

Study Guide 2

“Narrating the Past”

Goal: To understand the content and purposes of 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:12

1. *To become familiar with the content and purpose of 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10*
2. *To appreciate the “introductory” nature of Paul’s opening Thanksgivings*
3. *To become familiar with the content and purpose of 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12*
4. *To gain a sense of how these two passages relate to each other*
5. *To begin the process of noticing (i.e., highlighting) key words and phrases*

1. Explore the Introduction (1:1-10).

Prescript: 1:1

Paul’s letters open with a Prescript, which includes an **Address** (whom it’s to) and **Greeting** (“Grace and Peace to you . . .”). We often get our first hints or echoes of the purpose of Paul’s letters by how he describes himself and his audience in the Prescript. 1 Thessalonians is one of the few letters, however, with no descriptive modifiers—it’s just Paul, Silas, and Timothy to the Thessalonian church. The fact that the letter (perhaps our earliest New Testament document) is written “to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” does, however, reflect bedrock and dynamic pieces of Paul’s faith

Reminder

Determining exactly what verses serve as the Introduction to 1 Thessalonians is challenging, and it’s certainly okay if you come to a different perspective in your own study.

Thanksgiving/Introduction: 1:2-10

The “Thanksgiving” is the early/opening part of Paul’s letters where he thanks God for the recipients of the letter (or actually reports his prayerful thankfulness). The expression of thanks quickly becomes an enumeration of the things Paul prays for on behalf of the audience or simply that he does pray for them constantly (as here in 1 Thessalonians). These Thanksgiving paragraphs often come to a close with reference to the coming of Christ or God’s power and kingdom work.

From a literary/reading perspective, *it’s extremely helpful to understand this section of material as introduction.* In 1 Thessalonians, moreover, instead of a listing of specific things that Paul prays for, the Thanksgiving quickly becomes a narrative summary of how the Thessalonians first came to Christ—which we should still see as part of the Introduction. (For more on various conventional/stereotyped forms in Paul’s letters, see *Rediscovering the Books of God*, 89-101, and Appendix 2 [344-51].)

Why might someone think that the Introduction/Thanksgiving to the letter consists of 1:2-10, ending with verse 10? (What about the Thanksgiving language of 2:13 and 3:9? We’ll come back to that later.) Is there a clue in 1:10 that the paragraph is drawing to an end and with 2:1 that something new is beginning?

List the primary topics introduced to us in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10? What 3 things in particular does Paul say he remembers about them (1:3)? What governing theme (think topic sentence) is set forth following this summary (1:4)? What two primary themes does the narrative of 1:5-10 focus (hint: one has to do with the actions of Paul and team; the other, with how the Thessalonians responded)? Consider how 1:9-10 summarizes these two themes.

2. Explore 2:1-12: Paul's Coming/Visit/Entrance.

What is the overall subject of 2:1-12 (as set forth in 2:1)? Note how the topic of "coming/visit/entrance" links back to the conclusion of 1:9-10.

What sort of coming/visit did Paul and his team have with the Thessalonians? How would you summarize it? What made it "not empty," "vain," or "pointless"? And how do we know (what proof or evidence does Paul give)? Are there any witnesses?

What relationship did Paul have with the Thessalonian Christians? What example or pattern did he/they give them while he was there? What images are used to describe how he/they worked with and cared for the Thessalonians? How would you describe Paul's overall purpose with them?

Summarize Paul's description of his initial coming/visit with the Thessalonians?

How does 2:1-12 relate to the Introduction of 1:2-10? In what ways does it develop ideas introduced in 1:2-10?

Extra, Extra . . .

During biblical times, professional speakers were taught how to organize or arrange their speeches in ways that would be the most effective for accomplishing their purposes. You've probably heard of "rhetoric" or "classical Greek rhetoric." It was basically the "art of persuasion" taught in the schools, beginning prior to Aristotle (Greek) and continuing up through Roman times (Latin/Italian). We have numerous copies of the handbooks (textbooks) used to train educated, public leaders. We don't know the precise training Paul might have had, but some of the things we learn from these textbooks can sometimes be helpful in perceiving the "shape" (arrangement) of Paul's letters.

Most any speech—like all types of formal communication—was to begin with an Introduction (think of Paul's Thanksgiving introductions). Its purpose was to secure the goodwill of the audience and introduce the most important subjects. Under certain circumstances, the speaker was then to provide a narrative summary of information relevant to his case or topic ("the facts of the case"). At times, the "Narrative" could simply be combined into the opening as part of the Introduction and could be distributed ("piecemeal") into various sections of a speech. The Narrative sometimes

ended with a list of the key topics of the speech (“division into headings”) or a/the key topic of the speech (the “proposition”—think thesis).

Does that sound anything like what we see in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10? Did you notice how Paul’s summary of things he remembered in prayer (1:2-3) was followed by a “narrative” summary of the Thessalonian’s “election” (1:4) or coming to God. Perhaps this should alert us as well to the potential importance of 1:9-10 as a governing theme or “proposition”: (the nature of Paul’s visit and the reception of the Thessalonians: turning (1) to serve God and (2) wait for Jesus.

3. How Does 2:1-12 Fit/Function in the Book of 1 Thessalonians?

How does 1 Thess 2:1-12 relate to what precedes and to what follows? How does it relate to the Introduction of 1:2-10? What role/place does it serve in the shape of 1 Thessalonians? (We’ll be in a better place to see how it fits into the rest of the letter after we’ve explored it further).

4. Highlight Key Words and Phrases.

Rule #4 of the “Ten Rules of Good Bible Reading” is to “Highlight recurring words and ideas.” A good time to do that is when you’re looking at the Introduction, assuming you have read the rest of the book (to help you see which words and ideas appear to be key). Highlighting key words and phrases throughout a Bible book can be a time-consuming process, but it’s extremely helpful for learning what the most important ideas are and how they relate to each other. To cut down on the time involved, I recommend that you do this as you work through the book.

Highlighting key words works best with a more literal version. The NASB (New American Standard Bible), ESV (English Standard Version), New King James Version (NKJV), and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) are some options. The basic idea is that you use various colored markers or electronic formatting to highlight words and phrases that are repeated and/or appear to be significant. Then continue to color/highlight those words as you go through the sections of the book. And obviously, you should do this on a photocopy of the text or an electronic version—not your “real” Bible.

Go through 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 (1:1-10) and highlight/color-code key words, ideas, and phrases. What are some of the key words/phrases in 1:2-10?

Go through 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 and highlight key words, ideas, and phrases, and note how they connect with 1:2-10.

As an example—and this is only an example—I’m including a copy my colorings. I copied the ESV version from www.biblegateway.com and then did some highlighting in Microsoft Word. It’s best if you do the exercise yourself rather than just relying on my highlights.

Sample Highlighting of Chapter 1

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you,

constantly mentioning you in our prayers,

³remembering before our God and Father your **work of faith** and **labor of love** and **steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.

⁴For we know [= knowing], brothers **loved** by God, that he has **chosen** you, ⁵because our **gospel** came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became **imitators** of us and of the Lord, for you **received the word** in **much affliction**, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an **example** to all the **believers** in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For not only has **the word of the Lord** sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but **your faith** in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For 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, ¹⁰and to **wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.**

2 For you yourselves know, brethren, that our **coming** to you was not in **vain**, ²but after we had already **suffered and been mistreated** in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you **the gospel of God** amid much **opposition**. ³For our exhortation does not *come* from error or impurity or by way of deceit; ⁴but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with **the gospel**, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. ⁵For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness— ⁶nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. ⁷But we proved to be **gentle** among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. ⁸Having so fond an **affection** for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only **the gospel of God** but also **our own lives**, because you had become very dear to us.

⁹For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; ¹¹just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, ¹²so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Extra, Extra . . .

When highlighting key words and phrases, there are times when some potential connections will be apparent in Greek, but not in our English translations. One potential such word in the early part of 1 Thessalonians is the word *ginomai*, which means “to come,” “be born,” or “become.” It’s sometimes translated in English simply with a “to be” verb: “be” or “was/were.” As innocuous as this word usually is, I suspect that Paul is using the word with more significance here. The focus is on what (our response to) the gospel of God does to us (what it did to the Thessalonians). It changes things—and us, at the deepest level. It’s similar here to the concept of “rebirth” or being born again and its impact in other Bible texts. Paul uses it to describe himself, his work with the Thessalonians, and what they *became* as a result. Check out its usage in our text (I’ll repeat the whole text for effect, starting with verse 4):

⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For 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, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

¹For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. ²But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. ³For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. ⁵For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. ⁶Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. ⁷But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. ⁸So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

⁹For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. ¹⁰You are witnesses, and God

also, how holy and righteous and blameless **was our conduct** toward you believers. ¹¹For you know how, like a father with his children, ¹²we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

¹⁴For you, brothers, **became** imitators of the churches of God

⁴... just as it **has come to pass**, and just as you know. ⁵For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor **would be** in vain.

Expert's Corner

Key Questions Review

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

- List key themes of the letter set forth in 1:2-10? In what ways did the Thessalonians become “imitators” of Christ and of Paul/team?
- Why does Paul put so much emphasis in the opening of the letter on reviewing or “rehearsing” what happened with the Thessalonian Christians (their “election”) when Paul and his team came to them? . . . on the coming of the gospel and their response, in other words? Why does Paul call upon their mutual knowledge and sharing of this experience?
- Though often present as a basic piece of Paul’s thinking and a structuring device in the opening of his letters, what additional concept stands out in the Introduction that becomes an important theme in the letter (see 1:3, 10; then compare 4:13-5:11)?
- Break down (the pieces of) 1:9-10 as a potential summary/thesis of important points within the letter?

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

- Summarize the key/leading topics of 2:1-12. What’s the central or topic concept (2:1)?
- What is Paul trying to prove (or remind the Thessalonians of) in this section through his recall of their experience together?
- What was the nature of Paul’s message, his work, his style, and his purpose? Why does Paul need to “defend” it?
- How does 2:1-12 develop key ideas from the opening (1:2-10)?