

09/05/2010 Morning Service Alex Cowie

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[0 : 00] the first letter to the Thessalonians and continue our study. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and we may just read from verse 5 through to verse 10.

For our gospel did not come to you in word only but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance. As you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

And you became followers or imitators of us and of the Lord having received the word in much affliction with joy in the Holy Spirit.

So that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth. Not only in Macedonia and Achaia but also in every place.

Your faith toward God has gone out so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

[1 : 36] We will focus then today on 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 9 and the first part of verse 10. And we're thinking about this in terms of repentance and to life.

He says how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven.

That will be basically the text we will consider. And we want to think about this in terms of repentance and to life as the best U-turn to make.

Well it's clear at least I hope it's clear to us from our study thus far that the saying is true a good story is worth telling and retelling.

And the conversion of many people in the city of Thessalonica back there when Paul first went to it and his fellow missionaries that that conversion of these Thessalonians was both a good story and it was a true story and it was being told all over the region not only in Macedonia and Achaia verse 8 but also in every place the message about the wonderful transformation of these folks had spread abroad and we looked at that last time.

[3 : 14] And the result of it was that Paul heard again and again from various sources how this news had spread around everywhere and we noticed last time some of the reasons why the message about the Thessalonians turning to Christ had been spread abroad.

We looked at the strategic place of Thessalonica on the Ignatian highway the Roman highway through to the east and through the north and we noticed too that it was a strategic seaport where a lot of cargo ships came in.

And from our studies thus far then we've been emphasizing that Paul traced the great change in these folks not to himself simply but to the fact that God's word had come to them in the power of the Holy Spirit and their lives were changed and that not even persecution could sniff them out or suppress them.

You became imitators verse 6 of the Lord having received the word in much affliction with joy in the Holy Spirit. They weren't going to be put down by the opposition and the result then was that everyone could see that this was real a real U-turn for these folks.

You'll know as well as I do I can't say she was a favourite of mine sorry if she was a favourite of yours but Baroness Thatcher when she was the Prime Minister was famously reported to and said the lady's not for turning well the Thessalonians were for turning they turned from idols to God to God from idols they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and so we want to look at this the nature of this repentance and learn something from it today.

[5 : 23] The first thing obviously is the Thessalonians turned to God from idols that's the obvious starting point you turned to God from idols and obviously Paul is thinking here about the way they were living before they heard the good news they were idolaters and it's helpful for us to remember you see that the influence of the Greek culture was all over the Roman Empire it was everywhere it penetrated everywhere you only need to go to the land of Israel even today you can go to many places one thinks of Caesarea out on the coast not Caesarea Philippi but Caesarea out on the coast you can go there in fact if you come to the manse we'll show you a photo of the lady of the manse standing at Caesarea by the shore and just there beside that was a huge hippodrome that Herod had built it was one of his summer residences it was probably the chief summer residence there's an amphitheater there's all sorts of things there that had been covered by the sand and it's all been cleared and you can go and see it you can go to many places in the land of Israel and other places too of course and you'll see the evidence of the influence what we call the hellenizing influence the Greek culture into the into the the thinking of the people and how they were modified there was this oneness that the

Romans imparted to the people to make them as united as they could be and so the the Greek culture and the Greek religions tended to to be in evidence all over the place another one that comes to mind is since we're talking about Caesarea Caesarea Philippi is a way up to the to the northeast of the land and it was in Caesarea Philippi where Jesus asked the disciples who do men say that I am and then who do you say that I am and it was said there now in Caesarea Philippi and it can be seen there there was a temple to Pan Pan of course is where we get the word Pantheism all God is everything everywhere part of the creation

God is and so on and of course there was a temple to Pan and that can still be said that it is seen there and the remnants of it is they are built into the rock actually and it's interesting you see that Jesus said to the disciples when he heard the response you are the Christ the Messiah the son of the living God Jesus went on to say and it is upon this rock upon this rock I will build my church this testimony that he is the divine son of God and he would be within sight of the temple of Pan built into the rock so what I'm saying and why I'm mentioning these things is to as it were help you to picture the scene the people couldn't turn but that they were confronted by these shrines these idols were everywhere not only was there emperor worship but there were the many gods of

Greek mythology and they were everywhere worshipped by the majority you remember when Paul went to Athens we're told he was grieved in his spirit because there was a veritable forest of altars and icons to the gods and he said to them I perceive that in everything you are very religious they were they were steeped in the in the Greek mythology in the culture that they were part of and of course we know that in from the background of all this that much of the temple worship was was pretty gross it was it was impure in the extreme there was temple prostitution and all that part of the worship it was pretty gruesome stuff the religious system we might say was rotten through and through and apart from the few that had connected themselves with synagogue worship because it was purer and more spiritual the rest of the people were steeped in idolatry and so the point is here

Paul says you turned to God from idols what relevance is this today well it is much relevance there are there are places in Glasgow city where you can find temples to the gods to the false gods you can find them in other places in Scotland I remember years ago in happier days I was very friendly with John McKenzie the elder now infamous as FCC but he lives in Culkin and looks over a beautiful bay there high up and across the water from it there's a there's a shrine there's a Buddhist shrine been there for decades idolatry is everywhere open idolatry is everywhere temples to false gods abound in 21st century

[12 : 01] Britain and far beyond many worship the gods of this world then and they do it not ignorantly as in the past they do it willingly and willfully because they are enlightened in the knowledge of Jesus Christ the Thessalonians then to return to them were idolaters and idolatry whether it was in in in first century Thessalonica or 21st century Britain idolatry is the putting someone or something in the place that belongs to God giving that person or interest or activity the place in our heart that belongs to the living and true God that's the relevance of it to you and to me today there's many a story could be told about a husband or a wife that has influenced the other away from the things of God we might even know of family members who are like that well I'll come to church with you if my brother will come if my wife will come or sister will come or husband will come whatever and they use the other person as an excuse for not giving to the

Lord the place that is due to him idolatry has many facets not just the more crass outward but the inward and it's therefore important to learn something from these folks they turned they turned from their idols to God and so may the Lord open our understanding all the more to see the exceeding sinfulness of idolizing anything or person we need we need to turn to him we need to address the problem wherever it is in our heart and say this is an idol it needs to be put out I need to shift the focus I need to give to the Lord what belongs to him this is exceeding sinful to cling to this or that in my heart that's actually keeping me back from turning to the living

God and that's what is really in the place of emphasis you turned to God from idols I've inverted it simply because in a sense we need to see the reality of the sin of idolatry before we'll have any desire to look to the Lord and stories could be told there you see of people who moved beyond love and concern for their family to actual idolatry they put them in the place that belonged to the Lord idolatry is a huge subject and I'm just highlighting one or two pointers that will help us see the sinfulness of sin and the need of turning from idols whatever that idol be to God and the wonderful thing here is as

Paul records is the genuineness of this U-turn they made was spoken about everywhere people were touched by it they were affected by it but I say again ever before we turn God word God's spirit shows us the sin that bars us from fellowship with idolatry whether it is idolizing in the grosser forms that we've referred to in Thessalonica or the secret and subtle intellectual forms of it in our own hearts it's no exaggeration to say that the secular view of life the worldview is idolatry the people who take it idolize their view it is God to them they wouldn't call it that but it is at the very core of their being and they they bow their intellect to that it's the same with atheism and we've had enough reference to some of the the more intellectual atheists around and about they bow they bow at the altar of atheism they're kidding themselves on if they think they haven't a God they've made a

God of their own philosophy no no what we need to grasp is that even idolizing our opinions in a way that keeps us back from turning Godward is a dreadful thing it happens in the church too it happens when people idolize or they're settled in their minds that there is a there is another option it's not just Christ and only Christ it can be Christ plus come on surely and in their mind they refuse to move from that plus Christ plus because it pleases the mind it pleases the human heart it's it's not on you see and we need to call that view of things an idolatrous view of things if it sits in our minds and keeps us back from turning

[18 : 38] Godward Christward it is an idolatrous point of view we're holding that is a serious thing it is barring us from a right relationship with God it's a damning thing it's idolatry in fact scripture says that that view of things is not only idolatry it is it is loving and living and making a lie let us ponder then whether this great you turn is indeed our experience you turned to God from idols whatever that idol be you turned to God from idols and from that it follows secondly then the Thessalonians turned to God to serve him you turn to

God from idols to serve the living and true God see the interesting reference he could have just said you turn to God from idols to serve him but he doesn't he says more because more is needed to serve the living and the true God there is a distinguishing doctrine here the God they've turned to is real he is living and true he's the genuine thing so to speak and what confronts us here is that there is a defining of God people of course and we're probably all familiar with this people will talk about a kind of a belief in God oh well I believe we hear it on the street there well yes you know I believe that there's some superior power that there's something out there you know I believe in the you know in the great spirit in the sky idea that appeals to me you hear folks saying that and this is perhaps the one that comes out most they'll say to you oh well we all believe in the same

God anyway how many times we've heard it again and again we've heard it again and again we all believe in the same God anyway and I said well tell me about the God you believe in he's got to be defined and he's got to be defined by the way he defines himself doctrine is that important it distinguishes him it defines him you know the picture that is looked at through the mist and you see a form there but you can't really define the form it's too indistinct people are like that about God they don't want definition high definition is the end thing sky I'm fed up with hearing them on the news high definition high definition gives clarity and people don't like clarity naturally they like to keep it fuzzy we all worship the same God anyway kind of thing like a nebulous cloud no God has defined himself in the

Bible in his word of truth that's what it's all about and of course in the word enfleshed in his son and this is an important point you see the coming of the son of God in human flesh as man marked the beginning of an end of all such wooliness and vagueness and indistinctness about God that prevailed in the nations that's why they had all these forests of God Paul talks about it in the book of Acts doesn't he in Acts 14 and again in Acts 17 the times of this ignorance God now passes over and he commends that all men everywhere should repent they should you turn and believe the good news in Jesus because the good news in Jesus is about the living and true

God and getting to know him and knowing that you know him you turn he says to God from idols that was the first thing but to serve the living and true God the true light now shines to quote him it shines and it is therefore willful ignorance to refuse that light and to turn to that light it is willful ignorance when people hear about Jesus Christ and they simply say well I follow so and so and I follow so and so I've read a bit of the Bible but no no not for me willful ignorance it's not wanting it's like the Jewish lady I remember from years ago she was dying and she had made me most welcome into her home and her daughter had made actually a profession of faith although it was a wee bit into the charismatic stuff nonetheless she made a profession but her mother who had welcomed me into her home many a time as she was clearly dying and I said to her you know let me read to you from the

[24 : 53] Bible no she didn't want that at all I had asked her did the rabbi ever read with her and she said no so I said well let me read I said I'll read from your own Bible I'll read from the Hebrew Bible I said from the Old Testament let me read to you from the Psalms I said they're all about true experience of God's people in relation to God and you'll learn something there no she didn't want it and this is what she said I said why will you not let me read from your own Bible and the book of Psalms wonderful in its reference to living relationship with God this is what she said to me no no I don't want you to read it what I don't know will not hurt me what I don't know will not hurt me that's dreadfully sad the gospel is light the good news as it's there prophetically in the

Psalms is light for us and we shine the light of Jesus coming into the pages of the Old Testament to illuminate them all the more for ourselves and the glory and the wonder of what Paul saw in Thessalonica is this that they not only turn to God from idols but to serve him the living and true God and he defines himself as the God of Abraham Isaac Jacob the God of Moses and all the prophets the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ of whom as we said in prayer a moment ago he said himself no one comes to the Father except through me we come to know God through him and we come to serve God through him and although idolatry may be seen on the face of it to be a kind of service it's not service at all it's self indulgence the core of idolatry is self indulgence self gratification it pleases the old men used to say it pleases the flesh it means it pleases human nature and all forms of idolatry whether it is a primitive worshipping the sun the moon the stars the trees and all that the

Baalism as we're thinking in the life of Elijah in the evenings it all has this in common self indulgence self gratification you can't beat the words of Sinatra's song I did it my way that sums up that sums up idolatry in all its forms I did it my way or I'll do it my way and I'm afraid that there's much going on in the Christian church the world over that is pretty much part of that package doing it their own way with little regard to what God himself wants as if as if he's not up to speed on how he is to be worshipped you see these Thessalonians were to use the word that here they were bond servants the word to serve is from *doulos* a bond slave they were bond slaves of

God once they had been slaves to idolatry to sin but now they're slaves to God the living God the true God and it's important that we think about this for ourselves and whether it is true of us that we have really turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and lastly and very briefly the Thessalonians turned to wait for Christ's return and to wait verse 10a and to wait for his son from heaven and we've got to link this in to finish with because you see we're going to consider this just briefly because it comes up later on in the epistle in the letter but it's important in connection with service with serving the living

God with living for the living God because the living they did or worked out was living in the light of the Lord's return and you see it ought to mark us out as those who live day by day in the light of the Lord's return one of the neglected areas of thinking in the church these days is living in the light of the Lord's return living serving him in the light of his return we've got to have an eye on his coming again we live as those who are told by Jesus to be watching and praying because we know not the day or the hour when the Lord will return we're to be busy serving him wholeheartedly looking for and hastening towards his coming again and although

[30 : 43] I can't say that I share Andrew Bonner's premillennialist views I share the sentiment in his words every morning he got up early to seek the Lord and he went out and he looked out and he said perhaps today and I like that emphasis that's that's the emphasis the Savior tells me to have perhaps today living waiting for expecting his return serving him in that light not not trying to philosophize it and say oh it's ages away his return is ages away but living in the light of a coming Savior well then our time has gone let's just remind ourselves of where we've come from the importance of knowing in our hearts that we've turned to the living and true

God from idols and that we are serving him in our lives wholeheartedly and cheerfully and that we're serving him until he comes whether he takes us away in death or whether he returns to bring us to himself he is coming again the one who died for his people and rose again for them is coming again to receive his own to himself and what a day a glorious day that will be for those who are living and serving him and longing for his return let us then ponder these things and seek the grace we need to be devoted wholehearted worshipping serving people until he takes us to be with himself or when he comes amen