

# 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10

## Thanksgiving (Part 3)

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### Form and structure

- ❖ Please see the outline on part 1 of the thanksgiving for a full discussion of the form and structure of 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10. It was concluded there that the structure of verses 2–10 is:
  - A. Statement of thanksgiving (1:2)
  - B. First reason for thanksgiving: fruit in the believers' lives (1:3)
  - C. Second reason for thanksgiving: God's election (1:4–5)
  - D. Third reason for thanksgiving: the Thessalonians' remarkable and exemplary conversion (1:6–10)
- ❖ 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10 forms a coherent whole, but we can recognize three parts to the passage:
  - A. The Thessalonians as model believers (1:6–7)
  - B. The extent of the Thessalonians' reputation (1:8)
  - C. The Thessalonians' conversion (1:9–10)

### Exposition

**Verses 6–7:** ‘<sup>6</sup> You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. <sup>7</sup> And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.’<sup>1</sup>

#### Overall idea

- ❖ Having thanked God for the Christian virtues that were active in the lives of the Thessalonian believers, and for the ultimate cause of those virtues (namely God's electing grace), Paul now moves on to a third cause of thanksgiving: the Thessalonians' remarkable conversion.
- ❖ Verses 4–5 speak of the mutual knowledge that Paul and the Thessalonians had of one another ('we know . . . just as you know'). It is natural to move from a statement about the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all English quotations of Scripture are from the New International Version (1984), abbreviated NIV.

Thessalonians' knowledge of Paul to a statement about how they became like him and his coworkers. In this way Paul introduces the subject of their remarkable conversion.

Verse 6a: 'You became imitators of us and of the Lord'

- ❖ In Greek, verse 6 begins with the word *καί/kai* ('and'), leading a number of commentators to link the verse very strongly with verse 5. On this interpretation, verse 6 is often understood as part of the reason for Paul's confidence in the Thessalonians' election.<sup>2</sup> However, it is better to recognize in verse 6 a natural progression to a new but related theme, since verse 7 is part of the same sentence in Greek and expresses the result of the imitation described in verse 6; if verse 6 is connected too strongly to verse 5, then verse 7 is left dangling, even though it is grammatically and logically dependent on verse 6.
- ❖ The pronoun **You**, which opens verse 6 signals a change of focus from Paul (at the end of verse 5) to the Thessalonians, who remain in the spotlight to the end of verse 10.<sup>3</sup>
- ❖ Although the theme of imitation is important in Paul's letters, the statement that the Thessalonians **became imitators of us and of the Lord** is probably not an assertion that they consciously aimed to imitate Paul and the Lord. Rather, the focus is on their conversion, and how it made them like both Paul and the Lord Jesus. As Malherbe explains:

What was proffered the Thessalonians was the gospel of the self-giving Lord preached by Paul, in whose life the gospel became transparent . . . Acceptance of that gospel *had the effect* of making the converts imitators of Paul and the Lord; it need not have extended to a conscious commitment to imitation.<sup>4</sup>

Verse 6b: 'in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit'

- ❖ This clause indicates how the Thessalonians became like Paul and the Lord. The **suffering** which Paul mentions was not some sort of inner turmoil brought about by their adoption of a new way of life and thinking;<sup>5</sup> rather, it resulted from the severe persecution which they had to endure from their compatriots. This persecution is mentioned explicitly in Paul's correspondence with the Thessalonians (1 Th 2:14-15; 3:1-5; 2 Th 1:4-7) and is also mentioned in Acts 17:5-7. Victor Furnish explains the probable nature of the persecution very clearly:

Most likely because the converts had abandoned their former gods and religious practices (vv.9b–10), they were perceived by others as a threat to the social and political well-being of the city. This would have resulted in such difficulties as their alienation from unbelieving family members and friends; the curtailment of their opportunities to maintain, let alone to improve, their current economic and social status; the restriction of their access to the city's political and social institutions; and their constant subjection to harassment and public insults.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Fee (2009:37); Malherbe (2008:114); Weima (2014:97).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. (Green 2002:97; Malherbe 2008:114; Weima 2014:97).

<sup>4</sup> Malherbe (2008:127, emphasis added); see also Michaelis (1964-1976:670).

<sup>5</sup> *Contra* Malherbe (1987:36-46; 2008:128).

<sup>6</sup> Furnish (2007:46-47); see also Green (2002:98); Weima (2014:100-101).

- ❖ To understand this persecution it is important to bear in mind that the ancient world was very religious, and religious observance was part of a person's duty to his family and city. In most people's minds, failure to discharge in this duty would anger the gods and thus endanger the city or the family. Usually, there was no objection to a person worshipping additional gods, provided the traditional ones were not neglected; but Christ demands *exclusive* allegiance, and the Thessalonians 'turned to God from idols' (v.9). This would have placed them at odds with family members and fellow-citizens who had not turned to Christ, thus exposing them to persecution.
- ❖ Paul thanks God because the Thessalonians had **welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit** — the suffering notwithstanding. Where verse 5 describes the inward aspects of the Thessalonians' turning to Christ — especially the power and working of the Holy Spirit — these words describe its more visible aspects. It is truly remarkable that anyone should welcome a message which results in such severe suffering, yet this is what the believers of Thessalonica had done. More than that, they had welcomed it with joy! Again, this points to the work of God, since he alone could enable a person to endure such trials with joy.

Verse 7: 'And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.'

- ❖ The idea of experiencing joy in the midst of suffering is prominent in the New Testament, and is found in the teachings of Jesus (e.g. Mt 5:11-12; Jn 16:33), Paul (e.g. Rm 5:3-5), James (Ja 1:2-4), and Peter (e.g. 1 Pet 1:6-9).<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that anyone who became a follower of Jesus would have had to endure hardship, and would have been expected to do so with joy. This is one reason why Paul was so thankful that the Thessalonian Christians had become **a model to all the believers** in Macedonia and Achaia. They demonstrated by their own lives that it was possible to suffer greatly, yet to be faithful to God's word and joyful in the midst of the suffering. Through their example many other suffering believers would have been strengthened to stand firm in the midst of great trials.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Green (2002:99); Weima (2014:101).

<sup>8</sup> Compare 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, where Paul motivates the Corinthians (in Achaia) by pointing to the example of the Macedonians. The Macedonians (surely including the Thessalonians) were a living demonstration of joy and sacrificial service in the midst of trials.



*The eastern Roman Empire in the time of the New Testament.*

- ❖ **Macedonia and Achaia** were two Roman provinces which covered more or less what we know as Greece today (see map above). In a short time the Thessalonian converts had begun to exert an influence on a large number of their fellow-believers, including those in such cities as Philippi, Berea, Athens and Corinth. More is said about the geographical extent of this influence in verse 8.

**Verse 8:** <sup>8a</sup> **The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—** <sup>8b</sup> **your faith in God has become known everywhere.** <sup>8c</sup> **Therefore we do not need to say anything about it . . .'**

*Grammar and structure of the verse*

- ❖ This verse is linked to verse 7 by the conjunction γάρ/*gar* ('for'), which does not appear in the NIV translation. The conjunction signals a loose connection between the two verses, where verse 8 explains *how* the Thessalonians became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.<sup>9</sup>
- ❖ The grammar of the original Greek in this verse contains an awkwardness that has been massaged into shape by the NIV translation. A more literal rendering of the Greek would look something like this:

For from you rang out the word of the Lord  
not only in Macedonia and Achaia,  
but in every place your faith towards God has gone out,  
with the result that we don't need to say anything.

<sup>9</sup> Weima (2014:103).

The normal way of writing would have been to end the main clause after ‘every place’, like this: ‘For from you rang out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place, with the result that . . .’ But Paul has added a second main clause ‘your faith towards God has gone out’. This has led to various suggestions for re-punctuating the verse, one of the most common being to put a full stop or semi-colon after ‘Lord’ and begin a new sentence with ‘Not only in Macedonia and Achaia . . .’ Although such a suggestion is appealing, it seems best to accept the awkward grammar as original.<sup>10</sup>

- ❖ Verse 8 is then understood to contain two statements:

For from you rang out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia,  
but in every place your faith towards God has gone out . . .

It is important to notice that these statements are parallel; the activity described in the first statement is much the same as the activity described in the second. The only difference between the two statements is the way in which the geographical extent of the activity is described — it is described negatively in the first statement and positively in the second.

- ❖ This parallel structure indicates that the statement ‘the word of the Lord rang out’ means much the same as ‘your faith towards God has gone out’ — thus providing an important clue regarding the meaning of the phrase ‘the word of the Lord’ (see below).

Verse 8a: ‘The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia’

- ❖ The phrase **The Lord’s message** is a translation of ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου/*ho logos tou kyriou* (‘the word of the Lord’). This phrase is used only twice in Paul’s writings (here and 2 Th 3:1), but is fairly common in Acts (Ac 8:25; 13:4,48-49; 15:35-36; 19:10) and abundant in the Septuagint<sup>11</sup> (occurring about 250 times). In the Old Testament the phrase almost always means ‘the word *from* the Lord’ (i.e. the message which the Lord has given), and this is why the phrase is so common in the prophets. If taken with this meaning here, it would refer to the gospel message and verse 8a would be a statement that the new Thessalonian believers had been very active in evangelism.<sup>12</sup>
- ❖ As attractive as this interpretation may be, it doesn’t seem to be correct; rather, ‘the word of the Lord’ should be understood as ‘the word *about* the Lord’, meaning the message about what the Lord had done among the Thessalonians.<sup>13</sup> There are at least three reasons for preferring this interpretation:
  - (a) As pointed out above, verse 8a is parallel to verse 8b. The activity of verse 8b is stated as ‘your faith in God has become known everywhere’. This cannot be a statement about the Thessalonians proclaiming the gospel; it must be a statement about how the news of the Thessalonians’ faith had spread.
  - (b) If verses 8a and 8b assert that the Thessalonians have been proclaiming the gospel, verse 8c implies that Paul does not find it necessary to continue his own evangelistic

<sup>10</sup> Fee (2009:42-43); Weima (2014:104).

<sup>11</sup> The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was commonly used in New Testament times.

<sup>12</sup> So Hendriksen (1983:53); Bruce (1982:16); Green (2002:101-104); Weima (2014:104).

<sup>13</sup> See Fee (2009:42-45); Wanamaker (1990:83) for this interpretation.

activity in Greece and beyond because of the evangelism done by the Thessalonians.<sup>14</sup> It is very difficult to believe that Paul, who considered himself obligated to both Greeks and non-Greeks (Rm 1:14), would ever make such a statement.

(c) Grammatically, the phrase ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου/*ho logos tou kyriou* can mean ‘the word *about* the Lord’ as easily as it can mean ‘the word *from* the Lord’.<sup>15</sup> It is arguable that, in the Book of Acts, the phrase ‘the word of the Lord’ usually means ‘the message about the Lord [i.e. about Jesus]’, since the main focus of Acts is how the apostles testified about Jesus (Ac 1:8). Furthermore, the work of Jesus is not only understood as the work he did during his earthly life, but also the work he did through the apostles after his resurrection (e.g. Ac 1:1; 18:9-10; 23:11); this is a perspective which Paul shares (Rm 15:18; 1 Cor 15:10). It is therefore quite natural to understand ‘the word of the Lord’ in verse 8a as a reference to what the Lord Jesus did in bringing about the conversion of the Thessalonians, and this interpretation would make verse 8a correspond to verse 8b.

❖ The verb translated **rang out** (ἐξηχέω/*exēcheō*) is an unusual one, occurring only here in the entire New Testament. Nevertheless, its meaning is clear: it refers to a sound which spreads out in all directions, thus making itself heard by all and sundry.<sup>16</sup> The news of the Thessalonians’ conversion was heard far and wide.

❖ The geographical qualification **not only in Macedonia and Achaia** indicates, firstly, that the Lord’s work among the Thessalonians certainly was heard throughout Macedonian and Achaia; secondly, the ‘not only’ prepares for the wider coverage expressed in verse 8b.

Verse 8b: ‘your faith in God has become known everywhere’

❖ The phrase **your faith in God** refers to the report concerning the Thessalonians’ conversion, as most commentators recognize. The content of this report is expanded on in verses 9-10.<sup>17</sup>

❖ The extensive range of the report concerning the Thessalonians is expressed in the phrase **has become known everywhere**. Paul here uses a figure of speech called hyperbole. It is a deliberate exaggeration, not meant to be taken literally, but intended to communicate something of the author’s emotional response to the greatness of what is described. In other words, although Paul is not asserting that the report about the Thessalonians’ faith has reached every square centimetre of the planet, he is expressing amazement at how far the news has travelled — and it has certainly travelled further than just Macedonia and Achaia.

❖ A little knowledge of the geographical location of Thessalonica will help to explain how this report spread so far so quickly. Thessalonica was located (a) on the *Via Egnatia*, which crossed Greece from the Adriatic Sea in the west to the Black Sea in the east; (b) on the best natural harbour in the Aegean Sea; and (c) on the important land route linking the regions

<sup>14</sup> This is what Green (2002:104-105) states.

<sup>15</sup> Technically, the first interpretation takes τοῦ κυρίου/*tou kyriou* as an *objective genitive*, while the second takes it as a *subjective genitive*.

<sup>16</sup> Arndt, Danker & Bauer (2000 s.v. ἐξηχέω).

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Wanamaker (1990:83); Fee (2009:44-45); Weima (2014:105).

north of Macedonia with important cities (like Athens and Corinth) to the south.<sup>18</sup> This meant that there would have been people passing through Thessalonica who were travelling in all possible directions to all the important cities in the Roman Empire. Disciples of Jesus who passed through would certainly have heard the news and repeated it excitedly in every Christian community which they came to.

- ❖ According to Paul, this widespread dissemination of the news regarding the Thessalonians meant that he did **not need to say anything about it**. One might imagine him in Corinth meeting up with Christians from other cities. As he began to tell them of the great work of God among the Thessalonians, they interrupted him, telling him that they had already heard the good news! Truly, the Thessalonians had indeed become a model to all the believers!

**Verses 9-10: ‘. . .<sup>9a</sup> for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us.<sup>9b</sup> They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,<sup>10</sup> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.’**

- ❖ These verses elaborate on the content of the report that had gone out regarding the faith of the Thessalonian believers. The NIV translation quoted above gives the impression that there were two aspects to this report: (a) the welcome given by the Thessalonians to Paul and his missionary team; (b) their turning from idols to serve the living and true God. However, a closer analysis seems to indicate that the statement in verse 9a should be read in conjunction with the statements that follow, and that the whole of verses 9–10 should be understood to focus only on the Thessalonians’ conversion.

Verse 9a: ‘. . . for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us’

- ❖ The key word in this phrase is the word εἴσοδος/*eisodos*, which usually means as ‘entrance’ but is translated as **reception** in this verse in the NIV (also ESV). It seems that the translators were motivated to translate the word in this way by the fact that verses 9–10 clearly deal with a report of the Thessalonians’ faith. It therefore seems out of place for Paul to speak about himself at this point (which would be the case if εἴσοδος/*eisodos* were understood to mean ‘entrance’). However, the word εἴσοδος/*eisodos*, wherever it is used in the New Testament, does indeed mean something like ‘entrance’, and it is used just two verses later, in 1 Thessalonians 2:1, of Paul’s ‘entrance’ into Thessalonica. Bruce Winter, in commenting on Paul’s arrival in Thessalonica, notes that ‘[t]he εἴσοδος [*eisodos*] is then a quasi-technical term for Paul in that it refers not only to his actual coming, but also to his professional conduct as a gospel messenger who lives amongst those who accepted his message as the λόγος [*logos*] of God.’<sup>19</sup> It would be best, then, to seek an interpretation which preserves this meaning for the word εἴσοδος/*eisodos*.
- ❖ The Greek text of verse 9a includes the words ‘concerning us’: ‘they themselves report *concerning us* what kind of εἴσοδος/*eisodos* we had among you’ (cf. ESV). This strengthens the suspicion that verse 9a focuses on how *Paul* acted in Thessalonica rather than on how the Thessalonians received him.

<sup>18</sup> See the sermon outline on 1 Thessalonians 1:1 for geographical details on the city of Thessalonica. See also the map on page 3.

<sup>19</sup> Winter (1993:67); see also Green (2002:105-106).

- ❖ As noted by Winter, the term εἰσοδος/*eisodos* refers to Paul's conduct as a gospel minister, and this is elaborated on in 2:1-12. In that passage Paul is at pains to show that he did not use flattery or deceit (2:3,5), nor did he seek to please the Thessalonians in the way he presented the gospel (2:6). He simply presented the message as it had been entrusted to him by God (2:4). The point is that the message Paul preached in Thessalonica was not designed to attract people by pandering to the value system of Graeco-Roman culture.<sup>20</sup>
- ❖ This understanding of verse 9a becomes meaningful when combined with verse 9b.

Verse 9b: 'They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God'

- ❖ This statement begins with the conjunction 'and' (καί/*kai*) in Greek, and should not be translated as a new sentence; it is closely connected with verse 9a. We can translate verses 9a-9b like this:
  - <sup>9a</sup> For they themselves report concerning us what kind of entrance we had among you,
  - <sup>9b</sup> and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God . . .
- ❖ It is now the *combination* of verses 9a and 9b that makes the point about the Thessalonians' faith: Paul's message was not tailored to win adherents by appealing to the values of the prevailing culture, *and yet* the Thessalonians accepted the message by turning away from idols and towards God. This implies that they had a real faith which was rooted in God's power (cf. 1 Cor 2:3-5). If they had responded to a flattering message, or one that was specially tailored to be appealing to them, there would have been less certainty regarding the genuineness of their faith. This is why Paul had to speak first about the nature of his own conduct.<sup>21</sup>
- ❖ The phrase **you turned to God from idols** uses standard terminology for religious conversion, especially as it appears in Acts (cf. Ac 9:35; 11:24; 14:15; 15:19; 26:20; Gal 4:9; 2 Cor 3:16). It is important to note that turning to God involved forsaking idols (which would include any kind of false religion). As noted above on verse 6b, there would have been little complaint from family and fellow-citizens if the Thessalonians had merely added Christ and the God of Israel to the pantheon of gods that they worshipped. It was the abandonment of those gods which caused such conflict between the new believers and their society. Yet, despite the suffering involved, allegiance to Christ left no room for syncretism.<sup>22</sup>
- ❖ The fact that Paul mentions the Thessalonians turning to God from idols sheds light on their ethnic and religious background. Such a statement could not be made about Jews in the first century, since they were fiercely monotheistic. Some of the God-fearers — Gentiles who had attached themselves to the synagogue — may still have worshipped the pagan gods to some extent, but that allegiance must have been loosening. Although Acts 17:2-4 does mention

<sup>20</sup> See also 1 Cor 1:18-2:4.

<sup>21</sup> Although commentators tend to understand verse 9a in the sense of Paul's 'entrance' into the city, they do not follow through on the logic of how this draws attention to the Thessalonians' faith. Cf. Wanamaker (1990:84); Green (2002:105-106); Fee (2009:45); Weima (2014:107-108).

<sup>22</sup> Wanamaker (1990:85-86); Green (2002:106-108); Weima (2014:108-109).

Jews who embraced Jesus as Messiah, the present passage shows that the majority of the Thessalonians were Gentiles converted from paganism.<sup>23</sup>

- ❖ Having turned to God from idols, the Thessalonians are said to **serve the living and true God**. The word translated 'serve' (δουλεύω/*douleuō*) is related to the word for 'slave', and indicates undivided allegiance to God.<sup>24</sup>
- ❖ That God is **living and true**, in contrast to the idols who are dead and incapable of doing anything, is one of the primary assertions of the Old Testament. Time and again Israel is called upon to recognize that Yahweh is the living God, the creator of all things, and that it is vain to seek help from any other god — which can never be more than something created by man himself; often, these idols are mocked in the most scornful terms (e.g. Deut 4:39; 6:4; 1 Ki 18:26-29; Is 44:9-20). By writing to the Thessalonians in these terms, Paul reinforces their decision to serve God and reminds them that it would be futile to return to the idols which they had previously served.<sup>25</sup>

Verse 10: 'and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.'

- ❖ Not only did the Thessalonians begin to serve God, but they also learned that they had to **wait** for the complete salvation that had been promised to them. The theme of future salvation, to be received at the return of Christ, is very prominent in this letter. It is introduced in 1:3 ('your endurance inspired by hope'), is hinted at in 2:19,3:13; 5:23, and is dealt with in detail in 4:13-5:11. Further study of Paul's letters shows that the need to wait patiently for the full glory of our salvation is fundamental to the Christian life (see, e.g. Rm 8:18-25; 2 Cor 4:16-18). In the case of the Thessalonians the promise of future glory had two important functions: (a) it motivated them to greater obedience (2:12; 5:6-10), and (b) it comforted them in the midst of their suffering (1:3; 4:13).
- ❖ The fullness of God's glorious salvation would be experienced at the coming of God's **Son from heaven**. For the Thessalonians, believing in God meant believing also in his Son. It also meant believing that world history will not simply go on indefinitely, but will reach a climax when God's Son comes from heaven to bring history to a conclusion (1 Th 4:16-18), destroy his enemies (1 Th 5:3; 2 Th 1:8-9), hand over the kingdom to God the Father (1 Cor 15:24; Rev 11:15), and usher in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21:1-4). This view of history is radically different from that which the Thessalonians had grown up with, but it was a view which gave hope and meaning to life, even in the midst of suffering.
- ❖ God's Son is now described in three ways: (a) he is the one whom God raised from the dead; (b) he is Jesus; and (c) he is the one who rescues us from the coming wrath.
- ❖ The Son of God is described as the one **whom [God] raised from the dead**. This is an important statement because it links the heavenly, cosmic ministry of Christ with his earthly life: Christ would not be able to return from heaven if God had not raised him from the dead.

<sup>23</sup> Fee (2009:46).

<sup>24</sup> Rengstorf (1964-1976:273-274); Arndt *et al.* (2000: s.v. δοῦλος 2bβ); Weima (2014:109).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Green (2002:108); Fee (2009: 47); Weima (2014:109).

Furthermore, the statement shows that the Thessalonians knew about Jesus' earthly life and his death on the cross. It also foreshadows what Paul will say in 4:14 about the resurrection of believers.<sup>26</sup>

- ❖ By introducing the name **Jesus**, Paul directs attention back to the activity of God's Son after briefly noting an action of the Father (the act of raising his Son from the dead). He also draws attention to the fact that God's Son was none other than the man known as Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in Palestine nearly two decades before the gospel came to Thessalonica.<sup>27</sup> It is important for us today to take note of this point. From our perspective there is no distinction between Jesus, the Messiah/Christ, and the Son of God; for us these are names which refer to the same person, namely the Second Person of the Trinity, who became a man and lived in Palestine. However, for people living in the first century, their initial view of Jesus would have been that he was simply a man, like any other man. It required a tremendous shift in perspective to accept that this man was actually the eternal Son of God and the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.
- ❖ The statement that God's son **rescues us from the coming wrath** is significant. It indicates, firstly, that the gospel which Paul preached to the Thessalonians included the notion of God's wrath. Although God's wrath is already being revealed in the way God hands people over to their sin (Rm 1:18-32), the **coming wrath** spoken of here refers to the final destruction of God's enemies at the coming of Christ (cf. 2 Th 1:8-9; Rm 2:6-10). Though the idea of God's wrath is unpopular in our day, Scripture reveals that it is an essential aspect of his character. If he is to be both loving and just, he must punish sin. This becomes even more important in the light of the gospel, which offers free forgiveness to all who put their trust in Jesus: it is bad enough to reject God's law, but to reject his mercy and grace is far worse (cf. Lk 13:1-9).
- ❖ Secondly, the Thessalonian believers are not threatened with God's wrath but are promised that Jesus is the one who **rescues** them from that wrath. They are not to be terrified by the prospect of judgement, but encouraged that Jesus, in whom they have believed, will indeed rescue them.
- ❖ Finally, the mention of God's wrath is an implicit statement that those who are presently persecuting the Christians in Thessalonica will be the ones who, at the end, will suffer God's judgement (cf. 2 Th 1:6-9). By reminding these suffering believers of what will happen in the future, Paul reinforces their commitment to persevere in their commitment to follow Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

## Application

**True conversion involves forsaking false gods as well as embracing the God who is living and true.**

- ❖ The Thessalonian believers could have avoided a great deal of suffering by trying to hold onto the gods of their city and culture, while also worshipping the true and living God and his Son, Jesus. And yet, this is inherently impossible. To trust in God means believing that he himself is

<sup>26</sup> Green (2002:109-110); Weima (2014:111).

<sup>27</sup> Green (2002:110).

<sup>28</sup> See Green (2002:110-111); Fee (2009:50); Weima (2014:112)

sufficient for all our needs; it means letting go of all other gods and trusting in him alone. To serve other gods alongside the one true God is to deny that he is sufficient; it means that one does not trust him fully.

- ❖ This can be illustrated quite simply. If I have to travel a long distance on foot, I will want to be sure that my shoes will last the whole journey. If I have confidence that my shoes are strong enough, I will not need to take a second pair along with me. However, if I suspect that my shoes will not last the distance I will need to take a spare pair. The fact that I take a second pair of shoes means that I do not trust the first pair completely. In the same way, if we want to worship additional gods alongside the one true God, we are saying that we do not trust him completely. We are, in effect, bringing him down to the level of gods that are neither living nor true.
- ❖ God warned his people most severely, especially in Old Testament times, against worshipping other gods:

Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God (Ex 34:12-14).

Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other (Dt 4:39).

It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you — for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God — lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth (Dt 6:13-15).

- ❖ The Jewish nation of the first century AD gives us another example of what it means to serve God alone. In about AD 40 (roughly a decade before the gospel reached Thessalonica), the Roman emperor Gaius began to think of himself as a god, and gave orders to Petronius, the governor of Syria, to set up statues of himself in the temple of Jerusalem. On receiving this instruction, Petronius set out for Jerusalem with thousands of soldiers. He was met in Galilee by a large number of Jews, who pleaded with him not to set up the statues. The argument Petronius used to appeal to the Jews is noteworthy. He pointed out that all the nations subject to Rome were willing to place statues of the emperor alongside the rest of their gods; why should the Jews alone refuse to do this? To this the Jews replied that God's law did not allow them to erect idols in God's temple. When Petronius threatened them, the Jews fell face down, exposed their throats, and said that they were willing to die rather than have God's laws transgressed. They understood that God was to be worshipped alone or not at all.<sup>29</sup>
- ❖ In many places near to where I live, pastors have a constant battle with people wanting to practise their traditional African religion alongside Christianity. People are happy to come to church, but when there is a funeral or some other communal event, there is a great deal of

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<sup>29</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.257-305; *Jewish war* 2.184-203.

pressure to get involved in rituals involving ancestors and other aspects of traditional African religion. This situation is very similar to what we read about in 1 Thessalonians, and we need to take the Thessalonian believers as our example: they turned to God *from idols* to serve the living and true God (1 Th 1:9). Though it meant rejection and suffering, they would not compromise by holding onto false religion while attempting to worship the one true God.

- ❖ Secular western culture also presents many idols that have to be resisted by disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. These idols include money, material possessions, personal ambition and other things that may not be overtly religious. They may nevertheless stand beside God in our affections and as such need to be resisted, just as the Thessalonian believers rejected the idols of their society. As Jesus said, 'You cannot serve both God and Money' (Mt 6:24).

**Forsaking the religion of one's family and culture may involve suffering, but that need not prevent believers from experiencing the joy of the Holy Spirit.**

- ❖ The New Testament is certainly clear that serving God involves suffering. Jesus said to his disciples, 'In this world you will have trouble' (Jn 16:33), and Paul wrote to Timothy, 'In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tm 3:12). But the reality of trouble and suffering should not make us negative, pessimistic and depressed. Jesus continued the statement quoted above by saying 'But take heart! I have overcome the world' (Jn 16:33), and Paul, from prison, urged the Philippians 'Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you' (Phlp 3:1).
- ❖ It can be very painful, both emotionally and physically, to endure suffering, and the Bible does not encourage us to pretend that bad things are good. Many of the psalms are laments, in which the psalmists pour out their hearts to God about the evil and suffering that are in the world (e.g. Pss 77; 79; 86; 137). Yet, the reality that we are reconciled to God, that Christ conquered evil on the cross, and that we can look forward to his ultimate and complete victory, can give us a profound and genuine joy in the midst of our trials.
- ❖ Just as the Thessalonians became an example to all the believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia, and beyond, so throughout history there have been believers who give us an example of joy in the midst of suffering. Some of the most striking and poignant examples come from believers who were persecuted under communist rule in eastern Europe. I share here the story of a nineteen-year-old girl called Varia, who at first persecuted Christians but was converted through the love of a girl by the name of Maria. Maria writes as follows about Varia:

I continue to live here. I am very beloved. I am beloved also by a member of the cell of the Komsomol (The Communist Youth League). She told me; 'I cannot understand what a being you are. Here many insult and hurt you and yet you love all.' I answered that God has taught us to love all, not only friends, but enemies. Before, this girl made me much harm, but I prayed for her with special concern.

. . . In my former letter I wrote you about the atheist girl, Varia. Now I hurry to tell you, my beloved ones, about our great joy: Varia has received Christ as her personal Saviour, witnessing openly before everybody about this.

. . . We went together with Varia to the assembly of the godless. Although I warned her to be reserved, it was useless. Varia went and I went with her to see what would happen. After the singing of the Communist hymn (singing in which Varia did not participate), she asked to speak. When her turn arrived, she came forward before the whole assembly. Courageously and with much feeling, she witnessed before those gathered about Christ as her Saviour and asked for her former comrades forgiveness that she had had her spiritual eyes closed until then and had not seen that she was herself going to perdition and leading others towards it. She implored all to give up the way of sin and to come to Christ.

All became silent and nobody interrupted her. When she finished speaking, she sang with her splendid voice the whole Christian hymn: 'I am not ashamed to proclaim the Christ who died, to defend His commandments and the power of His cross.'

And afterwards . . . afterwards they took away our Varia.

Varia was taken to prison; Maria continues:

When I saw her yesterday, she was thin, pale, beaten. Only the eyes shone with the peace of God and with an unearthly joy.

. . . I asked her through the iron bars: 'Varia. Don't you regret what you did?' 'No', she answered. 'And if they would free me, I would go again and would tell them about the great love of Christ. Don't think that I suffer. I am very glad that the Lord loves me so much and gives me the joy to endure for His name.'

Varia was then taken to a prison camp, probably in Siberia. She wrote to Maria:

We work twelve to thirteen hours a day. Our food is just as yours, very scarce. But it is not this that I wished to write to you.

My heart praises and thanks God that He showed to me through you the way of salvation. Now, being on this way, my life has a purpose and I know where to go and for whom I suffer. I feel the desire to tell and to witness to everybody about the great joy of salvation, which I have in my heart. Who can separate me from the love of God in Christ? Nobody and nothing. Neither prison nor suffering. The sufferings which God sends us only strengthen us more and more in the faith in Him. My heart is so full that the grace of God overflows. At work, they curse and punish me and give me extra work because I cannot be silent, but must say to everybody what the Lord has done for me. He has made of me a new being, a new creation, of me who was on the way to perdition. Can I be silent after this? No, never! As long as my lips can speak, I will witness to everybody about His great love.

. . . At the age of nineteen I celebrated the Birthday of Christ for the first time. Never will I forget this wonderful day! We had to work the whole day long. But some of our brethren could go notwithstanding to the river nearby. There they broke the ice and prepared the place where, during the night — according to the Word of God — I and seven brethren were baptized. O, how happy I am.

Maria received one more letter from Varia, after which the nineteen-year-old former communist was never heard of again. Though she was sentenced to slave labour and a life of obscurity, Varia's example is a shining light to us in our own trials.<sup>30</sup>

**True faith cannot find ultimate fulfilment in this life only; it must wait for the coming of Jesus.**

- ❖ The expectation of Christ's coming became very important to the Thessalonian believers. In fact, it was so important that they were very worried about fellow-Christians who had died. They thought — incorrectly — that these brothers and sisters might not experience resurrection from the dead (1 Th 4:13-18). The hope of Christ's return gave them joy and purpose in life. In this respect also, they are an example to us.
- ❖ We who have trusted in Christ do not look forward to the return of Christ with fear and trepidation. We look forward to that day as the day on which Jesus will finally rescue us from the wrath of God. In Romans 5, Paul expresses the confidence with which we can approach that day:
 

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God . . . <sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! <sup>10</sup> For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! <sup>11</sup> Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rm 5:1-2,9-11).
- ❖ It is also important for us to cultivate a sense of expectation regarding this day, and not to live as though all our hopes are fixed on this present world. As Paul wrote to the Romans:
 

<sup>23</sup> Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently (Rm 8:23-25).
- ❖ In times of suffering, this hope is a great encouragement. It reminds us that what we have lost in this world is more than outweighed by the glory that is to come (cf. 2 Cor 4:17). But it is also important to remember our future hope in times of prosperity and plenty. It is too easy to indulge in the comforts of this life, and to focus all our desires on the here and now. We need to develop a lifestyle of moderation, sacrifice, and servanthood whereby we lay up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal (Mt 6:19-20). Instead of living at the limit of our means, we must learn to live more simply so that we can give of our time and resources to the work of missions, and to caring for the poor.

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<sup>30</sup> These letters are quoted by Richard Wurmbrand (1967:115-120) in his book *Tortured for Christ*.

## Sermon suggestions

### Theme

❖ Exegetical theme:

Topic: The Thessalonians' exemplary conversion

Theme: The conversion of the Thessalonians was thorough and true, and resulted in them becoming an example to all the believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia, and beyond.

❖ Possible **homiletical** theme:

The example of the Thessalonians shows us that true conversion involves forsaking all idols and trusting in God alone; it will always involve a cost.

### Comments

- ❖ This passage offers an opportunity to challenge and invite people to put their trust in God as he is revealed in Christ and through the gospel. A useful brief definition of faith, using the word as an acronym, is 'Forsaking All I Trust Him'. The Thessalonians' faith is a good illustration of this definition. During the course of the sermon, one will want to present the beauty and glory of God in Christ, to show how attractive and desirable he is, and to show how worthless all our idols are in comparison. Some idols specific to one's own context should be highlighted so that people can see that they are neither living nor true. It is important here to move the hearers' affections!
- ❖ The sermon should also highlight the costs involved in following Christ, as relevant to the congregation's own context. People should be encouraged in relation to these costs, and reminded that the Holy Spirit will give them joy, despite the suffering.

### Possible sermon outline

- I. Introduction
- II. True conversion involves turning from idols to serve the living and true God.
  - A. The Thessalonian believers turned from the idols of their culture.
  - B. The Thessalonians believers trusted in God and in the Lord Jesus.
  - C. This conversion involved a great deal of suffering.
  - D. The Thessalonians' conversion was so remarkable that they became an example to everyone.
- III. True conversion in our day also involves turning away from the idols of our culture and trusting in God alone.
  - A. God is the living God, and in the gospel he offers us deliverance from judgement.
  - B. To trust in God requires turning away from the idols of our culture which are neither living nor true.
  - C. Though it is costly to serve God, he gives us the joy of his Spirit to sustain us.
- IV. Conclusion

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