

Transformed By the Gospel of Christ

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, friends, he was a Roman citizen, but in his vein ran blood much thicker and much richer. It was ancient blood, a blood formed by God, Hebrew blood.
- You see, he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, a holy man, an untainted Jew, a preserver of the ancient heritage, committed to his ancestors' customs and laws from the day that he was born.
- And he had had enough of these sectarians, these Christians, these adulterers of true religion. It was bad enough that they had let Samaritans and unclean outcasts share in the treasures of being God's people.
- What was worse was that they promoted the most horrendous beliefs. They spoke of this Jesus of Nazareth as a Messiah. And yet everyone knew that this Jesus was crucified.
- And even ordinary, untrained Jews knew that Messiahs don't die. They certainly don't die on crosses at the hand of Romans. To hang on a cross, you see, for a Jew was to be cursed by God.
- [1 : 0 2] And a crucified Messiah is worse than a contradiction in terms. For those who were Jews, it was an outrageous blasphemy. And the perpetrators of such a blasphemy must be sought out, purged from God's people.
- And he, Saul, would do it. Friends, you all know this man Saul and his history. Of course, we know him not as Saul, but as the apostle Paul. However, we know that this pre-Christian Saul cruelly persecuted early Christians.
- And we know that God, in his wonderful mercy, stopped him in his tracks and confounded him, rebuked him, taught him and transformed him.
- This most zealous Pharisaic persecutor of Christians was changed by God into most zealous Christian missionary. He was transformed into the most earnest pastor and teacher of God's early Gentile Christians.
- And today we've heard from one of his earliest letters to one of the earliest church plants. In fact, I suspect that 1 Thessalonians may be the very first letter we have in the New Testament of Paul's writings.
- [2 : 1 1] Anyway, as we've read that, we'll learn that as we read chapter 1, we learn that God's transformation will not stop with him.
- You see, it will continue with these early Thessalonian Christians. And as we read it and as we study it together, it will continue on through history through us. The God who stopped Saul in his tracks will also stop us.
- And he'll confront us. He'll speak his word into our lives. And from him, the Thessalonians and us, God's word will sound forth to all the world. And when it does, it will do what it does in all the world.
- It will bear fruit and increase. So, friends, I want you to turn with me to this marvelous letter from Paul to the Thessalonians. And let's see what God has to teach us today.
- 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 1 to 10. I'm going to begin, though, by telling you a little bit about the Thessalonians. Thessalonica was a principal metropolis of Macedonia.

- [3 : 14] It lay at the junction of the main land route from Italy to the east. It was a free city governing itself on Greek lines rather than Roman lines.
- The population of the city was about 200,000 strong. The city had a fertile hinterland, a fine harbor. It was prosperous. It was wealthy. In other words, it was a key city in the world of the first century.
- And this is the city that the transformed apostle Paul to the Gentiles, the apostle to the Gentiles, arrived at during the second missionary journey. His reception is spoken about in Acts chapter 17.
- Let me tell you what happens. In verses 1 and 2 of Acts 17, we're told that Paul followed his usual custom when he arrived in a city. That is, he found a Jewish synagogue. For three Sabbaths, he spoke about Jesus from the scriptures.
- He explained and proved that there was nothing inconsistent from the scriptures about a suffering and rising Messiah. In fact, it was the fulfillment of scripture.
- [4 : 16] And a number of Jews who listened to Paul were persuaded. So were many devout Greeks. And so were a number of leading women of the city. And verses 5 to 9 tell us that persecution erupts.
- Verse 10 tells us that the end result is that the Christians of Thessalonica decided that it was best for Paul and Silas to leave. So they push on to a place called Berea.
- And so that's the introduction to the city of Thessalonica. And that is the history of the evangelization of this city. These are the Thessalonian Christians. And this is the apostle who brought the gospel to them.
- However, the letter that we read today is addressed to a situation slightly later. We're told in chapter 2 verse 17 that Paul had an intense longing to see these young converts.
- In chapter 2 verse 18, we're told that Satan had somehow blocked his way. In response, Paul sent to Timothy to investigate. According to chapter 3 verse 6, the news that Timothy brought back to Paul was not good.
- [5 : 19] However, it was also clear that the news was good, but it was not all good. And Paul the pastor, the church planter, was worried clearly about this young congregation.
- And so he decides, given that he could not visit, that he would write to them. And the letter he writes oozes with love for this young Christian congregation. It's intimate. It's warm.
- It flows with a deep affection for these early converts to Christian faith. And I want to concentrate on verses 2 to 10 of chapter 1. So turn and follow with me, if you will.
- After we've done this, after we've skimmed over it, I will then explain what we learned from these verses. And I'll draw out some implications for us. Look at verses 2 and 3. Chapter 1, verses 2 and 3.
- Paul says, Paul is first and foremost here a thankful man.
- [6 : 28] He is thankful to God because he knows that everything he's about to talk about has its source in God himself. You see, God is behind it all. God is the ultimate source of all.
- Therefore, God should receive first mention. God should be thanked. And Paul turns to thank him and to praise him. And then he goes back to express just exactly what it is that he's thankful for.
- In the original language, the three participles are used. In verse 2, he speaks of mentioning. In verse 3, he speaks of remembering. And in the very next verse, verse 4, he will speak of knowing.
- Mentioning, remembering, knowing. I wonder if you can see what Paul is doing. He is expressing his thankfulness to God by telling them that he continually mentions the Thessalonians in his prayers.

He expresses his thankfulness to God by remembering things about them before God in prayer. And he expresses it by knowing or recognizing certain things about them.

[7 : 30] So what is it that he does remember? What does he know or recognize in them? Look at verse 3. We're told he uses three key Christian words.

He remembers their faith. He remembers their love. And he remembers their hope. Your work produced by faith, he says. Your labor prompted by love.

Your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. These are the things that Paul remembers and mentions. Verses 4 and 5 tells us what he knows or recognizes.

Look at it. Verse 4. For we know, brothers and sisters, loved by God, that he has chosen you. Because our gospel came to you, not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, with deep conviction.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You see, Paul says he knows and recognizes the evidence that they are loved by God. He knows and recognizes in them the evidence of God's rich and elective love.

[8 : 29] Where does he see that evidence? Well, he sees it in the way they respond to the gospel. So, he remembers their conversion. He recalls how they responded to the gospel.

And this vivid recollection is that the message of the gospel came to them in word, in power, in the Holy Spirit, in full conviction. You see, it's something that is just deeply embedded in his mind.

And he saw these Thessalonian Christians just respond. And it was deep and rich. The word of God came to them and was received rightly by them.

But not only was this true. Look at verse 6. This word came to them and changed them in an extraordinary manner. They became even like Paul himself. They became like the Lord Jesus himself.

You see, friends, it is one thing to receive the gospel when things are good. It's another thing to receive it when things are bad. And that's what happened with the Thessalonians.

[9 : 29] You see, in spite of the severe suffering and persecution, they welcomed the word of God with joy. It was a joy that could only come from God and be inspired by God.

But the dramatic change didn't stop there. You see, they went even further. Look at verse 8. Paul, Silas and Timothy say together, The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Archaea.

Your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we don't need to say anything about it. I mean, that's remarkable, isn't it? The faith of these people was so rich. It was legendary, as it were.

These Thessalonians became an example, a model for all Christians. As they imitated the apostles and the Lord Jesus himself, so others were inspired by their example and followed suit.

And as the apostles brought the message of God to God's world, now the Thessalonians were agents of that message themselves. Through them, the Lord's message has sounded out through Macedonia and Archaea.

[10 : 31] The Thessalonians themselves became involved in missionary proclamation. You see, people came to them. They went to others. Their faith became somewhat legendary.

It was exemplary faith. Look at it described, verses 9 and 10. It was a faith that turned from idolatry. A faith that turned to God. A faith that decided that from now on it would be directed toward serving the living and true God.

A faith that was now focused on waiting for God's Son from heaven to come. A faith focused on the resurrected Jesus. A faith in Jesus who rescues us from this coming wrath.

So, friends, there's a brief overview of the chapter. Now, what I want to do now is just step back a little bit and to reflect on what we learn from it. First, I want you to notice what becoming a Christian is all about.

Do you see it there in the passage? Becoming a Christian is first and foremost about change. That is, the Thessalonians were people who worshipped and served idols.

[11 : 39] They were without hope and without God in the world. But then they listened to these missionaries with this extraordinary message of a crucified and risen Messiah. And it changed their lives.

They turned from their idols to serve a living, true God. And that faith in the living God produced changed lives. It produced works.

Their love of God prompted labor in them. It caused them to look forward in hope and to be steadfast in it. Friends, please understand this.

Becoming a Christian is about change. You see, there is a before and after if you are Christian. Once you were this, but now you are that.

Once you did this, but now you do that. Once you had nothing to look forward to, but now you have something to look forward to. You see, there is a before and after to being Christian.

[12 : 40] And that is why we Christians use the term conversion. It is about a conversion that happens within you. It's about change. It's about converting from one thing to another thing.

Conversion is first and foremost about change. And if that's the case, then what changes? What is it exactly that does change?

Well, conversion is about changes in lifestyle. Friends, in our world, Christian conduct is often not much different from non-Christian conduct. But that was not true with these early Christians.

No, their lifestyle changed. And you could tell. It was transformed. Instead of being like their surroundings, they became like Christ.

They became like Jesus himself. As verse 6 says, they became imitators of the apostles and imitators of the Lord. And their faith caused them to reach out to others and to proclaim the message to them.

[13 : 37] That's what verse 8 says. Can you see it? Conversion is about change. And key among those changes is life and lifestyle. I need to make it clear. You see, friends, let me say that lifestyle is often the only evidence many people will ever have that we have been converted.

And if they don't have that, then have you really been converted? See, it is often the only evidence that our family, the people that we work with, our neighbours and everyone will have that we have met God.

That our life has changed. Our lifestyle has changed. That we have received God. That we're related to a true and living God. So firstly, conversion is about change.

Second, it's particularly about lifestyle change. And third, conversion is conversion to a totally different orientation. It is a conversion to a between-the-times existence.

Look at verse 9. Did you notice it? The Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the true and living God. But they also changed their orientation in life.

[14 : 43] You see, life was now not just for now. Life also had a future in mind. It had eternity in mind. It was a future determined by the return of Jesus Christ.

They lived between the times. Looking forward to the time when Jesus would come and a whole new heaven and earth would exist. So that's the third thing we learn.

But there is a fourth, friends. Not only is conversion about change. Not only is it about lifestyle change. Not only is it about life lived between the times. This new existence is founded on one person and made possible by one person alone.

It's made possible by God and possible by the work of his son. God and Jesus are the ultimate source of this new orientation, this new lifestyle.

God and Jesus are the ultimate source of conversion and the growth it produces. God and Jesus are the roots of this new transformed existence. And that is what transformed Paul.

[15 : 42] And that's what transforms every Christian from Paul on. It is the power of God. It is the transforming work of Christ. That's what brings light out of darkness.

That's what causes people to turn to God from idols. That's what causes people to serve a true and living God. That's what causes them to have an incredible orientation of seeing that true existence is lived in the light of the future coming of Christ.

Now, friends, let's now turn to see what we can do with what we've learned this morning. First thing I want to do is to direct our question, a question to each of us as individuals.

I want each one of us here today to ask ourselves whether the signs of conversion are present in us. Here's the questions to ask. One. Is there a before and after for you?

Is there a before and after for you? Two. Is your lifestyle any different from those around you? Is your lifestyle any different from those around you?

[16 : 49] Three. Do you really believe in a saviour who is returning? And are you living in the light of this? Do you really believe in a saviour who is returning?

And are you living in the light of this? Friends, if these signs are not present in you, then I want to tell you how to change. You change by going back to God and the good news of Jesus.

For God alone has the power to change, to turn sinners into saints. The gospel of Jesus can transform. It did transform Paul.

It did transform the Thessalonians. It has done so with generations of people for 2,000 plus years. And it can do it for you. God works through the gospel concerning his son.

And he works to transform people. And he works to change people. God alone is the ultimate source of conversion and growth. And now, friends, I want to turn to us as a church.

[17 : 49] Now, I need to tell you that the very first sermon I preached on a Sunday morning at Holy Trinity was 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. So I thought it was only appropriate that I finish on it.

Because I'm sure you've forgotten about it by now anyway. So, no harm in reminding you. But I thought it would be a good place to finish as well as to start. I need to say I'm so glad to have been your pastor and teacher these last six years, six and a half years.

Even before I came, your reputation had gone out widely. This was a church I had heard that was committed to the gospel. This was a church where people had turned to God from idols to serve a true and living God.

This is a church where people were eagerly waiting for God's son from heaven. And my six years have confirmed that reputation. I have seen people.

I estimate that in the time that I have been here, nothing due to me, but in the time that I've been here, my rough estimate has been that amongst the Chinese and the English speaking people, there have probably been somewhere between 200 and 300 people converted.

[19 : 01] That's phenomenal in a church like ours. I have seen people turn from atheism and false belief to true belief and the risen Christ.

One of the most moving things I've done in this church is to go along to a baptism in the Chinese congregations and to think that those people were once atheists, convinced atheists, and now they're getting dunked under the water for their faith in Christ.

I have seen, not only have I seen people turn from atheism, I've had the wonderful privilege of seeing people die with a smile on their face, ready to meet their God.

I've met some lovely people with strong faith and watched them die in the six years here. I've seen people support Christian ministry around the world and give generously to it and pray for it.

And I've seen the Lord's message ring out from this church, not only to Doncaster and the surrounding suburbs, but also to the world. I've walked beside my fellow pastors here at Holy Trinity in ministry and seen them committed to the same things.

[20 : 12] And I want to tell you that this has given me great joy. It is something that I will miss tremendously. I'm so glad to have been your pastor and teacher.

There's some sorrow in leaving you, but I want to tell you, I will be praying for you. And my hope and prayer for you is that you will continue to be a church that believes in the true and living God.

And that turns away from vain pursuits to serve a living and true God. And a church that is continually being transformed by the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And I will be praying for you that the news about you will cause me to thank God for you and continually mention you in my prayers with joy.

I'm praying that you'll be like Paul and the Thessalonians. Friends, such things will only be possible if God is at work among you.

Let me tell you that a new vicar is not going to make it possible. God will make it possible. They don't hang your hat on a new vicar. Hang it on God.

[21 : 35] Trust in him. So I'm going to pray that God will be active among you. You will always be close to our hearts, to Heather and my heart. And we'll try to remember to continually pray these things for you.

I'm so glad that the parish has let us be linked missionaries, which means I will be keeping in contact with you. And Holy Trinity will be our home church when we come back. We'll try to pray for these things for you, but we'll certainly thank God for you.

We will pray that God will continue this great work among you. So let's pray. Father, thank you for the work that you do here at Holy Trinity through your son and the great news about him.

Father, I pray for this church. I pray that it will be like Paul and the Thessalonians, filled with people transformed by the gospel, living lives grounded in the faith.

People whose faith produces works. People whose lives are filled with a labor of love. Father, may this church be a model to all believers in Melbourne.

[22 : 46] And may their faith in the Lord Jesus become broadly known. Father, please work here among your people. Please work deeply and solidly and continue your great work here and from this church.

Father, I pray. The gospel of your son will go out even more strongly. And Father, I pray these things in Jesus name. Amen.