

Radical Transformation

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage that we read, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians in chapter 1. And we may read again at verse 8.

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you. But how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for a son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Right at the beginning of this letter, Paul tells how he gave thanks to God for what took place in the experience of these peoples.

We give thanks, he says, to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.

And now he places in print what before he had spoken in words as he prayed for them to God.

And in doing so, he tells us of the effect of the word among them. They welcomed the truth. They were no longer indifferent to the message of the gospel as previously had been the case.

[1 : 42] There was a thirst for the scriptures amongst these people. What had caused this thirst?

But that the word or the gospel had come and poured into this area. And the result of that was that they became imitators, as he says, of us and of the Lord.

For you received the word, he says, in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. And note the two things that he couples together there.

Much affliction and joy of the Holy Spirit. And it's almost as if these two things are poles apart.

Much affliction and joy. And yet the apostle associates these two elements with those who are believers in Thessalonica.

[2 : 46] Their affliction arises probably from the same source that drove Paul out of Thessalonica when he conducted his short ministry there over three Sabbaths.

He experienced vehement Jewish opposition. And you find that narrated for us in Acts chapter 17. And although this opposition was intense and constant, it was insufficient to erase their newfound joy.

That founded source in the Holy Spirit. And when you look at the Bible, the way the Bible speaks of Christian joy, there's nothing average about it.

It is always spoken of in superlatives. And it ought to fill you with amazement that that is so.

The joy that characterizes those who are united to Christ through faith in his name is spoken of in superlatives in the Bible.

[4 : 01] And perhaps that description is brought to its ultimate height in the description that Peter gives in his first letter, where he speaks of believers rejoicing with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

Joy is both a sovereign act of the Holy Spirit, but it is also commanded as human responsibility. How does it happen?

How does this joy come into our lives? Well, the combination of the scriptures being assimilated along with the Holy Spirit produces, I believe, both joy in the believer's life.

And one commentator I read recently compared it, and I like the kind of illustration he used, compared it to starting a car. God's spirit, he compared it to the engine.

Our will, the ignition key. God's word acts as fuel. Now, as every person who is mechanically minded, and I have to confess I'm not, having an engine without fuel, you can turn the ignition key repeatedly, but the engine won't fire.

[5 : 41] Without the word, the power of the Holy Spirit goes unfueled. You can also have the finest engine and the fuel, but until the ignition is engaged, there will be no combustion.

You need involvement of the human will. But with a top-rate engine, with high-octane fuel, and the ignition engaged, you have all the power required to move.

So it is. The Holy Spirit, rich portions of the Bible, your will, as it were, embracing God's will, then you have the spiritual energy required to be in possession of this joy. And it seems to me that all these three elements need to synchronize for the Holy Spirit to produce joy as our constant companion.

Well, these people, whom the apostle associates, much affliction and joy as characteristic of their lives, he tells that they became examples to all the believers in Macedonia and in Nehaya.

[7 : 10] And Paul tells them and us what it means to be an example to all that believe. Now, why does Paul say that they became an example?

What was it that made them and their actions so commendable in the eyes and estimation of the apostle? Well, there are three things, I believe, that are set before us as to why Paul speaks in this way about the believers at Thessalonica.

And the first thing I'd like to highlight from our text is this. They are a gospel-spreading people. The word of the Lord, says Paul, sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Nehaya, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything.

This was a fact. The word of the Lord sounded forth from them in Macedonia and Nehaya.

Secondly, how was this demonstrated?

And Paul answers, you turn to God from idols to serve the living and the true God. And thirdly, the result of this radical change, they became eternity-focused to wait for a son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

[8 : 41] In other words, they were living in the light of the return of Christ. Well, firstly, they are a gospel-spreading people. The word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Nehaya and so on.

The evangelistic zeal of these newly converted people appears to have touched on large areas. before Timothy had even returned with a report on how the church in Thessalonica was progressing, it appears that this news had spread.

It was known in northern and southern Greece, Macedonia and Nehaya. It wasn't just confined to these areas, but other places too. And Paul says the word had sounded forth.

In other words, they hadn't kept this to themselves. Where the gospel is received in power, there is an inner compulsion to share the good news, isn't there?

[9 : 49] Put it to your own life. When the Lord touched your heart and when he came into your life, was there not an inner compulsion on your part to share it with someone else?

Were you like Andrew? Did you go and find your brother? Did you go and find a member of your family? Did you tell them we have found the Messiah?

Did you share the good news with them? I believe that is a feature of those when the Lord comes into their life that there is this inner compulsion to share it with others.

I remember back in my student days in the late 60s and when the Lord touched my heart how I wrote letters to my brothers to tell them of this experience.

It was so new. It was so overwhelming. And I felt that I must inevitably share it first of all with those who were closest to me and tell them of what the Lord had done.

[11 : 04] And I think there is this inner compulsion I believe in the lives of those who are touched by the power of the Spirit. And one would hope that that zeal and fervency would not just be a characteristic of your life when you are newly converted but that it would be a characteristic of your life right through to the end of your days to have this inner compulsion to share the good news in Christ Jesus.

And here the phrase that is used is very interesting. The phrase that is translated here for sounding forth is literally a trumpet blast.

A clear ringing sound that rises above every other noise. A loud clear penetrating rousing melodious note.

That is what he likens the sounding forth of the word of the Lord to. It was the word of the Lord they received and spread. It was the word that empowered their witness.

And it is important to note the emphasis in the context on the word of the Lord. And yet the emphasis here if I understand it properly is not so much on systematic evangelistic verbal communication of the gospel.

[12 : 38] Certainly every believer has a duty to be engaged in that. Remember at the time of the stoning of Stephen the increased persecution of the church under Saul of Tarsus.

And we are told that rather than have the effect of silencing the witness of the church it led to the spread of the truth. Isn't it strange? In the providence of God the ways that are used to promote the spread of truth rather than have the opposite effect when those who are bright witnesses are removed from the scene of time you might expect that that would have the effect of silencing and suppressing the spread of the gospel it had the opposite effect.

When Stephen was removed as a bright witness what happened? Those who were scattered because of persecution went about preaching the word. Philip went down to Samaria proclaimed to them the Christ.

Paul writing to the Philippians counsels them to shine as lights in the world holding fast to the word of life. So evangelistic zeal is required in communicating the message and that requires words. You cannot do it without words. The message ought to be biblical and Christ centered focusing on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[14:04] But here here and I emphasize that in contrast the emphasis falls more on the silent but powerful evidence of transformed lives.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Antiochia but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything.

News of their faith in God has gone everywhere so that when it sounded out a phrase that literally means a trumpet been blown the loudest note and this is the paradox the loudest note is one that is made known by the silent eloquence of their transformed lives and that I believe is testimony to the power of the gospel which controlled their lives and enabled them to lead such transformed lives.

Their transformed lives gives a note of credence and authenticity and persuasiveness to the message that is being proclaimed.

This place was a hub of commercial activity and the news was did you hear did you hear that those people in Thessalonica who were once pagan idolaters did you hear how they are now living so you have the silent impressive eloquence of transformed lives.

[15:44] It's not often what we say that makes the greatest impression on the minds of others but how we live.

Remember the old adage actions speak louder than words. How we live speaks far more eloquently than millions of words that we might speak.

By our actions we can destroy the words but if our actions live up to the words that we profess then our actions monitored as they will be and you can be sure they will be monitored.

They will be monitored carefully they will be monitored with a microscope and your life will be put under the microscope of the world and your actions will speak far more eloquently than your words. And you see that is what happened here. So far as the context goes I don't know we're not told there might not have been any of them who spoke for Jesus Christ.

[17:01] They might not have felt that they had the ability to go out and to preach. We don't know how far there were a congregation of silent witnesses but this we know that what Paul meant when he said the whole world is ringing with the voice of the word of God sounded from you not because they were going up and down shouting about their Christianity but their quiet Christ-like living was eloquent testimony to the power of the message of the gospel.

You see just as it is when you go out on a winter's evening a frosty night and you can see the stars glittering in the canopy of heaven.

They're not speaking. There's no voice or language used as the Bible says no speech nor other words whose voice is not heard and yet when you stand beneath that myriad of stars they are speaking.

Their voice goes out through all the earth their words to the end of the world. They shine. They declare the glory of God. They proclaim his hand work.

The power of God and creation. And so you can speak of him without speaking. And although you have no gift of speech the night can be filled and your lives can be eloquent testimony to the Christ within you.

[18:43] Now notice what he says about these people whose lives are so transformed. They have faith. They have faith he says in God.

Not just any God. He identifies the God in whom their faith is placed as the living and the true God. Now that's important.

Many people have a faith in God but their God is not the living and the true God. He's not the God revealed in the Bible. He's not the God of truth and the God of light.

He is just an aberration of God. A distortion of God but not the living and the true God.

The God whose son lived, died and was raised from the dead and is returning to judge the world.

That is the God in whom their faith is placed. It's directed, their faith is directed to an objective revelation.

[19 : 51] Just, it's not just saying that they have faith but faith in the God as revealed in the Bible. Faith in the Christ who is revealed in the word of God.

And attention is not so much on faith as if it was some kind of magical ingredient. Faith is the bond that unites a believer to the living God.

faith is the hand which takes hold of the great provisions that he provides in his grace. And there is a certain and peculiar sense in which believers have a hand-to-mouth existence.

They bring through faith that feeding into their own souls. And so you see that is what he is setting before us here.

Faith directed to an objective revelation rooted and embodied in the Bible. And the lesson for us here with regard to evangelizing, when Paul went into the synagogue in Thessalonica, you remember how the book of Acts tells us he reasoned with them from the scriptures explaining and proving it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, to rise from the dead and say, this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ, is the anointed messenger of God.

[21 : 16] He showed to them who Christ is. In this context, we are reminded who God is, the living and the true God. We are reminded what Christ has done in his person and work.

It is the duty of the church to proclaim these facts like Paul did, proclaim the facts about God revealed in his word. and you remember that is how people come to call on the name of the Lord.

And the promise, as Paul reminds us in writing to the Romans, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How will they call, says Paul, on him in whom they have not believed?

How can they call on an unknown Lord they have not heard of? How are they to believe in him on whom they have never heard? How are they to hear without someone preaching? In other words, they must know what the Bible teaches about God and Christ.

Must be communicated. And so they are a gospel spreading church. How was this demonstrated? That's my second point.

[22 : 30] And what Paul tells us here, you turn to God from idols to serve the living and the true God. God, some commentators would suggest that this verse presents us with the fullest account or the fullest summary of Christian conversion in the New Testament.

The New Testament has all sorts of ways by which it summarizes what conversion is. Talks about going from death to life.

You were dead in your trespasses and sins but God made you alive together in Christ. You get the same kind of language when Jesus is talking to Nicodemus in chapter 3, John chapter 3.

He must be born again. Images from darkness to light, from death to life, from being dead to being born anew, or from above or born again. There you have all these summaries and pictures of what conversion involves set before us in the Bible.

Well here is one. You turned from idols to serve the living and true God. And it seems to me that's a marvelous description of conversion.

[23 : 59] And can we not say that this shows us the close link between faith and repentance. Faith and repentance are inseparably joined together.

Remember how the reformers answered the question what is repentance unto life? And the response they formulated was this, repentance unto life is a saving grace whereby a sinner out of a sense of his sin, apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ doth with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

Paul has been speaking of their faith being spread abroad and he describes their faith as one that involves turning to God from idols and to wait for his son from heaven.

There is an inseparable connection between saving faith and true repentance. repentance, a turning to God. Repentance is not just a turning from, but it's a turning to.

You must remember that very often we think of repentance in a negative way, as if we were turning from something, but it always involves, that's only part of it, it involves turning to.

[25 : 21] That is the positive aspect of repentance, you're turning from in order to turn to. true. And so here you find this seems to me this inseparable connection set before us.

And you have to ask yourself the question as I ask myself today, have we the faith which is a gift from God? Then if we do, those things that Paul speaks here of the Thessalonians must be true of us.

there must have been a turning to the living God and a turning away from false gods and idols. You remember when Paul went into a pagan environment, he didn't go with a strategy that he mustn't upset the existing structures.

You remember how, when he went into pagan situations, what did he do? He taught them that what they were believing was wrong.

And he said, you should turn from these vain things. And so he expresses it. These mere puffs of wind, these mirages, turn from these vanities to a living God, the creator of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them.

[26 : 49] And so Paul laid huge emphasis on turning their back on all that had governed and motivated their lives, but was just a fallacy in place of the living and the true God.

So his description of believers at Thessalonica involves a radical break with their former way of life. Is that true of you and me?

you might tell me, well in our culture minister, we don't worship idols. Oh, do we not?

Do we not? Well, we may not have shrines to Athena and Aphrodite, but we still have our shrines. You see, an idol is anything that we trust and serve in place of God. You don't need to frame or shape your idol from wood or stone.

[27 : 58] You can just concoct a God out of our vivid imagination and worship that God. That's idolatry. Idol worship is not restricted to people who are pagan, polytheists, people who believe in many gods.

I think all of us, I'll be surprised anyway, all of us struggle with idolatry. It's a universal and perennial sin.

It's a foundational and fundamental sin that all of us fight against. And rather than make a list of idols, and you might say, well he didn't mention this or that, so I'm okay, I don't have an idol.

I'm only going to ask you a couple of questions just to see. And the first question I want to ask is this, how do you think about when you're not thinking about anything else?

What I mean by that is this, you know in those moments when you are frustrated and disappointed something? And you seek escape in your thoughts.

[29 : 15] And very often what you are thinking about is designed to give you relief or escape from your frustrations and your disappointment.

It gives you a certain amount of pleasure and satisfaction, security. What do you think about in those moments?

Might be right before you fall asleep at night. And you're trying to escape from the problems of the day.

And in your mind you're dreaming, you're wishing about someone, about some desire. What do you think about, what are the things in those, quiet moments when you're away from the stress and immediate demands of day-to-day living?

What is it that you think about that gives you hope and delight? When you begin to identify those things, you're coming close to identifying your idol.

[30 : 29] Here's a second question. How do you spend your time, your resources and your energy? When you look at these three things and you ask that question, you're going to see the things that you really care about.

So if you'll ask that question, you'll probably be able to identify some of your idols. What do I spend my time on? What do I spend my money on? What do I spend my energy on? Three things. And then the third, ask yourself this question. What disappoints you? What are your disappointments?

What crushes you with disappointment? And if you answer that question honestly, you're going to find an idol.

Perhaps something that you think that you need to have or something that you desperately want to have that you don't have and you're disappointed by it. Maybe a situation you have in your life that you don't want.

[31 : 38] Maybe a situation that you do not have in your life that you do want and you're crushingly disappointed by it. It may have to do with your family life. It may have to do with your work.

It may have to do with your children or your parents but you're disappointed by it and you'll think about it for a while. You'll be well able to identify your idols. But every converted believer, says Paul, turned from their idols to serve the living and the true God.

Does that mean that your battle with idolatry has ended? Oh no it doesn't. I wish it did. But it should mean this, that people can tell you that they are worshippers of God rather than worshippers of anything else.

You see they have turned from idols to serve. And the word that is used there to serve is literally to be a slave to God so that you are under the power and the dominion of God in your life.

Just as a slave is under the power and dominion of whatever master they serve. The God of Scripture is the sovereign God.

[33 : 13] and here Paul speaks in turning to the living and the true God. He is the God who visits in wrath on those who reject his rule and who defy him.

Now is this the God whom you and I serve? Or is he the God that Israel tried to create in the days of Aaron when they gathered all the jewelry of the people of Israel, placed them in a pot and melted it down and made it into a golden calf before whom they bowed?

Who is your God today? The God of your thoughts and the thoughts of others? Or is it the God who emerges out of the Bible the God of truth, the living and the true God?

Because if your faith is genuine, there is a turning from idols unto God. You see, rejection of idols is not only a necessity of conversion, but a part of the deliverance that Christ effects in salvation.

There is a new focus, a new direction in the lives of those who are worshipping the living and the true God. There are new standards, there are new ambitions. Your life is now lived in a face-to-face relationship with the living and the true God.

[34 : 57] They turned with a disposition to receive the benefits of salvation, but to submit to the implications of the rule, the authoritative rule of God.

They didn't turn away to escape wrath or to live as they pleased, but they turned away to acknowledge the lordship and the headship of Christ.

Thanks be to God, says Paul, another occasion, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

So, they were a gospel-spreading people. This was demonstrated by the radical transformation in their lives. And the result, finally, of this radical change, they became eternity-focused.

They were living life in the light of the return of Jesus Christ. Listen to the language that is used. They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

[36 : 20] They were living in the light of the return of Christ. They were waiting expectantly for the return of the Lord.

comfort. And you remember, that was the very message of comfort that Christ gave to his traumatized, deeply agitated disciples in the upper room, that he would come again.

And the expectation of the Thessalonians and of every believer down through the generations are to be fixed on one who comes not only to take you to heaven, but to take you to himself in glory.

And that doesn't mean that you live with a far away distant look in your eye, waiting for the clouds to part. What it means is that your life has changed because of your confident expectation that Jesus is going to come again.

The whole sphere of influence is altered. They were performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. Remember what it says in the Bible that when Jesus was going to come, it's very interesting, in the book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 6, the kings of the earth, the great ones, the generals, the rich and the powerful, everyone and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves among the rocks of the mountains, calling on the mountains to rock, follow us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, from the wrath of the Lamb.

[38 : 04] For the great day of the wrath has come, and who can stand? And listen to this phrase now in Thessalonians, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

When Jesus comes, what is the world going to face? It's going to face the wrath of the Lamb. It's the answer of the Bible. But these Thessalonians are confident that they will not face the wrath of

the Lamb.

Why? Because Jesus has delivered them from the wrath of the Lamb. How has Jesus delivered them from the wrath of the Lamb? By bearing that wrath for them. And so, though they look for a day when God is going to come and set everything right and punish every sin and bring about a just judgment of all wickedness, yet they are not going to face that wrath because Jesus died for them. And they long for that Jesus to return because they know that he will deliver them in that day. And they live their lives in the light of that focus and that hope and expectation that has filled their hearts.

[39 : 21] change their ambitions, change their desires, change their behavior pattern, change their form of worship. Is that true of you and me?

You see, one of the great ways in which we bear witness to the watching world is that our gospel is true. It's in the way that the gospel transforms our lives, sets us free from idolatry to serve the living and the true God.

Does your lifestyle and mine give us the reputation of people whose treasure most surely is in the world to come so that our thoughts and our passions and our longings are directed to the Christ who dwells there now?

Are our talents being used in the service of Christ? Not how many talents we have, but are they being used for a service? So that at the end of the day we will hear these words, well done, good and faithful servant.

You see, good and faithful. faithful. Well, as Paul encourages the Thessalonians and as he thanks God for them, we're learning something that ought to be our aspiration.

[40 : 59] Do we want every one of us today to be freed from idolatry to serve the living and true God? Do we want people around us, in our homes, our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues, at work to know that the gospel has transformed our lives so that they are saying something is going on in the life of that person or this person or in the community of point.

God is doing something there. Is he at work in your heart today? They were a gospel spreading people.

Their transformation was shown in the change in their lives and the expectation that characterized them as they waited for the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Oh, perhaps you think that could be a long time away. Maybe it is. I don't know. Nobody knows that, but what we do know is that he's coming.

We have to stand before them. Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.