

Study Guide 1 “Getting into Shape”

Goal: To get the big-picture shape of 1 Thessalonians

1. *To have a big-picture sense of what 1 Thessalonians is about*
2. *To set out the basic 3-part shape (structure or design) of the letter*

If you will do the first two things (i.e., tasks) listed here/below as part of this study guide—the third one will be completed automatically as a result of the first two—you will be well on your way to building a context for understanding the Bible book of 1 Thessalonians (and the same process will work for most Bible books). We’ll add more things as we go, but these are the first . . .

3 Steps to Better Bible Reading

1. **Read** the whole book, preferably several times.
2. **Find** the Introduction and the Conclusion.
3. Set out the overall **3-part shape** of the book.

1. Read the whole book, preferably several times.

This is the first step for studying any Bible book: read the book from beginning to end, several times (easy to do with short books; not as easy with the longer ones). The purpose is to begin to get a big-picture sense of what the book is about. It’s sort of like looking at the picture on the box when putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

Which Version?

There are two main types of Bible translations: literal and functional or conceptual. A literal translation—sometimes called a “word-for-word” translation—tries to retain the phraseology and structure of the original language as much as possible. A conceptual (idiomatic or dynamic equivalent) version—“thought-for-thought”—seeks to communicate the same thought or meaning of the original (without strict adherence to the words or forms of the original). As expected, a conceptual translation is usually more readable, while a literal version works well when looking at the specific words and design of the text. We could think of them, then, as a (for) **reading** version and a (for) **study** version.

Actually, no version is completely literal or conceptual, but has elements of both and thus falls on a continuum from “completely free” to “strictly literal.” For this study, I recommend you use both: a “zoom-out” (reading/contemporary) and a “zoom-in” (study/literal) version. The first time you read a Bible book, you’re reading to get a sense of the big picture—the main story, the overall framework and context. So, on first read, I suggest you use a version that you like, one that’s fun to read. As you begin to focus on specific details, I recommend the most literal version you can understand. If you choose to use just one version, then a “middle-of-the-road” version, like the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), the NIV (New International Version), TNIV (Today’s New International Version), the HCSV (Holman Christian Standard Version), or the NET (New English Translation Bible—an online version), would probably be best.

For more on the question of which version of the Bible to use, check out “The Version Question” on pp. 54-57 of *Rediscovering the Books of God*. Here’s the conclusion to that section:

“So what version should I use?” I’d like to make two general suggestions. The first is that, depending on your immediate purposes according to the rules of good Bible reading, you use both types: a dynamic equivalent translation for reading with an eye on the big picture (like when you want to read the book as a whole) and a literal translation when you want to focus on specific words and structure (more about this in upcoming rules)—thus, a *zoom out* and a *zoom in* version. Of course, the specific version is up to you, but, for a literal version, the NASB is a traditional standard. For a recent literal version, the English Standard Version (ESV) is quickly becoming a favorite of some serious Bible students. Any of the freer translations (but not the paraphrases) could serve as a fun-to-read, big-picture version—the New Living Translation (NLT) is the “pew-,” or in our case, “chair-Bible” of the church I attend. I’ve chosen to use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) for most of the scripture citations in this book, though I’m partial to the New International Version (NIV) for my own English reading. My second recommendation is that, if you plan to use only one or one primary version, you choose something in the middle of the literal-free scale, like the NRSV, the NIV/TNIV, or the REB. These middle-of-the-road, dynamic equivalent versions can be both readable and useful for some detailed work as well.

Overview

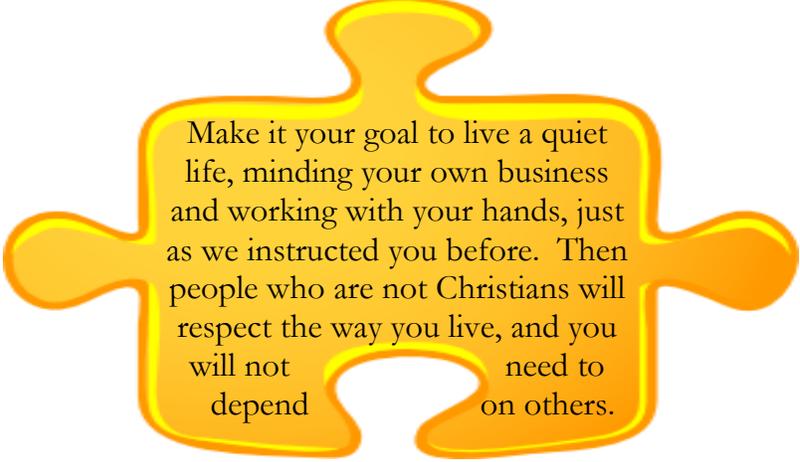
Describe in a brief paragraph (or to a friend or yourself) the overall story/picture presented in the book of 1 Thessalonians. Who wrote it? To whom? For what?

From your initial reading, what issues, requests, or ideas does 1 Thessalonians talk about? What are some of the main topics or themes? What do you think is the main point or purpose of the book? (Of course, you should revisit these questions as your exploration continues.)

Inkblots

When studying a Bible book, I like to pick out a verse or two at the beginning of the study to illustrate the importance of reading verses of scripture in context. (That way you can get a “before” and “after” view.) Any verse from the Bible can be turned into an inkblot when it’s read in isolation from its book-level context. Rule #2 of good Bible reading (*Rediscovering the Books of God*) is to understand each verse as it relates to the book as a whole—“to book-level focus the verses.” For 1 Thessalonians, let’s use 4:11-12 from the New Living version as a potential inkblot:

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12



Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we instructed you before. Then people who are not Christians will respect the way you live, and you will not need to depend on others.

By reading this verse by itself, one might conclude that Christians should always live a “quiet” life. And what would that mean? Are politics, sports, and the entertainment industry out of the question, if we take this at its disconnected, face value? Many vocations also seem inconsistent with the admonition of “working with your hands.” Perhaps, then, these verses go against technology and various modern ways of making a living, suggesting the need for Christians to withdraw and maintain a simple, communal, or primitive lifestyle. And what does it mean not to need “to depend on others”? Does this support the idea of Christians separating from society, or does it have more to do with each individual working and doing his or her part? What do these verses really mean? Isolated, like many Bible verses, it’s easy to see how verses become inkblots.

2. Find the Introduction and the Conclusion.

To get a clear sense of what a Bible book is about, it’s important to come to see how the book is put-together, organized, or “shaped.” Rule #3 of good Bible reading (as set out in *Rediscovering*) is to “Discover the structure or ‘shape’ of the text.” To do this, a first, helpful step is to find the Introduction and Conclusion—it’s like finding the corner pieces when putting together a jig-saw puzzle. Introductions often introduce key ideas and purposes of a text; Conclusions sum up and bring things home. Isolating the Introduction and Conclusion also reveals the basic 3-part shape: Introduction-Middle-Conclusion.

Introduction

What verses (chapter and verses) serve as the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians?

Clue

In Paul’s letters, immediately following the initial Address and Greeting, opening Thanksgiving sections (“I/We always thank God for you . . .”) usually serve as introductions. So look for the beginning and ending of that section, which sometimes includes something that Paul is praying for, for his readers (or that he’s praying for them generally) and often ends with climactic reference to the coming or power of the Lord Jesus. So, find the Thanksgiving.

Alert

Let me warn you, 1 Thessalonians (and 2 Thessalonians) presents a challenge regarding the opening Thanksgiving and what might be considered the “Introduction” to the letter, being different from what is typically found in Paul’s letters. There appears to be a second Thanksgiving section (and even a third reference to thanksgiving) or one really long one:

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3: “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers . . .”

1 Thessalonians 2:13-14: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men

but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. For you, brothers”

1 Thessalonians 3:9-10: “For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?”

Are these three separate Thanksgiving sections? If so, how are they related? Or are they a part of one long section, consisting of the first three chapters? Are they all a part of the Introduction? Does a 5-chapter book have a 3-chapter Introduction? That seems rather strange, doesn’t it? Where does the Thanksgiving/Introduction end? Maybe there’s more than one Introduction? Or maybe “Thanksgivings” don’t always function as introduction.

Figuring out which verses function as the Introduction in 1 Thessalonians and what role these “Thanksgiving” verses serve in the first half of the letter presents a challenge, even to scholars—but don’t let the challenge keep you from tackling the question. This is a fascinating and important question. Working through it (“Finding the Introduction”) will go a long way toward helping you get a grip on the “shape” of 1 Thessalonians.

Conclusion

What verses (chapter and verses) serve as the Conclusion to 1 Thessalonians?

Consistent with the style of Paul’s letters, 1 Thessalonians ends with some short requests, greetings, and a blessing or benediction (5:25-28). (These sorts of “friendly” exchanges helped to accentuate a positive, community relationship on both sides of the letter—part of the “friendly letter tradition” of the culture). It’s easy to see these verses as part of the 1 Thessalonian Conclusion. But is there more to it—from a literary or rhetorical point of view? Remember that conclusions typically sum up the most important points, as they seek to influence the listeners one last time. What about the brief prayers of 3:11-13 and 5:23-24? Or the succinct exhortations of 5:12-22? What roles do they serve?

3. Set out the basic 3-part structure of 1 Thessalonians.

Once you find the Introduction and Conclusion, you should be able to set forth the basic, 3-part shape of 1 Thessalonians.

Something like . . .

Introduction:	1:1 – ??:?
Middle/Body:	??:? – ??:?
Conclusion:	??:? – 5:28

With changes in Paul’s typical pattern, your developing shape may look a little different (we’ll come back to this later):

Introduction:	1:1 – 2:2
Middle/Body:	2:2 – 2:2
Introduction/Transition:	2:2 – 2:2
Middle/Body:	2:2 – 2:2
Conclusion:	2:2 – 5:28

Extra, Extra . . .

While reading 1 Thessalonians, you may notice other sections of material that sound a lot like introductions, summaries or conclusions. In addition to the Thanksgivings, notice, for example, the brief prayers of 3:11-13 and 5:23-24; and the concluding exhortations of 4:18: “Therefore encourage one another with these words,” and 5:11: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” These are the kind of things that help to reveal the shape of the text. Theoretically, the possibilities are infinite—the inspired shape of 1 Thessalonians can only be discovered by a careful reading of the letter.