

To God from idols

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[0 : 00] Let us turn now to 1 Thessalonians 1, verses 9 and 10, the last two verses of the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians.

For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye 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 delivered us from the wrath to come.

Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come.

Paul must have been very footsore and exhausted when he arrived in the city of Thessalonica. For a very short time before, he had been beaten and imprisoned in another city, in the city of Philippi, and all for doing good.

But after his release, a release due to an earthquake, he walked the 70 odd miles from Philippi to Thessalonica, along with Silas.

[1 : 15] That's why I said that he must have been very sore-footed and exhausted. Now the city of Thessalonica was a very strategic city, in that, among other things, its main street, its high street, was a part of the great Roman way, the Ignatian way, which stretched from the Adriatic to the Bosphorus Sea.

This great Roman highway ran right through Thessalonica. There were no bypasses in those days. Now, in this city, Paul, we are told, in Acts 17, preached for three Sabbaths in the synagogue.

And the result was that some Jews believed, many Gentiles believed, and not a few of the chief women. Quite a number of ladies who were quite well off, they also believed.

And because of this, the two men, Paul and Silas, became the talk of the town. For they were turning the place upside down, as the account in Acts tells us.

And we can imagine that when some of the ships left Thessalonica for other parts of the world, that they would take with them this report that in this city, this strategic city, a new god was being worshipped.

[2 : 42] And a new religion was gaining ground. And, of course, that would have been a very fair, honest, and correct report, for that was what was happening in the city of Thessalonica.

But the devil is never far away when there's a work of God going on, whatever that work may be, at whatever time. And we read that the devil, we believe, moved a number of people called there in Acts 17, lewd fellows of the baser sort, the riffraff of Thessalonica.

The devil moved them and stirred them up to such an extent in their opposition to Paul that both Paul and Silas had to escape to Berea for safety.

But they escaped in the face of that mob, roused by the devil. They escaped not before this could be said of many people in that city.

They turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God, and so on. Now, we have in these words, verses 9 and 10, we have in these words an analysis of what is meant by Christian conversing.

[4 : 01] And this is one of the fullest and most succinct descriptions anywhere, in the New Testament, of what conversing is in its widest scope.

For it involves the three actions described by the three verbs in the verses. This is what they did. They turned, they served, they waited. And that's what conversing involves in its fullest outreach, in its fullest scope.

They turned, they served, they waited. They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, even Jesus, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come.

Now, first of all, we notice the change that marked them. They turned. They turned to God from idols. The change that marked them.

[5 : 05] And this is where a Christian spiritual biography begins. It begins at the turn. It begins when we turn to God from idols. That's the beginning of a Christian biography.

Now, I want us first of all to notice, to notice two things here. First of all, the cause of this turning to God from idols. Turning to God from idols. The cause of it. Now, it seems to me that it had to do with the kind of entry that Paul and Silas had into the city of Thessalonica.

You see, he tells us in verse 10, they themselves show of us what kind of entering in we had unto you. What kind of entry we had into your city.

Now, I believe that this means more than what the NIV says it means. That it refers to their reception by the people of the city.

No doubt that's true. But I believe it means more than that. It has to do with their actual entry into the city. And it has to do with how they entered into the city.

[6 : 13] Well, then, how did Paul and Silas enter into the city? Did they enter as tourists? Or as terrorists? Or as reporters?

No, but as evangelists. They entered into the city not with loads of luggage or equipment. And yet they entered in not empty-handed.

For when Paul and Silas entered Thessalonica, they brought with them the gospel. And so Paul says in verse 5, The gospel came to you in the Holy Ghost and in power and with great conviction. And it was the gospel that was responsible for the change in the people, in many people in that city, and was the cause of turning them to God from idols.

That was the entry in that Paul had to the people of Thessalonica. He was brought in with the gospel. Now then, what did Paul do with the gospel when he went into the city?

[7 : 16] Well, we are told in Acts 17 that he reasoned with the people in the synagogues for three Sabbaths. He opened up the scriptures. In other words, he preached the gospel, he expounded the word, and he proclaimed Christ.

And the result of that was that it knocked successfully on many a fast, closed heart and was responsible for the change in the lives of many in that city.

Now, for the gospel to change any person's life and lifestyle, I believe that it comes generally, first of all, to one's mind.

And it enlightens one's mind and removes the misconceptions and gives light in the inward part. But it doesn't stop there.

At the same time, it affects a person's conscience so that that person is convicted of his sin and becomes aware of his guilt before God. And it doesn't stop there, but when the gospel enters a person's heart and life, it goes to his emotions so that he is greatly humbled out of what he sees God to be and a sense of his own guilt.

[8 : 33] And it affects his will so that his will is set free from its native bondage. And all this may take place bit by bit, very slowly, or it may take place suddenly, immediately and traumatically.

But the result is always the same, that through the power of the gospel, we turn to God from idols. That's the cause of the turn, the gospel that entered the city.

Now the other thing is this, regarding the change that marked them, not only the cause of it, but the nature of it. The nature of it.

And two details are given here in these verses which are universally and perennially true. For they concern the direction of the change.

And it's this direction of the turning that constitutes the nature of the change. And the direction is to God from idols. That's the change, that's the nature of the change that to place in the lives of the people, of many of the people in Thessalonica, in the first instance.

[9 : 50] Notice this then first, that they turned from idols. They turned from idols. And there were plenty in Thessalonica.

Now the apostle Paul tells us that an idol is nothing. Now when he says that, he does not mean at all that an idol or idol worship doesn't matter.

It doesn't mean a thing. It's nothing here or there. Of course not. But when Paul says an idol is nothing, he means that an idol is a non-entity. It has no standing in itself.

The only standing it has is in the eyes of the beholder. And certainly it has no standing before God. An idol in the sight of God is a God substitute.

For it is putting something of infinitely less value before God and in the place of God. And in the eyes of God, it is a non-entity.

[10:51] And it was through the gospel that the Thessalonians were turned from their idols and their false god and their worship of them. Now I want to make a very relevant point here which exalts the gospel by saying this, that it could have been no easy thing for the Thessalonians who had become Christians to have turned from their idols.

that could have been no easy thing for them. Because you see, they worshipped gods from their childhood.

They had childhood gods. They were brought up to worship gods. False gods. And their gods were just household names all over the city.

And the gods that these converted people at one time worshipped were the gods of their ancestors and the gods of their parents and the gods of their relatives. They were steeped in idolatry in that idolatrous city and therefore it was no easy thing for them to turn away from their idols.

And we remember this also. That the city of Thessalonica was only about 50 miles away from Mount Olympus. And Mount Olympus in the eyes of pagan people was the headquarters of the gods.

[12:16] And tradition has it incidentally that Zeus, when he shook his curls caused the mountain of Olympus to tremble. But the point is that they were so near what they called the headquarters of the gods to be influenced by idolatry.

And you see, in spite of these strong influences against any change, they did change. They turned from their idols. That was no easy thing.

And it was accomplished only by the supernatural power of the gospel which Paul brought into the city. Through the gospel they turned.

And they turned from their idols. Now, our idols are much more sophisticated than theirs. They are found in the house, in the garage, in the garden, in the sports field, in the entertainment world of stars.

But compared with the God of heaven and all that he is and all that he is to give, our idols are non-entities.

[13:25] And also, it's the case that so many people in this day in which we live, so many people have eaten up with the love of ambition and power and money and work and fame.

And in each case, it's an idol that demands total allegiance. and no one has undergone a spiritual change who gives allegiance to any God substitute.

And no one can undergo a spiritual change and turn from their idols to God without the power of the gospel. And you see, when a person turns from their idols by the gospel, it means that the spell of the idol has been broken and that the power of God and the gospel have been demonstrated.

The dearest idol I have known, whatever that idol be, help me to tear it from thy throne and worship only thee. They turned from idols, but the other thing is this, and this is the most important thing of all, they turned to God from idols.

They turned to God from idols. You see, they didn't turn from one form of idolatry to another. They didn't turn from an insidious form of idolatry to a less insidious form, to a more acceptable form, to a less demanding form.

[15:03] Not at all. What does that tell us? It tells us this, that conversion is not a quarter turn or a half turn or a three quarter turn. It's an about turn. It's a complete turn.

It's turning to God who in his very nature is diametrically opposed to God's substitutes and counterfeits. To a God who says, my glory I will not give to another, nor my praise to graven images, to your idols, to your non-entities.

conversion therefore is not simply a reformation. It is a revolution. Old thrones must fall and a new king must reign.

And if we are to be Christians, he must be Jesus. And you'll notice in these verses that this God whom we worship and to whom we turn is called the living and true God.

That is, he is living for he is unlike the dead idols and the non-entities and he is true for he is unlike the counterfeits and the God substitutes.

[16:18] Well, that's the first thing we notice here. The change that marked them they turned. Not by any power of their own wills but by the power of God working in them to will and to do of his good pleasure.

I wonder if every one of us tonight have taken that turn and that we have commenced on a Christian way and that we are beginning to write our Christian biography and not a biography by the very lives we live.

That's the first thing the change that marked them they turned. The second thing is the evidence that followed them they served to serve the living and true God.

How you turn to God from idols to serve. Now here we have the evidence that followed them. They served the living and true God. Well, first of all their service was Christian service.

It was Christian service. It was the service it was service of a Christian kind. It was the service of God undertaken by the servants of God.

[17 : 26] The Thessalonians were no longer counterfeit worshippers and they therefore did not give counterfeit service. They were true worshippers truly turned to the Lord and they gave Christian service.

Now, notice the sequence here. From idols to God into service. From to into.

Into. To serve the living and true God. And you see, any claim to the first two is a bogus claim unless it is followed by the third into the service of the living God.

And I believe myself that conversion is not full New Testament conversion if it is only deliverance and deliverance from sin. of course it is that but it is also deliverance for service that we might be workers together with him.

And we could say that Christian service is an exchange of one kind of slavery for another so long as we add immediately that the new slavery being born slaves of Christ is in fact perfect freedom.

[18 : 48] it was Christian service that they gave but now the other thing is this that it was practical Christian service that the Thessalonians gave and this is revealed very clearly in this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians it was practical Christian service.

When these idolaters became followers of the Lord Jesus Christ they didn't sit in armchairs theorizing about service pontificating making sounds and noises and suggestions but doing nothing about it nor did they delude themselves that simply being Christians was tantamount to serving and that nothing more was required.

Look at how they viewed their Christianity and look at how Paul commends their view of Christianity. Look at verse 3 Paul says regarding the Christians they're remembering without ceasing your work of faith your labour of love your patience of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ your work of faith that is your work and expenditure of energy because of your faith as a result of your faith your labour of love your labour prompted by love and your patience of hope your endurance inspired by hope.

Look at the words work labour endurance all for Christ's sake and the gospels they weren't sitting back doing nothing. Look at verse 7 Paul says you were examples to all that believe in Macedonia and the higher they were a model of they were a model to Christians round about them they were a pattern which anyone could safely and genuinely imitate and their renunciation of dreary idolatry is something to be copied by everyone as is their work and labour and endurance.

Look at verse 8 in verse 8 Paul says from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia but also in every place your faith towards God is spread abroad so that we need not to speak anything.

[21 : 10] You see they were heralds and the word here means they were sounding boards they were sounding boards they didn't originate the message but they proclaimed it.

You see the Thessalonians just were not able to keep the good news to themselves and so the good news reverberated all over northern Greece called Macedonia and all over southern Greece called Achaia and so thoroughly did they proclaim the word and tell of their faith that Paul says here at the end of verse 8 it wasn't necessary for us to say anything.

Now that does not mean that Paul and Silas therefore became redundant as preachers and apostles of course not but it does mean that before Paul and Silas could tell others in other parts of the world about God's work in Thessalonica that others were able to tell them because they heard it from the Thessalonians themselves.

They were so taken up with what had happened that they couldn't keep it to themselves and the whole world knew about it north and south of Greece and other parts of the world as well. They were they gave Christian service but also it was practical Christian service.

They worked they labored they endured they were examples and they were sounding boards because they were so in love with what they had received so taken up and thrilled with it that that

was the kind of service they gave.

[22 : 49] My dear friends if only if only we could serve God like that if only the gospel would mean as much to us as it meant to the Thessalonians and that we ourselves would be sounding boards and heralds and you see I believe that if the gospel meant much more to us than it apparently does that there would be no need for special gospel crusades and special campaigns and missions but of course if we are not heralds and if we are not sounding boards as the Thessalonians then we have no cause to be critical of efforts that are being made for they are attempting to do what we obviously are not doing.

These Thessalonians gave Christian service and they gave practical Christian service. That's the second thing then we notice. Not only the change that marked them they turned but the service the evidence that followed them they served and that evidence was a proof that their turn their turning to God was not a bogus counterfeit thing.

Last thing is this the expectancy that motivated them they waited. The expectancy that motivated them to wait you turn to God from idols to serve the living God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead even Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come.

they not only turned and served but they waited. First of all they waited for the son they waited for the son to wait for his son from heaven they waited for the son they didn't just wait mindlessly aimlessly helplessly but they waited for the second coming of Christ and although Paul had to put them right about their view of the nearness of this coming nevertheless they had the right approach they waited for the coming of the Lord.

Now I think that it's very striking here that Paul shows that serving and waiting go together in the Christian life.

[25 : 19] Serving is being busy for Christ on earth and waiting is looking for Christ from heaven and this expresses to my mind a very important recognition and it's this that however hard a Christian may work however diligent he may be his work can only be partially useful he still has to wait for Christ to come to secure the final overthrow of evil and to establish the final triumph of Christ's own reign and you see this combination will save us on the one hand from the presumption of thinking that we can do everything and on the other from the pessimism of imagining that we can do nothing here is the here are the two things that while we wait we serve and while we serve we wait now to wait for the

Lord Jesus from heaven means that we look forward to that event with patience and with confidence and if we can do that then it means that we are ready for the coming of the Lord when we wait for a visitor to come to our home it means that we are ready to receive that visitor and when the doorbell rings we can go and welcome him few things are more embarrassing than to be caught in a muddle by someone we are expecting and some would look upon that as an actual disaster but my dear friends there is nothing so disastrous and nothing will be so disastrous as to be caught in a muddle when the heavenly king comes unprepared for his coming the sin of that unpreparedness will be unpardonable and the loss irretrievable and with that in mind the Lord

Jesus says be ye also ready for the son of man is coming at an hour you know not of and we are ready and we can look forward with confidence to the Lord if we ourselves have turned to God from our idols that we have secured our own salvation and are in some way concerned about the salvation of other people if that is the way we live our lives then we can say with honesty and sincerity even so come Lord Jesus they waited for the son the last point I want to make here is this to notice the son for whom they waited the son for whom they waited we have here a description of the kind of person he is to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead even Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come notice the description given here of the coming son of the coming Lord there's a reference to his deity his son that is

God's son there's a reference to his humanity even Jesus son of Mary there's a reference to the unity of his divine person that it's both a son of God and Jesus that he will come there's a reference to his death and resurrection raised from the dead a reference as we notice to his return waiting for his coming and then a reference finally to his work for his work is to deliver us from the wrath to come now the wrath of God the Bible tells us is already on the children of disobedience already God has revealed from heaven his wrath against all ungodliness and unrighteousness in men that's already the case that present wrath is not to be compared with coming wrath for coming wrath the wrath to come is wrath to the uttermost to the uttermost of degree and to the uttermost of duration for it will be eternal and never ending and this will be seen when the sun comes when the

Lord comes then will be the wrath of the lamb but all who believe and who have believed perhaps for many a year have already been delivered from coming wrath the second death will not touch them we've got we've got God's word on it all who believe are already delivered from coming wrath the second death will have no hold over then that's God's word and all who will yet believe will then be delivered from coming wrath for you see that is the ultimate purpose of our deliverance through Christ delivered from coming wrath the wrath to come this then is the deliverer for whom we are to wait and we are to wait for this deliverer in his deity and humanity and unity this one whose work through his death and resurrection is to deliver us from the wrath to come we are to wait for such for such majesty and royalty and deity as is in

[31 : 03] Christ not with our eyes shut or with our arms folded but as Jesus says with our loins girded and our lamps burning because we do not know the day nor the hour when the son of man come but come he will are we therefore ready in terms of from idols to God into service and into the patient waiting for the Lord Jesus Christ is that how we are is that a description of our life here on earth at this moment from idols to God into service waiting patiently for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ serving and waiting waiting and serving as those who have been turned by the power of the gospel of God well if that is so we can take this for our comfort if that is our attitude then we will not be ashamed before him at his coming that is we will not be put to shame when he does come for he will come then for his own so may these words be descriptive of each one of us tonight let's make sure that they are you turn 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 is delivering us from the wrath to come let us pray O Lord our God we give thanks to thee for thy great deliverance for deliverance from sin's guilt and power and pollution and final punishment that help us to realise O Lord that as long as we live in this world we are delivered for a purpose in order that we might serve the living and true God and in order that we might serve and wait for his son from heaven help us O Lord to fit into this pattern which we believe is universal and abiding we pray Lord that thou will come to each one of us and assure us afresh if we need to be assured that we have turned from idols to God and if we have not yet then show us tonight the necessity and encourage us by the example of what happened to the

Thessalonians who were steeped in idolatry and yet turned by the grace of God and the power of the gospel and we pray O Lord that as thy word is proclaimed tonight and the gospel of Jesus Christ expounded that many in our land and overseas would turn to thee from idolatry and from darkness from God's substitutes from all forms of counterfeit religion and when we turn to thee we are immediately in touch with reality and with the real thing may we all have the real thing that we belong to thee by faith that we serve thee by grace and we wait for thy coming in power and in great glory we ask that thou will remember us as we enter into this new week with this new commitments and difficulties and decisions that we may well have to make help us to live our lives usefully help us to be of service the one to the other and to strengthen one another in the

Lord stand at our right hand O Lord so that we would not stray from thee and if thou art at our right hand then we shall not be moved and keep us immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord for as much as we know that our labour is not in vain in the Lord remember all that has been done in thy name today up and down the country encourage all who have heard thy word to take it to heart and may all that has been done redound to the glory of thy name and to the honour of thy grace through Jesus Christ our Lord and for his sake Amen thing it means have anything say again things have been established and to support and need goodbye