

# To God from idols

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[ 0 : 00 ] We turn for a time this morning to look at some of the teaching we have in this chapter that we read. The first letter to the Thessalonians in chapter 1.

And I want to pick out certain key thoughts that run through the chapter. Suppose the great turning point is verse 9.

In the end of that verse there where the Apostle tells the church in Thessalonica that they had turned from idols to serve the living and through God.

Now the background to the church in Thessalonica is recorded for us in chapter 17 in the book of Acts. And there Luke gives us a short summary of the way in which the gospel came to this particular area.

And as was often the case in the scattering of the seed of the gospel, some came to saving faith in Christ. And others caused, I suppose, what we would describe as a mini-riot against the word of God.

[ 1 : 13 ] And it's interesting to recall that it was there that those who were the greatest critics of the gospel of Christ used the terminology that these men had come amongst them who had turned the world upside down.

Because it is of a truth that no matter where the gospel penetrates to a great extent it turns the life or the lifestyle of people upside down.

And so it was with the church at Thessalonica or with those who became believers at Thessalonica. They were turned from idols to serve the living and the true God.

It's also interesting to see the subtlety of the Jews who sought to discourage and discredit this Christian faith. They used the power of the Roman Empire and the claim that they were removing Caesar who was worshipped as a god.

And thus undermining the authority and power of the Roman Empire. Amazing how arguments can be turned on their head to suit a particular situation or a particular case.

[ 2 : 24 ] And yet it was through the power of the Holy Spirit that the apostles, Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, came to proclaim the word of God in that place.

And it's with great and fond remembrance that the apostle speaks and writes to these brethren in Christ. And it's a wonderful thing to have that sort of mindset where we can recall and we'll use that almost as a heading today, Paul's recollections.

Where Paul recalls for these people the bond, the affection, the love and the way in which God's spirit worked amongst them. And how when the power of the Holy Spirit comes to possess people and to possess people individually and collectively, it creates that bond, that unity, that oneness, that harmony that should be so much part and partial of the church of God on earth.

And that to a great extent is the key theme that runs through this, the manner in which he has this great concern for them. In many ways it's similar to the manner in which he writes to the church at Philippi.

Because there you see was a church that was also very dear to the heart of the apostle. It was a church that he loved and has little criticism of it.

[ 3 : 54 ] One or two references, but that is basically all. And here you see is something similar. It is a letter that tells something of their character, something of their response and their reception to this gospel.

And it's a letter that ought to, in some ways I suppose, make us want to see such a power and such a spirit ruling and reigning within the church of Christ.

Well, let's say for a little this morning, look at something of what Paul teaches to you and to me, because there is always a purpose in the manner in which God's word is written.

It's written for our instruction and it's written for our learning. And a problem so often is that you and I are unwilling to take to heart, to take at a personal level what God's word teaches.

We ever put it to others. Often people will say, they. I sometimes pause and say to myself when I find myself saying it, what about me?

[ 5 : 08 ] And perhaps we would learn something of our own limitations and our own failings. If we took more to heart what God's word has to say to us.

And as we do so, through the power of the Holy Spirit applying it, our lives becoming more fruitful, our lives becoming more meaningful, becoming more purposeful in the service of Christ.

Well, he begins, as is so often the case, with his great salutation to the brethren of Thessalonica and to the church of the Thessalonians, which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see where he places the church within the very bosom of the Godhead. He places it in that special place, that particular spot that belongs and is the privilege of the people of God.

And again, you see, when we begin to reflect on these things, how often perhaps we read these introductory remarks in the letters to the apostles and don't stop to think about how significant they are.

[ 6 : 21 ] How often we stop, we do not stop. We want to perhaps read on into the main text, as it were. And yet here is a statement that reminds these brethren that he loves in the Lord, that it is so because they are the church of God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he goes on from that and says to them, Grace and peace be unto you. Grace be unto you and peace. Now I suppose we would say that there could be no peace except God's grace ruled in their hearts.

You might remember how someone described grace using the initials G-R-A-C-E, God's riches at Christ's expense.

God's riches at Christ's expense. And you see, it is because of the richness of our God that we know something of this peace ruling and reigning in our lives through what God in Christ has done for us.

It is through that that you and I will be privileged, if we're spared tomorrow, to sit at the Lord's table and there sit with the people of God in that oneness, in that unity that should be part and parcel of the church of God on earth.

[ 7 : 53 ] And it is obvious the great bond, and we've touched on this, that exists there. This great bond that is so striking and so wonderful, even with the apostle, you see, even when he writes to rebuke, there is that spirit of love, that spirit of wanting to correct.

It is not a spirit that says, I must get even. It is a spirit of correctness, a spirit that wants correctness, that wants the writing of what is wrong, the spirit of God ruling in the apostle's life so as to show that it is Christ that matters ultimately in the life of the church.

And so he says, grace be unto you. And if God's grace is there, then God's peace will reign also in their hearts.

Now it's worth pausing for a moment and asking ourselves, do we know something of this grace of God and that peace that comes through his grace being applied, being given to us, do we know it in our lives as we prepare ourselves for sitting at the Lord's table?

Do I know something? Am I rejoicing in that? Or am I allowing so much of what is of no consequences to creep in what Solomon calls in the Song of Solomon, the little foxes that spoil the vines?

[ 9 : 34 ] Are these little foxes, are they finding spaces, corners, areas in our lives? And as a result, we don't have that peace.

We don't have that recognition of the peace of God flooding our hearts, filling our lives and showing us something of the wonder of his grace.

Let's ask ourselves why that should be. Let's ask ourselves and let's not go beyond ourselves. Let's ask ourselves at a personal level why that should be.

So it is then that in this salutation, Paul has this obvious identity with these Christians. And remember this and we'll turn if we remember later to this.

They weren't just simply Jews. they were Gentiles also. They were of a much wider area of Christianity than was ever imagined by the early apostles.

[ 10 : 46 ] And here you see the wonder of God's grace and the wonder of that peace he imparts through his grace that he draws people from so many different areas and walks of life.

in his own time, by his own means and for his own glory. He wants to pay tribute to them regarding the bond and the unity and the friendship that they enjoy the one with the other.

And then going out from that he takes up another thought in verse 2. He says we give thanks to God always for you all.

We give thanks to God always for you all. Notice again that little word at the end of the verse. The two little words.

You all. It's not an exclusive club that he speaks of here. He speaks of the breads and extensiveness of this church and of its membership.

[ 11 : 58 ] And he does so as I've said with that great sense of joy making mention of you in our prayers. Making mention of you in our prayers.

Now let's just pause for a moment and ask ourselves again. Let me ask myself. Let me ask you. Do we make mention in our prayers over the church of Christ in its bread?

Do we see the wonder of how the gospel has touched so many lives throughout the world? There's one thing that really struck me when we were away.

We had on a Friday afternoon we had the church open for people if they wished to come in and there were various facilities there for them. But what struck me it wasn't necessarily those who had no conversion experience that came in but rather Christians from so many different parts of the world.

And it in many ways never ceased to amaze me that this gospel that we perhaps think is so exclusive because we can become so insular that this gospel has reached far and wide and I would see there in many respects the fulfilling of that great commission that Jesus gave to his disciples to go into the whole world and preach the gospel and that that gospel effectively works in the lives of people throughout different areas of the world and society.

[ 13 : 41 ] and so Paul says here I remember all of you in my prayers. We ought to have a prayer life that is broad in its vision and in its perspectives.

I know we have an absolute responsibility for the places where the Lord has left us or placed us but we must extend beyond that and we must have this word that it goes out in fullness and in power. And so he says I make mention of you in our prayers. Are we making mention in our prayers of the church of Christ?

And then he turns as it were to recalling so many different things about this church and I want for a time to deal with that in the remainder of our service.

Right from verse 3 down to verse 9 he's in reflective mode. You know sometimes when you sit and meditate when you sit and think you begin to recall certain events certain things.

[ 14 : 53 ] You recall spiritual blessings that you have enjoyed in times past and how that sometimes opens up avenues in our minds to reflect on what God has done for us and how he has used and blessed his word in our lives.

And it is so that Paul here comes into that kind of reflective mode. and he says there in verse 3 I remember without ceasing your work of faith.

Now remember it is work of faith. Now the great discovery of course that Saul of Tarsus made was that it wasn't justification by works.

He tells us something of his pedigree in chapter 3 in the Philippians how he thought that because of his cultural background things would be well with his soul.

He thought because he was a Jew of the Jews that because he was of the stock of Abram that he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews that everything was going for him. But then you see he discovered that it wasn't by works a man is saved.

[ 16 : 08 ] And perhaps just in passing I should say that that is vitally important. If you are here today I don't know many of you here. Perhaps some of you are here because you always attend the communion services and the preparatory services.

And yet you don't know the Christ of the communion. You don't know the Christ that God's people will remember here tomorrow and in the church. And perhaps you even think and Satan has deluded you into this to think that by your own works and by your own efforts salvation is attained. Well you see what Paul says here. Remembering without ceasing your work of faith. And all of us need to remember that it is not piling up self-righteous piety points that gain spiritual growth. But it is working by faith. By faith believing in him. Believing that he is our sufficiency. That he is our strength.

here is active faith. Active faith. Has my faith, your faith become in some respects inactive?  
[ 17 : 24 ] We lost as it were the bite for service in the kingdom of Christ at all the different levels at which many of us were.

And are we just living as it were our lives as Christians on the periphery? We've lost this vision of work and faith because faith without work is dead.

And we need to grasp again this vision that Paul recalls that these Christians in Thessalonica had. and then he says as he looks at them he says I recall your labour of love.

Your labour of love. Now we will say a certain thing and you say well it's a labour of love. It's just something that person likes doing.

There is no perhaps monetary reward in it. It's a labour of love. But that is not what Paul speaks of as he reflects on the church in Corinth.

[ 18 : 35 ] This word labour in its original form has a different meaning to what we would suggest what we would think it has.

This labour of love speaks of really hard work. Now it's really hard work in the service and in the kingdom of Christ.

Your labour your hard work of love love for the master love for Christ.

And this love again is a very strong word. It's a word that suggests and is rooted in that word that Paul gives us in Romans 5.

God commends his love to us. That's the same word. Love that brings man to see the magnificence and the awfulness and awesomeness of Calvary.

[ 19 : 40 ] As we look, that is the motivation as it were that Paul says these Thessalonians have. When they saw, when they reflected, when they viewed what their Lord and Saviour had done for them, then it was their motivation to work, to labour, to give their all for their Lord and Master who gave us all for them.

Rooted in love, a labour of love, love that grasps what Christ did, love that gives as the example of the Master is.

Have we got that love? Have I got that love? Have you got that love today? we are coming again to sit at the Lord's table. And let me say I address this as much to myself as I do to yourselves.

We are coming to sit at the Lord's table. And how is my love for my Lord and my Saviour? Is my love one that manifests something of Christ in me?

Does the world see through my care, my concern, my love that there is a higher principle ruling and reigning in my life?

[ 21 : 19 ] Does the world grasp that? You see this is what Paul is so reflective about. He says later on you see their example as believers was known throughout the world.

It's our example as believers known throughout the community. What kind of example do I set? Do you set?

This is the point you see that Paul is driving at here. He says I remember without ceasing your work of faith and your labour of love.

How is that love love in relation to my labouring for Christ? How is my affection, how is your affection for your Lord and for your Saviour?

Has that love been somehow or other smudged like you see the condensation on the windows there?

[ 22 : 29 ] it stops you seeing properly. Are there things, elements, call them what you want, these little foxes, are they placing obstacles in my life and in your life in relation to this area of loving our Lord and working in service for him?

And he says as he reflects not only your labour of love but your patience of hope. Not, as it were, a passive patience.

Context implies that it was an enduring patience. One that is grasped because of the situation in which these Thessalonians found themselves.

It is that which continues faithfully as disciples. And again he comes back to the basis of that.

He says it is in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of God and our Father. And then he goes on to reflect on that wonderful, wonderful doctrine that we have in verse 4, your election election of God.

[ 23 : 58 ] It's interesting to reflect that in the Old Testament the whole picture of election was one that was national. Election I have chosen Israel as a people to or for myself.

And yet when the apostle comes and in the teaching of our Lord this picture of election becomes much more personal.

It becomes much more personal. Now I would want to say this that election is a doctrine that cannot be understood by the non-Christian.

The non-Christian will use it frequently as a means of excuse for not committing himself or herself to Christ. But you who are in Christ we who are in Christ we who will sit at the Lord's table tomorrow we claim this great doctrine as being ours at a personal level that I am elect of God.

Is that not a comfort? Perhaps you feel that sometimes the preaching is hard and harsh and uncompromising. Well sometimes it has to be so to both speaker and hear but here you see something else that brings us into that wonderful closeness and intimacy of relationship that exists between God and his people that you as a Christian today are elect of God and that ought to comfort and strengthen us on this journey of life to know that I am and that you are elect of God and it's a theme that the apostle takes up on many different occasions and this election you see has its roots a way back in eternity and before ever the world was before the mountains were brought forth he has elected from all eternity some to everlasting life and it's a wonderful thought today that those who are the lords here you were ever in his plan of election and none could alter that plan you look at elections at a human level at a natural level and so many different things can alter situations a manifesto was brought out a plan a program and sometimes it has to be adjusted and there's the uncertainty of being elected to office but there's nothing like that when we look at this it is so completely different because it is of

[ 27 : 07 ] God and that's what he says your election of God and not in the eternity when the son enjoyed the glory he had with the father before the world was there was this election of God and there was that election for every single person from Adam down to the very last person that ever will live and amongst all of that mass of people there were those who were elect of God and that is your privilege and that is my privilege today that we are elect of God but notice the term he uses also when he speaks of the elect of God brethren beloved brethren beloved can we use that term in relation to our brethren or brothers and sisters in Christ beloved can I can you can we can we use that term brethren beloved term that speaks of that intimacy of relationship that term that was spoken of and arose in a sense out of the writings of the apostles it was a term brethren or brothers one that identified one that manifested the bond the unity that held the

Christians together and when we read of Paul writing to his brethren let us from now on reflect on that the term as it were grew out of this obvious bond that existed and it is in that sense one which has a distinctly Christian term and it ties in of course with the election of God brethren beloved and then in his recollections Paul remembers the way in which the gospel came to Thessalonica and sometimes as we read these words perhaps we long perhaps we even try and pray that such a sin could be our description of the gospel at work in our day verse five our gospel came unto you not unto you in word only let's just stop for a moment there so many many words spoken so many words preached so many words offered in prayer so many words offered in praise what kind of words do

I offer what kind of words do we offer the apostle reminds us in 1 corinthians 13 I say supposing I have the greatest eloquence supposing he almost saying supposing I'm the greatest orator yes he says supposing I speak with the tongue of men and of angels plenty words but I have not charity it's nothing remember the description he gives sounding brass and tinkling cymbals plenty noise what's wrong we need what he goes on to say here we need the power of the Holy Ghost we need the power of the Holy Spirit we can preach some can preach with the greatest of eloquence and it's good to heal how much of it stays with me how much of it stays with you how much of it do we take away with us and think upon it and meditate upon it discuss it how often our thoughts shoot off to something else some triviality of no consequences and the little fox comes in and spoils the vine ought we not to be pleading with God on high that the power of the Holy Spirit would come upon us and then he reflects that it was also in much assurance as you know what manner of men we were among you for your sake now he's going back in his recollection here to think upon the manner in which this this gospel had worked so effectively in Thessalonica and he was saying you as a people who responded to it you were willing to stay with it even through the difficulties through the persecution through the hostility that was raised against you he says as we would use a common expression you hung in there and he says

I recall that and then he says and he doesn't exalt himself when we come to verse 6 he recalls you became followers of us what he's really saying is you became followers of the Christ who was in us wonderful thing to see people coming to follow the Lord Jesus Christ marvelous thing to see the spirit of God working one here and one there wonderful to see it being poured out and seeing multitudes turning and calling on the name of the Lord I say you became followers of us and of the Lord there is the proof you see here they received the word in much affliction with joy interesting combination there isn't it with affliction in affliction and yet with joy count it all joy when you fall into different testings

[ 34 : 45 ] James tells us manifest manifold temptations is the word different testings and then he says in verse 7 you are an example to us or you are examples to us no we must hurry on the time is nearly gone this word examples are examples interesting word I want us to take with this in passing it was the word that was used to show that an impression was made on something like you would put a stamp or a seal on something with a blow like that and an impression was left upon it and this is the kind of picture Paul is painting for us as he recalls the church in Thessalonica he says you became an example that that identity that seal that showed you were elect of God was manifested in your life you could perhaps use the illustration of a passport that requires a stamp upon it to gain access to a country requires that stamp of elect of God for us to be examples their lives were a pattern for others to follow and we touched on that earlier on we ask ourselves again is my life your life an example for others to follow is that pattern of my life a new life one that gives me my grace and my faith to say

I love the Lord because he heard my voice and gives me that grace and strength to say I will come with the people of God and join in the oneness of the people of God around his table on his day and then he recalls that the word sounded out the word of the Lord sounded out not only in Macedonia but also in every place the faith to God was spread abroad he says we don't even need to speak about it it's so well known ah what a difference when the spirit of God comes what an added dimension it makes to the life of the church when the spirit of God stirs us and makes us the people we ought to be and then what we outlined at the outset as I suppose the great turning point the great turning point that the apostle reflects on here and recalls how he says how he says you turn to God from idols you remember we said that the

Jews had cast this accusation against these Christians that they worshipped another God than Caesar in Thessalonica there were many idols what was the difference between these gods that they worshipped in Thessalonica and the true and living God this God hears this God answers this God sees their idols silver iron gold works of men's hands they be and there was this great awakening within their own beings and he says the gospel this word he says it sounded out it was like a trumpet and he says the word of the Lord was with power and he says you turned from idols to serve the living God remember that great confrontation on Mount Carmel prophets there calling and calling working themselves up into a frenzy the writer tells us there was none to answer and no one heard and then

Elijah steps forth and he rebuilds the altar why does he do it tells us so that they will know that you are God and that you hear and that you answer and he cries to his God and his God hears and his God answers and this was the great discovery that they made in Thessalonica and that's the great discovery I'm sure all of you who love the Lord here today made and you're searching in so many different places in so many different corners where you tried the broken cisterns and the waters failed even as we stooped to drink they fled and mocked us as we wailed no none but Christ can satisfy and so it is you see that this great turning point was one that motivated them to service he says you turn to serve the living

God and the idea there in the context is to serve as servants even as slaves to serve the living God well then we're coming to his table tomorrow if we are spared we are coming hopefully as us servants we are coming because we want to come not that there is anything within us that would commend us and yet we come because we know it is our privilege to come we know it is our duty to come do this in remembrance of me and we come because we know that the blood that he shed for us is sufficient to remove my sin and your sin there was only one identity mark in the night when the destroying angel went through the land before

[ 41 : 27 ] Israel came out of Egypt what was that the blood on the doorposts and on the lintel and if we have that blood perhaps its effectiveness and its power by our reckoning has faded or diminished but the blood the hymn writer tells us will never lose its power let us come then and let

us fill our day not with that which would distract us from the preciousness of remembering the death of our Lord but let us fill our day and reflect a mode as the apostle reflected on the great events of Thessalonica we could reflect on the great events that changed our lives that made us a new creation in Christ that made us see something of his beauty something of his wonder and when we look on that we want to come in submissiveness and as servants to call upon his name to pay our vows before his people perhaps you feel that you are so unsuited and so unfitted perhaps you never sat at the

Lord's table and you think yourself so unsuited and unfitted well I suppose that you could ask many Christians in here today and they would tell you the same we will never be ready or suited or fitted in a sense but we are nevertheless told we are commanded to come and sit at his table and when we reflect on all he has done for us in the awfulness and splendor of Calvary surely it is little enough for you and for me to want to be with his people at his table and he goes on from that and we finished in the last verse he goes beyond recollection to a great prospect that lies ahead and that is the prospect of the church of God the church militant on earth will ultimately be the church triumphant in heaven we have turned from idols to serve the living God oh that the Lord would make us willing to be in real service for him and that the Lord would heal us and restore us supreme to theatori this will be to theader to the