

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 "When God's Word Comes with Power"

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Date: 26 November 2023

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[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me, actually, to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

It's a privilege to bring the message once again, as our rector, George, is away. If I didn't say my name earlier, I'm Steve, and I'm delighted to see you here this morning. I see some new faces, so I do look forward to chatting with various ones afterwards.

Driving home from Florida a few weeks ago, my wife Stella and I had the chance to spend some time in the area of Massachusetts that once witnessed a great spiritual awakening. In fact, the first of a series that we refer to as the great awakening that began in the 1730s there. Now today, 300 years later, the same churches that witnessed that revival have been swept quite thoroughly up into the new thing, the new form of Christianity, which H. Richard Niebuhr, excuse me, he described so well when he said, some decades ago now, that this new form of Christianity tells the story of how a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross. But in the 1730s, God moved in a very special way. Now in my history class that I got to teach at McGill about a year ago, we got to read about it in Jonathan Edwards' narrative called

A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God. That was from the year 1737. We didn't read the whole thing, but we read a good chunk of it. In that piece, Edwards wrote about how, quote, at the latter end of the year 1733, there appeared in our young people, listen up young people, a very unusual flexibility and yielding to advice. This came as a big surprise, and Edwards tells us why.

[3 : 18] The greater part of the young people seemed at that time to be very insensitive to the things of religion. They were, many of them, very much addicted to night walking and frequenting the tavern and lewd practices, wherein some, by their example, exceedingly corrupted others.

It was their manner very frequently to get together in conventions of both sexes, for mirth and jollity, which they called frolics, as they would often spend the greater, I'm sorry, and they would often spend the greater part of the night in them without regard to any order in the families they belonged to. But a great change happened, said Edwards. Not just one or two, but a great many of them had become teachable, moved by what they were hearing from the pulpit on Sunday. They were, after all, a church-going culture. And they became open to correction. And before long, in groups of five or six, they were all, to all appearance, savingly converted. And some of them wrought upon in a very remarkable manner. I've shared with you just the early moments in that narrative, because I want us to consider, guided by the chapter that Morris read, 1 Thessalonians 1, what it looks like when God's word comes with power. As we heard, Paul said to the church in Thessalonica, for we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not only a word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. I invite you to pray with me once again before we get into our text.

Father, we, to enter into those secret places of our heart, and we trust that you do that, even as we open our hearts to hear your word. And we ask that you would show us our need, and also that you would, above all, show us Christ in all his glory, and all his majesty, as we hear your word today. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, to answer the question, what happens when God's word comes with power? We're going to begin in the middle of the passage, verse 6, and then we'll make our way back.

[6 : 03] Just a quick word by way of background to the letter. It was around the year AD 50 that Paul had planted a church there in Thessalonica. If you've been to that area of northern Greece, it's Macedonia. It stretches into the Macedonian part of, I guess, the former Yugoslavia, and we have Thessaloniki there, which is the modern Thessalonica in that part of Greece.

But he was soon driven out, very soon driven out by a mob that had formed when some of the leaders of the synagogue didn't like all the details in his message. He didn't get to witness the church's growth there personally. He did get to hear about some of that from Timothy not long after. And the report Timothy brought gave rise to this letter, probably Paul's first epistle, written when he's further... And it's full of encouragement to the young church there in Thessalonica.

So we're in the book of Acts in an indirect way. Okay, so a little bit further ahead, but George gave me the privilege of selecting the passage. I've pondered this passage a lot, and I've never had a chance to teach it or preach on it, so this is a good opportunity for me.

Right in chapter 1, I say there's a great deal of encouragement in it, because right in chapter 1, beginning with verse 6, and already in the context of giving thanks to God, Paul reminds them what happened once they embraced and took hold of the good news of Jesus. Let's look at that under three headings. Participation, pattern, and proclamation. The first thing Paul rejoices in is the fact that the believers in Thessalonica have come to participate in Jesus's sufferings. Now, Paul doesn't use that word. I'm borrowing it from Peter, from 1 Peter 4.13, because the theme is the same.

[8 : 09] Peter says to the Christians in Asia Minor, the scattered ones up there, rejoice in as much as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. The point is this. Christ, in Christ, suffering and joy actually go hand in hand, as if they were a single blessing. How is that? Well, see what he says, Paul says in verse 6, you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. In the context of the whole passage, Paul's meaning is this. You've been united to Jesus in his sufferings by the work of the Holy Spirit, who gives you joy in the midst of the suffering that you're having to endure as you wait for his coming. Paul himself may have been run out of

Thessalonica, but these believers had, if you like, extended his visit in their own person, extended his impact as they took up his example, facing challenges really on two fronts, from the wider pagan world, but also from the Jewish leaders who were opposing their message. What an encouragement for us today is as we face very similar challenges. Insults from those who think we're too religious, or maybe just jeers, I don't know, and condemnation from those who perhaps think we're not religious enough.

It's an interesting conundrum, isn't it? Too religious in one context, because we say to modern pagans, those whose only real concern is maybe the here and now, there's a day coming when we're all stand before the judge of all the earth, like Paul said there in Acts 17. But we're not religious enough in another context because of the freedom we have found in Jesus. We don't have to try to earn or merit God's favor. So let's turn from that participation to the word pattern. The second thing Paul rejoices in is in verse 7. He says that by participating in Christ's sufferings, they became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. That's the regions immediately close by.

Macedonia and in Macedonia and Achaia to the south. That is, in their union with Christ by the Spirit, who gave them joy in their sufferings, Christians in their region and in nearby Achaia to the south were able to look to them as models and patterns of life in Christ, even as they imitated Paul, and in imitating Paul, Jesus. And the lesson that I think that you and I can take from this is that while God surely sees fit to use these under patterns in our life, if you like, godly men and women, the true and the real pattern is, for the Christian life, can only be Jesus.

He's our model for our formation and our reformation, so that if we want to know how we're supposed to remain in Christ, once the Spirit has done the initial work of uniting us to him, we only need to look to Jesus' example, asking the Holy Spirit to fashion us according to it. And what does that pattern look like? Well, we know that Jesus is priest, king, and prophet. We refer to this as his

threefold office. As priest, very briefly, as priest, what does he model? Well, he models the way of self-sacrifice. As king, he models the victory that we have through that sacrificial death on the cross for us.

[12 : 25] And as prophet, what does he model? Well, he models the way in which we, as that royal priesthood that Peter talks about in 1 Peter 2.9, declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. See that, how we're included in Christ's threefold office by the Holy Spirit who unites us to Jesus. So from participation and pattern, we come to that third reason that Paul rejoices, and it's in the word proclamation. As a result of their example, in verse 8, he says this to the church there in Thessalonica, not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia nearby, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we really need not say anything. Of course, that's hyperbole, isn't it? But because he does say something, but it's as though we didn't need to say anything. What we see here is that life in obedience to Jesus translates into verbal witness. That is, we see God's word here literally going far beyond the Thessalonian churches, Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Their verbal testimony was a local one, but the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus had made it a global witness, hadn't he? As Jesus' followers simply passed the good news along. The Holy Spirit, if you like, multiplied that witness, even as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes. I think it's good to remind ourselves here that this came about not through big preaching campaigns or professional evangelists and apologists, but as God used ordinary Christians just like us. In his book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*,

Michael Green describes the evangelism that happened, quote, in homes and wine shops, on walks and around market stalls. These people did it naturally, enthusiastically. Having found treasure, they meant to share it with others to the limit of their ability. I think what's important there is that within the gifts that God has given to us, within even considering our temperament and the way we just naturally raise the question of the things of God with friends, just this natural lifestyle and personal evangelism that happens. Not because our purpose in befriending others is to gain converts, but because we want to share that treasure that is ours and that we simply want to pass it on.

If you have a look at the end of our passage, verses 9 and 10, you'll see that Paul names three habits that are essential to the church's witness. We're still on the topic of what happens when God's word comes with power because these habits serve as means of grace. They form and they fashion us as God's people so that verbal testimony flows more or less spontaneously out of these habits. And the three habits that I want to highlight are welcome, worship, and waiting. Welcome, worship, and waiting. I'll just look at them very briefly because they're really only in verses 9 and 10. Verse 9 begins like this, for they themselves, that is the believers in Macedonia and Achaia, report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you. Here Paul, I think, is referring to the welcome they gave not only to him and to his traveling companions, Silas and Timothy, but to the message they brought when they were with them on Paul's second missionary journey. And if we stay with the rest of the letter, we'll see that the message and the messengers go together because of the bonds of fellowship in the gospel.

In chapter 2, for instance, Paul mentions how eager he has been to see them again. He just loved being with them. This is a tribute to their hospitality, but also to his desire to be with them and to see them grow in the faith. The habit of welcoming the word in our lives and in our homes and in our congregations is linked to a new way of worship. Paul reminds them in the second part of verse 9 that they, what did they do? Well, they turned from idols to serve the living God. I think we need to grasp how radical this change was because the point is that the believers in Thessalonica hadn't just stopped burning incense in pagan shrines and that sort of thing. If in the welcome they had given to the gospel, they turned away from that self-sufficiency that is natural to us, here in their rejection of idol worship they were saying no to self-worship ultimately because that's where idolatry leads.

This truth came through rather powerfully for me when I read the testimony of a man called Rabbi Maharaj, a former Hindu guru in training in his book, *Little Book, The Death of a Guru*. Since his tradition had taught him that it was proper and good to venerate and worship things, objects in creation, in the world, one day he, as he was contemplating his own image in the mirror, he asked himself, well, what's really keeping me from worshiping myself? And this produced such a feeling of horror in him that he was led eventually to seek to know the living God and to trust in Jesus as his Savior and Lord. You can read that in that book, *Death of a Guru*. I think I may have shared with

you a personal experience that's really in the same category because I was, I suppose, in the early stages of imagining that the real mediator between God and man was a more or less impersonal cosmic Christ.

[18 : 56] Sounded Christian because I was still talking about Christ. But this cosmic Christ that Jesus of Nazareth really only pointed to the cosmic Christ so that in effect Jesus could be a Savior, but not the Savior and Lord of history.

And when I came to realize that one day, that's where my thinking, when I came to realize that that's where my thinking was actually heading, I felt a shock that Rabbi Maharaj must have felt because I became aware that I wasn't really thinking in Bible categories of another worldview. So back to idols for a second. We should remember that the business of turning from idols is also a discipline in the Christian life. It's not just a one-off, but as Calvin said, we're a factory of idols, in fact.

In fact, we know how well we invent our own and how much we need God's grace daily to help us not to confuse things that are passing with things that are eternal.

From true worship, Paul turns to the third habit of waiting. So we have this welcome. We have a new worship, and then we have a waiting. In verse 10, he reminds the church in Thessalonica that they began to wait for God's Son from heaven.

[20 : 25] What we see here, I think, is the way God adds a new blessing to the new identity that he gives us in Jesus.

It's the blessing of a new orientation or direction. History now has purpose, and the flow of time is no longer meaningless.

That's because Jesus' promise to return for those who are waiting is a sure one. When we take these three habits together as a bundle, we can see how they form the basis of our witness in the world.

They account for the strong global witness that even that young church there in Thessalonica had. And the lesson for us is this. To welcome God's word is to receive a treasure that we have no business locking up in a safe, since it's meant to be shared.

While to turn to the living God and to wait for Jesus from heaven is in effect to say no to the gods of the age and to man-made kingdoms.

[21 : 38] And that decision, when we take it to heart, sooner or later manifests itself publicly as a testimony to what is real and lasting.

And the world, insofar as it remains in a state of unbelief, is going to be pushing back, to be sure. As Paul contemplates all these signs of God's power, his first instinct is to give thanks.

And that's why the whole context of this first passage is one of thanksgiving. And he says, we give thanks, in verse 3, to God always for you, all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith, and labor of love, and steadfastness of hope.

There's that triad of faith, hope, and love in our Lord Jesus Christ. What he acknowledges here is that true faith, by its very nature, is a living, dynamic faith.

Why? Well, because the same spirit who unites us to Christ also gives us the power to obey and to be confident that God's promise is sure.

[22 : 53] Now, having looked at some of the lessons in that second part of this chapter, at this point I have to change gears a little bit.

Because as we read on and come to the middle of the passage, we bump up against something that's fairly puzzling. Maybe it stood out to you too. And it has to do with the word chosen.

I know George spoke about the twin word, predestined, a few weeks ago. So before we consider how this passage might challenge us today, I think we need to take a little bit of a step back and do something maybe a little unusual in a sermon, but that's try to ask, what is Paul saying about this business of election?

Let's hear verses 4 and 5 again. For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you, not only in word, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.

Now, I'm sure you know there's an age-old debate among Christians about this matter, and I think it's safe to say it comes down to something like this. Does God's yes of election come logically after my yes of faith, or before it?

[24 : 21] Can I say that again? Does God's yes of election come logically after my yes of faith, or before it? Now, whether the answer is clear to you already, or it sounds like I'm launching into an exercise in hair-splitting, bear with me just a minute.

It's a difficult topic, and the difference matters. I'll try not to make the question more complicated than it is, but I'll also try not to oversimplify it as if we could just resolve it neatly once and for all. After all, there are godly men and women on both sides of this intramural debate among Christians. In one way of looking at the matter, God elects you and me on the basis of our faith response to the message of Jesus.

So Paul's message in 1 Thessalonians 1 would go something like this. When the Holy Spirit impressed upon you the truth of the message that we preached to you, you responded in faith with deep conviction.

Your yes to God then led to his yes, and he included you in his family. Got it? And the other way of looking at the matter, election is unconditional.

[25 : 43] So the meaning of what Paul says is this. When the Holy Spirit impressed upon you the truth of the message that we preached to you, he gave you such a deep sense of conviction that we have reason to believe that he has chosen you.

His yes made your yes possible. It freed you to respond in faith. So is there a huge difference here? Well, some say no, because if there were, then we would have sorted it out by now in the churches after all the centuries. But I think the difference is important when it comes to thinking about our assurance of salvation.

And with this, I can offer the main reason why I think the second way of looking at the issue is the right one, or at least the one that creates the fewest problems. And when I teach theology, I try, and I'm asked my opinion on thorny questions, I say, I think, in my view, this creates the fewest biblical problems.

And that's how I approach this. In the first approach, in which God's yes comes after mine, I'll be inclined to link election to my faith response.

[26 : 59] I'll tie them together. Election, my faith response. And I bundle them together. And this means that if I ever sense that my faith is weak, or even gone, which is going to be inevitable, I'll doubt that God has made me his own after all.

And when I doubt that, I easily start to imagine it's something I have to earn back. I proceed in the Christian life asking, have I done enough to please God and to enter into his kingdom?

But in the second way of looking at the matter, I link election to God. Now, how does that make a difference? Well, I think it makes all the difference because when I think about the assurance question, I let it rest with his decision, with his faithfulness, and working in me that conviction that his promise is sure, and that apart from his forgiveness, I'm lost.

And what I find in the Christian life is that God uses my moments of doubt and hesitation and wandering, as we sang, prone to wander. He uses these themselves to bring me back to him. What I hope is clear at this point is that while God's work in election certainly makes me receptive, it doesn't make me purely passive so that I just kick back.

[28 : 28] How do I know this? Well, I know it because after Jesus says to his disciples, already you're clean by the word I have spoken to you, he adds this. You remember?

Now abide in me. John 15, 3. As George explained a few weeks ago, I think, God's predestination of events does not undermine human freedom.

Rather, it establishes human freedom. So too in election, God's word frees us to trust and obey.

And while we're in John, consider the priority of the Father's yes over yours or mine when Jesus says, all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. John 6, 37. And Jesus restates that promise a little later in John 10. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

Verses 27 to 28 in John 10. Now, at this point, we might still want to ask, doesn't this second way of looking at the matter make God's decision kind of arbitrary?

[29 : 45] And if God can elect some, well, why doesn't he elect everyone? Well, the answer to the second question might be this. If Scripture is our guide, as it ought to be, we can say that God hasn't revealed why he elects some while passing by others.

Just as we can't really say why he doesn't right all the wrongs in an instant. Why he didn't make a way for Adam and Eve to go straight back into the garden.

Why some are born into the privileges of a Christian home and others aren't. Why he turned Northampton, Massachusetts upside down in 1737 and not say Quebec City.

Or for that matter, why some people groups are drawn into the scope of salvation history while others are left out. These things belong in the category that we mark the deep things of God. And I don't think it's a cop-out to keep that category there because there is so much that God has not made plain in his word. And in any case, it's pretty clear from all these examples that the fairness question is still there.

[30 : 55] It doesn't go away. God works powerfully here and not there whether you take the first view or the second. And so you're left grappling with why? Why does God work like this?

This way here but not there. Well, what we can say to answer the first question about this arbitrary business is that nothing that God does is arbitrary. We know this because Scripture reveals to us his attributes, his qualities, his qualities of faithfulness and justice so that his works are perfect and that he does no wrong as Deuteronomy 32 and verse 4 tells us.

What God has revealed clearly and beautifully is his purpose in election. It's so that his children can be assured of forgiveness.

It's so that his children can have joy even in their suffering. It's so that they can go out and be a light to the nations. There's nothing in them that made them electable. He just chose them and he said, here, I want you to have the assurance of my love.

I want you to have the assurance that I'm with you in your suffering. And it's precisely because our focus is on what God is doing through election to reach the nations that we have a good hope of everyone.

[32 : 18] We have a good hope of all. The Swiss reformer Heinrich Bollinger wrote in 1560, he said this, and although God knows who are his and here and there is mention made of the small number of elect, yet we must hope well of all and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate.

While the Bible is clear that not all will be saved in the end, the picture we have of the last judgment in Matthew 25 reminds us that there will be surprises on that day.

To bring this towards a conclusion, I don't even know how long I've gone, but I'll bring it to a conclusion. What might God be saying to you and me this morning? I can imagine someone, whether here or online or down the line or downstream or whatever the right term is, I can imagine someone here saying, wow, I'd love to have that assurance you're talking about, but I'm not really sure that God's word has ever come to me as Paul wrote with full conviction.

There's so much that really is unclear to me. Well, what I want to say to you is that we need to be clear that by full conviction, Paul isn't talking about having everything figured out.

You can see I haven't got everything figured out. he's talking about that heart confidence that God is trustworthy. That heart confidence that God is trustworthy.

[33 : 52] That he promises, that, I beg your pardon, that the promises set forth in the gospel are sure. That is, that as I put my hope in the very putting of hope in that promise, I can be sure.

I experience the assurance that his death on the cross covered my sins, all my sins, and that Jesus' words now apply to me.

My sheep hear my voice and I know them. That's what it means fundamentally for God's word to come with power. Even when we don't see mass conversions, our response is simply to come to him just as I am without one plea, but that his blood was shed for me.

And in doing that, find in him the rest we desperately need. And what a joy it is simply to know that in Jesus, the living God knows us.

There's this dynamic aspect of election. Election is of the Father, but through the Son, through the proclaimed word, challenging us, confronting us, speaking to our hearts.

[35 : 05] That's what I would want to emphasize here in Paul's message. Maybe someone else is thinking something a little different. Maybe someone's saying, I have trusted in God's promise, but if I'm honest, I'm not sure that my life could exactly be described as one of waiting for Jesus to return.

And I think God's word for you, as we've heard from Paul's letter, would be something like this.

You've heard how the welcome we give to God's word, how turning from idols, and how waiting for God's Son from heaven are all bound up together.

In other words, to have one is to have the others by the work of the same Spirit who brought us to Jesus in the first place. So take hold of his word.

Let his word do its work in you, and you will find yourself longing for the new creation, even as creation itself is in its own way, as Paul explains in Romans 8.

Longing for what? Well, for the children of God to be revealed. Dig into Scripture and you'll find yourself longing. I've experienced that, and I'm not the greatest prayer or the greatest Bible reader, but by God's grace, as we get into his word and his word gets into us, we find ourselves longing for his promise.

[36 : 31] Someone else might here be thinking, wow, it's wonderful to think that mission belongs to God, that's encouraging, and that the business of changing hearts is his work.

So does that mean that evangelism is not really such an urgent task after all? He's doing the work. Maybe we can remain somewhat passive. And I have to admit that it's sort of tempting to think that way.

And hence, the blessing of preparing this sermon. Because I'm forced to ask again, what exactly is urgent about the task of evangelism?

So, I'll end with just two points. Well, first, I think the task of evangelism is urgent because as long as people don't turn to the living God, they remain in idolatry, without hope and without God in the world, as Paul says in Ephesians 2.12.

We can ask ourselves, where were we before the gospel came to us and we were able to take hold of it? What was our state? And in getting the good news of Jesus to sinners from every tribe, tongue, and nation, God has seen fit to use human witnesses.

[37 : 47] He could reach them directly if that's what He so chose to do, but He has chosen us as His witnesses. As Paul says in Romans 10.14, how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?

And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? The second reason that the task of evangelism is urgent, I think perhaps the more profound reason, even though the depth of wandering and sin is profound, but I think the more profound theological reason why the task is urgent is because God's command and call carries its own urgency.

It's in the very nature of God's call. When the living God speaks, His word accomplishes its purposes. That means that when He declares through Isaiah, turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other, we're not simply in a position to say, well let me consider that a bit and I'll get back to you.

See what I'm saying? God's call has its own urgency. And I learned a bit of that reading Bonhoeffer's call to discipleship.

Even back there with my students at McGill, I'm privileged to read these books with people who believe all sorts of things and yet McGill gave me the privilege of reading these books with them and we read *The Cost of Discipleship* or at least part of it in that class.

[39 : 24] And that point is so strong in that book that God's call has its own urgency as when Jesus calls and we simply get up and leave our nets and follow Him.

So, may God strengthen us to do that this morning without delay according to our need. thanks be to God.