

The Word Sounds Out

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[0 : 0 0] Father, we thank you so much for your word to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, or who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for your word to us in the gospel about him, and thank you for your word to us in scripture, which points us to him. We pray today that you would open your word to us, that we might learn of you and respond rightly to you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, he was a Roman citizen, but in his veins there ran a blood that was much richer than that.

It was an ancient blood. It was a blood formed by God. It was Hebrew blood, and he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, a holy man, an untainted Jew, a preserver of an ancient heritage, committed to preserving his ancestors' customs and laws, and from the day he was born he'd been doing it.

Circumcised probably on the eighth day, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Jew of Jews, a godly man. And he had had enough of these sectarians, these Christians, these adulterers of true religion.

[1 : 2 0] It was bad enough that they had let Samaritans in and these sort of unclean, outcast Ethiopian eunuchs, and that they'd let them share in the treasures of being God's people.

What was worse was that they promoted the most horrendous beliefs. They spoke of Jesus of Nazareth as a Messiah, and yet everyone knew that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified.

Even ordinary, untrained Jews knew that messiahs do not die, and they certainly do not die on crosses at the hands of pagan Romans.

To hang on a cross is to be cursed by God, and a crucified messiah is worse than a contradiction in terms. It is an outrageous blasphemy, and the perpetration of such blasphemy must be sought.

The perpetrators of such blasphemy must be sought out. They must be purged from God's people, and he would do it. Friends, you all know this Paul. You know that early after the death of Jesus, he began to persecute those who were Christians.

[2 : 2 8] And you know that God, in his wonderful mercy, stopped him in his tracks. That God confronted him with his son, or his son confronted him.

That this son rebuked him. That this son taught him. And this son transformed him. The most zealous persecutor of early Christians was changed dramatically by God, so that he became the most zealous Christian missionary.

He was transformed into the most earnest pastor and teacher of God's mostly Gentile people at this stage.

And today, we have heard, just read, one of his earliest letters, perhaps even his first letter. And as we read from it today, we will learn that he is convinced that God's transformation could never stop with just him.

It would continue with Thessalonian Christians. It would continue throughout history. It would continue down to this day. It would continue to this congregation. And it would transform us as well.

[3 : 36] For the God who stopped him in the tracks will stop us also. He will confront us. And he will speak his word into our lives. And from him and the Thessalonians and us, his word will sound forth to the world.

And when it does, it will do in all the world what it has always done. 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 this morning. Now, I need to tell you, I've never preached from 1 Thessalonians before. Maybe a passing verse, but that's it. And so, about a month ago, I started reading 1 Thessalonians.

And it is the most warm, intimate letter. I'd always thought, you know, Philippians was up there. But 1 Thessalonians is just so pastorally warm. It is a wonderful letter.

And it just strikes me that so early on in his career, he's so brimming with care for these people. So, let me begin by telling you just a bit about the Thessalonians. Thessalonica was the principal metropolis of Macedonia.

[4 : 43] It lay at the junction of a trade route that ran from Rome all the way through to the east. It was a free city. It governed itself not by Rome along Roman lines, but along Greek lines.

Its population was probably about 200,000 at this time. The city had this fertile hinterland. It had a fine harbour. It was prosperous. It was wealthy.

In other words, this was a key city in the first century world. And the Romans thought that. And this is the city that the transformed apostle to the Gentiles arrived at during his second missionary journey.

And his reception is spoken about in Acts chapter 17. So, I wonder if in your Bibles you would turn to Acts 17. That's where we're going to begin. And we'll just hang around there for a couple of minutes. Turn with me to Acts 17.

And in verses 1 and 2 of Acts 17, we're told that Paul does his usual thing, his custom. That is, he arrives in a city and the first thing he looks for is a Jewish synagogue.

[5 : 45] And when he finds it, he speaks to it. And for three Sabbaths, he speaks, we're told in verses 1 to 3, about Jesus from the scriptures.

And what he does is he explains and he proves that there's nothing inconsistent, as he had thought there might be, about a suffering and rising Messiah. That is, the scriptures clearly present that in his view.

They present a suffering and rising Messiah. And he explained that to them and proved that to them from the scriptures. And a number of Jews listen to him do this and they say, yes, you're right, I can see it.

And they're converted. And so are many devout Greeks. And so are a number of leading women among the city. And in verses 5 to 9, we're told that the inevitable happens.

Persecution arrives. This man who has turned, so we're told in these verses, the world upside down is not going to turn our part of the world upside down. And so persecution begins.

[6 : 43] And verse 10 tells us that the end result is that Thessalonica, newly converted Christians, come and tell Paul and Silas, it's best for you to leave. And so they push on in Berea, into Berea.

And that is the city of the Thessalonians. It's a grand city, isn't it? And a grand reception. And this is the history of the evangelization of this city. These are the Thessalonians.

And this is the apostle who brought the gospel to them. Now, imagine for a moment a little time has passed. And while we're imagining that, you can turn to 1 Thessalonians again. 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 17 tells us that what happens is, as time passes, an intense longing springs up within Paul.

He wants to go and see them. But he then says in verse 18 that Satan blocked his way so he could not see them. And so he says, well, I've got to get in contact with them somehow. So he sends Timothy, his young colleague.

And according to chapter 3 verse 6, the news he receives back from Timothy is good news. However, it's also clear from the letter that it's not all good. And so Paul determines to write to this group of young Christians that he has a great affection for.

[7 : 56] And Paul the pastor and Paul the teacher is, you see, worried. And so he writes. And the letter that he writes just oozes with this warmth I was telling you about.

It is intimate. It is warm. It flows out of this deep concern and affection for these early Christians. And today I want to concentrate on just verses 2 to 10 of this letter.

So have a look at it. And let me see if I can summarize the passage for you. This is my run through chapter 1. And what I want to do is I want to run through it quickly and give you a framework for thinking about it.

Then I want to tell you what we can learn from it ourselves. And then I want to tell you what I think it says to us sitting here today. I'll draw together some of the implications for 1 Thessalonians for us in our life together.

I've chose 1 Thessalonians because I thought it speaks to us as a pastor and a teacher interact with each other. A pastor and a congregation interact with each other. So I thought it would work for us in this first month.

[8 : 54] So let's have a look at it. Have a look at verses 2 and 3. Paul says, Can you see what Paul is?

First and foremost, he is a man thankful to God. He is a man thankful to God because he knows that God, that everything he is about to talk about, everything he's going to address to this congregation has its source in God.

God is behind it all. And God is behind them. And God is the ultimate source of all. Therefore, God should receive first mention. And so within the first verse after he's got past the dear so-and-so, he says, God, and he is thankful to God.

God should be thanked. All praise, all ways should go to him. And Paul then goes on to express his thankfulness. And he does so in three ways. And I wonder if you can see it.

There are three participles. Our English version sort of just slightly tinker with it. Three participles used. Can you see them there? In verse 2, he speaks of mentioning. In verse 3, he speaks of remembering.

[10 : 15] And in verse 4, he speaks of knowing. So it has this nice run to it in the original. Mentioning, remembering, knowing. Can you see what Paul is doing? He's saying, look, I express my thankfulness to God by mentioning you in my prayers.

I express my thankfulness to God by remembering these things before you when I speak to God. And I express my thankfulness to God by knowing or recognizing certain things about you.

That's what motivates me to this prayer. And that's what fuels my prayers. So what is it exactly that he remembers about them? Or what does he know or recognize or see in them?

Well, verse 3 tells us what he remembers. Now, have a look at verse 3 and see if you can suss out the three key Christian words. Three key words. He remembers their faith, their love, their hope.

We normally put them in a slightly different order, but there they are. Faith, love and hope. And what does he do? He remembers their work of faith. That is that faith has resulted in them doing something.

[11 : 20] He remembers their labor of love. That is that their love has resulted in them doing something as well. And he remembers their steadfastness of hope.

That is their acknowledgement of Christ has caused them to be steadfastly fixed on him. Verses 4 and 5 tell us what he knows or recognizes in them and about them. Look at them. Paul says, Can you see what he's saying?

Paul's saying, I can recognize in you that you are loved by God. You are beloved of him. I know and I recognize in you the evidence of God's rich and elective love that has shaped and formed you.

And where do I see the evidence? Well, I see it in the way you responded to the gospel. And I remember your conversion. And he recalls the response. And it's a vivid recollection.

He says, You know, It's as though he's saying, I came among you and the message I saw as I spoke to you came to you in power, but not in word, but not just in word, but in power, in the Holy Spirit and in full conviction.

[12 : 45] You see, he looks at them and he says, I remember it was so good. And it was a sign to me that you were chosen by God. The word of God came to you and you embraced it and received it rightly.

But not only is this true, as verse 6 says, This word came to them and changed them in one extraordinary manner. They became like the apostles themselves.

They became like the Lord Jesus himself. You see, friends, it's one thing, isn't it, to receive the message of the gospel when things are good and comfortable and, you know, that's relatively easy.

It is another thing, isn't it, to receive the message of the gospel when things are bad. And that is what he's saying about the Thessalonians. You see, in spite, he says, of severe suffering and persecution, what you did was, you welcomed the message with joy.

It was a joy that could only come from God who inspires such a response. But then he says the dramatic changes didn't stop there. They went even further. Look at verse 8.

[13 : 51] Paul, Silas and Timothy say together, the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Archaea, but in every place your faith in God has become known.

So that we have no need to speak about it. In other words, we don't have to go around praising everyone about you guys, because everyone knows. These Thessalonians became a model for all Christians.

And as they imitated the apostles and the Lord Jesus himself, so others looked at them, were inspired by their example. And as the apostles brought the message of the gospel to God's world, well, now the Thessalonians also brought the message to God's world.

And through them, the Lord's message just rang out. It's sort of like this clanging sound throughout all Macedonia and Archaea. And the Thessalonians themselves, you see, became involved in missionary service.

And their faith became legendary. You know, you've got faith like the Thessalonians. It was exemplary faith. Look at it described in verses 9 to 10.

[14 : 58] This is the sort of faith they had. It is faith that turned away from idolatry. A faith that turned to God.

A faith that decided that from now on, it was going to be directed towards a true and living God, not a dead God. By the way, that Acts 17 passage, just a bit later on, that was read out loud, just fits so wonderfully into this passage, doesn't it?

It just, it has lots of echoes of it. They turned away from idols to a living and true God. And the faith that was, their faith was a faith that was focused on waiting for God's return, the return of God's son from heaven.

A faith focused on a resurrected Christ. A faith that in Jesus that says, he will rescue us from the rock that we know is coming. So friends, there's an overview of the passage and of the faith of these people.

Now what I want to do is, if I can, just step back a little bit and reflect on what we learn from it. First, I want you to notice what being a Christian is all about. Can you see it here?

[16:07] Did you hear it in this passage? Becoming a Christian is first and foremost about what? It's about change, isn't it? The Thessalonians were people who worshipped and served idols.

They were without hope. They were without God in the world. And they listened to these missionaries and their extraordinary message and it changed their lives. They turned from worshipping idols to serve a living and true God.

And their faith in a living God produced works. Their love of God produced a labour of love. And it caused them to look forward in hope and to be steadfast in it.

Friends, becoming a Christian is about change. There is, you see, if I can put it this way, a before and after about being Christian. There is what you were before you became Christian.

There is what you are after you become Christian. It is about change. Once you were this, but no, not now. Now you are that. Once you did this, but no, not now.

[17:12] Now you do this. Once you had nothing to look forward to, but now you do have something to look forward to. This before, there is a before and after to being Christian.

Now some of you probably have been Christians all your life. You can't remember what it was like before. That doesn't mean there's not an after for you, if I can put it that way. There is an after. That is why Christians use the term conversion.

Becoming a Christian is about conversion. It's about change, isn't it? You see, it's about converting from one thing to another thing. Conversion is first and foremost about change.

And if that's the case, then change where? Well, it must be change in lifestyle at least, mustn't it? It's certainly a change in faith, but it must result in a change of lifestyle.

Friends, in our world, and particularly sort of in middle class Australian world, I think, Christian conduct probably often doesn't look any different to non-Christian conduct.

[18:16] But even here, it should, it must. This was not true with those early Christians, you see, their lifestyle changed. It was transformed.

Instead of being like their surroundings, they became like their Lord Jesus Christ. They became like Him. As verse 6 says, they became imitators of Him and the apostles.

Their faith caused them to reach out to others and to proclaim God's message to them, which alone would have made them different. Conversion is about change, friends, and key among those changes is lifestyle.

Let me make it clear. Lifestyle is the only evidence many people will have that you have been converted, that you are Christian. It is the only evidence that sometimes our family, our workmates, our neighbours will ever have that we have met God, that we have received God, that we are related to the living and true God.

So first, conversion is about change. Second, it's about lifestyle change. And third, conversion is conversion to a totally different orientation. And it is like that, isn't it, you see?

[19 : 32] Conversion is conversion to a sort of between the times existence. That is, the times that are presently here and the times that are yet to come.

That is what conversion is about. Did you notice verse 9? The Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the true and living God, but they also changed their orientation in life.

You see, life for them was now, not just now, but it had a future in mind, a future where they knew God would act in wrath, where God would judge the world.

And they knew that in that time the Son of God would come and they would be seen to be right in His eyes. Life had a future in mind.

Life had eternity in mind. It had a future determined by the return of Christ and they lived between those two frames. So, that's the third thing we learned.

[20 : 26] However, there's one more. There is a fourth. You see, conversion is not only about change. It's not only about lifestyle change. It's not only about orientation change.

This new existence is founded in one place, in one person. It is made possible by one person. It is made possible by God and by His Son, Jesus Christ, by the work of Christ.

God and Jesus are the ultimate source of that new life. So, hence in chapter 1, He begins with God, He finishes with Jesus. It's a way of saying the same thing. God and Jesus are the ultimate source of this new lifestyle.

They are the ultimate source of conversion and of growth that it produces. God and Jesus are at the roots of a new transformed existence. They are like what everything else stands upon or stands under.

You see, that is what transformed Paul and that is what transforms every Christian from Paul on. It is the power of God, not only for salvation, but for transformation.

[21 : 32] It is the transforming work of Christ. That is what brings light out of darkness. That is what causes people to turn from idols to God. That is what causes people to serve a true and living God.

And that is what causes them to have this incredible orientation of seeing that true existence is lived in the light of the future coming of Jesus Christ. Now, friends, with all of that as background, let's turn to what we can learn from this this morning.

You see, the first thing I want to do here is direct a question to each of us as individuals and then I'll talk about us as a congregation. So first of all, us individuals. I want to ask you the same question I ask myself as I look at this passage.

I want to ask you, are the signs of conversion present in you? You know what I mean? When I look at you, when you look at yourself, is there a before and after for you?

That is, is there something that you were that you are now not? Please hear what I said earlier on. I think that for many Christians there is just this smooth transition that almost is, there's not a hiccup to it.

[22 : 44] One day you didn't believe in Jesus, the next day you did and you just act the same. So the morals of Christians in our day, I think, are terribly low. They are not transformed often.

They are not known as Christians among their colleagues in their workplace, by their husbands. Let me just give you a little example. When we ministered in Western Australia, there was, there was a delightful Chinese man who had no knowledge of Christ who was brought by another friend to our church in the university there and he changed.

As he learnt the Bible, as he read the Bible with Heather before church each Sunday, he changed. His orientation changed. His looking forward changed. His concept of what life was about changed.

His lifestyle changed. And you know how you could tell? Because after about a year or two, his wife arrived. And his wife one day came running up to Heather and said, Heather, tell me about this God.

And then I won't tell you the name of her friend. She said, because he's not the same man. He is transformed and I want what he's got. You see, friends, he was a changed man like these Thessalonians, you see.

[24 : 05] And that's what the gospel is meant to do. It is meant to change you. So, is there a before and after for you? And if you haven't, if you can't remember when you became a Christian, is there a change in you as a result of the gospel?

Second question, is your lifestyle any different from those around you? And that's sort of a subset of the previous question, isn't it? But are you different from your workmates, from the family that are not Christian that you have, from the people that you mix with regularly?

Are things different for you? Because they should be. For people who know Christ are to be transformed by Christ. And third question, do you really believe in a Saviour who is returning?

And are you living in the light of His return? Friends, it's been a long time since the Lord Jesus walked on the earth, but He is coming back. God is only holding back so that many might come to repentance, but the Lord Jesus will return.

And are you living in the light of that return? 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, going back to the great news of Jesus Christ, back to the gospel.

[25 : 25] God alone, not you, but God alone has the power to change and to turn sinners into saints. the gospel of Jesus can transform you.

It did with Paul, it did with the Thessalonians, it has done so with generations of people for 2,000 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. You cannot work it up. It happens as you expose yourself to the Word of God and accept it.

Friends, let's now, if I can, turn to us as a church. I am so glad to be among you as your pastor and teacher. And let me tell you, just as the reputation of the Thessalonians has gone out into Macedonia and Achaia, so your reputation as God's people has gone out to many people.

I know because when I was appointed people told me about you. I knew because when friends come and visit you as preachers they tell me about you.

[26 : 39] So you have a reputation. You love God. You are committed to God. My hope is that there will be news that continues to go from this congregation and this church and that that news will be that we are a church that believes in a true and living God.

That we are a church that wants to turn away from vain pursuits to serve a living and true God. That we are a church that has been transformed by the gospel.

That we believe that the Son of God is coming from heaven. That we believe that He's a Son who has died and risen. That we believe that this Son rescues us from a sure and coming rock. But friends, please understand me.

I don't just want us to be a church noted for good theology. God wants us and I want us and I'm sure many of you if not all of you want us to be like the Thessalonians and their apostle.

People who are transformed people. Transformed by the gospel. Who have our lives deeply grounded in the faith. That whose lives have a faith grounded in faith that produces works.

[27 : 51] whose lives are filled with the labour of love. Whose lives are filled with vibrant and expectant faith that is steadfast and sure.

Friends, these things, let me say, will only be possible if God is at work among us. So please pray with us that it is God who is at work among us.

Please pray daily that this is the case. that we be transformed people for the sake of his son. So let's pray. Let's start here and do that.

Father, please cause us to be people who know and love you, who are faithful to the gospel of your son, who believe that your son is coming from heaven, who believe that he's rescued us from the wrath to come.

But Father, please make us to be people who are transformed by the gospel. That we have living lives grounded in faith, lives whose faith produces works, lives who are filled with the labour of love, lives that are filled with vibrant and expectant faith that is steadfast and sure.

[29 : 09] Father, transform us as you always do through the gospel of your son. Father, ground us in him and in his word we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen.