

## 1 Thessalonians 1 (9) – How Holy Makes You Happy

There are a lot of ups and downs and all arounds in this life. In your life. And if you're a Christian, there are times when you just don't feel like you're doing a good job. You aren't praying like you should. You're not helping others like you could. You don't want to do the things you would. And you need to be reminded of what the Christian life is about. It's about Christ. Our assurance is in his person. We fall. We fail. Jesus does not. Praise his name.

Maybe you feel the pressure of your position, and the growing weight of your responsibilities. You need to remind yourself that your identity is found in Jesus, not in your job. The ancient theologian Augustine said this – For you, I am Bishop, but with you, I am a Christian. The first is an office accepted, the second a grace received. One a danger, the other safety. If then I am gladder by far to be reckoned with you than I am to be placed over you, I shall, as the Lord commanded, be more completely your servant.

The Apostle Paul was living this out. In 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10, he discusses what he has seen and heard about the Thessalonians. And he gives them several lines of evidence that demonstrate why Paul knew that God had saved them. And him. And how you can know that God has saved you.

In vs.6, we saw the first two evidences. The first evidence of salvation is community. Paul says, *“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.”* Walking with Jesus means walking with others who walk with Jesus. The second evidence was perseverance. Paul says, *“for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”* Clinging to God in faith, and the power of God to give you joy in Jesus in hard situations, this is another evidence of salvation. You walk the hard, narrow road with others.

In vs.7, Paul said, *“you became an example.”* Living as an example of faith, in a way that is vibrant, and growing, this is more evidence of salvation. The Thessalonians had heard about Jesus from Paul. Then they began to follow Jesus, after the manner of Paul. Then they became examples to others, just as

Paul had been an example to them. They were hearers of the word, then doers of the word, and their lives became teachers of the word.

In vs.8, Paul said, “*your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.*” This was more evidence. The Thessalonians had become enthusiastically evangelistic. These believers were spreading the good news about Jesus everywhere. They were talking about the faith, and other people were talking about them. Genuine Christians tell people about Jesus. It is another evidence of saving faith.

In vs.9, Paul says true believers will believe in God’s word, and proclaim it as true. *For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you* – People from all over knew that the Thessalonian church had welcomed the gospel and proclaimed it to others. Paul didn’t have to ask how it was going in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians were “living out loud.” And Paul was hearing about it before he even asked about it.

Paul continues in vs.9 by saying that the Thessalonians *turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*. This is more evidence. They turned from their idols and they also turned to Christ. Our idols today aren’t made of metal, wood, or stone. People today have idols when they think there are things they cannot live without, or that they can’t be happy without. Repentance is about turning from your idols and turning towards God. It is about replacing your idols, one by one, with God as the center of your life.

It was obvious that the Thessalonians had changed the direction of their lives. It was God’s grace that did that! They did more than turn around a little because they felt bad about something. No, they were truly turned around, and other people knew it, and were talking about it. Word gets around when you really turn around.

There is a genuine quality among those whom are truly repenting toward God by having faith in Jesus Christ. It isn’t just about how far they’ve come, or how fast they’ve grown. It is about the direction they’re headed. God’s people are not perfect, but they aren’t what they once were. And other

people notice it. Especially God's people. Yes, you still sin, but now you battle with it, with Jesus as the center of your life.

This is a very important line of evidence; repentance! This isn't talking about perfection; this is talking about direction. As you begin to walk towards God, your whole life begins to be a repentant life. You keep turning, and you keep progressing. You'll take some steps back and some steps forward at times. But the direction of your life will always get turned around towards Jesus.

John Newton – I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.

Turning to God from idols and serving the living and true God, these should be happening together. Perhaps not fully, or all at once, but in an increasing fashion. People can leave an idol, and that is good. But people can leave an idol and not turn to Jesus. They can take up some other idol. And some people start serving Jesus, but they still cling to an idol. The way forward in this process is that you learn to leave your idols behind like the Thessalonians did. They turned from their idols *in order* to *serve* Christ. Part of successfully putting off the old is by putting on the new.

You want people to turn around right away, and you get frustrated with them because you forget that repentance is an ongoing process. People are in "the process of the turn." So, when Paul says *you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*, you see the process happening there. And Paul is talking about their process of repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ by pointing to the other evidences he's given, and now with the evidence of the witnesses that are watching them turn.

Here is a brief, practical way that describes the process. You go from "I don't need it," to "I don't want it," to "I can't stand it," with the ultimate reason being because God's not in it. You can be "done with" something for a long time before your motivation is as sanctified as it can be.

It's important to understand that turning around can be a process. And you need to understand the process in your own life as well as watching the process unfold in other lives. You need to be patient, but not complacent, with the process in your own life. And when it comes to others, you need to be patient, and ask God what is your part in their process. Your prayers might be your only role. With loved ones, you need to pray that God would give you wisdom, prudence, and humility, so that you would know what to do (wisdom), when to do it (prudence), and how to do it (humility).

Again, you go from "I don't need it," to "I don't want it," to "I can't stand it," because God's not in it. And in the path of the process, you begin to discover something. It is a truth that you need to tenaciously hold onto, live out, and model for others, because it makes all the difference. Here it is: Repentance toward holiness is not an awful process of losing your happiness. True holiness brings true happiness. And that is the truth.

Nothing can make you happier than God. This is where faith comes in, because the world, your flesh, and the devil try and convince you otherwise. They try and deceive you into thinking that holiness means no happiness. The truth is that holiness means you find new reasons for happiness, and being happy in Jesus and the things of God, this is how you find true joy, without having to find some temporary fix or sinful coping mechanism.

Jerry Bridges – God intends the Christian life to be a life of joy – not drudgery. The idea that holiness is associated with a dour disposition is a caricature of the worst sort. In fact, just the opposite is true. Only those who walk in holiness experience true joy.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul instructs church leaders to patiently shepherd people through this process – *And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.* When you've come a long way down the road of sanctification, you might forget how long that process was for you. And you might expect others to move faster and arrive sooner than you did.

You need to be constantly and consistently reminded to be patient with people in the process. 2 Timothy 2:24-26 – *And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*

In Paul's day, people were still bowing down and sacrificing to manmade idols of wood, metal, and stone, etc., but not so much today. But the idolatry is still the same. People had served idols because they felt that they must serve them or they would not receive the protection or blessing they wanted. People today have idols when they think there are things they cannot live without, or that they cannot be happy without.

The word "serve" in vs.9 is from a Greek word that means slave. People are slaves to their idols, and they become slaves of Christ. They drop this other thing that they are in fear of losing, in fear of not having, in fear of thinking they cannot live without it, that they won't be happy without it. And they now serve Jesus, in the fear of the Lord. Jesus has become the one ultimate thing in their lives, the one thing that everything else revolves around, the one thing that matters most, the one thing they cannot live without, the one thing that they find their significance, satisfaction, and security in. Instead of being a slave to some dead thing they are a slave to the One who is Life itself. And their holiness brings them happiness. Especially when life is hard.

Get that truth down into you: holiness can make you happy. When nothing else can. When everything else goes wrong. When you've messed everything up. That's what happens when you turn around from your idols to serve Jesus. The more you truly do it, the happier you'll truly be. Your assurance will increase. And remember that this is a process. Be patient. It is worth it.

Paul was patient with the Thessalonians. He wasn't nitpicking every little detail of their process. He was cheerleading before correcting. He wasn't cynical, he was celebrating. You need to go and do likewise. Amen.

In Luke 10:20, Jesus says – *Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*

Our greatest rejoicing is not about how far you've come or how fast you're going. It is not how successful you become or how gifted you are. It is that you are written in the book of life in heaven.

Salvation isn't just about knowing it intellectually. Salvation is about living it experientially. Having joy in your salvation is about meditating on it with your mind, which leads to experiencing it in your life.

The Thessalonians had joy even in affliction because their joy wasn't in their situation. Their joy was in their savior.

If you are a Christian, God has made you holy by setting you apart for himself in Jesus Christ.

And that is how holy makes you happy.