



## **Background to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians**

In AD 49 or 50, Paul visited Thessalonica, with Silas and Timothy. This visit is recorded by Luke in Acts 17. We read that Paul reasoned from Scriptures in the Jewish synagogue, as was his custom. He explained that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. He told them about Jesus and then that the man Jesus is the Christ. His message had a mixed response – some believed and others rioted. A church was formed, which was still under persecution when Paul wrote his first letter to them less than a year later. By this time he was in Corinth, and Silas and Timothy had rejoined him.

The letters were written in response to Timothy's reports on the Thessalonian church. He brought news of their faith and love, loyalty and standing firm under persecution (1 Thess 3:6-8), but also that they were criticizing Paul for insincerity and ulterior motives (2:2-6) and for not coming back to them (2:17-3:5). They also needed teaching on specific issues including sexual morality, unity of the fellowship and the second coming (Stott 2009, p19).

The reply from the Thessalonians prompted Paul to write to them a second time. We find that Paul was deeply thankful to read of the Thessalonian church's faith and love and that they were standing firm under persecution. But the church was being disturbed by persecution, false teaching (particularly regarding the second coming) and people who were not working (Stott 2009, p21).

## **Bible studies from Thessalonians**

### **Structure of the studies.**

These studies are designed for a group who are already Christians, but should not exclude people who have not made a profession of faith. You may have to back-track sometimes to re-explain the gospel, in order to help people understand what the letter to the

Ephesians means – the letter was written to Christians, and assumes that the reader understands the basic gospel story.

There are a lot of questions in each study, but you will notice that several of them are simple comprehension questions and should not take more than a couple of minutes. We recommend that you do the study yourself before running it with prisoners, so that you can see which questions are likely to take up more time, and have a good understanding of the answers, and where the study is going.

Each study is designed to last for about 90 minutes. Guidance for timings are given, which should help you to see when to keep discussion brief and when to go a bit deeper! If you get diverted, and don't finish the first set of questions, make sure you study at least one application question before you close. We would suggest that you take a 10 minute break around half-way. If you only have an hour, just do the starred \* questions.

Each study is written out twice, once for leaders (*with a guide to answers*) and once for participants. The studies are laid out in 2 sections:

### **What does the passage say and mean?**

Please don't be put off by the number of questions in a study! These studies contain some comprehension questions – it is important that we understand what the passage literally says. These questions can be taken fairly quickly. Try not to go too deep with them - they just aim to set the background. There are also some deeper questions to help the group to think, and unpack the meaning of the passage. There are some interactive questions, to keep people who have short attention spans engaged:

**SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING – SDL** – 3 questions that need to be prepared. Write them on flip-chart paper, spaced out so that there is room to write the answer. Prepare enough flip-chart sheets for the group to work in pairs, and provide enough marker pens for them to write their answers. When they are finished, download the answers as a group, with a leader co-ordinating the discussion.

**STICKERS** – Write the question on the top of a flip-chart sheet. Give the group stickers or post-it's and ask them to write the answer to the question on their sticker. Give them biro's to do this. Ask them to stick their stickers on the flip-chart. When they are finished, the

leader reads out the answers, and then explains the right answer to the group.

**SHOUT-OUT** – Write the question on the top of a flip-chart sheet. Ask the group to suggest answers, and write their answers up, so that they can see the results of their brainstorm. If someone gives an answer that is unacceptably wrong (i.e. not just slightly wrong), don't write it up, but do explain why you are not writing it.

### **How can I live according to these truths in my life?**

Each study ends with some application questions. These application questions are very important, but should not be tackled without understanding what the Bible says – we cannot apply the Bible to our lives if we have not read and understood it!

### **Bibliography**

Stott J (2009) *The Bible Speaks Today, The Message of Thessalonians, Preparing for the coming King*,  
Nottingham: Inter Varsity Press