

MATTHIAS BIBLE GUIDES

1-2 Thessalonians

*Matthew
Jensen*

New Testament Series Editor
Geoff Robson

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Series Editors

Old Testament: Kamina Wüst

New Testament: Geoff Robson

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Matthias Bible Guides
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About Matthias Bible Guides

Matthias Bible Guides exist to help Bible teachers of all levels engage with the word of God and prepare themselves to teach the Bible to others. This series is for the Bible study leader who wants to equip himself or herself to prepare and lead studies that are faithful to the Scriptures, and to answer questions with confidence. It's for the busy preacher who's faced with the wonderful but daunting task of writing a new sermon series. And it's for any interested Christian who wants a reliable companion as they read through a book of the Bible, alone or with others.

A Matthias Bible Guide is not a commentary. It's a good place to start *before* you read any commentaries. Like many commentaries, each guide gives some big-picture information on the book's authorship, date, genre, purpose and theological themes. From there, its aim is to equip you to understand the book for yourself and apply it to your pastoral context.

To create a series that's informed by serious scholarship yet accessible to all, the guides are written by authors who are both academically accomplished and pastorally experienced. All our contributors have academic qualifications in their area of the Bible, and we've worked with them to distil their expertise into

an easily digestible resource. The guides include tools such as suggested breakdowns for sermon and study series, plus recommended reading lists both at entry level and from more advanced academic sources. There are also free daily reading plans available online to accompany most guides, making the guides well suited to personal devotional use.

The guides assume a degree of biblical literacy while aiming to be accessible to Christians with and without formal theological training. That's why, for example, they include Greek and Hebrew words but make sure to translate them, and they use academic terminology while including a glossary of these terms in case any are unfamiliar. The guides are designed to be stimulating to those who already have a Bible college education, while opening up a new world of scholarly thinking to those who don't have such training.

While the guides reflect the theological convictions and, to some extent, the personal interpretations of the authors, they aim to *teach you* how to read the book instead of simply *telling you* what it says. The series operates within an unashamedly evangelical framework where the Bible is treated as the inspired, infallible and inerrant word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct. Within this framework, we aim to uphold what is certain from the text while stimulating your thinking around any areas of ambiguity, confident that the Spirit is working as you wrestle with God's word. In all this, our aim is to assist you not so much to master the Bible as to be *mastered by* the Bible.

As with all material published by Matthias Media, the aim of these guides is to help make and grow disciples of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Every Matthias Bible Guide is rich with Christian application and ideas for illuminating the gospel in

a way that's faithfully grounded in the unique qualities of each book.

The Thessalonian correspondence is among the warmest and most encouraging parts of the Bible. In these much-loved letters, the apostle Paul reveals his joy at the progress God's people are making, along with his deep desire that they keep walking in faith, hope and love. As he guides us through the letters, Dr Matthew Jensen shows that very same desire. He brings his usual clear, no-nonsense style to analyzing the text of Scripture, combining it with a gospel-centred approach that helps readers to see what really matters—not just in these letters, but in the Christian life.

Kamina Wüst and Geoff Robson
Series Editors

Getting started with 1–2 Thessalonians

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians deal with some of the more difficult issues that humanity faces. In particular, he deals with death and with our future. But more than that, he also explains what it means to live in the present while knowing the future—a sort of guide to life with your fate in mind. Let me briefly touch on each to whet your appetite for the letters.

It is often said that there are two certainties in life: death and taxes. A good accountant might help you minimize the second of these, but there is no escaping death. If we have lived long enough, we have inevitably felt the pain of death as we lose loved ones. Because it is so painful, and perhaps because of fear of our own mortality, we typically avoid it as a topic of conversation. In fact, we generally push the thought of death as far as possible from our minds. But this is not the apostle's approach; he deals with the uncomfortable topic very openly. Once we understand his answer and take it to heart, we won't

face death with the same fear or sadness. Let me pique your interest and soothe your soul with this quote:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.
(1 Thess 4:13-14)

But Paul not only comforts us about death; he also informs us about the future:

For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “There is peace and security”, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.
(1 Thess 5:2-5)

God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ... (2 Thess 1:6-7)

If we knew that certain things were guaranteed to happen in the future, we would live in such a way as to avoid the bad and make the most of the good. These quotes talk about a coming day of judgement when God will return to bring justice and destruction, but also salvation and relief. So how should we live

now considering this knowledge of the future? Look how the Thessalonians lived:

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.
(1 Thess 1:9–10)

In one sense, this really is the heart of these letters: *how to live now in light of what is to come*. These letters talk about what our knowledge of the future means for our approach to sex, love, grieving, alcohol, work, church life, and prayer—to name just a few topics. In Paul’s view, our understanding of the future is directly and intensely relevant to our lives in the present.

But the Thessalonian letters also deal with a false teaching that directly attacks Paul’s teaching about the future—namely, the erroneous view that Jesus has already returned:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. (2 Thess 2:1–3a)

If we are to live well now, we need to not only embrace the truth about the future; we also need to recognize and reject every deception about the future. Paul’s letters will equip us to do both.

These are just a few of the reasons the letters to the Thessalonians are so worthy of our attention today.

Having spent many years studying 1 and 2 Thessalonians, I have found that, though they are short—just eight chapters in total—they are an inexhaustible source of richness and encouragement for the Christian life. They address some of our most pressing existential questions, and they present the Christian life as one of *waiting* and *serving*—waiting for the Lord Jesus to return to judge, and serving the true and living God while we wait. These letters keep my eyes on the future amid the pain and suffering that we all go through as Christians in a fallen world.

I am delighted that you have picked up this guide, and I hope it gives you a clearer understanding of these wonderful letters. It should be an encouragement to continue in the faith in the face of suffering and to press on until the coming of the Lord Jesus.

The central message of 1–2 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians

Paul's purpose in writing 1 Thessalonians can be seen most clearly in two places: his prayer, and the letter's ending. Paul expresses his desire for the readers when he asks God to give them love for one another and to make them blameless:

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (3:12–13)

Paul wants the Thessalonian Christians to increase and abound in love for one another, and to be blameless in holiness before God when Jesus returns. The letter itself is an attempt to bring about these very things that he prays for.

Paul's final summary of the contents of the letter and its overall aim also indicates this same purpose:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely,
and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept
blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (5:23)

When these two sentences are put next to each other, the key themes of the letter emerge: holiness/sanctification (see also 4:3–4, 7); blamelessness (see also 2:10); and the coming (or return) of Christ (see also 2:19; 4:13–18, especially 4:15). This is why Paul wrote the letter.

It is not that the Thessalonians lack these qualities or are unsure about the return of Christ. Indeed, they are already living this way (4:1, 9–10), following the example and teaching of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy. Paul's desire is that they would continue to do what they are already doing—especially that they would keep going in the face of their suffering, persecution, and questions about the future. This desire flows from his situation and theirs: he had not been in Thessalonica for very long, so he is concerned that the suffering and persecution they face may cause doubt (3:3–5). If Paul had been able to return to them in person, he would have done so (2:18). Instead, in his place he sent Timothy to encourage them (3:2–3) and to bring news of their situation (3:6).

In sum, Paul is writing to encourage the Thessalonians to continue in holiness and blamelessness until the coming of Christ in the context of their persecution and affliction. He is doing this because he is unable to visit them personally.

2 Thessalonians

In response to a report that Paul had received about the state of the Thessalonian church (3:11), he wrote 2 Thessalonians for two purposes.

First, the Thessalonians were facing false teaching about the coming of Jesus and their being gathered to him. This false teaching was that “the day of the Lord” had already happened (2:1–2). Paul, Silvanus and Timothy write so that the Thessalonians would not be shaken or alarmed by such teaching. Instead, they encourage the Thessalonians not to be deceived by people spreading such false teaching (2:3). This concern gives way to an explanation of the events that are expected before the return of Jesus (2:3–9) and an explanation of why people believe delusions (2:10–12). Consequently, Paul and his colleagues write to encourage the Thessalonians to hold to the traditions that they heard from them (2:15).

Second, the report had also contained worrying news about some of the Thessalonians and their work habits. It seems that some had forgotten the apostle’s teaching about, and example of, hard work (3:6–10), instead deciding to become idle (3:11). This idleness needed to be challenged, and replaced with a correct understanding of work.

The commands throughout the letter reveal these two purposes. The first two commands relate to the threat presented by false teaching:

Let no one deceive you in any way. (2:3a)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2:15)

The discussion of the second purpose, the need to work, is concluded with another pair of commands:

Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn

their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. (3:12–13)

Paul also addresses the difficult situation of the Thessalonians. Even in the face of persecutions and afflictions, Paul encourages the Thessalonians by teaching about the just judgement of God (1:7–10) and God’s ability to protect them from the power of the evil one (3:3–5).

Big ideas

With all this in mind, we could summarize the big idea of each letter like this:

1 Thessalonians

Even though you are suffering, continue to strive to live a holy and blameless life of love until Jesus’ return.

Key verse:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(1 Thess 5:23)

2 Thessalonians

Even though you are suffering, Jesus has not returned, so continue to hold to the truth, pray for the kingdom, and work to provide for yourself.

Key verse:

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thess 2:15)