

Jer. 33:14–16

Ps. 25:1–10

1 Thess. 3:9–13

Luke 21:25–36

A Message of Hope

Goal for the Session

Youth will recognize, through the Thessalonians letter, that hope is found as imperfect people pursue perfect love.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Allen Hilton

Consolation does not exhaust Paul’s purpose for his eschatological moment. He will not have these Thessalonians sitting on their rooftops. Rather, he chases his words of assurance with a strong call to vigilance and right living in the meantime. Because the longed-for Son will come “like a thief in the night,” the Thessalonians should be constantly ready for his coming—by living as children of light, embodying faith and love. And this watchful, awake way of living is not a private or isolated undertaking, but involves the work of mutual edification. The day of reunion will come. The meantime is full of mundane preparations for it.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” James H. Evans Jr.

The major Christian doctrine illuminated by this text is Christian hope. It is significant that this earliest of Paul’s letters would center on hope. As the church dealt with the delayed Parousia, the notion of hope moved from the foreground to the background in doctrinal reflection. It is hope that draws both love and faith into maturity. Because this text rests on the foundation of hope, Paul’s prayer in verse 12—“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you”—can be understood as an exhortation and testimony to imperfect people pursuing a perfect love.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Philip E. Campbell

On the First Sunday of Advent many congregations light the hope candle. A vision of “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” can encourage hope, regardless of how or when it occurs, whether the hearer conceives of this coming literally in history or metaphorically in the experiences of individuals and communities. To be ready for the “coming of our Lord Jesus” is a faithful way of living not dependent on predictions as to when. Endings and beginnings abound. Personal tragedy or world calamity can intrude at any time. Faithful preparation and expectant living can help us face whatever comes.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Joseph R. Jeter

We are called to do the best we can to live lives pleasing to God. And though we will surely fail to live up to the high standards of perfection, we can be grateful for those things we have done for God and live in hopeful confidence that the love and mercy of the risen Christ will not let us go. As Tennyson wrote of his faith, “Not one life shall be destroyed, or cast as rubbish to the void.” And there is more. Remember, when Jesus comes, he will bring with him those who have gone before, those whom we have loved and lost a while.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

**1 Thessalonians
3:9–13**

Focus on Your Teaching

While living in a world with twenty-four-hour news cycles and the never-ending availability of information through the Internet, young people have plenty of reasons to feel hopeless. Stories and images of political conflict, environmental destruction, and human injustices appear regularly on their television screens and computer monitors. The pressures and problems inherent to adolescence can seem relentless because of social networking sites. Yet, 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 offers a message of hope. This message is particularly appropriate on the first Sunday of Advent as Christians begin looking forward to the birth of the Christ child.

God of love, may your message of hope resonate in me as I prepare to teach about your hope in a sometime hopeless world. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- recent newspapers
- blue or purple cloth or placemat
- Advent wreath, 4 blue or purple candles
- lighter
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 and 2
- envelope
- Bibles
- newsprint
- marker
- battery-powered votive or tea light candles

For Responding:

- option 2: construction paper, markers
- option 3: artificial Christmas tree, spring-type clothespins, poster board, markers, paper, pen

For Music Connection:

- recording of “Hope” by Royal Tailor and music player

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, place four purple or blue candles in the holders of an Advent wreath. Place it on a blue or purple cloth or placemat. Use the color that your church uses in worship during Advent. If you do not have an Advent wreath, place the candles in holders in the center of an artificial evergreen wreath or simply arrange them on the cloth. Place a copy of Resource Sheet 2 (1 Thessalonians 1:1–10) in an envelope and address the envelope to “The Church in Thessalonica.” Note that throughout Advent, the third option in Responding is a mission project.

Distribute the news sections of recent newspapers. Have each participant tear out a news story that tells about a seemingly hopeless situation. Then, give participants an opportunity to read the headlines of their stories aloud and explain why they selected each story. Explain that there are many situations in the world that can make us feel hopeless. However, today’s Scripture offers a message of hope.

Gather the participants around the Advent wreath and welcome them to the First Sunday in Advent. Review that Advent is the church year season of preparing for Christmas. Have a participant light one candle and pray:

Holy One, as we begin our Advent journey together, may our lives be transformed through the hearing of your holy Word. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians). To introduce Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, review the information on the resource sheet together and find Thessalonica on the map.

If open flames are not allowed in your church, use battery-powered candles.

Have the group imagine that they are followers of Christ in Thessalonica in 51 A.D. Give the prepared envelope to a participant as if it's a letter to the Thessalonian community. Have the participant read aloud the words on the outside of the envelope before opening it and reading aloud the version of 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 on the resource sheet. Discuss:

- ✪ As a Thessalonian, how does this letter from Paul make you feel?
- ✪ So far, what is the theme of this letter?

Have participants find 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 in their Bibles. Read the verses together. Discuss:

- ✪ What does it mean that the Thessalonians were waiting for God's Son?
- ✪ What does it mean that Jesus "rescues us from the wrath that is coming"?

Read Mark 13 to learn what Jesus said to his disciples about his coming again.

Explain that, as a young community of believers, the church in Thessalonica had questions about Jesus' promise that he would come again. Therefore, Jesus' return is one of the themes in this letter.

If you have more than six participants, do this activity in groups of two or three and let the participants read their rewritten verses to each other.

Read together 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13. On a posted sheet of newsprint, lead the group in rewriting 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 in their own words. Then, explore the following questions together:

- ✪ According to these verses, what kind of lives are these early believers pursuing?
- ✪ Where does this love come from?
- ✪ How does this pursuit of love lead to hope?
- ✪ Why might Paul have included a message of hope in this letter?

Explain that in the season of Advent, we celebrate our hope in Jesus Christ as we look forward to both the celebration of Christ's birth on Christmas Day as well as Christ's return.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of the following learning activities:

- 1. Act It Out** Form groups of two or three. Have each group create and present a skit that portrays people living lives of love in a Christian community. Then, discuss:
 - ✪ Where can hope be found in the situations that were portrayed in these skits?
 - ✪ How does spreading God's love create hope?
 - ✪ How can you spread God's love during the coming week?
- 2. Cards of Caring** Participants will create greeting cards that reflect God's perfect love. Make construction paper and markers available. Have participants fold the paper in half length-wise to make a greeting card. Have them write a simple greeting on the front of the card and a message of love on the inside of the card. Discuss:
 - ✪ As a community of believers, why is it important that we spread God's love in the world?
 - ✪ How does spreading God's love create hope?

EASY
PREP

If possible, provide other card-making supplies such as stickers, glitter pens, stencils, or stamp sets.

✪ How can you spread God's love during the coming week?

Challenge participants to give or send their cards to someone in need of God's love.

If using an artificial Christmas tree is not possible, have youth create a tree on a bulletin board and place a donation box next to it.

- 3. Advent Mission Project** The participants will create a "Giving Tree" and invite church members to hang on it items needed by helping agencies in your area such as mittens, gloves, hats, socks, or underwear. As a group, select a local mission agency to which you can give the items after December 23 and decide where the giving tree will be located in your church building. Place an artificial Christmas tree there with spring-style clothespins attached to the branches. Then, form three groups. Have one group create publicity posters that can be displayed around the church, have a second group create a short article that can go in your congregation's newsletter or an e-mail blast, and have a third group write a script for an announcement that can be made during worship.

CLOSING

Gather the participants around the Advent wreath and light one candle, if necessary. Give each person a battery-powered votive or tea light candle. Have each participant name a hopeful situation in the world. After each situation is named, have participants light their candles and place them around the wreath.

Close with this blessing:

As you go out into the world, may you be led by the light of hope that comes from Christ's perfect love. Amen.

Extinguish all candles. Save them to use next session

■ ENHANCEMENT

MUSIC CONNECTION

Explain that you are going to play a song about hope and that participants need to select a phrase from the song that particularly resonates with them. Listen together to "Hope" by Royal Tailor. Then, give participants an opportunity to name their selected phrase and explain why the phrase resonates with them. Explore the following questions together:

- ✪ When have you felt hopeless like in the situations described in this song?
- ✪ In what ways does this song connect with the message about hope found in 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13?

Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians



Probably written around 51 C.E., 1 Thessalonians is widely accepted as the oldest book in the New Testament. This means it's older than the four Gospels!

1 Thessalonians is an *epistle*, which is from a Latin word that means "letter."

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica. Paul was a leader of the early Christians who visited different cities and started churches. Thirteen books in the New Testament are letters attributed to Paul.

Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. Located on the northern shore of the Aegean Sea and also on the Ignatian Road, Thessalonica was an important economic center. This also meant that the people of Thessalonica would have been exposed to a variety of religious, social, and cultural influences.

1 Thessalonians helps us understand the lives of the earliest Christians and their struggle to live faithfully in a diverse culture.

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

I, Paul, together here with Silas and Timothy, send greetings to the church at Thessalonica, Christians assembled by God the Father and by the Master, Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace be with you! God's robust peace!

Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you're in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God our Father. It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions.

You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated the Master. Although great trouble accompanied the Word, you were able to take great joy from the Holy Spirit!—taking the trouble with the joy, the joy with the trouble.

Do you know that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore—you're the message! People come up and tell us how you received us with open arms, how you deserted the dead idols of your old life so you could embrace and serve God, the true God. They marvel at how expectantly you await the arrival of his Son, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescued us from certain doom.

Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.