

Turning • 1 Thessalonians 1

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Read Acts 17:1-9

B. Ichii

1. Some years ago Japan was terrorized by a series of shocking crimes.
2. Tockichi Ishii seemed the epitome of evil. // He brutally murdered men, women & children.
3. Eventually he was caught, convicted & sentenced to death.
4. A week before his execution Canadian missionaries visiting the prisoners came by Ishii's cell.
5. They tried sharing Christ with him but he only glared at them like a dangerous caged animal.
6. As they left, they slipped a Bible thru the bars of Ishii's cell.
7. With nothing else to do, Ishii read that Bible from cover to cover.
8. The story of Christ so impacted him he became a new man.
9. The transformation was so dramatic, when the guards came to lead him to execution, they thought Ishii had exchanged cells with another prisoner.
 - a. **Before** his conversion, Ishii looked like a wild beast; his face was a mask of hate & threatened violence that scarred all who saw him.
 - b. But now his countenance was so serene the guards thought Ishii had escaped.
 - c. It was several minutes before he convinced them it really was him, & that Jesus had made the change.

10. Something similar happened in Thessalonica when Paul preached the Gospel to them.

II. TEXT

A. V. 1

Paul, Silvanus [Silas], and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. This is Paul's first letter & one of the earliest in the NT.
2. The sitch was this –
 - a. Paul, Silas, & Tim were in **Corinth** a couple hundred miles south of Thessalonica.
 - b. The team had planted the church in Thessalonica a few months earlier.
 - c. But they had to leave when enemies of the Gospel paid some thugs to start a riot.
 - d. Paul & his team only spent a few weeks in Thessalonica & he was concerned about how they were doing. So after arriving in Corinth, he sent Timothy back to check on them.
 - e. Tim brought back a good report; the Thessalonian church was thriving.
 - 1) Despite persecution the church was growing.
 - 2) Timothy also had a list of questions from the Thessalonians.
 - 3) They were mostly about the End Times & Jesus' Second Coming.
3. Paul's team had only had 3 or 4 weeks in Thessalonica.
 - a. When they first arrived, there wasn't a single believer because the Gospel had not yet reached there.
 - b. When they left a month later, there was a small but solid work going.
 - c. Paul had done much more than preach simple evangelistic messages.
 - d. He'd taught them the **basics** of the Christian Faith & Life Including the End Times & Jesus's Return.
4. If **you've** studied eschatology, you know how confusing it can be.
5. No wonder the Thessalonians had questions for Tim to take back to Paul.
6. Here in the Introduction, Paul doesn't claim sole authorship. This letter was from the whole team.
 - a. Paul had certainly done the majority of the preaching in Thessalonica.
 - b. But **Silas** helped teach & train the new converts.
 - c. Though young, **Timothy** was a gifted pastor Paul was mentoring for ministry.
 - d. They each played a role in planting a solid church that was able to **continue growing** both in quality & quantity when they had to leave after only a month.
7. **Most** effective ministries are a **team-work**, the fruit of a group of people each faithfully using their gifts.
 - a. Such in the case here at CCO.
 - b. God has brought together a group of gifted men & women.

B. Vs. 2-5

² We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers,

1. Unlike the **Galatians** who were a cause of grief because of their foolish turning from grace to legalism, the **Thessalonians** brought **joy** to Paul & his team.

2. Even though it wasn't easy following Christ in their city, they were doing just that – **following Jesus boldly!**

3. Note how Paul recalls how they lived -

³ remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father,

4. There it is again – Paul's triad of Christian virtues: **Faith, Hope & Love**.

5. Their **faith** was genuine because it **worked** – it produced results.

6. Their **love** was real because it **moved them to action**. = **31 Days**

7. Their **hope** was certain because it enabled them to **endure hardship**, knowing God has the last Word & is faithful to reward His people.

8. Then Paul writes something interesting. He rejoiced -

⁴ knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.

9. V. 5 tells how he knew they were chosen -

⁵ For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.

10. Paul **knew** they were born again because of the **power of the Spirit** that marked his preaching there.

a. **Miracles** confirmed his message.

b. And the Thessalonians had experienced an **astounding transformation - a genuine conversion**.

11. Paul remembered how **powerfully** the Spirit had come on him as he preached to them.

a. Of course it was Paul's **habit** to preach the Gospel.

b. He knew what to say & how to say it.

c. But there were special times when the HS came in power & lifted his preaching to a whole new level.

12. I study diligently for Sundays & Wednesdays.

a. I want to make sure I **understand** the passage we're looking at.

b. I **pray** over it, asking God to show me what **He wants me to focus on** & share with you.

c. I trust as I faithfully put God's Word before you week after week, the Spirit will apply it.

d. But **every so often**, the HS comes in power & it's different.

e. It's hard to explain but it's as if I'm standing to the side listening to someone else.

1) It's my voice – but not my words.

2) I can **see** the impact it's having on people.

13. Paul's preaching in Thessalonica was **consistently** marked by that kind of power & presence of the Spirit.

a. And I can't help but wonder if it wasn't because Silas & Timothy were praying **while** Paul was preaching. // [Aaron & Hur – Battle with Amalekites.]

C. Vs. 6-8

⁶ And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.

1. Paul & Silas came to Thessalonica from **Philippi** where they'd been beaten & imprisoned.

2. They **still bore** the marks of their thrashing as they ministered.

3. The Thessalonians what turning to Christ could cost, but came to faith anyway.

4. And indeed, opposition to the Gospel led to violence, but it didn't deter them.

5. They counted it a privilege to suffer for Christ who'd suffered far more for them.

6. Word of the Thessalonians courageous faith had gone out to the rest of the region & encouraged others facing opposition.

⁸ For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

7. Paul led the team to Thessalonica because it was a major center of trade & culture.

a. It was the capital of the region, had a great harbor & was a key city on the busy Egnatian Way that

stretched from Rome to the Far East.

b. It was a large city with a population of 200,000.

c. Every day, **hundreds** of merchants passed through its harbor & streets from all over the Empire.

9. Paul knew if he could plant healthy churches in such places, the Gospel would launch from there to dozens of other far-flung places, like seeds carried on the wind.

10. That's precisely what happened in Thessalonica.

a. Visiting merchants heard of the new faith & went to one of the church services.

b. They were saved & grounded in the faith, which they then took home with them.

c. Paul's vision & strategy was working.

D. Vs. 9-10

⁹ For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *even* Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

1. The Thessalonians had a well-earned reputation for turning from idols to God.

2. That's **remarkable** when you consider the historical context.

3. Thessalonica was the capital of a region called **Macedonia**, home of the all-time great Greek General & leader **Alexander**.

4. The Greeks believed in **many** gods.

a. And because of their reputation as conquerors of the world, the Greek gods were held in the highest regard.

b. Many others adopted the Greek gods as their own. // Even Rome worshipped them.

5. Now, there was no separation of religion & state in the 1st Century.

a. **Everything** was religious.

b. It might not be particularly **moral**, but it was religious.

c. Kings didn't do **anything** without consulting the priests & their omens.

d. Generals never began a war or battle without secure the favor of the gods.

e. Every business venture was begun with elaborate rituals in the hope of gaining an idol's blessing.

f. Every house had a shrine with family idols that were daily given a piece of bread & a drop of wine.

6. Even those who didn't care about the gods performed these rituals because their neighbors **expected** them to.

a. If calamity struck & they'd been **impious**, their neighbors would blame **them**

b. Assuming the gods were **punishing them** because of their failure to give them their due.

7. The point is, **idolatry dominated society**.

8. Thessalonica was 2nd only to Athens in cultural influence. And Athens had **hundreds of idols**.

a. But now in Thessalonica, a new religious movement was thriving;

b. One that claimed there was only one, invisible God Who can't be represented by an image.

c. And devotion to Him required a whole new ritual, creed, & morality.

9. No wonder Paul & his team were accused of **turning the world upside down!**

a. Really, they were turning it right side up.

b. But for those turned upside down by sin, those who've turned right-side up **look** upside down.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Conversion

1. Look at v. 9 again –

For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God

2. That word "**turned**" means **to change**, to **convert**.

a. It was used in secular Greek to refer to something that's come back to its **original & proper place**.

b. It's a word that assumes a back story.

1) A tragedy has occurred & something has been ripped from its home.

2) It can't be what it's supposed to be **until it returns** where it's **supposed to be**.

c. This word 'turn' is change that takes place when that which is lost comes home.

3. Picture a fish. It's proper place is in water. That's the element for which it's created.
 - a. If we take it out of the water & set it on a table, it can't breathe.
 - b. It'll last for a while as it flops around, but eventually, it'll die.
 - c. The only way to keep it alive, the only way it can **thrive**, is to be returned to the water.
4. That's what's happened to mankind.
 - a. God created us for an intimate love relationship w/Him. That's the element we were designed to dwell in.
 - b. But like a fish that foolishly jumps out of its bowl, we jumped out of that relationship into self-will.
 - c. It's killing us – more slowly than a fish out of water, but no less certainly.
5. You can dress up a fish in a little tuxedo, spray it with some Channel so it doesn't smell so fishy,
 - a. It doesn't matter how good it looks & smells – it's gonna die if you don't put it back in the water.
 - b. Give it an iPod with some Sennheiser earbuds.
 - c. Take it to the movies & buy it popcorn & a Coke – it won't matter!
 - d. It's gonna' die because the water is the only place it was meant to be & it can't **really live** unless it's in that water.
6. **WE** aren't **really living** unless we're walking in fellowship with God.
7. Life in this world without God is like a fish out of water. **All dressed up with nowhere to go.**
8. The Gospel is the good news that Jesus lifted man out of sin & put him back where he belongs.
9. For the people of Paul's day, turning back to the true & living God could only happen by turning **away** from idols.
10. So Christians in the 1st Century **dismantled** their household shrines. They got rid of their idols.
 - a. They stopped going to pagan temples.
 - b. When Rome demanded they say, "Caesar is Lord" they humbly declined, knowing to do so could lead to a fine, a beating, or worse.
11. **But the change went even deeper.**
12. Those early believers understood that idols only represented a **deeper** problem, a more subtle sin.
 - a. The battle wasn't between **God & Zeus**. It wasn't between **God & Caesar**.
 - b. Idols are just **masks** our fallen-**self** wears. // And they had turned **from self to God**.
- B. Today
 1. When the early church theologian Augustine returned to his home city of Milan after being gone for several years,
 2. His old lover saw him and assumed they'd renew their affair.
 3. But Augustine was a Christian now and pretended not to hear her.
 4. She ran after him in the street, repeatedly calling, "Augustine, it is I."
 5. Finally he turned & said, "Yes, but it is not I."
 6. The **change** that had taken place in the Thessalonians in their turn from idols to God was **evident to all**.
 7. What change has taken place in us?
 - a. If it were illegal to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?
 - 1) Not bibles, bumper stickers & T-shirts.
 - 2) I mean does your **lifestyle** speak of the change Christ has made in you?
 - b. In v. 3 the Thessalonians were **marked** by faith, hope, & love.