

## ***Reflecting the Redeemer***

### ***1 Thessalonians 1:5-10***

***On Horeb's heights as on Damascus' road,  
I've heard the boiling boom, the prodding goad  
And winsome whisper of my Master's voice,  
And that is more than reason to rejoice.  
But better still I've seen His holy Face,  
Reflected in the godliness and grace  
A woman wore. She'd walked with God long years,  
But was no stranger to life's fears and tears,  
Yet still she glowed with happiness and hope.  
I still recall her counsel not to cope,  
But triumph over all life's thicket thorns.  
A mind that's filled with love for God adorns  
A face with peace, she said, and earns the right  
To, by God's grace, reflect the Living Light.***

For centuries, Thessalonica was a peaceful port city. Ships from all over the Roman Empire sailed into the city's spacious harbor. And both merchants and traders made a good living.

Pagan priests did too. They built splendid, shining temples and filled them with fierce, stone statues and perfumed prostitutes.

A closed community of Jews also lived in Thessalonica. As merchants and traders, they were also prospering.

Their synagogues were so grand and glorious, pagan gentiles often joined the Jews for Sabbath services. Many of them were prosperous and powerful. And offerings overflowed.

But then one Sabbath morning three traveling missionaries showed up for services. The leader of the trio was a short, baldheaded man.

And for three successive Sabbaths he spoke at synagogue services. After that, nothing was ever quite the same at Thessalonica.

Later, angry synagogue officials complained to the city magistrates about those missionaries. And in their charges, they offered an apt description of what those men did.

***...men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, Acts 17:6 (ESV)***

The message Paul, Silas and Timothy proclaimed at this Macedonian port city upset everything. But when everything is upside down and backwards, things need to be upset.

The wrong needs to be made right. The crooked needs to be made straight. Slaves need to be freed. And people who live in despair and defeat need to be rescued.

Thessalonica is a case study in how the Gospel can change a city or a state, a community or even a country. It is a pattern that has been duplicated in every culture, continent and climate.

Even now, all over the world communities like Thessalonica are being turned right side up. So we would be wise to examine precisely what God's servants did and how they did it.

It can teach us how we can upset our own upside down world.

## *The Message*

Much earlier, Paul proclaimed the message of salvation by trusting Jesus Christ in towns and villages in the Roman province of Galatia. Then he moved on to share the Savior in other places.

After he left, other teachers followed in the apostle's footsteps. With sweet smiles, they oiled their way into the confidence of new Christians. Then they started teaching their own message.

But it was nothing at all like the message of full faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ that Paul preached. They taught that confession and commitment were not enough. They insisted those new saints also needed to obey Old Testament laws to be saved.

Paul's message to Galatian believers left no room for debate.

***...even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!***  
***Galatians 1:8-9***

The great apostle was only able to spend two or three months at Thessalonica. But that does not mean the message he taught those people was abbreviated or incomplete.

We can see the elements of the apostle's teaching in his words of commendation to those Christians. Paul started out by teaching the Thessalonians about Jesus.

At the synagogue, he demonstrated how Old Testament scriptures describe the Messiah who would come one day.

***...according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ."***  
***Acts 17:2-3***

Of course, Paul and his fellow missionaries could not refer to Old Testament scriptures with gentiles. But he did teach them the essence of what God's Word says.

For one thing, he taught gentiles that the divine Creator is a righteous, holy God. In fact, He hates evil and wickedness so much, He will pour out His wrath on all sin.

In our own day, it is not popular to talk about of God's wrath. But our eternal Lord's hatred of sin is a reality. And His wrath cannot be wished away by ignoring it.

The truth that God judges sin is much more than an underhanded way of scaring people into Christ's Kingdom. Instead, it is crucial to understanding what Jesus did for us by dying on a cross.

***Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. Verse 10***

God's beloved Son willingly endured all of God's wrath for our sins. And if we trust in Him, He will rescue us from God's wrath.

Literally, the word *rescues* means to deliver someone by drawing them to oneself. That is just what Jesus does.

He draws us to Himself. draws us out of our darkness into His light, out of our death into His life, and out of our failure into His freedom. That is truly good news.

But Paul did not minimize the requirements for coming to Christ as our Redeemer. He reminded the Thessalonians that they turned away from worshiping idols and to come to Christ.

We call that repentance. It is forever abandoning all our sinful attitudes and addictions, our selfishness and sensuality. It means changing our mind and choosing to shun all that we once savored and love that which we once loathed.

All of the apostles taught that salvation is by faith. We are declared righteous and adopted into

our heavenly Father's forever family by faith and faith alone. But that faith cannot be partial or passing. It must be complete.

***...our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; Verse 5***

The message the missionaries proclaimed was more than words. It was empowered by the Holy Spirit.

And that is essential. By our Savior's Spirit we understand the Gospel. By the same Spirit we are able to place full faith in Jesus as our Savior, Captain and King.

Paul did not tailor the gospel to fit the ears of anyone. He proclaimed a complete Gospel. And we must do the same.

We must share the full spectrum of spiritual truth with people. They may not want to hear some parts of it. But they must.

An incomplete Gospel is powerless to save.

## ***The Model***

Christians at Thessalonica were not born again into a peaceful garden. They had to endure both pressures and persecution. That is why Paul reminded them that they received the message of salvation with much tribulation.

But that should not come as a surprise. Our Savior warned us that those who trust in Him will be persecuted.

***If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; John 15:18-20***

And the world in which our Lord lived did hate Him. He faced fierce enemies every day. They set traps for Him and peppered Him with problems that were designed to be unanswerable dilemmas.

In the end, they slapped and slugged Him. They beat and brutalized Him. Then they nailed Him to a Roman cross.

The four Gospels offer us detailed accounts of the persecution our Savior endured. More important than that, they also describe how our Redeemer reacted to those threats.

The apostles included that for an important reason. We who have chosen to trust only in Jesus are to imitate Him.

We are to have the same godly attitude He did. And at all times we are to act and react as He did. Especially when face problems, perils and persecution simply because we belong to Christ.

***...you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; 1 Peter 2:21-23***

Of course, the original apostles had an advantage we do not. They actually saw how the Savior acted and reacted.

Our Lord knew those who trust in Him need a human model to imitate. Paul knew that, too. That is why he commanded new Christians to imitate the way he lived for the Lord.

***You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, Verse 6***

***Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. 1 Corinthians 11:1***

That is why Paul labored sewing tents at night while preaching and teaching during the day. He was modeling the loving sacrifice that characterized Christ Himself here on earth.

Also, the apostle was careful never to indulge resentments or animosity toward the many people who opposed him. He was giving saints a human model of the Master's willing self sacrifice.

It is never enough to simply proclaim the Gospel of grace with words. People always learn a great deal more through what they see than what they hear.

That is why Paul urged believers to learn from both what he said and what he did.

***The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, Philippians 4:9***

Long before I ever understood the gospel of salvation, I learned what serving the Savior is all about. I did so by watching saints like my mother's sister live for the Lord Jesus.

My aunt lived beside a dusty, gravel road in a clapboard house that was weathered Confederate gray. Her husband was an alcoholic. So she had to sacrifice and work long hours just to put food on the table for her eleven children.

Nevertheless, I never heard her complain. Instead, while living from hand to mouth, she shared her Savior's love with everyone she knew. And each evening, she gathered her children around her and read the Bible to them. Then everyone, even little Pamela, prayed. I never had the privilege of seeing the Savior's face and watching how He reacted to both life's failures and those who so bitterly opposed Him.

But I have seen my Savior reflected in my aunt's face. And by imitating her, I imitate Him.

Paul was just such a model for new Christians at Thessalonica. By imitating him, they imitated the Master.

## ***The Missionaries***

That modeling and imitating did not end when the missionaries left Thessalonica. It continued with those they left behind: men and women who loved and lived for the Lord Jesus.

***You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. Verses 6-7***

Those former pagans may not have realized it. But they were also models. Just as they watched Paul, other people watched them.

And there is an important lesson in that for everyone who claims Christ as Savior and King. With neither posturing nor pretense, saints at Thessalonica lived their lives loving and serving their Lord.

They may not have known it or seen it. But all the time, people were watching them. And people are just as surely watching everyone of us who loves and lives for the Lord Jesus.

Those silent watchers will not see the Savior's face until they pass the portals of death or when He comes. But they can, indeed they must see the Master reflected in our lives.

They must see His love in how we react to people who are sorrowing or suffering. They must see His kindness and compassion in the way we react to people in desperate need.

And at all times, they must see His selflessness and sacrifice, His goodness and godliness in the way we live each day. That is precisely how our Savior said we should propagate the Gospel to

people around us.

***Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Matthew 5:16***

Thessalonian believers may not have known people were watching them. But they were.

People they did not even know were marveling at their goodness and godliness, at the strength and serenity those saints exhibited in the midst of trials and troubles.

And as they watched, they saw how sweet and satisfying it is to know the Lord Jesus.

***...you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, Verses 7-9***

As Paul traveled to other Macedonian cities, he met some of those people. And the apostle did not even have to recommend those Thessalonian believers as examples of how Christ can change lives.

Without being prompted, people shared how impressed they were with Christians at Thessalonica. And so it is that the Gospel spread to distant shores without the voice of any preacher.

Those Thessalonian saints did not realize how far the Gospel would spread because they lived their private lives, imitating the apostle as he imitated Jesus.

Two thousand years later, people all around the world still marvel at the grace and godliness of those believers. And multitudes of people in America, Africa and Asia choose to trust in the same Savior the Thessalonians trusted.

The lesson for us is more important than most of us realize. We cannot know who might be watching us.

That is why, in our darkest, most difficult hours, we must determine to share our Savior's loving attitude. If we do not, nothing we might say to people will make any difference.

The Thessalonians were looking for the Lord Jesus to split the sky and return to this earth. However, they did not indulge any impatience or anxiety.

They lived with the knowledge that their lives could be interrupted at any moment by Christ's coming. And above all else, they wanted to be found faithful to the Savior who loved them and laid down His life for them.

That is the way we must live if we are to model our Master's majesty to this world. We must live both in His presence and in expectation of His coming. If we do not, we are not worth imitating.

And this upside down world will never be righted.