

CONTAGIOUS CHRISTIANITY

A STUDY OF 1 THESSALONIANS

STUDY THREE

The Flip Side of Leadership

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20

If Paul had a chariot while he was riding around Corinth and writing this letter, I think it might have had a sticker that read, “Ask me about my month in Macedonia,” or, “I’d rather be in Thessalonica.”

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

PATRONS dressed to the nines are quietly buzzing with anticipation as they await the orchestral performance. A sudden hush fills the concert hall as the conductor assumes the platform and taps his baton on the glistening brass music stand. The conductor carefully surveys the orchestra, sweeping his gaze right and then left, his eyes meeting those of the soloist and then each member of the orchestra. He assesses their readiness; they anticipate his initial move. They are locked in as one.

The conductor deliberately raises his hands—holds them momentarily—then drops them emphatically. As his hands drop, the orchestra resounds—artistically, harmoniously, thunderously. For 90 minutes, patrons are mesmerized by the symbiotic connection between maestro and musician.

This pleasing arrangement between conductor and orchestra only works because a skilled leader leads, and a talented and receptive group willingly follows. Without a leader, people go astray. Without followers, a leader cannot lead and cannot become the maestro God designed him or her to be. They make beautiful music only in partnership!

Successful leading depends upon responsive following. This, then, is the flip side of leadership. As strong as Paul’s leadership qualities were, he would have exercised them in vain had the Thessalonian believers not willingly followed his lead.

In this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, we’ll look at the flip side of Paul’s leadership—the Thessalonians’ willingness to respond to the downbeat of his gospel proclamation.



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The Bible-Teaching Ministry of Chuck Swindoll
Study 3 • Page 1

SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES
BIBLE STUDIES

The Flip Side of Leadership

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Our Savior Jesus Christ perfectly embodies leadership and followership—leadership as the sovereign Creator and Lord of the universe; followership as the sacrificial Lamb of God submitting to the will of His Father.

Anticipating our passage from 1 Thessalonians 2, read [Matthew 16:24](#); [John 12:26](#); [1 Peter 2:21](#). Then, record in the space below your prayer to live as a follower of Jesus.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

After experiencing abusive treatment at the hands of the Philippian authorities, Paul's brief stay in Thessalonica proved to be the healing balm he so desperately needed.

First Thessalonians 1 records Paul's gratitude for and affirmation of the believers' exercise of faith, loving deeds, and enduring hope. In chapter 2, Paul reminded the Thessalonians that his time spent with them was not in vain for three reasons.

First, Paul *avoided* certain ministry pitfalls—he was never deceptive, was not a people-pleaser, wasn't greedy, nor was he authoritarian in his leadership. Second, he *adopted* certain ministry practices—he was sensitive to their needs, was affectionate toward them, modeled authenticity, and he offered enthusiastic affirmation. Third, Paul *admirably modeled* the character qualities of Christ in order that the Thessalonian believers would walk in a manner worthy of God and for His glory.

What about Paul's leadership style paved the way for the young Thessalonian believers to responsibly follow Paul's lead?

The Flip Side of Leadership

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20



Observation: Paul and the Thessalonians . . . Reciprocal Love

Observation is the first step toward unlocking the meaning of a text and applying its principles to your life.¹ The first word you see in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 is *therefore*. In the NASB, it's translated *for this reason*. Paul had just recounted in 2:1–12 his leadership efforts, and in 2:13 he states the reason for his gratitude for the Thessalonians. They could have ignored and rejected Paul, but, instead, they “*received his message*” and “*accepted what we said as the very word of God*” (1 Thessalonians 2:13, emphasis added).

We'll explore the significance of these two key verbs in interpretation, but for now, put yourself in Paul's situation. What emotions must he have felt? Why was he bursting with gratitude?

The Response in Attitude Among the Thessalonians—1 Thessalonians 2:13–16

The Thessalonians had opened the door of their hearts to God's Word. It was an essential step in becoming a willing follower, for only when God's Word is welcomed will God's work flourish. Carefully read [1 Thessalonians 2:13–16](#) and look for three responses to Paul's leadership.

The first response is in the final line of 2:13. The church at Thessalonica was comprised of Jews, God-fearing Greeks, and former idolatrous pagans. Despite their differences, what were they *all* allowing God's Word to do in their lives?

Find the second response to Paul's leadership in the first part of 2:14 in the NASB. To whom did Paul liken the Thessalonians? These believers lived in a region far away and vastly different—a region where the Christian faith first took root (Acts 2–7). Why was it significant that Paul likened the Thessalonians to these spiritual pioneers?

The Flip Side of Leadership

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20

The third response to note is in the last part of 1 Thessalonians 2:14, which Paul elaborated in 2:15–16. What common danger did the Thessalonians share with the Judean believers?

According to 2:15–16, of what sins were the Jewish persecutors guilty? Whom did Paul charge with the death of Jesus? Summarize Paul's indictment against the Jews and the significance of comparing the Thessalonians' suffering with the persecution endured by the believers in Judea.

Suffering is the common theme. The one thread that can cause all of us to be drawn together in a tight loop is the reality of suffering.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

The Response in Attitude Within Paul—1 Thessalonians 2:17–20

Read [1 Thessalonians 2:17–20](#), noting how the Thessalonians' courageous response inspired Paul as their leader. His first response to their receptivity can be seen in 2:17. What deep feelings did Paul express?

Paul's second response appears in 2:18. What do you observe in this verse? What did Paul say about Satan? List any questions you might have about Paul's comment, and we'll explore possible answers in interpretation.

The Flip Side of Leadership

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20

Despite Paul feeling cut off from the young church, he neither dwelt on his problems nor wallowed in self-pity. Instead, he riveted his gaze elsewhere. According to 1 Thessalonians 2:19–20, *what* brought him hope, joy, and reward, and *when* would those promises be realized?

When I think about the future and when I think about Christ's coming and I think about being gathered up and caught up with other believers, and I'll see the Thessalonians with me, I'll think, That was worth it all! There is my hope. That is my happiness. That makes me rejoice. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Word, Suffering, and Glory—the Spiritual Thread

Paul's heart leapt with gratitude because the Thessalonian believers “received” (*paralambano*) Paul's message and “accepted” (*dechomai*) it as God's Word ([1 Thessalonians 2:13](#)). Review the Greek terms *paralambano* and *dechomai* in Mounce's Greek dictionary at [billmounce.com](#). The words are similar, but you may see a slight distinction in meaning. Why is it essential that we not only *receive* the Word but also *accept* it?

*And the Spirit of God drops the Word of God in the right place and covers it over with soft soil and fertilizes it with time and affliction, and it begins to take root.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

The Thessalonians sensed the divine spring flowing through Paul's message, and they longed to immerse themselves in it. Waiting to attack, however, were opposing forces—initially, Jewish persecutors.

In [1 Thessalonians 2:16](#) (NASB), Paul employed the phrase, “they always reach the limit of their sins. But wrath has come upon them fully.” To decipher Paul's meaning, consult your commentary or [Constable's Notes](#) at [netbible.org](#). What was Paul referring to?

The Flip Side of Leadership

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20

Paul also pointed to Satan as another source of opposition. What did Paul mean by saying that Satan “prevented” him from seeing the Thessalonian believers (1 Thessalonians 2:18)? The Greek word is *enkopto*, which pictures a runner in a race cutting in and tripping up another runner. How might Satan prevent or “hinder” (2:18 NASB) believers today?

*Paul sensed he was in enemy territory. You will sense it too. The deeper you walk with Christ, the more you'll be able to differentiate. I can't give you the rules. You'll just know. Operate in the power of the Spirit, for "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

According to *1 Thessalonians 2:19*, who will bring all believers future hope and joy? In whose presence will it be shared for eternity? No power can hinder His will! What encouragement does this verse offer you?

The remarkable thing is that whether you're ministering in Canada or Mexico or mid-United States or the South Sea Islands or some part of Europe, regardless, there is a thread of godliness in the lifestyle that connects with fellow believers. It's called the Spirit. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Biblical Examples of Leadership and Followership

Scripture contains many examples of leader and follower reciprocity. Read *Exodus 4:28–31*. Describe the leadership and followership pattern in Moses' encounter with the elders of Israel, noting any similarities with Paul and the Thessalonians.

The Flip Side of Leadership

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20

Read [Luke 5:1–11](#). How does the disciples' reception of Jesus mirror our text?

In [1 Timothy 1:2](#); [2 Timothy 1:2](#); [Philippians 2:20–22](#), Paul expressed his feelings toward Timothy. What similar words and concepts do you find which echo Paul's feelings toward the Thessalonians?

One of the reasons that Paul was so in love with Thessalonica is that the body of believers there were such great followers. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Emulating the Thessalonians' Followership Qualities

Let's summarize our study with three principles followed by three responses.

Principle: *an attitude of gratitude can be developed by welcoming God's Word.*

Response: *I will welcome the truth of God I hear.*

Principle: *a commitment to contentment will be strengthened by accepting God's will.*

Response: *I will accept the path I walk.*

Principle: *a happiness amid heaviness must be cultivated by affirming God's people.*

Response: *I will affirm the people I love.*

The Flip Side of Leadership

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20

Think of a way you can apply one of these principles and responses today. What might God be leading you to do?

Who has served as a “Paul” in your life? How have you communicated that you welcome his or her leadership? How might your followership motivate this person to effectively lead?

Paul and the Thessalonians enjoyed what could be described as a “love story” of sorts. As Paul led and taught with authority and humility, the Thessalonians responded in faith with receptive hearts, and their receptivity further inspired Paul, fostering a reciprocal loop. They made beautiful music together! So can you and your leaders as you follow God’s Spirit and His Word as one.



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, life is tough stuff. It’s eternal. Only two things in this old world are eternal: God’s Word and people. Thank You for giving me truth. Thank You for saying it straight. Thank You for making it stick. I believe in Your Son. May Your Spirit assist me to obey Your Word. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, “[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)”

For the 2026 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll’s messages. Copyright © 1984, 2026 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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Study 3 • Page 8