

What is Reality?

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Preacher: Rev. Rico Tice

[0 : 00] Well, it's a privilege to be here this morning and I wonder if you could turn to the front page of the bulletin because I'll be speaking from 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 and particularly from verse 10.

Well, as we begin, let's pray. Let's pray that God will speak to us through the Bible. Father God, thank you so much for the Bible. Father God, please help me to speak clearly and please address each one of us in the very depths of our being and we ask this for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. In my family, we've got an incredibly immature ritual of throwing each other into water wherever it may be found.

So whatever the time of year it may be, spring, summer, autumn or winter, and whatever the type of water, sea, stream, river or pool, the rule is if there's water, somebody has to go in, which is the reason we're all slightly overweight, to avoid ourselves being thrown in.

Anyway, this came to a height four years ago on New Year's Day, January the 1st in England in Hampshire, freezing cold day, when my older brother George, who is 41, has three children, pushed me into a river.

[1 : 18] I don't know if you've got a relation like my brother George, he's 95% Christian and 5% animal and you're never sure when the animal's going to emerge. It's terrifying doing life with him.

Anyway, I was standing by this river and his two little boys, Dalton and Patrick, were either side of me and the next thing I knew, I was falling in. I couldn't believe it. And you know what happens?

Time just stops as you're about to hit the water and you think, I can't believe he's done this.

Anyway, I went in and I went straight in under the water. It was perishingly cold and because I'm a clergyman and a vicar and a forgiving person, I went straight up the bank and took him in.

And on the second occasion we went in, my car keys fell out of my pocket and it was not a great start to the new year. Anyway, it didn't break the water habit. And about six months after that, I was in Sydney doing a placement with a preacher called John Chapman and on a day off, he took me to Botany Bay and it's the most beautiful place.

And the sun was bouncing off the water and it was crystal blue and I thought, I've just got to go in. Well, I thought about throwing him in but he's 70 years old, I thought, I can't do that. So I thought, I'll just go in myself.

[2 : 29] So I stripped off to my boxer shorts, which is not a great sight since I now have a furniture problem and my chest is in my drawers nowadays. And I was just walking into the water when Chaco, this Australian, said, what are you doing?

I said, what do you think I'm doing? I'm going for a swim. He said, don't be ridiculous. I said, you don't be ridiculous. It's a beautiful day, there's no one here. I'm just going to nip in. He said, what about those signs?

And I looked around and there were two enormous signs behind me saying, danger, sharks, no swimming, with great jaws, clamping shut. And I said, oh, I'll be fine.

And he said, listen, mate, 200 Australians have been killed by sharks. You've got to work out whether those signs are there to save you or to ruin your day. You're of age, you decide. And with that, he walked off down the beach and I rather pathetically put my clothes back on and shuffled after him.

Now, as we come to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, there is a massive danger sign here. And the question is this morning, do you think it's here to save you or to ruin your day?

[3 : 33] What do you think it's there for? And I want to ask you whether actually you think it's reality. I had a choice to make about those signs on the beach. Do you think this is reality?

Let me show you the danger sign. There it is. It's the last three words of our passage. 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 10. And there are three words there. Do you think this is reality? The coming wrath. The coming wrath. Now, God's wrath is his settled, just, controlled, personal hostility to all that is evil.

So, God is going to judge all that is wrong in this world, which is a good thing. Because God is not indifferent as to how I treat you. And he's not indifferent as to how you treat me.

And he's not indifferent as to how we treat this world. He's never lost interest in any of those things. So, he's not like some sort of benevolent grandfather who leans back in his rocking chair and while the grandchildren are mucking about just says, well, we'll just sweep it under the carpet.

[4 : 35] He's not like that. Now, how you treat me matters to God. How I treat you matters to God. How we treat the world matters to God. It all matters to him. And as I speak of the word wrath, can I say, please get out of your mind a volcanic temper.

Some of you here will have grown up with people in the family who treat others like that. They explode when they don't get what they want. That is not what I'm talking about here with God's wrath.

I'm talking about settled, just, controlled, hostility to evil. And it was very important when I understood this. You see, in the Bible, God's judgment is not set against God's goodness. It's proof that he's good. The God of all goodness will not coexist with moral evil. So there will be a day when he will judge in a way that is completely comprehensive.

The Bible says, Hebrews 4 verse 13, nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.

[5 : 41] And let's face it, life would be a mockery if this were not the case. I mean, God is not good if he sits lightly to evil. No, he's good because he's implacably opposed to evil, be it on an international, national, communal or personal level.

And that's a good thing. I'm very proud of my twin sister. She works with AIDS patients in South Africa. And I was out visiting her. And a couple said to her in Port Elizabeth, our daughter was raped and murdered.

The boy who did it was out of prison after two years. We thought that our little girl was worth more than that. Now when you hear that, doesn't something rise up inside you and say, that should not be the case?

How dare that be the case? 165 million people killed in the 20th century, the murder century, a twin tower a day, 3,000 a day, died violently.

Doesn't something inside you rise up and say, that should not be the case. That is appalling. Or even on a personal level. We all come across people and the selfishness is staggering.

[6 : 51] And they just treat others as their servants. And the whole of their life revolves around them. And the decisions they make are staggeringly selfish.

And it's a good thing, is it not, that there's a judgment to come. And the Bible says that God is totally committed to his world. And that men and women are destined to die once and after that face judgment.

And I'm saying it's a very good thing. I got my stupid name Rico in Chile. Sorry about it. It's my parents' fault. And it is Rico Tice, not Tico Rice, just by the way. But my dad once told me, he said, when he grew tobacco in Chile, he said, on Hitler's birthday, he said, you could drive up into the Andes Mountains and there would be Nazis publicly celebrating his birthday, bouncing their grandchildren up and down on their knees in the Andes of Chile in the 1960s.

Well, here are other people's grandchildren. This is a mother and four children going to the gas chambers. And I'm saying it's a very good thing there's a judgment to come. But the issue, you see, is that everything needs to be judged.

The issue is that the Bible tells me that every one of us is on the Titanic. This is what the Lord Jesus says. And I'm just wondering whether you think this is reality or not. But the Lord Jesus, and I think he's the most loving man that ever lived, said this.

[8 : 12] What you've said in the dark will be heard in the daylight and what you've whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. I tell you, my friend, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more.

But I will show you whom you should fear. Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. And the Bible says, be sure that your sin will find you out.

It will find you out. Do you know, I was speaking on the judgment of God in my church in London. My church family had asked me to speak on 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. And after I finished speaking, I was only 27, very kind of the congregation to listen to me blurting away. But after I finished speaking, there was a man who was shaking with rage, an older man. And he walked up to me and he said, I hate people, I hate people who try and frighten me with regard to God.

He was furious with me. But you know, the question is not, have I tried to make you frightened? But is there anything to fear? That's the question. And can I say that when I hear that there is God's just, settled, controlled, personal hostility to all that is evil, frankly, it makes me nervous about my own life.

[9 : 25] It makes me nervous about my own life. Well, in AD 49, when Paul the Apostle, the writer of this letter, went to Thessalonica with his colleagues Silas, Timothy and Dr. Luke, they did believe in this warning sign, the coming wrath.

They did believe that. But wonderfully, that was not all they heard about. They also heard about, can we see the previous seven words there as we looked down?

They also heard about Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath. So there's no doubt that when Paul went to Thessalonica, he spoke about the death of Jesus.

And he'd have explained to them that Jesus' crucifixion on a Roman cross was no ordinary death. It was special. It was to pay for sin. So this is how Jesus spoke about his own death. He said, I'm the good shepherd.

And the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He said, the reason why the Father loves me is because I lay down my life for the sheep. On another occasion, he says, I've come to give my life as a ransom for many.

[10 : 28] Indeed, Mary was told by the angel as he was born that she was to give him the name Jesus because he would save his people from their sins.

This little baby boy, as we're hearing today, was born to die. So in other words, for every time I've said to God, no, for every time I've said to God, look, I know you give me each breath, but actually I will run my life my way.

For every time I've said to God, look, you give me the gifts, fun, family, friends, falling in love, food, fitness. God, you give me those things, but you keep out of my life because I'm running my life my own way and I make up my own rules.

For every time that we've done that, God's wrath should fall on me, but amazingly, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath, allows that wrath, that anger, to fall on him as he dies on the cross.

In other words, what I'm saying is, we're on the Titanic and the cross is the lifeboat. And do you remember the terrible words that came from the cross? Jesus was up on the cross and he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[11 : 42] Haunting words that have echoed through the centuries. And if you hear those words, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Can you hear that though he was in physical agony, they are not words of physical agony?

Now, crucifixion was the slave's punishment. There were 60 million slaves in the ancient world. When you saw a fellow slave being crucified, you thought, rebellion isn't worth it. But, I mean, I'm not going to, that'll happen to me.

So he was in agony. Indeed, we get the word excruciating from the Latin word crux, cross. But this was not a cry of physical agony. It's a cry of relational agony.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It's a cry of spiritual agony of one who is separated from his heavenly father. So he's crying out, God, why have you rejected me?

Why have you thrown me out? And after we were in Chile, my dad moved to Africa. We moved as a family. And as a little boy, I grew up in Africa.

[12 : 42] And I grew up in Zaya in Uganda. And there was no children's TV. So we spent our time mucking about doing hobbies. And as a little six-year-old, I had two hobbies, stamp collecting and butterflies.

And both are amazing in Africa, the stamps and the butterflies. And for both of them, you needed one of these, a magnifying glass. But I soon found, as a little six-year-old boy in Africa, that making little things bigger was not all a magnifying glass could do.

I found if you took one of these things out into the midday sun, the possibilities were endless. I found that you could set alight a newspaper or a leaf.

You could burn patterns on fences and trees. You could even set alight the gardener's hut. And best of all, I found that if you held your twin sister down, you could scare the living daylights out of her with one of these.

That was before I thought of the ordained ministry, I hasten to add. You see, you can take a magnifying glass and you can bend the rays of the sun into such a sharp point of intensity that things are burned.

[13:48] Well, I wonder if in St. John's this morning, you could imagine a massive moral magnifying glass the size of this church. And through it our past, not the sun's rays, but God's righteous anger at our wrongdoing, at the selfishness, at the hatred, at the envy, at the greed, at the arrogance, at the dishonesty, at the lies.

And it all comes down, down, down, until it hits one man in one point of history that he cries out in agony and screams, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

That is how Jesus rescues us from the coming wrath. It's no small thing. And the prophet Isaiah looked ahead 700 years to Jesus dying on the cross and he said these words, I praise you, O Lord, although you were angry with me, your anger has been turned away.

Turned away onto the Lord Jesus as he dies for my sin and as he was born to die for that rescue. And this is why the very night before he died, Jesus in Gethsemane said, My soul is overwhelmed to the point of sorrow.

Why? Why did he fall to the ground and sweat blood in Gethsemane? Because he prayed, My Father, if it's possible, may this cup be taken from me.

[15:11] What was the cup? It was the cup of God's anger, God's wrath at my sin. So Jesus drank that cup as he rescues us, 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 10, from the coming wrath.

And if you're a Christian here this morning, my question is, are you overwhelmed with thanksgiving for this death? Because if you're not, you're in a very dangerous place.

If your heart has hardened to this, and the reason is, is that you don't really think sin is too serious, because you live a respectable life. So really your sin isn't very serious, so you don't really need his death on the cross, but there are other people who do need it, but not yourself.

So my question is, are you full of thanksgiving for this? About, I guess it was six, seven years ago, the guy I met on the beach, John Chapman, was in London, and I went to see him, this older clergyman, and I went through about five or six things that were wrong in my life, typical whinging pom, and I went through one thing after another that was wrong for about 15 minutes, and he listened, and gradually his Australian lip curled, and at the end he said, Rico, mate, I had a friend like you, single clergyman like you and I, and he committed suicide, and if I may say, you're not unlike him.

I said, what? He said, it is quite obvious listening to you that there is no thanksgiving in your life, and he said, why don't you kneel by your bed morning and night, and give thanks to God, and begin with the cross.

[16:46] And you know, that one spiritual exercise transformed my life, and it transformed my heart. So if you're Christian, are you giving thanks for Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrong?

If you're someone who's not yet a Christian, thank you so much for getting up to come. Thank you very much. And my question for you is, where is your trust focused so that you can be forgiven? So let me sort of hone that down, and this gets you right to the heart of what you believe about the Christian faith, of what you believe about the death of Jesus, about the birth of Jesus that we've had sung to us.

Here's the question. If you were to die tonight, and God said, why should I let you into heaven, what would you reply? If you were to die tonight, and God said, why should I let you in, what would you reply?

What would you say to that, if you're somebody just trying to work out where you are? Would you say, for example, listen, I've been good enough. I mean, it's a moral thing. I've been a good person.

[17:44] I don't steal. I give to charity. Actually, my charitable giving is index linked. I'm not a murderer or a rapist, or a meter maid or a dentist. I'm not something evil like that.

Actually, if you're a dentist, you know, I'm sorry about that. If you're a meter maid, you may want to see me afterwards. I don't lie. Would you say, one person in London said this, he said, Rico, I give blood.

I'm a blood donor. Now, you may go down the moral route, or you may go down the religious route. You may say, well, actually, you know, I go to church. Huge numbers of people in Vancouver don't go to church, but I do.

Actually, I don't just go to church. I'm an Anglican. I'm a member of the Church of England. You know that, don't you? Why is it that the Anglicans will be first in heaven? Because it says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 that the dead in Christ will rise first.

That's the Anglicans. We're hopeless. We're hopeless. I've been baptized. I've been confirmed. [18:45] I pray. I go to communion. I read the Bible. Where is your trust focused? For that moment, as you stand before God, who will rightly judge the world?

Well, can I say, if it's in any of these things, can I absolutely assure you, as an ordained minister, that these things will do you no good at all. These things are like sticking plaster, band-aids, on a gaping wound, they'll do you no good at all.

Because sin is so serious. The only thing that will pay for my sin is the death of the Lord Jesus. Otherwise, why did he have to come and die? About, I guess it was 12 years ago now, I was playing rugby in Bristol against a club side called Dings Crusaders.

And I arrived at the Bristol ground in England, down in the West Country. And it was known affectionately as the Killing Fields. It wasn't a great place to play. And I arrived, and I saw my opposite number.

He was enormous. He was built like an outside toilet. I mean, the guy was, do you have them in Vancouver? I don't know. He was vast. And you know, you look at a guy like that, and you think, what does his mother look like?

[19:57] I mean, he was massive. And I thought, this is going to be a terrible afternoon. And I just looked around a bit, and I saw he wasn't warming up at all. I thought, I wonder why that is. And I looked around, and I saw he had a tiny baby boy in his arms.

And I thought, well, maybe he's not playing. Maybe he's babysitting. Maybe his mother's playing. I didn't know. Just before kickoff, he handed the baby boy across, and he walked onto the field, and he ripped me limb from limb.

Half time, he went straight back to the baby boy. Second half, he came back on, and he threw me around like straw in the wind. It was dreadfully embarrassing. As the final whistle went, and I stuttered off, that little baby boy was back in the man's arms.

And there was no question who the father was, and there was no question who the son was. And I'd like to have seen anyone lay a finger on that little boy. It would have been most amusing to behold the result. Now, here's the issue. Do you think God loved his son, Jesus Christ, any less than that, yet he sent him to die?

He was born to die so that I could be forgiven my wrongdoing. And yet we have people who say, well, I've lived a decent life and that's why I'll be accepted by God.

[21:05] And can I assure you that you need the death of Jesus to be accepted by God? And can I plead with you to focus your trust there? That's what we do at communion.

At communion, as I drink the wine and I eat the bread, I'm trusting in what Jesus did in his performance, not my own. That's the question.

When it comes to standing before God, are you trusting in your own performance or Jesus's? Well, these Thessalonians, they understood what Jesus said and they made exactly the right response. Let's have a look as we finish at the right response because it would be great to get back to the music. But let's have a look. Let's have a look at the right response and it's in verse 8. Paul marvels at the fact that the Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Archaea, your faith in God has become known everywhere.

That's because Thessalonica was on a trade route and people were coming in and going out and they were saying people have changed. They were saying these preachers arrived and these people have changed.

[22:10] Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it. For they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us, they tell. Now here is what it means to respond. How you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

God. So up until then, you see, people who lived in Thessalonica had focused their prayers up on Mount Olympus and when they prayed, they prayed to the gods up there. And I don't know, I guess some were sceptical.

I guess some went along because their families made them. I guess some were earnest. But wherever they stood, they said, they said, you know, I've been wrong to focus my prayers there and when they heard of Jesus who rescues from the coming wrath, they focused their prayers into him. And what did they do? Do you see what they did? They turned from idols. Now what's an idol? An idol is a made up God. I guess most people would say, well that's rather old fashioned.

We don't really have idols in Vancouver, there are not many altars around, I don't know. But when I say to you, what are you living for? We get closer to what a modern idol is.

[23 : 15] And when I say to you, what's the most important thing in your life? We're right there. And if that is not the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, you've got an idol if Jesus isn't the most important thing in your life.

And it may be something that's very good that's your idol. For example, the children. But they're a gift from the Lord Jesus. They can't be a God themselves. It might be to just have an easy time. It might be the career and that it goes well. But if you're not living for the Lord Jesus, you have an idol. With me, this is slightly embarrassing, but my idol was me.

I lived for myself. I was my own God. And I had to say, Rico, you've got to get with reality and turn around and kneel before the Lord Jesus and he is the centre of the universe and you are not.

And it's a wonderful thing to be led by him, you know, because he died for us on the cross so we can trust him to lead us. But another reason to allow him to lead us, do you see as we look down, it's in verse 9 and 10, they tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead.

[24 : 36] In other words, Jesus who came to die not only rose from the dead but actually will return because the universe belongs to him and so does this world and so does this beautiful planet and so does Stanley Park.

It all belongs to him and he will return to rule it. And the question is, is that reality? Now I guess there are people in lots of different places as I say this.

There'd be some people who'd say, Rico, Jesus who rescues us from the coming rock, I've never thought about it. And to you I'd say, please come on a course, there's a Christianity Explored course, I'll talk in the announcements of a card you can fill out for that.

Maybe you want to talk individually to something, to people. But there'll be one or two here who'll be saying, I know it's true, I know that he died for me and I know that this world belongs to him and I know that he will return to rule this world and I need to get right with him today.

And if that is the case, if you're in that position because you do want to be saved from the coming rock and that's a good reason to become a Christian, so that you don't pay for your own sin in hell, you allow Jesus to pay for you, it's a very good reason.

[25 : 46] It wasn't a small thing that God sent his son to die for me. He had to do it because I needed rescue. Well, if you do want to pray that prayer, then I'm going to say a prayer now and if it's right for you, why not echo it in your own heart?

Let me read it first because you've got to know what's coming. But if you do want to pray it, why not on my second time through echo it in your own heart? Here's the prayer and it might be right just for one or two this morning to put their trust in what Christ has done and the amazing thing is you're living by his performance, not your own.

That's the great joy of it. Let me read it for you. Here's a prayer. Lord Jesus, I recognise that you are God and have the right to control my life. I've rebelled against you sinning in thought, word and deed, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately.

I'm sorry for the way I've lived and asked you to forgive me. As best I can, I want to turn away from rebellion and obey you. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for dying for me on the cross.

Please come in and into my life and take complete control of it so that I can be ready for your return. Well, that is the prayer. I'm going to pray it much more slowly now. Let's have a moment of prayer now and if it's right for you, why not echo it in your own heart?

[27 : 01] Here's the prayer. Lord Jesus, I recognise that you are God and have the right to control my life.

I've rebelled against you sinning in thought, word and deed, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately. I'm sorry for the way I've lived.

I ask you to forgive me. As best I can, I want to turn away from rebellion and obey you.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for dying for me on the cross. Please come into my life and take complete control of it so that I can be ready.

Amen. Thank you.