

1-2 THESSALONIANS

THE MODEL CHURCH



9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

GEOFF ROBSON

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Model Church

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ISBN 978 1 922280 15 1

Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God's word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of 'interaction'—interaction with the Bible, with the things we've written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what the passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but also respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learned.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

We quote from and refer to the English Standard Version, which we recommend. There should not generally be any problems, however, if you are using a different translation (though it might be useful to have an ESV on hand in case of any confusion).

» STUDY 1

TURNING, SERVING, WAITING

[1 THESSALONIANS 1]

OF THE 27 BOOKS IN THE NEW Testament, 13 are letters written by the apostle Paul to churches, to groups of churches, or to individuals. And of those 13 letters, perhaps no other contains the warmth, encouragement and hope that characterize 1Thessalonians. This much-loved letter, co-written by Paul and his colleagues Silvanus and Timothy (1:1) but rightly attributed primarily to Paul (2:18, 3:5, 5:27), urges the Thessalonians to press on in the Christian faith. They're on the right track, their apostle tells them (e.g. 5:11). But in the face of opposition and hardship, they need encouragement to hold fast to Jesus, to keep living godly lives, and to keep building each other up.

One of the earliest of Paul's surviving letters, 1Thessalonians was written around AD 50–51 during Paul's 18-month stay in the Greek city of Corinth. Thessalonica (present-day Thessaloniki in northern Greece) lay about 300 km (185 miles) north of Corinth. It was an important city—the provincial capital of the region of Macedonia, located on important trade routes, populated by around 100,000 people. Paul and his colleagues had visited the city and established the church during Paul's second missionary journey.

Let's begin by turning back to the book of Acts to see what happened when the gospel first came to Thessalonica.

Read Acts 17:1–15.

1. What were the two (very different) responses to Paul's preaching (vv 4, 5–7)?
2. How do some of the Thessalonians respond to news of the gospel spreading in Berea (v 13)?
3. What can we conclude about what life would have been like for the new Thessalonian Christians (the people mentioned in verse 4)?

New converts facing the mob

AS PEOPLE WERE CONVERTED IN Thessalonica, the anti-Christian mob became so hostile that they followed Paul and his colleagues to Berea (present-day Veria, about 70 km west of Thessaloniki) and stirred up crowds to oppose the converts. From the very beginning, the Thessalonian Christians knew what it was to face opposition. And this opposition wasn't just a raised eyebrow or a snide comment. It was serious hostility—houses being attacked,

and people being dragged before authorities and forced to pay to secure their freedom. And all because their lives had been reshaped as they started to follow King Jesus.

But thanks be to God, the Thessalonian Christians did not give up. They didn't cave to the threats of the mob. They persevered in following God's risen king, and in doing so they gave Paul and his friends reason to rejoice.

Models of faith, love and hope

PAUL OPENS THE LETTER BY USING A well-known Christian triad: faith, love and hope. As he, Silvanus and Timothy give thanks for the Thessalonians, they remember the ways in which God has worked in the Thessalonians to produce these three wonderful and interconnected qualities. But the Thessalonians haven't just *said* that they have faith, love and hope; they've *shown* it—through the works produced by their genuine faith and love, and through the steadfastness and perseverance produced by their hope.

Along with seeing faith, love and hope manifest in their lives, Paul is confident about where the Thessalonians stand because he recalls his ministry among them. He didn't just preach empty human words; he preached the gospel of God, a message that came with divine power and with a conviction born of the Spirit.

And how did the Thessalonians respond to this message? They responded by imitating not only Paul and his colleagues, but the Lord Jesus himself. Jesus, the “man of sorrows” (Isa 53:3), was well acquainted with suffering. And as we have seen, the Thessalonians suffered for their allegiance to King Jesus from the very beginning. But they didn't shrink back. Instead, they imitated their apostle and his colleagues, who were

imitating the suffering servant king. And the chain of imitation didn't stop there—the Thessalonians' resilient faith became known throughout the region, prompting others to follow in their footsteps. Resilient, persevering faith, it seems, is contagious.

When people today talk about role models, they're often talking about a celebrity who has captured their attention—an athlete, perhaps, or an entertainer who inspires them to pursue greatness. But it makes little sense to choose people we don't know as our role models. The Christian pursuit of role models should have a different focus. Are there godly family members whose lives you can imitate? Are there people in your local church who have shared the gospel with you, and who are now living out the gospel? We should model ourselves and our lives after Christians who have faithfully lived out the gospel amid all life's challenges—including suffering for the gospel. These are the people worthy of being our role models. And of course, it's all driven by our imitation of the Lord Jesus himself (v 6), the perfect role model and the inspiration for all other worthy role models.

And who knows—when we follow the right role models, we might even look around and find others imitating us and following our example (v7).

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10.

8. What did the Thessalonians turn *from*? What, or who, did they turn *to*?
9. Read Isaiah 44:9–20. What does this passage say about idolatry, and what does it imply about the living and true God?
10. What exactly do you think it means to serve the living and true God? What will this involve in practice?
11. Based on Paul's description of the Lord Jesus in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, why would it have made sense for the Thessalonians to "wait" for him?

Turning the world upside down

WHEN WE INVITE SOMEONE TO become a Christian, what are we really doing? We're inviting them to have their life turned upside down (and to start living their life 'right side up').¹ The call to follow Jesus is a call to upend your life and start all over again.

If you've walked the Christian path for some time, you can begin to lose sight of this fact. But for those hearing about Jesus for the first time or still considering where they stand with him, the gospel is radical. Saying 'yes' to Jesus is likely to bring upheaval and chaos to their lives. They're not being invited to renovate the house a little; they're being invited to demolish the old dwelling and build a whole new

house, right down to the foundations.

But the gospel brings the very best kind of 'chaos' and 'upheaval'. When we turn away from dead, useless idols and turn to the true and living God, and when we begin to serve him, and when we fix our eyes on Jesus, waiting for him to return and living with eternity in view, we're living the way we were designed to live. The great reformer John Calvin famously wrote that "man's nature ... is a perpetual factory of idols".² Left to our own devices, we all worship and serve created things rather than the Creator (see Rom 1:22–25). But in the powerful gospel of Jesus, we are brought back to the true and living God.

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- Are faith, love and hope producing good works and patient endurance in you? In what ways are these good deeds and endurance being seen in your life?

-
- Who are your role models? Do you need to be more intentional about choosing godly Christian role models? Who could you imitate? At the same time, who are you setting a godly example for? Who is imitating you?

- What specific idols did you have to turn from when you turned to God? Are those idols, or any other idols, threatening to turn you away from God in some way? What do you need to do to turn from those idols and to turn again to the true and living God?

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- How will you ensure that you keep waiting for Jesus to return from heaven, rather than being distracted by the things of this world? What practical difference does (or should) this waiting make in your life?

» Give thanks and pray

- Praise God for his powerful gospel. Thank God that his Son, Jesus, delivers us from the wrath to come and produces in us faith, love and hope.
- Pray that God would enable you to see the potential idols in your life and to turn away from them. Ask him to strengthen you to keep serving him and to keep waiting for Jesus to return.

Endnotes

- 1 This is the title of Paul Grimmond's book (subtitled 'Life as God meant it to be') on living the Christian life (Matthias Media, 2009).
- 2 J Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (JT McNeill ed, FL Battles trans), I.11.8, The Library of Christian Classics, vol xx, Westminster John Knox Press, 1960, p 108.