

November 8, 2020
Sunday Evening Service
Series: 1 Thessalonians
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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TURNING TO JESUS WHO DELIVERS US 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

I cannot escape Bunyan's picture of Christian and others walking the road to the Celestial City. It is the most apt description of the life of those who trust God, from the Old Testament to the New and into our own lives. Life is a walk. God required in His law telling His people, *You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 18:4)*. The psalmist understood that truth and wrote, Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD (Psalm 119:1)! We ran into this same picture over and over in our recent study through Ephesians. Paul challenged us, *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called (Ephesians 4:1)*. He admonished, *Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds (Ephesians 4:17)*. He warned, *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise (Ephesians 5:15)*.

Picture your life as a walk along some of the beautiful trails in our state and national parks. Along the way you will have to make important decisions like, "Do I turn to the left here or turn to the right?" Or "Do I just continue going straight?" Your decision is very important because it determines your destination. Unlike the foolish doctrine of salvation promoted by false teachers, all trails through the woods do not end up at the same place.

The essential message of everything that bombards us from the world through media and peers is that you must decide that life is about you. We are told quite convincingly that our comfort, satisfaction, happiness, fulfillment must be found in the passing

popularity, pleasures, and possessions of this world. The siren call of the world is "turn in here," "take this path," "make this choice." And all of those choices lead eventually to dissatisfaction in life and eternal destruction.

God the Holy Spirit comes to us in powerful conviction through the gospel saying, "Turn out of that path of destruction and turn to Christ who delivers you." Have you heard the Holy Spirit's call? Did you respond? Did you turn out of the path of destruction and into the path of deliverance? How do you know? Can observers of your life tell on which path you are walking?

Paul's opening words in this letter to the believers in Thessalonica commend them for turning out of the path of the world and into the path that follows after Christ. How could he tell that such a change came into their lives? Change toward Christ is obvious. The text explains to us how obvious it is.

Evidence of Change (vv.6-7).

The word "and" at the beginning of verse six indicates that Paul is adding to the evidence he piled up in verse five. Evidence about what? *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you (v.4)*. We rightly ask, "Wait Paul. How do you know that God has chosen those people for salvation?" Evidence. That's the point! Evidence like, *Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:5b)*.

And further evidence of their election is found in that *you became imitators of us and of the Lord (v.6a)*. Christians are imitators. But whom do we imitate? At this point, we need to zero in on the word *became*. It is an aorist passive indicative verb that means at a point in the past a change came over them. It was an obvious, observable change.

The change came about when the Holy Spirit brought the gospel to them in supernatural power. The result was conviction of sin and conviction that Christ is their only means of salvation from the penalty for sin. And the result of that was change in that they "became. . . ." The people became something they had not been before. In the past the people simply imitated their pagan world

because they were powerless to do otherwise. Now they were imitating, conforming to a different pattern. The KJV translates the Greek word by saying that they became “followers.” That gives us the idea of what it means to be a disciple. The disciples who followed Jesus did not just walk around Palestine following where Jesus went. They followed with the intention of becoming like Him.

When a person follows and becomes like Christ, he or she will also experience the same reactions that came against Christ. That is why the new believers in Thessalonica became mimickers (the Greek word gives us the English word “mimic”). Who did they mimic? Who did they imitate? They took on the characteristics of Paul, Silas, and Timothy. By following after, mimicking the servants of the Lord, they of necessity became imitators of Christ. Indeed, all **Christians** should display the character of our Lord. That is what the word Christian means—like Christ.

And because we take on the character of Christ, we should not be surprised to experience the same responses He experienced in this world of sin. Paul connected the two truths in 2:14: *For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews (1 Thessalonians 2:14).*

What are the results of imitating Christ? The people *received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit*. People who live like Christ will be afflicted. The word translated *affliction* speaks of persecution in the form of trouble or tribulation that causes emotional stress and anguish. Jesus warned in the parable of the Sower and the seed that this kind of tribulation causes the person who is not truly born again to abandon his profession of faith (Matthew 13:21).

This is also the word that Jesus used to describe the great tribulation that will come upon the world in the last days, *“Great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be” (Matthew 24:21)*. Jesus promised His followers that in Him we have peace but in the world we will face such persecution and trouble (John 16:33).

Not surprisingly then, when the sinners in Thessalonica were brought under conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit and received the good news of the gospel, salvation from sin, immediately they

experienced affliction. We read the historical context in Luke’s account in Acts. *But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:5-6).*

And yet in vivid conflict with human wisdom we learn that people who live like Christ, and are therefore persecuted, should experience the joy of the Holy Spirit. How does that work? This is a reference to the joy that the Holy Spirit gives. He gives us the joy that Jesus promises to His followers. But if we are quenching or stifling the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we will not have the joy.

Consider the formula for Holy Spirit joy. Jesus taught, *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love” (John 15:9)*. Okay, it surely makes sense that experiencing God’s love brings us joy. But Jesus continued speaking to say, *“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10)*. Whoa! We didn’t see that coming. Jesus plainly said that keeping His commands are necessary for abiding in His love which is where we find joy. But we know very well that our flesh does not **enjoy** keeping commands. Maybe there is a difference between fleshly joy and spiritual joy. Jesus assured us that true joy, fullness of joy is found in obeying Him. *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11)*.

The great result of sinners becoming Christians is that the new Christians become examples. Notice who were the observers of the example. Paul told the Thessalonians that *you became an example to all the believers (v.7a)*. The new Christians in Thessalonica attracted attention from those who persecuted them because they were different. But they also set a good example for other believers. Collectively, the believers of that new church left an impression on others. The Greek word for *example* speaks of the impression left by a hammer blow. Others could see it.

Who? Who were the other believers who observed this example of new faith? They were the believers *in Macedonia and in Achaia*

(v.7b). Macedonia was the northern province of Greece where Thessalonica, Philippi, Berea were located. Achaia was the southern province of Greece where Athens and Corinth were located. Christians all over that part of Asia heard about how people in Thessalonica came to know Christ, were persecuted for it, and endured it with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

And also . . .

Proclamation of Change (vv.8-9).

The example of changed lives was obvious because the word of the Lord sounded forth. It was a testimony of God's word. *For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia (v.8a)*. It wasn't just the news about the Christians' experience that spread. From those Christians the word of the Lord was blasted like a trumpet. The news was not that terrible sinners were now living good, clean lives and enjoying God's blessing. Rather, the *word of the Lord* was the gospel, the Bible truth about the work of the Holy Spirit to redeem sinners. It was declared (sounded forth) and then kept having results (perfect passive indicative).

What people heard and observed was a testimony of new-found faith. *Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything (v.8b)*. In fact, everywhere Paul and the team went they heard reports about the Thessalonians' example. It means that the news of the gospel was already known about wherever they went, which according to Acts 17 means that Paul must have been hearing reports all the way down to Athens in southern Greece. There is always a need to say something about the gospel – even in Greenville. But when word of the gospel has spread, at least people are familiar with it.

The word of change was a good report. Other people talked about reception of the gospel. *For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you (v.9a)*. By the time of the writing of this letter, Paul had reunited with Timothy and Silas in Corinth and they all shared reports of what believers throughout Asia were saying. A major focus of the reports was how the sinners in Thessalonica heard Paul and the team declare the gospel and how they embraced it with open hearts.

That means that other people were talking about the critical change in the lives of those former sinners. They talked about *how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (v.9b)*. First, we notice the important move as they turned to God. Redeemed sinners do not add God or Jesus to their lives. A turning away, a turning toward is the essence of redemption. God buys us out of the slave market of sin and puts us in His family as sons and daughters. Therefore, we are no longer slaves to sin. And because sin no longer owns us, we have to turn from idols.

Serving idols is the norm for people who are born with the sin principle which is all of us. By nature we serve the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). Our idols are manifold, innumerable. But the chief idol and the foundation or creator of all idols is ourselves. All tangible, physical, or ideological idols are simply an expression of our will to serve ourselves.

Having turned to the true and living God, the believers have to serve Him. It must have been astonishing news for Christians throughout Asia to hear how thoroughly the Thessalonians had left the sin of their idols and fully embraced Christ in spite of persecution. What kind of impact would we make on our world if we did the same thing?

We have come to a point in our culture where to truly live for Christ, to truly forsake the idols of human origin, will call attention to ourselves and is very likely to result in persecution. In the next couple of years, we are going to witness more and more lawsuits, fines, mockery on social media, and possibly even imprisonment for Christians who will not bow to the god of sexual perversion or the god of socialistic ideology. How many professing Christians will create ways to “tolerate” the world's idolatry in kind, compassionate expressions of love?

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit promise that we are on a worldwide, humanity-wide downward slide into bold, blatant, abject idolatry. The world will not only ignore God but will raise their fists of rebellion against God more and more as we work toward the end of the age. That is going to bring more and more tribulation for the saint. Is there any relief, any hope for us as the tribulation increases? What hope was there for the new believers who were being persecuted in Thessalonica?

Promise of Change (vv.10).

Part of the result of sinners turning from idols to God is that we also turn to God to wait for the Son. Here is the most wonderful promise that our Savior Christ is coming from heaven. And so we wait for his Son from heaven (v.10a). Our hope is the promise that God the Son is going to come from heaven. We rest in this truth by faith since we don't even really know where heaven is. But Christ will return.

We wait for the same Christ who rose from the dead (v.10b). Christ's resurrection is very important in the context of this promise. It connects with the promised first fruits and resurrection taught in 1 Corinthians 15. That connection is made between the teaching of this letter and the teaching in 1 Corinthians by the statement in 4:14. *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep (1 Thessalonians 4:14)*. Why would a promise like that offer hope? Why would Jesus coming from heaven give hope to persecuted believers?

Like us, those early believers in Christ looked forward to deliverance. They waited and longed for *Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (v.10c)*. The great promise is that Jesus will deliver. The word *deliver* means to save, to protect, to help out of distress. It is a synonym of the Greek work *sozo* that we typically translate, "save." But this word means more than just save.

The word is not found all that often in the New Testament. Jesus taught us to pray that God will deliver us from temptation (Matthew 6:13). The mockers at the cross cried out, *"Let God deliver Him"* (Matthew 27:43). Overall, we find the word for deliver used throughout the New Testament, but not once in the Revelation.

In the larger context of the letter, the promised deliverance looks like this: *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)*.

We look for Jesus because we know that He will deliver from coming wrath. That is not a reference to the wrath of pagans who

were persecuting the Christians (2:14). Jesus promised that His followers in every age will experience the wrath of those who hate Him. He said, *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12)*. Jesus told us to, *"Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours" (John 15:20)*. Obviously, the Lord expects us to endure that wrath learning to trust God and resting in His grace.

This could be a reference to God's wrath of eternal judgment. Jesus taught, *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36)*. Paul taught, *But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed (Romans 2:5)*. In the same letter we read, *Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God (Romans 5:9)*. And, *What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction (Romans 9:22)*. Christians must be confident that, according to the Bible's promises, we will be delivered from that wrath.

But, interpreted in the context of the rest of this letter, this is likely a reference to the coming outpouring of God's wrath in vengeance upon the world of sinners. This is the wrath that Jesus talked about at the end of the age. *"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be" (Matthew 24:21)*. This wrath is described more fully in chapter five. *While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape (1 Thessalonians 5:3)*.

This is God's wrath described as being poured out against sinners on earth in successive plagues in seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls (Revelation 6:1-16:21). There are eight references to God's wrath in the context of these detailed judgments. And as the

judgments begin, the sinners will be found, *Calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Revelation 6:16)*. It is interesting that those doomed sinners don't cry, "Deliver us" but "Hide us." That is because only Christ whom they have rejected can deliver from His wrath. At the end, the judgment is described: *From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty (Revelation 19:15)*.

We who have trusted Christ to redeem us from the penalty of sin have our hope firmly fixed in Jesus' promise to return from heaven to deliver us from that coming wrath. It is also true that our hope is fixed in Him delivering us from eternal wrath as well. But the context of this letter will show that we are looking for a great and marvelous catching away from the end of the age of tribulation.