

AUTHOR Mark Howell

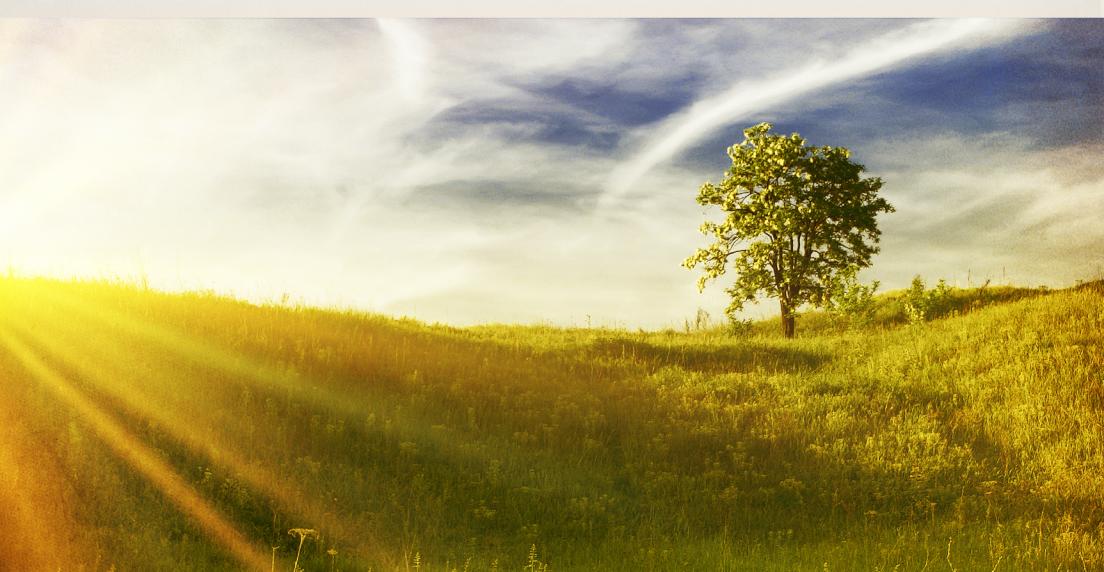
SERIES EDITORS David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida

C H R I S T - C E N T E R E D

Exposition

E X A L T I N G J E S U S I N

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS



“How can the church thrive in modern-day cities that are filled with diversity and littered with false teachings and immorality? The apostle Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians lay out a very relevant roadmap. Paul challenges early Christ followers to live out their faith with an obedience that will lead to their personal transformation and spill over into the lives of even the nonbelievers around them. Dr. Mark Howell brings fresh insight and application to these passages, showing us how believers in Thessalonica experienced many of the same challenges we face today and persevered as they submitted to the authority of Scripture in their lives, learning along the way how to genuinely love, encourage, and serve one another.”

—Kevin Ezell, president, North American Mission Board, SBC

“Dr. Mark Howell has powerfully exegeted and applied the deep riches found in Paul’s letter to those in Thessalonica. Like Paul, who visited this strategic city on his second missionary journey, Howell has ‘reasoned . . . from the Scriptures, explaining and showing that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead’ (Acts 17:2). I am confident that after reading this exposition you, like the Thessalonians themselves, will welcome it ‘not as a human message, but as it truly is, the message of God’ (1 Thess 2:13). Read it and reap!”

—O. S. Hawkins, president/CEO, GuideStone Financial Resources

“Dr. Mark Howell has done an outstanding job in his treatment on First and Second Thessalonians. The result is the product of a scholar’s mind, delivered through a pastor’s heart. This material will be a welcome addition to the library of the pastor in the pulpit and the person in the pew, well documented and written in a style to be easily understood by both. (‘He has put the cookies on the bottom shelf!’) I further believe there is no more timely a message to our current age than this message, written to the Thessalonian Christians. Therefore, I highly recommend Dr. Howell’s work and endorse it without reservation.”

—Dr. Glen E. Owens, Assistant Executive Director, Florida Baptist Convention

“In these engaging expositions Dr. Mark Howell has given us a clear glimpse into a pastor’s heart. The expositions in these pages are not the work of a dry exegete; rather they represent the Word of God as

channeled through the heart of a pastor-shepherd. I'm grateful for these stellar expositions whose tight exegetical work and crisp illustrations bear the marks of their effective leader. I especially appreciate Dr. Howell's attention to the semantic structural analysis of each unit. May they be used to aid us in the work of exalting Christ in the text!"

—Steven W. Smith, vice president for Student Services and Communications, and Professor of Communication, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

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E X A L T I N G J E S U S I N

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in
1 & 2 Thessalonians

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B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

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ISBN 978-0-8054-9645-1

Dewey Decimal Classification: 220.7
Subject Heading: BIBLE. N.T. 1 & 2 THESSALONIANS—
COMMENTARIES \ JESUS CHRIST

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Printed in the United States of America
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SERIES DEDICATION

Dedicated to Adrian Rogers and John Piper. They have taught us to love the gospel of Jesus Christ, to preach the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, to pastor the church for which our Savior died, and to have a passion to see all nations gladly worship the Lamb.

—David Platt, Tony Merida, and Danny Akin
March 2013

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2 Thessalonians

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without a doubt one of life's greatest joys is getting to enjoy the journey with my wife, Carmen, and my two daughters, Abigail and Rebekah. Indeed, God has made my life rich and sweet by entrusting to me the privilege of being Carmen's husband and Abi and Beka's dad. This side of heaven, there is no place where I would rather be than spending time with my three girls. Without their unconditional love, tireless encouragement, and personal sacrifice this commentary would never have been written. Though they do not hear it enough, I could not be more grateful for having the privilege of being the only male in a house full of girls.

I also want to express my profound gratitude to Dr. and Mrs. Paige Patterson for not only welcoming me into their family, but also for treating me as one of their own children. To say that I am blessed would be a gross understatement. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for encouraging me both to pursue my calling with passion and excellence and to love Jesus with all of my heart. To my mother, Donna Howell, thank you for your unconditional love and support even when you did not fully comprehend what your son was doing when he followed God's call to be a pastor. To my dad, Larry Howell, who is now with Jesus and will never get to read this commentary but who now knows perfectly what Paul meant when he wrote, "Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus" (1 Thess 4:14). A special thank you to Mrs. Patterson and Tamra Hernandez for their graciousness in reading and editing my manuscript. And finally, I am deeply grateful to the First Baptist Church of Daytona Beach for granting to me the privilege of being your pastor. Your passionate love for Jesus and His glorious gospel is obvious and contagious.

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Augustine said, “Where Scripture speaks, God speaks.” The editors of the Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary series believe that where God speaks, the pastor must speak. God speaks through His written Word. We must speak from that Word. We believe the Bible is God breathed, authoritative, inerrant, sufficient, understandable, necessary, and timeless. We also affirm that the Bible is a Christ-centered book; that is, it contains a unified story of redemptive history of which Jesus is the hero. Because of this Christ-centered trajectory that runs from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22, we believe the Bible has a corresponding global-missions thrust. From beginning to end, we see God’s mission as one of making worshipers of Christ from every tribe and tongue worked out through this redemptive drama in Scripture. To that end we must preach the Word.

In addition to these distinct convictions, the Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary series has some distinguishing characteristics. First, this series seeks to display exegetical accuracy. What the Bible says is what we want to say. While not every volume in the series will be a verse-by-verse commentary, we nevertheless desire to handle the text carefully and explain it rightly. Those who teach and preach bear the heavy responsibility of saying what God has said in His Word and declaring what God has done in Christ. We desire to handle God’s Word faithfully, knowing that we must give an account for how we have fulfilled this holy calling (Jas 3:1).

Second, the Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary series has pastors in view. While we hope others will read this series, such as parents, teachers, small-group leaders, and student ministers, we desire to provide a commentary busy pastors will use for weekly preparation of biblically faithful and gospel-saturated sermons. This series is not academic in nature. Our aim is to present a readable and pastoral style of commentaries. We believe this aim will serve the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Third, we want the Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary series to be known for the inclusion of helpful illustrations and theologically driven applications. Many commentaries offer no help in illustrations, and few offer any kind of help in application. Often those that do offer illustrative material and application unfortunately give little serious attention to the text. While giving ourselves primarily to explanation, we also hope to serve readers by providing inspiring and illuminating illustrations coupled with timely and timeless application.

Finally, as the name suggests, the editors seek to exalt Jesus from every book of the Bible. In saying this, we are not commanding wild allegory or fanciful typology. We certainly believe we must be constrained to the meaning intended by the divine Author Himself, the Holy Spirit of God. However, we also believe the Bible has a messianic focus, and our hope is that the individual authors will exalt Christ from particular texts. Luke 24:25-27,44-47 and John 5:39,46 inform both our hermeneutics and our homiletics. Not every author will do this the same way or have the same degree of Christ-centered emphasis. That is fine with us. We believe faithful exposition that is Christ centered is not monolithic. We do believe, however, that we must read the whole Bible as Christian Scripture. Therefore, our aim is both to honor the historical particularity of each biblical passage and to highlight its intrinsic connection to the Redeemer.

The editors are indebted to the contributors of each volume. The reader will detect a unique style from each writer, and we celebrate these unique gifts and traits. While distinctive in their approaches, the authors share a common characteristic in that they are pastoral theologians. They love the church, and they regularly preach and teach God's Word to God's people. Further, many of these contributors are younger voices. We think these new, fresh voices can serve the church well, especially among a rising generation that has the task of proclaiming the Word of Christ and the Christ of the Word to the lost world.

We hope and pray this series will serve the body of Christ well in these ways until our Savior returns in glory. If it does, we will have succeeded in our assignment.

David Platt
Daniel L. Akin
Tony Merida
Series Editors
February 2013

1 Thessalonians

Real People—Real Gospel—Real City

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1; ACTS 17:1-9

Main Idea: The gospel of Jesus Christ can transform a people and impact a city.

I. The Gospel Motivates (1:1a) (Acts 17:1-4).

- A. The gospel motivates us to go and tell.
 - 1. We become passionate about the advancement of the gospel (Acts 17:1-2a).
 - 2. We become passionate about the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 17:2b-4).
- B. The gospel motivates us to press on and persevere (Acts 17:5-9).
 - 1. The church keeps going despite adversity (1 Thess 3:1-5).
 - 2. The church keeps growing through adversity (1 Thess 3:6-8).

II. The Gospel Transforms (1:1b).

- A. The gospel transforms people (Thess 1:1b).
 - B. The gospel transforms position (Thess 1:1c).
 - 1. Grace: our standing before God
 - 2. Peace: our relationship with God
-

A common misconception people on the outside of the church have about people on the inside of the church is that people on the inside are somehow insulated from or unaffected by the real struggles of life. Many attenders perpetuate this idea by observing the unwritten rule that when attending church, if you pretend that your life is perfect, you may just be able to convince others that it is. They could borrow a line from the old commercial on a certain deodorant: when in church, never let those in the pews around you “see you sweat.”

Of course, those on the inside know from personal experience that Christians are real people who live in a real world and experience real struggles. The variable changing the equation for a believer is not the absence of these struggles, but a personal, life-changing encounter with a real God through the person of Jesus Christ. From the moment you

embrace the gospel, the entire picture and pursuit of your life is radically transformed. The gospel goes far beyond reforming character or insulating you from life's challenges; it brings about the transformation of your heart.

If ever a city needed this kind of transformation, it was Thessalonica. This city was full of real people who were overwhelmed with real struggles and desperately needed a life-changing encounter with a real God. Thessalonica had a burgeoning population of more than 200,000 Romans, Greeks, and Jews. It was also the temporary home of thousands of sailors, travelers, and immigrants who visited its bustling port or traveled its busy highways. A vibrant economy, a strategic harbor, and a prime location on the Roman Empire's Egnatian Road made Thessalonica one of the most influential cities of the first century. It was the New York, Houston, or Boston of its day—yet for all its assets, Thessalonica was a lost city. The Greeks filled the temples, the Jews attended the synagogue, and the Romans paid homage to Caesar, but a pervasive spiritual darkness covered the city. As Gene Green puts it, the Thessalonians were afloat "in a sea of great religious pluralism and confusion" (Green, *Letters*, 32).

The apostle Paul knew that for the gospel to break through the religious fog of the city, it first had to shine in the hearts of the people. He was convinced that if a church could be planted in this strategically located and culturally diverse city, the gospel could spread to Rome in the West and to Asia Minor in the East.¹ He and his colleagues, Silvanus and Timothy, had personally experienced the transforming power of the gospel. They were now passionately committed to bring this good news to the people of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9).

The Gospel Motivates

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1A AND ACTS 17:1-4

"Be careful" are words all parents have uttered to their children. I can remember, as a child, hearing those words a thousand times, and as a

¹ William Barclay contends that the establishment of the Thessalonian church was vital for the advancement of the gospel and essential for the rapid spread of Christianity (Barclay, *Letters*, 181). Paul obviously recognized the strategic importance of this church. Timothy's report about the health of the church was not only a cause for much rejoicing but also a reason to be hopeful about the future advancement of the gospel (1 Thess 3:1-10).

parent I have also shared them with my children. After all, what loving parent wants a child to take unnecessary risks? In life, risk—whether it be an uncertain investment, a drive on a dangerous mountain road, or sharing a secret with an untrustworthy friend—is something to be avoided.

However, when you follow Jesus Christ you do more than choose a different life; in a real sense, a different life chooses you. This new life leads you to take big steps and bold risks. Jesus put it this way: “If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it” (Luke 9:23-24). Later Jesus would look squarely at the multitudes and challenge them to “calculate the cost” of following Him (Luke 14:28-33). Risk comes at great cost, and not everyone is willing to pay it. Denying self, taking up crosses, and following a revolutionary figure like Jesus Christ are not natural pursuits for anyone. This kind of risk-taking requires a supernatural motivation.

The Gospel Motivates Us to Go and Tell

The Thessalonian letter begins by introducing the founders of the church—Paul, Silvanus (Silas), and Timothy (1:1). They had been in the beginning weeks of their second missionary journey, and their arrival in Thessalonica was not accidental. Behind the scenes God had been supernaturally preparing the way. Through divine intervention, Paul had experienced the unmistakable call of God to take the gospel to the cities of Macedonia. His response was decisive and immediate (Acts 16:9-10). Macedonia boasted some of the most strategically located, culturally diverse, and spiritually dark cities of the ancient world. What better place to preach the good news!

Before arriving in Thessalonica, Paul, Silas, and Timothy had visited Philippi. Philippi proved to be both a formidable place to preach the gospel and a serious test of their resolve and character. Although their experience in Philippi nearly cost them their lives, it did not shake their confidence in God’s calling. Far from being dissuaded from their mission, Paul, Silas, and Timothy forged ahead with a renewed sense of passion and urgency. They rejoiced that in the midst of their personal adversities, God was up to something big. Many lives were transformed, a vibrant church was planted, and the gospel was advancing.

We become passionate about the advancement of the gospel (Acts 17:1-2a). With the trials of Philippi behind them, Paul and his companions came

expectantly to Thessalonica. For them, ministry was less about their own good fortune and more about the advancement of the good news. How unfortunate to view ministry as more about our comfort than about God's calling or to be more consumed about what we want God to do for us than about what He desires to do through us. We would do well to recognize a discernible link between adversity and the great purposes of God. The biblical record is replete with testimonies of how God uses the suffering of His servants to bring about His most significant work.

The pattern emerging from Paul's ministry was that whether he experienced a revival or a riot, he remained inexorably committed to his calling. Dietrich Bonhoeffer powerfully captures what it means to follow Christ in this way:

God honors some with great suffering and grants them the grace of martyrdom, while others are not tempted beyond their strength. But in every case it is one cross. It is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering that everyone has to experience is the call which summons us away from our attachments to this world. It is the death of the old self in the encounter with Jesus Christ. Those who enter into discipleship enter into Jesus' death. They turn their living into dying. . . . Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death.
(Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 87)

So whether he was beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, chased and pursued in Thessalonica, or ridiculed and mocked in Athens, Paul affirmed without hesitation that he was not ashamed of the gospel (Rom 1:16).

We become passionate about the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 17:2b-4). Without question, our lives are awash in a sea of opinions. From well-meaning friends to aggressive advertisers, there is never a shortage of people who want to tell us what we should do or how we should live. However, followers of Jesus Christ do not interpret the world through the lens of human opinion; they interpret the world through the lens of Scripture.

Upon their arrival in Thessalonica, Paul, Silas, and Timothy made their way to the synagogue. It provided the perfect setting to preach the good news. Their goal was not to add another religious opinion to the already overly saturated religious climate of Thessalonica. Instead, for three weeks Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2). Notice that he did not talk *about* the Scriptures, he reasoned *from*

the Scriptures. There is a big difference. Faithful biblical exposition will always help people to see the text for themselves. Preachers and teachers must never assume that people will connect their thoughts with the truths of the biblical text. They must be shown what the text says and where the text says it. Biblical exposition is simply helping people to read their Bibles for themselves.

Paul's pattern of preaching provides preachers with a helpful model for faithful Bible exposition. This can be clearly seen by Luke's description of how Paul "reasoned" from Scripture, "explaining" its meaning and "showing" that Jesus was the Messiah who was raised from the dead (Acts 17:2-3). That brings together *argumentation*, *explanation*, and *illustration*. His approach was logical, it was thorough, and it was unmistakably biblical.

Notice carefully Paul's threefold approach in Acts 17:2-3.

- He reasoned from the Scriptures by using carefully crafted arguments to demonstrate the Christocentric focus and theological significance of the Scriptures. He engaged their minds with hopes that God would enlighten their hearts.
- He explained the meaning of the Scriptures by helping his listeners to know what was said and where the Scriptures said it.
- He illustrated biblical truth by placing it before the people in such a way that they could see the implications of its message for their lives.

Clearly, the gospel message connected with more than a few of the Thessalonians. Luke tells us, "some of them were persuaded . . . including a great number of God-fearing Greeks, as well as a number of the leading women" (Acts 17:4). The good news had arrived in Thessalonica, but this good news was about to present Paul and his companions with a big problem.

The Gospel Motivates Us to Press On and Persevere (Acts 17:5-9).

Whenever the gospel is preached, you can generally anticipate one of three responses. First, some people will get angry. This response is common in today's world when Christians are regularly labeled as hatemongers for declaring the exclusivity of Jesus as the only way to God. Second, some people will elevate that anger to the level of persecution. Around the globe untold millions of Christians live in imminent physical danger and many have lost their lives for the sake of preaching Jesus. Finally,

when the gospel is preached, there will always be some people who will embrace the message and be saved.²

These were the exact responses in Thessalonica. The excitement of the Jews, God-fearing Greeks, and leading women who embraced the gospel was about to be interrupted by an angry mob of envious Jews and evil men who had no appetite for the message. Their initial response of anger had escalated to persecution. The gospel that had come to Thessalonica was threatening to turn their city “upside down” by challenging the authority of Caesar through the claim that there was “another king—Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7). This *serious charge* came with *serious consequences*. Simply put, the message of Jesus was counter-cultural to the Thessalonians. It hit the very heart of the city. If Jesus was the true King, then Caesar was not. If Jesus was the *only* Savior, then all the shrines and temples were worthless monuments built to worship worthless gods. If Jesus was in fact the Son of God, then God must be real. And if God was indeed real, then they were accountable to Him. The message of Jesus was therefore unpalatable to most of the Thessalonians, and they were determined to mute the message and the messengers by whatever means necessary. **When Jesus Christ is faithfully preached, you don't have to go looking for trouble; trouble will often come looking for you.** Hence, out of growing concern for their personal safety, the new Thessalonian converts implored Paul, Silas, and Timothy to leave the city. Under cover of darkness, they left the fragile new church that had been established in Thessalonica.

The church keeps going despite adversity (1 Thess 3:1-5). The decision to leave the city was doubtlessly painful for Paul. A true shepherd is driven not by personal ambition but by pastoral concern. Added to his own personal struggles, a pastor also carries the burdens of those entrusted to his care. Most pastors will tell you that even when God calls them to a new ministry, their fond affection remains for the people they leave behind. Paul may have continued on his journey to advance the gospel, but his heart was still very much in the city. He may have escaped the persecution of the angry mob, but he could not escape his concern for the new believers he left behind. Was the adversity too great? Were they still running the race? Did they feel as if he had abandoned them? When you gaze through the window of Paul's heart, you begin to see

² See Acts 4:1-4 for this same threefold response to the preaching of Peter and John at the temple in Jerusalem.

his passionate love for the church. When he finally pens his letter to the church, his words give us some indication of the inner turmoil he experienced by having to leave them so hastily.

Therefore, when we could no longer stand it, we thought it was better to be left alone in Athens. And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith, so that no one will be shaken by these persecutions. For you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. In fact, when we were with you, we told you previously that we were going to suffer persecution, and as you know, it happened. For this reason, when I could no longer stand it, I also sent him to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter had tempted you and that our labor might be for nothing. (3:1-5)

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to be assured of his love for them. He also wanted to know how they were doing. When Timothy returned with an update, what Paul learned brought great joy to his heart.

The church keeps growing through adversity (3:6-8). The Thessalonian church was alive and well. Instead of snuffing out the light of the gospel, the adversity had the opposite effect. As early church father Tertullian so aptly affirmed in his *Apologeticus*, persecution quite often leads to a stronger church because the blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the church. The seeds that Paul had planted in Thessalonica were growing in the fertile soil of adversity. The Thessalonian church was growing in its faith in Christ and in its love for Paul. Of course, the church was not perfect. The church was made up of real people who were living out their faith in a very real world. The gospel brought them transformation in their hearts but they had a long way to go in the sanctification of their lives. Paul would address this in greater detail later in the letter.

The Gospel Transforms

1 THESSALONIANS 1:1B

During my 25 years of ministry I have witnessed dozens of programs, campaigns, and initiatives that have promised to bring new life to the church. Many of these have been commendable and have provided valuable resources and offered helpful insights to and for pastors like me as I have sought to lead the church. Yet even a cursory survey of the ecclesiastical landscape reveals that despite the implementation of

new programs and strategies, an alarming number of churches are plateaued or declining. To borrow a common phrase, it is as if we have been “rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.” New life does not always accompany new programs. Perhaps the most helpful thing that a pastor can do to breathe new life into his church is not to introduce a new church growth model or to implement the latest church growth strategy. Rather, the most important thing a pastor can do may be to recall what the church really is and refocus his energy into what the gospel really does. The key to breathing new life into your church may not be in the discovery of something new. The key may be found in your discovery of a passionate recommitment to proclaiming something that is old.

The Gospel Transforms People

The word translated “church” is *ekklēsia* coming from two Greek words (*ek kaleō*) meaning “called out.” The church then is the “called-out ones.” As you have already observed, Paul’s preaching impacted the Thessalonians in such a profound way that Jews, God-fearing Greeks, and “leading women” embraced his message. However, if you pick something up, it most often requires that you put something down. When these believers turned *to* God, they were turning *away from* their past way of life. One of the most fundamental truths of the gospel has been expressed in this way. When a person comes to *know* Jesus, they will *know* change and if there is *no* change, there is likely *no* Jesus (2 Cor 13:5).

God called many of the Thessalonians out of the legalism of Judaism, the emptiness of idol worship, and the bankruptcy of religious ritual. They abandoned their former lives “to serve the living and true God” (1:9). Their lives changed and changed radically. They were called out of darkness into light. They were called out of their sin and into sonship. Their new standing was on the basis that they were now “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1b), which is the essence of what it means to be the church. I. Howard Marshall drives this truth home:

The Christian stands in such a relationship to Jesus that his life is determined by his death and resurrection, both that in and through Christ he is a new being and that he is summoned to live a new life in the fellowship of the church. The church, then, is constituted by its relationship to God the Father and to Jesus. (Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 49)

A church is not built on the foundation of programs or strategies, but on the Lord Jesus Christ. When the gospel penetrates hearts it transforms people. Transformed people constitute the church. This concept is the essence of the believers' church, and this was what Paul founded in Thessalonica.

The Gospel Transforms Position

For many years, the American Express Company told its customers that "membership has its privileges." The privileges of a credit card company may offer some short-term benefits, but they pale in comparison to the lasting riches that are guaranteed to those who are in Christ Jesus. To be a member of God's church means that you are the beneficiary of God's grace and peace. Notice that these are not *rights* to which you are entitled, they are *gifts* that are given to the church.

Grace: our standing before God. Before being transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, no person, regardless of how deserving or noble, enjoys a proper relationship with God. Sin, like a thick fog on the darkest of nights, blinds our eyes from seeing God for Who He is. Even our best efforts to cut through the fog and darkness prove to be woefully inadequate. Religion can't do it. Love for our fellow man can't do it. Our best intentions can't do it. We are like the travelers on the highway wanting so desperately to speed on ahead but unable to do so because we can't see beyond the hoods of our cars. You know the feeling of helplessness and frustration if you have ever been in that situation. The fog of our sin is just that way. It is simply too thick and there is nothing we can do to lift it. We are hopelessly lost and there is no way out. We may try to ignore it and press on recklessly, but on the horizon there is a precipice that is growing closer and closer. Many people live their lives in this way. Sin has blinded them and they cannot see. The prognosis is not good. There is a cliff in the distance, and it is called "judgment." They speed down life's highway oblivious to the imminent danger ahead.

Before we can have a relationship with God, God Himself must do something about the fog. He has to help us see through it. Here *the good news* enters the picture. God offers a way out through Jesus Christ. God lifts the fog by grace. Grace in its fullest expression is revealed by the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross. God "made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). By His own initiative, God gives us a way out. The way out is a Person and His name is Jesus Christ.

His forgiveness can't be earned . . . it's a gift. The only way to get this forgiveness is to receive it as a gift (John 1:12). The only way to see God is to embrace Jesus.

The moment we receive Jesus our standing before God radically changes. We are immediately delivered from the fog and the darkness of our sin. Our citizenship is immediately transferred to a different kingdom, and we are clothed with a righteousness that is not our own (Col 1:13-14; Isa 61:10). God did not create the fog; we did. Yet because of His love for us, He provides a way out. God does for us what we could never do for ourselves. Through Christ we now stand in a proper relationship with God, and it is all because of His grace. Life's journey now takes on a new meaning. This is exactly what happened to the Thessalonians. When their standing before God changed, their lives changed because they were the recipients of God's grace.

Peace: our relationship with God. Sin not only destroys our standing before God, it also destroys our peace with God. Sin means war. You and I are at war with each other, and we are at war with God (Col 1:21). When we are at war, there is no real peace. It's no coincidence that public demand for sleep medication nets billions of dollars in revenue for pharmaceutical companies each year. Many of us can't rest peacefully at night because we aren't living with peace during the day. This includes peace in our relationships with others and peace in our relationship with God. The sobering reality is that people are looking for peace in all the wrong places. Jesus Christ offers a lasting peace—peace with one another, peace with yourself, but most important, peace with God.

Let's bring this into focus as it relates to the Thessalonians. An angry mob has stirred up their city, disrupted their fellowship, threatened their well-being, and chased away their friends. This is a recipe for sleepless nights and anxious days, right? Not exactly. You see, you could take away their stuff, but you could not take away their peace. If God's grace is real, then His peace is not only possible, but it is guaranteed. David declares that "the Protector of Israel does not slumber or sleep" (Ps 121:4). Since God is more than capable to keep watch over your life, there is no good reason why any follower of Jesus Christ should not be able to rest no matter how difficult the circumstances.

Conclusion

Indeed, Paul's time in Thessalonica was short. If we did not have access to the "rest of the story," we might readily conclude that his mission there

was a failure. But as we have seen, the faith of these young Thessalonian believers was anything but superficial. They had a genuine love for Christ and a zealous passion for proclaiming His transforming gospel. Despite Paul's forceful eviction from the city, the faith of the Thessalonians persevered. Furthermore, although he was physically absent, his presence continued to be felt as he took up his pen and wrote his epistles. **Even in the midst of the most troubling circumstances, God was doing His work in His way.** Paul would never return to the city of Thessalonica, but God was going to do far more there than Paul ever could have imagined. As John Phillips insightfully notes,

The Holy Spirit showed Paul there was more than one way to evangelize a city. If he could not go back to Thessalonica in person he could write the church a letter. . . . A new method of evangelism was born—literature evangelism. . . . Down through the ages millions have been saved through reading those letters, and millions more have had their faith strengthened. . . . God knows how to overrule our mistakes. He makes the very wrath of man to praise Him. (Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, 341)

That is how God works. No matter how routine the details of your life may appear, not a single detail is wasted by God. If God can use angry mobs (Acts 17:5) and frustrated plans (1 Thess 2:18) to bring about one of the most insightful and encouraging epistles in the New Testament, then you can be sure that He will also use your life experiences to bring about your ultimate good and His greater glory (Rom 8:28). While on this side of heaven you are afforded only an occasional glimpse of what He is doing in the world, you know that God is up to far more than you could ever imagine. The Thessalonians have long since been transported to their eternal home, but their faith continues to inspire and encourage. You stand on their shoulders. You also know that a day is coming when those who follow you will stand on yours. That's what it means to be a part of God's church.

Reflect and Discuss

1. Why do you think so many people try to hide their problems from others when they go to church?
2. What are some ways that you can encourage people in your church to be “real” with one another?

3. What was it about the city of Thessalonica that made it such an important place to plant a church? How does it compare with your city?
4. What was Paul's approach for sharing the gospel? How might you apply his principles?
5. When you preach or teach, do you talk more *about* the Bible than you preach or teach *from* the Bible? How can you do a better job of helping people to see the text?
6. What was the response to Paul's preaching in Thessalonica both positively and negatively? What kind of reaction can you anticipate from those who hear when you faithfully preach the exclusivity of Jesus Christ from the Scriptures?
7. What single characteristic is common to every church? Is this the case in your church?
8. How does adversity reveal the genuineness of one's salvation? How does it affect the genuineness of a church?
9. What do grace and peace mean for your relationship with God? How do they affect your relationship with one another?
10. How are you and your church actively pursuing your calling to advance the gospel?

Living for Today but Longing for Tomorrow

1 THESSALONIANS 1:2-10

Main Idea: The gospel will affect every area of our lives, including our passion for living today and our hope for what is coming tomorrow.

I. A Genuine Church (1:4-6,9-10)

- A. Genuine conversion changes our direction (1:4-6).
- B. Genuine conversion changes our affection (1:9).
- C. Genuine conversion changes our reflection (1:10).

II. A Dynamic Church (1:2-3)

- A. A working faith (1:3a)
- B. A laboring love (1:3b)
- C. An enduring hope (1:3c)

III. A Contagious Church (1:8-9)

- A. Contagious in our proclamation (1:8)
 - B. Contagious in our passion (1:8-9)
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As an athlete, I will always be grateful for the influence that my coaches have had on my life. The life lessons that I learned from them, on and off the practice field, have proven to be invaluable tools in helping me to face life's many challenges. One particular lesson that my coaches taught me was, "little things make big things." My teammates and I were told repeatedly that if we paid careful attention to the little things of life, the big things would take care of themselves. We were thus challenged to be on time for meetings and class, to respect our classmates and professors, to study diligently, to take pride in how organized we kept our lockers, and to perform our practice drills with precision. Our coaches were careful to remind us that our performance during the big game on Saturday would only be as strong as our faithfulness to live with excellence throughout the week.

Mediocrity inspires no one, but those who pursue their lives with passion and excellence challenge and encourage others to do the same. It's no small thing then that Paul begins his letter by thanking God for the genuine commitment of the Thessalonians to the gospel (1:2-3). This church clearly lived for Christ with passion and expectancy. There

was nothing mediocre about their faith, their love, or their hope. They were an inspiration to Paul and to the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (1:8-9). But despite the excellence of the Thessalonians' faith, God was ultimately the source behind every good thing that was happening among them. Hiebert makes this point:

Paul's heart was full of praise because of the good news concerning the Thessalonians, but he did not simply congratulate them on the success that had been achieved. He was well aware that the spiritual results evoking his gratitude were due ultimately neither to the preachers nor the converts. God Himself was the real cause of it all. To Him belonged the thanks for what had been wrought. (Hiebert, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 47)

Because God transforms those whom He saves, we should expect that genuine conversion will produce visible results. As we explore this passage more carefully, we will see how Paul expresses gratitude to God for how the gospel has taken root in the hearts of the Thessalonians. He will identify three characteristics of their *authentic faith*: it was genuine, it was dynamic, and it was contagious.

A Genuine Church

1 THESSALONIANS 1:4-6,9-10

After his customary greeting in verse 1, Paul's first words express his joy in hearing a good report from Timothy concerning the status of the church. The months of mental anguish, not knowing what had become of the church, must have been overwhelming. But when the news finally arrived, Paul could rejoice that their faith had proven to be real. If someone had accused them of being genuine followers of Jesus Christ, the evidence to convict them was apparent: they were guilty as charged. Their faith was working, their love was laboring, and their hope was enduring. Their Christianity meant something. Paul could thus say without equivocation that he "knew" their election by God (1:4).

Here is an important theological point: They were not the elect of God because they worked at their faith. **Rather, because they were the elect of God they had a faith that worked.** The distinction is very important. Election is not something that we earn. An earned salvation would destroy the doctrine of grace. However, while election and salvation are

not earned, they without doubt produce evidence (Jas 2:14-26). Truly there are no Secret Service agents in God's kingdom. As noted, **genuine conversion produces visible results**. If someone followed us around for a week and observed our lives, would there be enough evidence to convict us of being Christians?

Genuine Conversion Changes Our Direction (1 Thess 1:4-6)

From the moment Paul set foot in the Thessalonian synagogue, his aim was to proclaim the good news. For Paul, there was no good news apart from the gospel, so the heart of his message focused on the Old Testament Scriptures that pointed to a risen Lord Jesus and on his own personal encounter with the Lord (Acts 9:1-9; 17:2). Luke gives a glimpse of Paul's preaching when he writes, “[Paul] reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and showing that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead: ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah’” (Acts 17:2-3).

While Paul opened the Scriptures and preached Christ to the Thessalonians, the preaching of the good news was only half the equation. For the gospel to take root, God's Spirit must intervene. Concerning this, John MacArthur insightfully notes,

Faith does not come by merely hearing those words of truth . . . [for] if the truth spoken is not accompanied by the power of God, it accomplishes nothing. But when empowered by God as it enters the prepared soul, the gospel truth saves.
(MacArthur, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 22)

The gospel had come to Thessalonica not in word only but also with great power (1:5). Through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit they were able to comprehend the gospel, and then by an act of saving faith, they embraced it. When the Holy Spirit opened their eyes to understand the gospel, they recognized its divine origin. This was no ordinary message; it was the Word of God (2:13). Their acknowledgement of the divine source of the message explains why, despite the high cost to their personal welfare, they received it with joy and therefore joined with Paul, Silas, and Timothy in following Jesus (1:6).

Genuine Conversion Changes Our Affection (1 Thess 1:9)

Verse 9 provides a vivid picture of what happens to us when we embrace the gospel: we turn from idols (repentance), turn to God (faith), and

turn our lives over to God (service). The Thessalonians did not merely *try on* Jesus to see if He would fit into the wardrobe of their lives. Instead, they *clothed themselves* completely with Him (see Rom 13:14).

Turning from idols is not easy. Idols ostensibly give life security and meaning. We spend our time and money on them. They consume our thinking. They become objects of our worship. Our thoughts are drawn to them and they occupy our dreams. In Timothy Keller's words, "An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources on it without a second thought" (Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 13–14).

How can we break free from something that is deeply rooted in our lives? There is only one way. We have to turn to something better. We have to turn from what is false to what is true and from what is dead to what is living. That is what the Thessalonians did. They turned to the "living and true God" (1:9). They turned from being slaves to lifeless idols to being servants of the living God. God changed their affections.

Of course, such a transformation is the result of genuine conversion. Throughout history, countless numbers of believers have chosen, at great cost to their own personal welfare, to pursue Christ above all else. Writing about early Christian martyrs, MacArthur describes their devotion to Christ:

Following Jesus Christ was the sum of their entire existence. At the moment when life itself was on the line, nothing else mattered besides identifying themselves with Him. For these faithful believers, the name "Christian" was much more than a religious designation. It defined everything about them, including how they viewed both themselves and the world around them. The label underscored their love for a crucified Messiah along with their willingness to follow Him no matter the cost. It told of the wholesale transformation God had produced in their hearts, and witnessed to the fact that they had been made completely new in Him. They had died to their old way of life, having been born again into the family of God. *Christian* was not simply a title, but an entirely new way of thinking—one that had serious implications for how they lived—and ultimately how they died. (MacArthur, *Slave*, 9)

The transforming work of Christ decisively and completely reoriented the lives of the Thessalonians. So apparent was their break from past pursuits that others took note of this transformation (1:9).

Genuine Conversion Changes Our Reflection (1 Thess 1:10)

One of my best friends once told me that I should visit a cemetery before making all major life decisions. His rationale was that such an exercise would remind me that life is short and eternity is long. The Thessalonians learned from Paul that **the Christian should view present circumstances in the light of eternal promises**. During Paul's short stay in Thessalonica, he taught the people extensively about the return of Christ (2 Thess 2:5). He clearly wanted them to live their lives in light of the imminent return of the Lord and their promised future with Him. As we will see later, Paul devoted considerable attention to addressing the Thessalonians' lingering questions about eschatological matters. His goal in teaching them about Christ's return was always more pastoral than theological. His purpose was to build within them an expectant hope for the future. He also wanted to reassure them that despite their present persecution, God's "coming wrath" was not something to be feared. Rather, they could be confident and hopeful about their future and pursue their walk with Christ with an expectant anticipation of His return. When everyone else was looking around in confusion, Paul wanted them to be looking up in anticipation. That is the "blessed hope" of the Christian life (Titus 2:13).

A Dynamic Church
1 THESSALONIANS 1:2-3

There are two great independence days in the lives of Christians: the day that you follow Jesus Christ and are set free from the penalty of sin, and the day that you understand the present implications of your salvation. From the moment of a believer's salvation, God begins the process of transformation. As you surrender to God, He transforms your mind and teaches you His will (Rom 12:1-2). As you grasp His will, you begin to understand better His purpose for your life. But you will never understand His purposes for you until you completely surrender your life to Him.