




## **Theme: Lighting the Way – Paul’s First Letters** **“Strong Hearts”**


### **Weekly Memory Verse:**

<sup>12</sup> *And may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow, just as our love for you overflows.* –1 Thessalonians 3:12

**Spiritual Formation or Family Activity Ideas for the Week:** Jesus was an incredible friend and encourager, helping build up people’s hearts to be strong. He saw the best in everyone no matter what they had said or done. Read 1 John 4:7 and 18-21. As a family, think of the people who see the highest potential in each of you. Talk about who cheers you on, builds you up and offers you hope. Create a list of those encouraging people in your lives. What qualities do they have that identify them as encouragers? Find a way to thank those people for their encouragement. Ask how you can be more encouraging to others and live out this quality of Christ. Discuss how can you see the best in people. Pray together, thanking God for seeing the best in you and in everyone. Ask God to help you grow as an encouraging person.

**Monday, September 27** – Read 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5. The apostle Paul compared his love for the Christians in Thessalonica to a nursing mother’s, in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, as well as a loving father’s, in 1 Thessalonians 2:11. Having faced first-hand the kind of violence the message of Jesus aroused, he felt concern like a good parent about whether their faith could withstand those pressures. A form of the word faithful, meaning “trustworthy”, appears five times in this chapter alone in 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 5, 6, 7, 10.

 Scholar William Barclay noted this about a major part of Timothy’s visit: “When Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica it was not nearly so much to inspect the Church there as it was to help it. It should be the great aim of every parent, every teacher and every preacher, not so much to criticize and condemn those in his charge for their faults and mistakes but to save them from these faults and mistakes.” To whom God has sent you with a mission, “to strengthen and encourage”?

 Don’t overlook the fact that when Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica, that meant Paul had to, “stay on in Athens by ourselves.” Paul did not have a large “entourage” of supportive friends and co-workers. Sending Timothy required the selfless choice to stay alone in a strange, potentially hostile city. In what ways can you give up some of your personal comfort or convenience to bless another person or group of people?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I want to be faithful, and I want to help others I care about be faithful.  
Please guide me to be effective in both of those activities. Amen.

**Tuesday, September 28** – Read 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10. To realize the depth of the apostle’s gratitude, imagine the world in his day. He sent Timothy off to Thessalonica—but there was no way for Timothy to text or phone him, such as something simple like, “Arrived safely—preaching for church this weekend 😊!” There wasn’t even speedy public mail service! All he could do was wait (and pray)—for weeks or even months—for Timothy’s return. Timothy’s report was indeed “good news.” The word Paul uses is the same as the word for preaching the gospel.

🏠 Paul’s link to the Thessalonians was not “professional,” but deeply personal. Timothy brought not only good news about the Christians’ “faithfulness.” Paul said it was also about their love for God and each other. Why could the Thessalonians accept and value Timothy’s visit as a sign of Paul’s love for them? What can this teach us, as members of a church with hundreds of members in multiple services, about the care ministers who extend the church’s love to us?

🏠 Paul said he prayed “to complete whatever you still need for your faith.” After 18 months and more of pandemic hardships, we’d like to think this was the ultimate—surely our faith is as “complete” as we’ll ever need it to be. Of course, we might have thought that after the great recession more than ten years ago or 9/11 20 years ago. Paul’s prayer reflected the spiritual reality that faith needs to grow with every day, with each new trial, or test. What helps you keep your faith growing every day?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, teach me more and more how to value all the people and activities through which you extend your love to me. Keep me growing my faith every day toward completeness. Amen


**Wednesday, September 29** – Read 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13. When the apostle Paul wrote, or dictated, this letter, he did not pause after the word, “Amen,” and say, “Chapter 4.” The chapter divisions commonly used today were developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton put the modern chapter divisions into place in around A.D. 1227. When Paul prayed for God’s love that is, “blameless in holiness,” he was likely preparing the way for the counsel he’d give in “chapter 4” about pure and impure ways to express physical love.


🏠 In verse 11, Paul gave us a valuable model of prayer. This was not about a big, complex issue. He just hoped to be able to soon plan and make a trip from Corinth to Thessalonica. But he didn’t think, “I can handle that.” He prayed for God to guide him on his way back to the Christians he loved in that city. In what ordinary day-to-day tasks do you remember to ask God to guide you?

🏠 And yet Paul’s prayer also reached all the way to, “when our Lord Jesus comes,” which the Thessalonians had asked Timothy about. Living in God’s love was the key to being prepared for that glorious future day. Paul makes it clear that the only way to prepare to meet God is to live daily with God. In what ways can even your most “routine” prayers be full of the light of God’s triumphant future?

**Prayer:** Lord God, in one short prayer Paul asked you to guide his current travel plans and to keep his people holy to stand blameless before you at the end of time. Remind me to include all my life in my prayers, too. Amen.


**Thursday, September 30** – Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-4. Paul writes, “God’s will is that your lives are dedicated to him.” This seems like a lovely, spiritual sentiment about staying away from sexual immorality.” Can you believe God is going to spoil this lovely moment by talking about, er, sex? Yes, he was. Scholar NT Wright writes in *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*, “If we needed any reminding that human nature hasn’t changed much in the last 2,000 years, the subject-matter of this chapter should provide it.”


 Wright went on to say that a “world of unbridled self-gratification was what the Thessalonians found on their doorsteps, the world to which until recently they had themselves belonged.” For people raised in the Greco-Roman culture, learning “how to control your own body in a pure and respectable way” was a new idea, not something they just assumed had any connection with serving God. In what ways is our culture different from that? In what ways is it similar?

 We may not see this passage the same way those early Greek Christians did. As Pastor John Ortberg drily wrote, “The church has also had a history of wrongness and weirdness when it comes to sexuality.” Unlike many medieval, and some modern, Christians, Paul did not write this to say God forbade all sexual expression. See 1 Corinthians 7:1-9 for more on this. In what ways is it as harmful to treat all sexual activity as wrong as it is to treat no sexual activity as wrong?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you created us with, well, hormones. Yet you made us able to direct those potent feelings and urges in ways that serve love, not self-gratification. Whatever my stage or station in life, help me find that pathway. Amen.


**Friday, October 1** – Read 1 Thessalonians 4:5-8. In verse 5, the apostle Paul dealt with sexual urges in a way like his (and Jesus’) teaching about money: do not make it your god by letting it control you. Verse 6 dealt with another real issue in his day that has resurfaced strongly in ours: the idea that sexual acts apart from committed love are “victimless.” Paul reminds us that to sexually mistreat or take advantage of anyone is to ignore God, who values and respects all God’s children.

 Later, to Christians in Corinth (a city even Romans mocked for its immorality), Paul wrote that your body is, “a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you.” As he did the Thessalonians, he urged them forcefully in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 to avoid sexual exploitation which made people into objects. Have you ever thought or said, “It’s my body—I can do what I want with it”? How did Paul’s teaching that, “God didn’t call us to be immoral” challenge that way of thinking?

 In all this, we must never lose sight of the power of God’s grace as showed in Jesus. Pastor Ortberg wrote, “Sexual sin all too often has become the primary litmus test for separating the sheep from the goats... How different are the teachings of Jesus. Over and over, it is the most scandalized sinners—including sexual sinners—who are drawn to him.” No matter your history, how does God’s grace invite you to, “be dedicated to God,” letting God control your life?

**Prayer:** King Jesus, make all of me—body, mind and heart—a temple where your Spirit dwells. Remodel me from the inside out in your beautiful holy image. Amen.

**Saturday, October 2** – Read 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12. The apostle’s words about, “loving your brothers and sisters,” followed his teaching about sexual ethics, but moved to a different but equally practical focus on “love’s” meaning. Verse 10 was the key to Paul’s message. NT Wright, in *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*, writes: “The point of this little paragraph is that money can express love, and, indeed, that if the love is genuine, it will find an outlet in financial generosity. This is not always clear, because in a literal translation verse 9 simply speaks of ‘love of the family’ and of ‘love’. Those who think of love as a set of feelings and emotions, at some distance from practical behavior, will naturally see this simply in terms of a kindly and winsome spirit in personal relationships... the rest of the paragraph makes it clear, as do similar passages elsewhere in the New Testament, that this ‘love’ is expected to issue in practical support within the Christian community, and also, as far as this may be possible, in the world outside.” In short, financial generosity is very much one way God has taught us to love.

 Paul saw believers as a family, not just an “organization.” This “brotherly love” presupposes the close ties within the spiritual family of God. When we experience the love of Jesus in our hearts, we are meant to become lifelong pupils as the Spirit bears inner witness to the love within the Christian family, as Paul notes in Romans 5:5 and Galatians 5:22. No external stimulus is necessary because mutual love among Christians is an inner quality gifted to us by the Holy Spirit. Our hearts are meant to grow strong as we become more like Christ, as mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 3:12. Paul says in verse 1, “we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so even more.” More love is always possible for Christians because the ultimate example of Christ himself we read about in John 13:34 and 15:12. The idea is that this love from God is infinite and can only be approached, never fully reached. In what ways are you included in God’s “family,” not just a church “corporation”? How can you extend that to other family members you may not yet know?

**Prayer:** Loving God, thank you for inviting me into your vast yet love-filled family. And thank you for calling me to actively invite and include others in this eternally enduring family connection. Amen.