

From God's Word to Action

A Pauline-Inspired Bible Study

by Fr. Dave Mercer

“In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them.” [Catechism of the Catholic Church, 104]

Catholic Biblical scholar Father Raymond Brown invited his readers into the meeting room where early Christians first opened a letter from their spiritual father, the Apostle Paul. Today’s scholars most often consider Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians to be the earliest writing we have in the New Testament.

The year is 51 AD, and Father Brown notes that, in the first ten verses of that first known letter, we hear Paul referring to God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the holy Spirit. He recalls their “work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope.” Raymond Brown then remarks how quickly “Father, Son, and Spirit” and “faith, love, and hope” had taken root in the founding testimony of early Christian faith.

Within twenty years of Jesus’ Death and Resurrection and after Paul left Thessalonica, he wrote to that Christian community to encourage them to hold to the Gospel he had proclaimed for them. Paul knew that God’s word had transformed their lives to be role models for others as he and his missionary companions had been for them.

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright captures this transformation by noting three themes in those first ten verses: Gospel, Community, and Mission. God’s word transforms the believers into a community of faith, whose example and witness carry it outward.

Wright’s three themes of the transformative power of God’s word form a framework for how we can approach studying it. Read the word of God, reflect on how its power transforms a community, and apply it to our God-given mission.

Focusing question. Paul’s letters address different needs in different communities; however, he understood his words were God’s word. He writes: “The word of God is now at work in you who believe.” [1 Thessalonians 2:13] A focusing question for this study plan can be: *“How is God’s word at work in me and through me?”*

Suggestion. This study plan is especially suited for studying the Apostle Paul’s letters. However, it can be used with other biblical books and passages.

This Bible study has seven distinct steps, moving you from God’s word to Community to Mission. Our printable Pauline Worksheet, Study Questions, and Catholic Resources can help guide your group through the steps. (Their PDF files are below.)

Always gather the group with a simple [icebreaker](#) question.

1. **Prayer.** For a few moments, the study group prays quietly to understand how God's word is active in their lives. Participants ask themselves: How has God's word been at work in my life since our last gathering? Those who wish may say how they wish God's word can transform their lives. Then, consider one of these [prayers for students](#), the prayer of [Saint John Chrysostom](#), or the traditional [Prayer to the Holy Spirit](#) before reading the Bible.

Read the Word of God

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.
[Romans 10:17]

2. **Read the selected passage from the Bible.** While a group member prayerfully reads the Scripture passage, the others listen and note in a journal or on the worksheet the words, phrases, actions, or images that stand out in the passage. They pause for a few moments in quiet prayer, then, while the passage is read again, they write, in their own words, the sentence that most resonates with them or a summary of the passage.
3. **Wrestle.** Jacob wrestled with God through the night and left with a limp and a blessing [Genesis 32:22-32]. Similarly, your honest questions can be fruitful when you wrestle with Scripture. The study group starts with journalism's "Five Ws and an H"—who, what, when, where, why, and how—but can go deeper with the Study Questions printable. Study group members note the insights and questions of others. As they do, keep before you the Bible study's focusing question: "*How is God's word at work in me and through me?*"

The Catholic Resources printable also offers ways to find answers to questions needing more expertise. It also discusses Catholic study Bibles.

God's Word Transforms the Community

Encourage one another and build one another up, as indeed you do.
[1 Thessalonians 5:11]

4. **Community.** For 2,000 years, God's word has transformed Church life with the scholarship of many faithful people, a great reason we needn't study Scripture in isolation but can learn from Christians across generations. A group member now reads, with copies for the others, an appropriate section of a commentary for the insights of a scholar. (Consider the commentaries, including a video series, listed in our Catholic Resources printable.) The group notes what they learn from such commentaries. Allow time for the group to discuss new insights, reconsider earlier assumptions, and explore questions that remain unanswered.
5. **Be Transformed.** Study participants reflect on how God's word is at work in their discussion and how, with God's grace, the insights might transform their relationship with God and each other. What is God's word changing in my understanding, attitudes, relationships, or faith?

Apply God's Word to Your Mission

Faith working through love.
[Galatians 5:6]

6. **Apply.** Imagining themselves back in the meeting room long ago and hearing Paul's letter being read, each study participant identifies one concrete action for the coming week, inspired by an insight from the passage and the group's discussion.

Note: before praying, review questions raised during discussion that remain unanswered and who can research a proper answer for the next study session.

7. **Closing Prayer.** Each participant reviews their notes from the discussions and reflections, then writes a brief prayer to God, perhaps answering the focusing question: "*How is God's word at work in me and through me?*" Those who wish may share their prayers aloud. The group might conclude by praying the [early Christian hymn](#) of Jesus (Philippians 2:5–11), whose attitude, the Apostle Paul writes, can be our own.