

# taking action!

small group material



www.studentlife.co.nz

Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Labourers

## A SINCERE FAITH • Multiplying Disciples

### What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

#### Background on I Thessalonians

The Christians at Thessalonica were young believers, perhaps not much more than a year old in their faith. From Paul's rather gushing praises, they're a healthy and growing church, actually becoming known among the other churches for their contagious faith. It might be helpful to read Acts 17:1-15 as preparation for the study in which the story of Paul's founding of this church is contained.

The occasion for writing the letter to the Thessalonians seems to be four-fold. Paul's first reason for writing is to express thanks and encouragement for the spiritual health of the church. Second, there seemed to be efforts to undermine Paul's reputation and question his sincerity. As a result, a great deal of the letter is an explanation and defense of the sincerity of Paul's love for the Thessalonians. Third, there seemed to be some confusion and wrong thinking related to the Lord's return, so in both letters to the Thessalonians this takes a prominent theme. Last, though they were spiritually growing, Paul includes steady encouragements to "excel still more" and to continue to make progress in their faith.

#### I Thessalonians 1:2-4

Apparently, Paul's sincerity has been questioned by some of his critics. But, before defending the sincerity of his love - which he does in chapter two - he begins by praising the Thessalonians for the sincerity of their faith.

The sincerity of their faith was manifested in good works, their love manifested in labor, and their hope manifested in perseverance. It's important to note the correlation between the unseen quality and its visible manifestation. How do you measure something invisible like faith? By external works. How do you measure the unseen depth of someone's love? By what they're willing to endure (toil or labor). How do you measure the veracity of someone's hope in the Lord? By their perseverance through adversity. Labor, works, and perseverance are the external manifestations of invisible qualities: the metrics by which we calibrate faith, hope, and love.

#### I Thessalonians 1:4-6

Paul supplies additional evidence for the authenticity of their faith from what he observed when he first came to preach to them.

In I Thessalonians 1:5, Paul mentions that an authentic sign of their true faith is that the gospel came "with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction." He notes that he could clearly see God at work in them because when he preached the gospel to them, his words were vested with power from the "Holy Spirit." This power produced a deep "conviction" of sin within the hearts of the Thessalonians, and a powerful transformation of life.

### What's the Big Idea?

A sincere relationship with God should manifest itself in faith that produces fruit, love that is willing to toil and hope that fuels perseverance.

This is how we see that a person has turned from the idols of their old life to serve the living and true God.

Such a faith is contagious; it spreads and multiplies.

### What's the Problem?

We have a distorted view of the gospel when we see it effecting only our souls and eternal destination.

We have a distorted view of the gospel when abnormal and unhealthy spiritual growth becomes the norm.





He further remembers how they had instantly become imitators of both himself and the Lord. This is a handy definition of “disciple:” a person who learns from and imitates both the life of mature believers as well as Christ. The Thessalonians’ hunger to be disciples portrayed the reality of their conversion. Last, just as the Holy Spirit was able to create sorrow in their hearts over sin, Paul notes that their ability to endure suffering with joy also displayed the presence of the Spirit.

### I Thessalonians 1:7-10

Paul again returns to the authenticating signs of faith, hope and love, but this time, he sites examples. Their faith was manifested in their commitment to share the gospel with others. As a result, the gospel “rang out” from them (v. 8). Their hope was seen in their waiting for the Son to return (v. 10) and their love was seen in how they turned from idols to “serve the living and true God” (v. 9).

Paul sites the powerful witness of the Thessalonian Christians as a testimony to the sincerity of their faith. As Paul puts extra emphasis here, the study follows suit. The word “rang-out” carries the picture of an echo, which persistently expands outward in ever-widening circles, in fact their faith had become know “everywhere.” It’s not just that the Thessalonians engaged in evangelism, but it flowed from their lives in what Scripture identifies as the reflexive way in which sincere faith expresses itself.

While Paul is not addressing a specific sinful condition among the Thessalonians, this snapshot of sincere conversion (turning from God to idols) is instructive as to what elements will be lacking in our life if we continue to cling to our old lives, sin and idols. Furthermore, faith, hope and love, as demonstrated by the Thessalonians, must continue to be cultivated, which is why Paul still “urges” them to do these things “more and more” (4:1). We never “arrive” in our walks with God, and even when we’re healthy and growing, we need to be diligent to continue upward and onward, and retain Christ as our first and only love.

### II Timothy 2:2

In considering how the message of the gospel “rings out,” the study takes a detour to II Timothy 2:2. In this passage, Paul encourages Timothy to find reliable men to train in the faith, who, likewise, will train other reliable men. This is the model of ministry which Christ demonstrated in His discipleship. It’s the idea of spiritual multiplication.

Let’s say in one year, you disciplined three people and taught them each how to share their faith. And lets say the next year, they each disciplined three people and taught them how to share their faith, and this cycle continued. How long would it take to reach 7 billion people? The answer, surprisingly, is only about 19 years. This is often referred to as “spiritual multiplication” and it’s what we see evidenced in the ministry of Jesus. He invested in small number of disciples, but that number rapidly turned into millions.

This provides a helpful picture of how the message of the gospel “rings out” in our lives and ministry, and provides an easy-to-follow model of discipleship.

## What’s Our Response?

With most of the studies in I Thessalonians, there is an attempt to surface a redemptive application as well as a discipleship application. The former will lead to more personal reflection while the latter will spark reflection on ministry.

**Personal Response:** Just as the Thessalonians turned to God from idols, you want the group to see what idols we have today and in what ways they still may hold sway over our hearts.

You also want the group to see faith, hope and love as the divine channels through which a sincere and growing relationship with God will express itself. This is the height, depth and width of how God wants us to grow.

**Ministry response:** You want the group to understand Christ’s model of spiritual multiplication as the method by which the gospel spreads.

You also want the members of the group to consider with whom they might invest their time in pursuing relationships that demonstrate the words of II Timothy.

## What Are the Questions?

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

### LAUNCH

What political figure strikes you as extremely insincere? How about sincere? What does it mean to be sincere? How do you know when a person is sincere or authentic? How do you know when they're not?

### EXPLORE

#### A Sincere Faith

Read I Thessalonians 1:2-10.

1. In verses 2 and 3, what do you think Paul's purpose was in saying these things to the Thessalonians? What effects in the hearts of his hearers do you think Paul wanted to produce?
2. Faith, hope and love demonstrated the sincerity of the Thessalonian's faith. How were they demonstrated? How do you see these at work in your life?
3. What do you think is the distinction between works and labor? Why does faith only produce works, while love produces toil?
4. If hope produces perseverance, in practical terms, what does it mean to hope in Christ?
5. Reread v. 4-6 and then read Acts 17:1-10. As nothing overtly miraculous happened when Paul preached to the Thessalonians, what are the internal and external evidences that the gospel came to them in power?
6. What other evidence in the passage do you see for the authenticity of the Thessalonians' conversion?
7. Pointing to the reality of their conversion, the Thessalonians felt sorrow (conviction) over their sin, but joy amidst terrible suffering. What things that used to make you happy, now bring conviction? What difficulties have strangely brought a sense of joy?

8. In verse 7-10, where do you, again, see the qualities of faith, hope and love alluded to?
9. In 7-10, how did God get the glory for what He did in their lives?

#### A Faith That Multiplies

10. In 1:8, we see that a sincere faith is one that reproduces itself through the sharing the gospel. What does the image "rang out" convey? How do you think it "rang out?"
11. In what ways do you feel it was a more difficult task for them to spread the gospel than for you? In what ways might it be harder for you?
12. If you shared with 1,000 people a day, how long would it take to reach 7 billion people? What if you reached just three people a year and taught them to share their faith and they each did the same and so on. How long until you reached 7 billion?
13. Read II Timothy 2:2. Pictured, here, is the model of spiritual multiplication mentioned in the last question. Who has passed things on to you and who have you passed things on to?
14. What would distinguish a person as "reliable" or "qualified?" How do you see yourself in these terms?

### APPLY

15. Share about the time when the gospel powerfully invaded your life.
16. What would be an example of an "idol" today? In what ways did you "turn from idols" in coming to Christ? How do these idols still hold sway in your heart?
17. In what ways is the gospel "echoing out" from your life. Where should it be, but it's not.
18. With whom could you invest time in a II Timothy 2:2 relationship? How would you initiate such a relationship?

### What Are the Answers?

1. One of the major themes of the letter is sincerity. Later, Paul will defend the sincerity of his love for the Thessalonians, but he begins the letter by noting the authenticity or sincerity of their faith.
2. Faith was manifested in good works (fruit), love was manifested in labor or toil, and hope was manifested in perseverance.
3. Paul is saying that the way the invisible quality of faith is seen is through good works. Love can be externally measured by a willingness and desire to toil, labor, or serve another.
4. That Jesus will return soon, and that He will reward us for the way in which we have served Him.
5. Internally, it is clear that the gospel brought conviction by the Holy Spirit. Externally, they immediately followed Paul and received the word with joy.
6. They experienced joy in suffering, they became imitators of Paul and the Lord and they “welcomed” the message.
7. Allow the group to discuss.
8. Their faith was manifested by their commitment to share the gospel to others (verse 8). Their hope was seen in their waiting for the Son to return (verse 10). Their love was seen in how they served God instead of idols (verse 9).
9. Everyone was hearing about their faith.
10. Like sound waves it emanated out from their lives and then geographically echoes out reaching more and more people.
11. No correct answer but you do want them to see that it was no easier for them to share the gospel.
12. Roughly 16,000 years. A calculator would be helpful. Roughly 19 years.
13. Allow the group to share.
14. A heart for God. Availability. A willingness to share their faith. A teachable spirit.
15. Allow the group to share.
16. Idols are the things we turn to rather than God. They take our devotion, control our behavior, meet our needs for the time-being, etc.
17. This is an opportunity to discuss evangelism: why or why isn't it happening in our lives.
18. Share how you might just connect with a person for coffee, and then suggest to get together on a regular basis, each week bringing some content or topic to talk about.

### Memorize

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I Thessalonians 1:3