays that the Thessalonians might be pure in heart when Christ returns. You may be reminded of Jesus' beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Day 4: Read 1 Thess. 5:23—24, in which Paul again prays that his readers be made whole and kept blameless for the coming of Christ. Why in this book is there such an emphasis on purity? Do we—should we—pray to be made and kept pure?

Day 5: Read 1 Thess. 5:25, in which Paul asks that the brothers pray for him. Do we not all—the greatest as well as the least—stand in need of the prayers of others? Pray for your pastor, for the leaders of your community, and of the nation.

Day 6: Read 1 Thess. 5:26, in which Paul asks that his readers greet one another with a holy kiss. In your service of worship do you have a moment for the passing of peace? a handshake? a hug? What is the meaning of this for you?

Day 7: Read 1 Thess. 5:28, in which Paul asks that the grace of Christ be with his readers. This may be all too familiar from its use as a benediction in services of worship.

⁵ Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 98-99.

seven

First Thessalonians 3:11—13; 5:23—28

Blessings and BENEDICTIONS

One of the most beloved of all hymns is Jeremiah Rankin's "God Be with You Till We Meet Again."

*God be with you till we meet again;
Loving counsels guide, uphold you,
With a Shepherd's care enfold you:
God be with you till we meet again.
God be with you till we meet again;
Unseen wings protecting hide you;
Daily manna still provide you:
Go be with you till we meet again.
God be with you till we meet again;
When life's perils thick confound you,
Put unfailing arms around you:
God be with you till we meet again.*

*God be with you till we meet again;
Keep love's banner floating o'er you,
Smite death's threatening wave before you:
God be with you till we meet again.¹*

The author said of the hymn, It was called forth by no person or occasion, but was deliberately composed as a Christian hymn on the etymology of good-bye, which is "God be with you."²

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

(This session is designed to close the study of 1 Thessalonians. Before you get to the subject of "how do you say good-bye?" you might consider any loose ends from previous discussions that need to be tied up. If there are areas that you had hoped the group would explore, but didn't get to, you may want to address them. If you followed the earlier suggestion of taping the epistle, you might want to play the tape again at this point. For some, this may be their first experience of hearing an entire book of the Bible read at one time. If they need encouragement, read them 1 Thess. 5:27, "I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them.")

Read 1 Thess. 3:11—13; 5:23—28. The words should sound familiar. These verses contain three benedictions, similar to those the minister pronounces at the close of a service of worship: 3:12—13; 5:23; 5:28.

Why not simply close the letter, "Your friendly apostle, Paul," or "Be seeing you one of these days"?

Do these words have any force, or do they simply fulfill a formal requirement?

Have you ever wanted another person to bless you when you were separating? Share your experiences with the group.

¹ "God Be with You Till We Meet Again," as published in *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 540.

² Linda Jo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), pp. 363-364.

Hard Good-Bys

Why is it hard to say good-by? Why is it difficult to consign loved ones to the grave? Why is it hard to see a pastor leave to take up another charge? Why do some of us have no trouble taking our leave from a party, while the spouse can never quite tear himself or herself away?

In the Presbyterian Directory for Worship, these instructions are provided for the closure of a worship service: "The service concludes with a formal dismissal. This may include a charge to the people to go into the world in the name of Christ. It shall include words of blessing, using a trinitarian benediction or other words from Scripture . . . Signs of reconciliation and peace may be exchanged as the people depart" (W.3.3702).

What do you think about the benediction at the end of the service? Is it meaningful, or just one more ritual left over from the "olden days"?

Compare and contrast the good-bys in Paul's letter with the four verses of the hymn that is printed at the beginning of this session, "God be with you till we meet again."

Discuss how you want to say good-by to 1 Thessalonians.

Are you glad to be through with this letter? Were early promises kept? Would you like to stay with this letter a little longer? What do you think it might still have to say to you? What do you still want to know about it? What has the experience meant to you? Was this the first time you tackled a whole book of the Bible? In what ways has this experience been a blessing?

³ Vachel Lindsay, "Rain," in *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*, Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade, eds. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), p. 102.

(To the leader: Even in a short series such as this, it's important for the members of the group that there be some sort of closure to the experience. Some leaders go to considerable lengths to devise a memorable moment. Others are content with a summary statement and a closing prayer. Basic to this series of studies is the idea that most men want a short-term study. This means that they come to such studies very goal oriented: They want to "get something out of it." They want to gain a mastery of the subject. If nothing else, it is important that they have a chance at the end of the series to say whether or not their hopes and expectations were met to some degree. That may be more important than any formal ceremony.)

Afterword

*Rain*³

Each storm-soaked flower has a beautiful eye.
And this is the voice of the stone-cold sky:
"Only boys keep their cheeks dry.
Only boys are afraid to cry.
Men thank God for tears
Alone with the memory of their dead,
Alone with lost years.

"One day, a few days after the liberation, I walked through the country past flowering meadows, for miles and miles, toward the market town near the camp. Larks rose to the sky and I could hear their joyous song. There was no one to be seen for miles around; there was nothing but the wide earth and sky and the lark's jubilation and the freedom of space. I stopped, looked around, and up to the sky, and then I went down on my knees. At that moment there was very little I knew of myself or of the world—I had but one sentence in mind—always the same: 'I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and He answered me in the freedom of space.'

"How long I knelt there and repeated this sentence memory can no longer recall. But I know that on that day, in that hour, my new life started. Step for step I progressed, until I again became a human being."⁴

⁴ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1963), pp. 141-142.

"I told Bob how I regretted not receiving the Dalai Lama's blessing. Bob said, 'All of us were feeling slighted because we weren't allowed to get close to him. But just as he was about to board his plane, I found myself reaching for him. Amidst all the flurry, he grasped my hands in his and stopped all motion for a long time. Smiling, he looked me directly in the eyes. Those warm, steady hands infused my whole body with a marvelous peacefulness. Now I can pass his blessing on to you.' And so he has."⁵

"I left the house before dawn on an October morning. Our good-byes were said at the door. It was as if almost always was between us in moments of deep emotion. No tears, no clasping in each other's arms, all emotion thoroughly under control, everything correctly repressed to insure against messy outbursts. [Mother] looked up at me and with a quick, tight smile said, 'Well, you'd better get going if you're going to catch that train, and I leaned down and kissed her briefly on the lips.

" 'Write me as soon as you get there,' she said, and waved me off up Marydell Road to catch the streetcar. I knew she was worried, but didn't realize how badly, and didn't think about it for long. I was too exultant. Boarding the streetcar I had no sense of putting my life at risk. Not a bit. I felt an intoxicating sense of being free for the first time in my life. Adventure. Flight. Freedom. Now at last, all were going to be mine.

"By mid-morning I was in Washington and homesick, missing her so much that I telephoned home long-distance, an outrageous use of money in that time. She was so flustered at hearing my voice that she hung up in confusion before we exchanged more than ten words. Late that afternoon I wrote her from the train carrying us south."⁶

⁵ Pierre Delattre, *Episodes (Saint Paul)*: Greywolf Press, 1993), p. 176.

⁶ Russell Baker, *Growing Up* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), pp. 266-267.

What People Are Saying About the Men's Bible Study Series

"I found the study materials and questions among the most refreshing of any Bible study materials I have ever seen within the Presbyterian Church for men.
Thanks so much for doing them... "

*Bill Richard
Presbyterian Stone Church
Ogdensburg, New York*

"We would like more of this kind of study."

*Jim Palmer
First Presbyterian Church
Bellevue, Washington*

"(The) men had been so used to listening to lecture type Sunday School lessons (that) I was afraid that drawing them into a discussion would be like pulling teeth. The surprise came on that first Sunday morning when all ten men in the class chimed in with their thoughts."

*Gene Wylie
First Presbyterian Church
Vicksburg, Mississippi*

"An excellent presentation . . . with good balance between Biblical work and reflection. Questions with contemporary applications are nicely done."

*Dr. Youngil Cho
National President (1993—1995)
Presbyterian Men*

The Writer

John C. Purdy, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, is a freelance writer and an educational consultant. He spent 26 years as an editor of educational resources in the national offices of the United Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In addition to writing numerous articles and study series for youth and adults in various church school curricula, he is the author of three books for the laity: *Parables at Work*, *Returning God's Call*, and *God with a Human Face*, all published by Westminster John Knox Press.

From 1989 to 1995 he wrote a monthly question-and-answer column for *Presbyterian Survey* magazine.

Born in Korea of missionary parents, Purdy is a graduate of the College of Wooster and Princeton Theological Seminary. He also attended the University of Basel in Switzerland. He is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), now honorably retired. Before becoming an editor, he served for 12 years as a pastor in Wisconsin.