

8th March 2026 – Ian Roberts

Hope-shaped Life – Hope that shapes community

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

1. What does ‘Being the Church’ rather than “Going to Church” look like? – Both in our regular ‘church’ meetings but also in our daily lives and amongst our friends/neighbours
 - a. What might we do as individuals to make this more of a reality?
2. What would encourage us to become more like the people that we are called to be, as God’s children?
3. How important is Hope as a motivator in what we do? What are important factors in cultivating Hope in:
 - Ourselves?
 - Others?
4. How do each of us express our personal commitment and responsibility towards the church family to which we belong? In particular:
 - Our leaders (v. 12 – 13);
 - Those whom Ian described as “Jesus in distressing disguise” (v. 14)What more could we do?
5. Regular ‘church’ attendance is important. However, do we see it as ‘spiritual maintenance’ or do we come with Hope that God will bring new things? Do we have a hopeful expectation that we will be Empowered and Inspired by God for the work of growing His kingdom in our community?
6. Do we have things in our lives that hold us back/smother our Hope? Jesus came to set us free, to give us ‘life in abundance’. How can being part of a church family help this to become a reality?

1st March 2026 – Richard Saint**Hope-shaped Life – Hope that keeps us awake****1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

1. The talk began with the idea of “getting ready.”
 - a. When you know something important is coming, how does that change your behaviour?

Application: If you truly believed Jesus could return today, what might you do differently?

2. Paul speaks about “the Day of the Lord,” a theme also found in passages like Joel 2 and Amos 5.
 - a. Why is this day described both as a warning and as a hope? (You might want to think about what God’s people were doing in the situations Joel and Amos were writing within.)

Challenge: Does the thought of Christ’s return stir more fear or more anticipation in you? Why?

3. Paul uses two images: a thief in the night and labour pains.
 - a. What do these images teach us about the timing and certainty of Christ’s return?

Application: Since we cannot control *when* it happens, what can we control?

4. Paul says believers are “children of light and children of the day.”
 - a. What does it mean practically to belong to the “day” rather than the “night”?

Challenge: Are there areas of your life that still operate in shadow rather than light?

5. Paul urges believers not to “fall asleep” but to stay awake and sober.
 - a. What might spiritual sleepiness look like in today’s culture?

Application: Where are you most tempted to drift, numb out, or become spiritually drowsy?

6. Paul speaks of putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation.
 - a. How do faith, love, and hope protect us spiritually?

Challenge: Which of these feels strongest in your life right now? Which needs strengthening?

7. The talk emphasised that readiness rests on who we say Jesus is, not on our performance.
 - a. Why is identity in Christ the foundation of readiness?

Application: How does trusting in Jesus (rather than trusting your own works) bring confidence about the future?

8. The sermon described readiness as faith in action, outward-facing love, and hope that refuses despair.
 - a. Which of these three do you find most challenging to live out consistently?

Practical Step: Name one concrete action this week that would reflect faith, love, or hope.

9. Paul ends by saying, “Encourage one another and build each other up.”
 - a. Why is watchfulness not meant to be a solo activity?

Challenge: Who could you intentionally encourage toward spiritual alertness this week?

10. The sermon concluded that the real question is not “When is he coming?” but “Are we ready today?”
 - a. If Jesus returned tonight, what would you feel joyful about? What might you regret?

Prayer Response: Invite the group to quietly ask God: “*Shape my life so that I am awake and ready.*”

22nd February 2026 – Thelma Edwards**Hope-shaped Life – Hope in the face of suffering, grief, and death****1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

1. Grieving with Hope (Salvation – Lifeline 1): Paul says believers do not grieve “as others do who have no hope.” What is the difference between hope-filled grief and hopeless grief?

Application: How does the assurance of salvation change the way we face death — our own or that of someone we love?

2. The Foundation of Hope (Salvation – Lifeline 1): Paul roots hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Why is the resurrection essential to Christian confidence about eternity?

Challenge: If someone asked you why you are confident about heaven, how would you explain it?

3. Strength for Today (Scripture & Prayer – Lifeline 2): How has God’s Word or prayer sustained you (or someone you know) in difficult seasons?

Application: What practical rhythm (daily reading, a prayer habit, memorising a verse) could strengthen your hope right now?

4. When You Don’t Feel Like Praying (Scripture & Prayer – Lifeline 2): Romans 8:26 reminds us the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

Why is it comforting to know that both the Spirit and Jesus intercede for us along with those in our church family?

Challenge: Who might you ask to pray with you or for you in this season?

5. Praise in Pain (Praise & Thanksgiving – Lifeline 3): Hebrews 13:15 speaks of a “sacrifice of praise.”

Why can praise feel costly in suffering — and why might it also be powerful?

Application: What is one small, specific thing you can thank God for today, even if life feels heavy?

6. Peace in the Present (Peace & Presence – Lifeline 4): Isaiah 26:3 links peace with fixing our minds on God.

How do our thought patterns affect our experience of peace during hardship?

Challenge: What practical step could help you “stay your mind” on God this week (e.g., worship music, Scripture on your phone, intentional pauses)?

7. God With Us (Peace & Presence – Lifeline 4): Isaiah 43:2 promises God’s presence in deep waters and fire.

How does knowing God is with us differ from expecting God to remove all suffering?

Application: Where do you most need to consciously invite awareness of God’s presence right now?

8. Not Walking Alone (Fellowship – Lifeline 5): Paul ends by saying, “Encourage one another with these words.”

Why is Christian hope meant to be shared within community?

Challenge: Are you more likely to withdraw or reach out when struggling? What would healthy vulnerability look like for you?

9. Who Is in Control? (Remembering Who Is in Control – Lifeline 6): Jesus says in John 16:33, “Take heart; I have overcome the world.”

How does remembering Christ’s victory reshape our fear of suffering or death?

Application: What fear do you need to place back into God’s hands?

10. A Hope-Shaped Perspective: The sermon emphasised that “this world is not our home.”

If you truly lived each day believing eternity is secure:

- What would worry you less?
- What would matter more?
- What might you hold more loosely?

15th February 2026 – Richard Saint
Bitesize: Child of God – New Status
Galatians 4:4-7 and Romans 8:14-16

1. Fullness – Belonging Completely

In Galatians 4:7 Paul says, *“So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child.”*

- What do you think it means to have full status as God’s child rather than being on probation or earning your place?

2. Fullness – Identity

Paul says we receive adoption to sonship and become heirs.

- How might your daily life change if you truly believed you already fully belong in God’s family?

3. Forgiveness – No Going Back

Galatians says Jesus came to “redeem” us.

- What does redemption and forgiveness free us from — practically and emotionally?

4. Forgiveness – Fear or Security?

Romans 8 says we have not received a spirit that makes us slaves to fear.

- In what ways do Christians, or you, sometimes still live as though they are afraid of being rejected by God?

5. Freedom – Employee or Child?

In the illustration, we compared living like an employee (insecure, anxious, earning your place, fear of rejection) versus living like a child (secure, loved, belonging).

- Which mindset do you tend to slip into when it comes to understanding your relationship with God — employee or child? Why?

6. Response – Living as Children

Romans 8:15 says, *“By him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”*

- What might it look like this week to approach God with the confidence and trust of a loved child?

Pray for each other that we would fully understand our new status:

- Fullness – we belong completely
- Forgiveness – our past no longer defines us
- Freedom – We live secure, not afraid

8th February 2026 – Mike Wilmott**Hope-shaped Life – Hope that calls us ordinary faithfulness****1 Thessalonians 4:9-12****Background**

This passage follows on from last week's, with Paul continuing to give instructions to the church at Thessaloniki about how to live in order to please God.

After setting out his instructions about controlling the body (sexual love, or eros in Greek), which Richard talked about last week, Paul moves onto a different kind of love – brotherly love (or philos in Greek) – which could be defined as reciprocal, supportive friendship.

1. John Donne wrote that 'no man is an island'. Why do you think that Paul is insistent that loving other members of the church is an integral part of living to please God? In what ways do you find belonging to the St James family here in Devizes to be helpful to you?

C S Lewis wrote that '*what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing*'. How well do you think single people feel connected to our church and loved? Is there more we can do to foster a sense of belonging?

2. Bishop Andrew was struck by his snowy neighbour's comment '*The snow gives us that sense of belonging together.....which we crave*'. Why do you think people may crave to belong to something bigger than themselves? What are we looking for?
3. What do you think it looks like in the here and now to fulfil Paul's instructions to love one another? How can we at St James model a community of life that will attract others to come and see, that can satisfy the craving to belong together? What part can you play in helping other members of our church family to flourish?
4. Love, including the brotherly love for each other that Paul talks about, is often seen as touchy-feely. However, Paul touches on the 'severe suffering' that the Christians at Thessaloniki were facing in seeking to live distinctive lives (1 Thess 1 v 6). Is living such a distinctive life today cost-free? What does it cost in today's society to live lives that are characterised by brotherly love for one another?
5. The early church seems to have been characterised by practical support that stretched across large areas. In Paul's letters, we hear of the collection he took from Gentile churches as far away as Greece to the church in Jerusalem (eg 1 Corinthians 16 v 1-3). In this passage (v10), he recognises the love that the church in Thessaloniki is showing for the Christian family in other parts of their country.

What can we learn about generous love from the early church? Here at St James, we give away 10% of our pledged giving and gift aid to mission partners outside of our local church, often located thousands of miles away in places like Ugandan refugee camps. Do you think that this is an appropriate use of our resources? Would Paul approve of this?

6. Whilst recognising the extent of their love for their fellow Christians, Paul urges the church in Thessaloniki to '*do so more and more*' (v 10). Why do you think he sees this as important? How important is it for a church to have an outward focus?
7. Paul confirms that their love for one another '*has been taught (them) by God*' (v 9). (This is the only place in the New Testament where such a phrase occurs.) How do you think God 'taught them'? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in this (mentioned by Paul in v 8). Is this part of the 'being set apart', or sanctification, that Richard was talking about last week?

8. Why do you think Paul urges them 'to lead a quiet life' (v11). Is there a clue in v 12? As many of us lead unspectacular lives, do you find it encouraging that Paul commends 'a quiet life' – albeit one marked by acts of love supporting the Christian family throughout the country.
9. Mike talked about acts of love for one another, regardless of how unspectacular they may seem, being like a distinctive cloak that we wear, one that marks us out as servants to the world and to other people. Read Matthew 22 v 1-14. How important is it that we are wearing the 'right clothes'?
10. A theologian once wrote that '*The Christian narrative is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but rather the medium in which one moves*'. Do you think the church at Thessaloniki demonstrate the reality of this? Which is easier – to believe a set of propositions, - or to demonstrate the reality of faith in Jesus by practicing loving one another? Which course do you find to be the most rewarding?

1st February 2026 – Richard Saint**Hope-shaped Life – Hope that calls us to holiness****1 Thessalonians 4:1-8**

1. The sermon defined holiness as “*set apart for a specific purpose*” rather than being something strange or confusing.
 - a. How does this definition compare with how you’ve previously understood holiness?
 - b. Application: How might this reframe the way you think about your everyday Christian life?
2. Paul urges the Thessalonians to live lives that please God *because* of their hope in Jesus.
 - a. Why do you think hope should naturally lead to a changed way of life?
 - b. Challenge: Where might your hope in Jesus not yet be shaping how you live?
3. Paul affirms the Thessalonians for how they are already living, but still urges them to do so “*more and more*” (v.1).
 - a. What does this tell us about growth and maturity in the Christian life?
 - b. Application: In what area of your life might God be inviting you to take a next step?
4. Sanctification was described as the lifelong process of becoming more like Jesus.
 - a. Why is it important to remember that holiness is a process and not a one-time achievement?
 - b. Challenge: Are there areas where you are discouraged because change feels slow or too hard?
5. The sermon stressed that sanctification affects *every* part of life, not just the obviously “spiritual” parts.
 - a. Why do you think we are tempted to keep certain areas of life separate from God?
 - b. Application: Is there an area you find harder to offer to God’s shaping work?
6. Paul focuses on sex in this particular passage not because it is the only issue where holiness applies, but because our attitude towards it can reveal whether we are willing to let God shape everything.
 - a. Why do you think this area of life is such a revealing test of holiness and self-control?
 - b. Challenge: How can we talk about holiness in this area with both truth and grace?
7. Paul contrasts “self-control” with being driven by “lustful passions.”
 - a. How does this distinction challenge the way our culture talks about freedom and fulfilment?
 - b. Application: Where might true freedom require loving boundaries?
8. The mug illustration emphasised that holiness comes from belonging, not being spotless.
 - a. How does this speak to feelings of shame, failure, or regret we may carry?
 - b. Challenge: What would it look like to trust that you still belong to God, even where you feel stained or imperfect?
9. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that God gives his Holy Spirit to enable this life of holiness.
 - a. Why is it important to remember that we are not expected to “clean ourselves up”?
 - b. Application: How can you become more open and patient with the Spirit’s work in you?
10. The sermon ended by encouraging us to remember, “*I am set apart, I belong to God.*”
 - a. How might regularly reminding yourself of this truth affect your choices, habits, or attitudes this week?
 - b. Prayerful challenge: What one area of your life will you consciously place before God, asking the Spirit to shape it?

25th January 2026 – Sarah Mallett**Hope-shaped Life – Hope that builds relationships of love****1 Thess 2:17 – 3:13 and 2 Thess 1:3-4**

1. Paul's visit to Thessalonica had been cut short by intense persecution meaning he had to escape in the middle of the night. Paul's critics had been saying to the Thessalonians that he didn't really care about them, he ran off to save himself at the first sign of trouble, and they questioned his motives for preaching to them in the first place.
 - a. In what ways is Paul trying to defend himself against these claims in these verses? How does he treat the Thessalonians?
2. How do you feel about the language Paul uses in verses 17-20? Is it the language you use about those you love? Is it a bit intense?? How can we explain it and learn from it in our own relationships?
3. Read about the "gifts" in Romans 12:6-8. Do we give equal importance to encouragement as to the other gifts? Is it a gift you want?
4. Have you heard about the difference between person praise ("you're so great") and process praise ("you have worked well on that")? Have you experienced either? How important is it to praise the process rather than the person?
5. There are 5 ways (at least) in which Paul encourages the Thessalonians in these verses:
 - i. Notice how God is working in their lives/through them (1Thess 3:6)
 - ii. Tell them that you are thanking God for them (1Thess 3:9)
 - iii. Pray with them (1Thess 3:10-13)
 - iv. Acknowledge answered prayer (2Thess1:3)
 - v. Publicly affirm them (2Thess1:4)

Read the verses attached to each. How do you think the Thessalonians felt on receiving this encouragement?

6. Which of these types of encouragement do you do and which do you not do? Which would you like to try?
7. Another Biblical person associated with encouragement is Barnabas (whose name means "son of encouragement"). He is known for encouraging quietly by standing alongside people when they needed him. He is not the same as Paul, although Paul valued his encouragement. What can we learn from his example?
8. Why do we need encouragement? Why is it important in the church? How can it be part of sustaining and growing hope?
9. Who do you know who you could encourage this week? Perhaps pray for God to show you someone and how you can encourage them.

18th January 2026 – Richard Saint
Bitesize Service – Child of God: New Origin
John 1:12-13

1. When you hear the phrase “*children of God*”, what thoughts, images, or emotions come to mind?
 - a. How familiar or unfamiliar is this way of describing Christian identity for you?

Application: How might regularly thinking of yourself as a child of God change your faith?
2. John says that becoming a child of God comes to those who “*received him*” and “*believed in his name.*”
 - a. Why do you think the Bible emphasises receiving rather than earning?

Challenge: Where might you still be trying to *prove* yourself to God rather than receive from him?
3. The talk stressed that our origin as children of God is “*not of blood... nor of human decision... but of God.*”
 - a. Why is it important that our spiritual origin does not depend on biology, background, or achievement?

Application: How does this truth affect the way you view yourself—and others?
4. The illustration of awards and achievements showed how easily people are included or excluded.
 - a. Where do you see this “earn your place” mindset most strongly in everyday life?

Challenge: How might that mindset sometimes creep into church or Christian living?
5. In the illustration, everyone who followed Jesus received the same “child of God” badge.
 - a. What does this teach us about equality and belonging within God’s family?

Application: Is there anyone you struggle to see as fully equal in God’s family? Why?
6. The talk said the Bible doesn’t say we *decide* to become children of God, but that God *gives us the right* to become his children.
 - a. How does this shape your understanding of Christian identity?

Challenge: Are you more likely to define yourself by what you do, or by what God says about you?
7. It was noted that we may not immediately *feel* different when we become children of God.
 - a. Why do you think feelings can take time to catch up with spiritual reality?

Application: How can you hold onto God’s truth when your feelings don’t align with it?
8. The talk emphasised that becoming a child of God is available to anyone, regardless of background or ability.
 - a. How does this challenge common assumptions about who “belongs” in church?

Challenge: How welcoming is your own attitude to people who are exploring faith?
9. Following Jesus was described as starting with what God has done, not what we do for God.
 - a. Why is this distinction so important for a healthy Christian life?

Application: Where might you need to let go of performance-based faith?
10. If being a child of God begins with receiving and trusting Jesus, where are you personally in that journey right now?

Challenge:

 - If you are unsure: what might be holding you back from receiving this gift?
 - If you are already a Christian: what would it look like this week to live more confidently as God’s child?

11th January 2026 – William Hazelton
Hope-shaped Life – Commitment
1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

1. Happy New Year!!! Are you looking forward to 2026? What does hope have to say to you as you contemplate this question?
2. 1 and 2 Thessalonians are the Epistles that speak most about the End Times or the Second Coming.
 - (a) What do you think about this? Puzzled, fearful, expectant or what?
 - (b) Some of you may have been on the Bible Course. Perhaps share with the Connect Group what you learnt about this subject.
3. William used the picture of a journey:
 - (a) Jesus journeyed to earth
 - (b) If we believe we are citizens of heaven and on our way home
 - (c) God is on the move and we journey with him and to him – in our earthly lives - and in eternity – he is there.
 - How does this perspective help us as we look at the world, as we contemplate the rest of our lives and life beyond death? And how does this affect the way we view others?
4. How can we know hope in our hearts?
5. 1 Thessalonians 1.10 and 2.16 both end with “the wrath of God.” Heaven and hell. An eternal perspective. Now note from the passage:
 - i. the gospel – v 2 – the whole gospel – can you summarise the gospel and the call we receive and the consequences of saying Yes or No to Jesus etc – are we ready to share the gospel
 - ii. does the future seem daunting – see v 2 – help of God – share how he helps
 - iii. are you fearful – see v 2 – courage – share experiences of this
 - iv. do you feel inadequate – v 4 – approved and entrusted by God with the gospel – God equips us
 - v. do we seek to please and as we do so downplay the gospel – v 4 – what does that mean for preachers – what does this mean to all of us in our contact with those whom we meet (of our faith, other faiths or no faith)
 - vi. how can we be faithful to the gospel’s demands and loving – v 7 – gentleness – what does this look like
 - vii. is this a whole life thing – v 8 – what a challenge to us and the church
 - viii. how can we live worthy lives – v 12
 - ix. do you know your ultimate calling – v 12 – his kingdom and glory
6. Take time to pray for one another as you discuss what all this means in practical terms.
7. See Romans 15.13. What has that to say to you as a Connect Group and as an individual? So for 2026. For the rest of our lives and for life beyond death....

4th January 2026 – Richard Saint
Hope-shaped Life – an Introduction
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

- 1. The talk suggested that “every day has a lot to learn from Christmas.”**
 - a. What aspects of Christmas faith (hope, expectation, God’s initiative) are hardest to carry into ordinary life once the season is over?
 - b. **Challenge:** What would it look like for one of those aspects to shape your January?

- 2. In verses 2–3 Paul links faith, love, and steadfast hope.**
 - a. How does biblical hope differ from optimism, wishful thinking, or positivity?
 - b. **Application:** Where might you be settling for something less than Christian hope?

- 3. Paul stresses that the gospel came “not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit.”**
 - a. Why is it important to remember that hope is God’s initiative rather than our achievement?
 - b. **Challenge:** Are there areas of your faith where you are relying more on effort than on God’s power?

- 4. The Thessalonians received the gospel “in spite of persecution... with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit”.**
 - a. How do you usually respond when faith makes life harder rather than easier?
 - b. **Application:** What might Spirit-given joy look like in a current challenge you are facing?

- 5. Paul says the Thessalonians became an example to others and that “the word of the Lord sounded forth” from them.**
 - a. What made their hope so visible and compelling?
 - b. **Challenge:** If someone observed your life for a month, what would they notice about where your hope lies?

- 6. Verse 9 describes a clear turning: “You turned to God from idols.”**
 - a. What “idols” might be more subtle in our culture today—things we trust for security, identity, or meaning?
 - b. **Application:** Is there anything competing with God as your primary source of hope?

- 7. The talk described syncretism as “adding taps” to the bath.**
 - a. Which extra “taps” are most tempting for you (comfort, success, control, spirituality without commitment)?
 - b. **Challenge:** What might it mean practically to turn one of those taps off?

- 8. The Thessalonians both served a living God and waited for his Son from heaven (v.9–10).**
 - a. Why do you think active service and patient waiting belong together in a hope-shaped life?
 - b. **Application:** Are you more comfortable serving or waiting—and how might God be inviting balance?

- 9. The Thessalonians didn’t just have hope; they became people of hope.**
 - a. What difference is there between hope as an “add-on” and hope as the foundation of identity?
 - b. **Challenge:** What would need to change for hope in Jesus to shape who you are, not just what you believe?

- 10. The talk ended with the image of one tap—Jesus—filling life completely.**
 - a. What one intentional step could you take this week to centre your life more fully on Christ as your only source of hope?
 - b. **Prayer response:** Invite the group to name that step silently before God and ask for the Spirit’s help.