

The Critical Turn (1 Thessalonians 1:1-10)

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There's a reason agricultural and construction metaphors show up so often in the Bible. They aptly illustrate some of the most important spiritual principles. Earlier this month, my wife and I began remodeling the kids' bathroom. Four weeks into a project I thought would be finished in two, I've learned something. You have to carefully think through how every part of the job – plumbing, electrical, drywall, flooring, lighting, etc. – is connected to the final product.

For example, when you rough in the plumbing, you need to know the location and dimensions of the vanity so you don't have the sink over here and the pipes over here. It's nice to get all the drywall mess done early, but I won't know exactly where to locate the electrical box for the light until we set the location of the vanity since the light has to be centered above the sink. And you can't install the vanity until the floor tile is done. However, you can't tile the floor until the drywall corner is finished. You get the picture. I've lost track of the number of times I've stood in the bathroom door and said to myself, "Ok, how is this step connected to the way everything is supposed to look in the end."

Experienced contractors do as much instinctively. They keep the end in the view. Christians are no different. They build and navigate their spiritual lives with the end in view. That end is the return of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, before whom every human being will give an account for the way they lived on earth. Because God created the universe, He is king over the universe. And one day, He will return to judge the living and the dead, condemning his enemies and welcoming his people into the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells.

Listen, you may feel right now like you're calling all the shots in the story of your life – for better or worse. The Word of God reminds us we're not in control of how it all ends because it's not our story. It's God's story. He's calling the shots. 2 Peter 3:10-12, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God..."

To start a remodeling project without a clear view of the end creates a disaster in your home. To navigate this life without a clear view of the end is to guarantee a



disaster for your soul. The end is clear. The end is known. The end is guaranteed. The question that remains is whether we will live with the end in view or not. That is what 1 Thessalonians is all about – living with the end in view.

Every chapter of this divinely inspired letter to the church in Thessalonica, written around 50 A.D. by the Apostle Paul and his coworkers, ends with an explicit reference to the return of Christ, to the last chapter in the story. It teaches us what it means to live various aspects of our life on earth with the end in view – this includes our relationship with God, our sexuality, our work, you name it.

For those of you listening to me who think, “I already know how to do that,” take care. The primary author – Paul – uses phrases like “you already know,” “you know,” or “I have no need to write” some 11 times. Translation? Much of what he says in here isn’t “new” information for the Thessalonians. But they, like us, didn’t so much need something new. They needed help to live in light of something they had heard before.

There’s a lot going on in the first 10 verses, but the central claim is simple. **Living in light of the end starts with choosing to follow the only One who can deliver us in the end.** The way you end depends entirely on the way you begin. If you want to end well, you must begin well. And ending well – salvation from death and judgment on THAT day – requires placing your faith in Jesus Christ in THIS day.

Hence Paul focuses in the first 10 verses on the doctrine of conversion, on how a man or woman comes to walk the spiritual path in this life that leads to salvation in the life to come. Why? Because living in light of the end starts with choosing to follow the only One who can deliver you in the end. Our initial choice to follow Jesus, the very beginning of our relationship with God, is what I’m talking about when I use the word “conversion” and it’s the focus of 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10.

1) CONVERSION PRODUCES RECOGNIZABLE FRUIT

After greeting the Thessalonians, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy immediately launch into an outpouring of thanksgiving. Though we see as much in many of Paul’s letters, it’s not a formula. Their hearts overflow with thanksgiving because Timothy brought back a report of some serious good fruit in the local church. Verse 3, “We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Their thanksgiving isn't generic. It's specific. First, they thank God for the Thessalonians' work of faith. Now it's easy to pit works and faith against each other and treat them as polar opposites. We say things like, "You can't earn God's love and acceptance through good works as if we could make ourselves right with God. Rather, we receive God's love and acceptance through faith or trust in Jesus who makes us right with God. That's what Josh Jr. preached last Sunday from Galatians 1.

Is that true? Yes. Does that mean works are bad and faith is good? No. It simply means works cannot do what faith alone can accomplish. But that doesn't mean they're bad. To the contrary, we won't be saved without them. Why not? Because they are a vital expression of faith. In Romans 1:5 Paul speaks of laboring as an apostle to bring about the "obedience of faith." If you think of works of obedience to God's commands and faith as two completely separate things, that phrase will make no sense. But if you recognize, as Paul did, that faith is both an act of obedience and manifests itself through obedience, then good works are not disconnected from faith. They are the fruit of faith.

So when Paul thanks God for their "work of faith," he means he thanks God for the obedience to God's commands he sees in their lives that proceed from their faith and give evidence of the authenticity of their faith. James 1:17, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

"Labor of love" is similar. It's the hard work of unselfishly serving the Lord and his people that's a result their love for God and his people – the first and second greatest commandments. Mind you, the "work of faith" and "labor of love" wasn't easy. As we'll see in more detail in Chapter 2, the Thessalonians were experiencing significant persecution and ridicule because they had become Christians.

Yet they didn't waver. They didn't give up. They continued in works of faith and labors of love, demonstrating a remarkable "steadfastness." What enabled that kind of perseverance? Paul knew the answer. It was their confidence, their "hope" that their suffering was not in vain, that Jesus Christ would return to vindicate his people. So Paul also thanks God for their "steadfastness of hope."

It's important to carefully consider what each of those phrases mean. But don't get bogged down in the details. What's the big picture? Conversion to Christianity produces recognizable fruit. Authentic faith isn't hidden. Genuine love is obvious.



Paul looks at their life and rejoices because he sees in their life the presence of the cardinal Christians virtues – faith, hope, and love.

What does our culture say? Whether I'm a Christian or not is between me and God. Don't be so arrogant as to assume you know the true condition of my soul. Paul doesn't say he has an infallible read on the true condition of someone's soul. He simply reminds us that genuine faith, hope, and love are not invisible. If they're actually present, they will manifest themselves in work, labor, and steadfastness – things which can be seen in a person's life. He sees them in the Thessalonians' life and his heart overflows with thanksgiving to God.

Two years ago, I planted what I thought was a Green Mountain Boxwood next to our front porch. I bought it because the label attached to it at the nursery said, "Green Mountain Boxwood." After a year, I started to notice something wasn't right. It wasn't branching the way a boxwood branches. It was leggy, not compact. The leaves seemed like the right color and size, but they were rounded like a holly, not pointed like a boxwood. When my other boxwoods all put out beautiful, new, light-green growth this spring, this shrub didn't. In fact, it started to yellow, which made me think it was looking for full sun and dissatisfied with the shade in which I had planted it. Last month, I confirmed my suspicion by digging it up and driving it over to the nursery. It was a Steeds Holly and the nursery manager immediately recognized as much. Why? Because it didn't have any of the signs of a true boxwood.

Friend, one of the most important questions you can ask, no matter how long you think you've been a Christian – is this: Do other Christians around you perceive and give thanks for the fruit of genuine conversion in your life? Humility doesn't say, "I know what's really going on inside me." Humility says, "Lord, I believe you when you say through your word that faith without works is dead. It's no faith at all."

If the fruit of authentic faith, genuine love, real hope in Jesus are visible to other Christians who know you, praise God! And if you see the fruit of authentic faith, genuine love, and real hope in Jesus in someone else's life, follow Paul's example in telling them! Few experiences are more encouraging than hearing how someone else sees the fruit of God's work in your life. Paul wasn't quick to complain and slow to give thanks. He was quick to give thanks and seemed to love nothing more than helping other people see evidence of good, spiritual fruit in their life. Lord help us to do the same!

The first thing we learn about the beginning of our relationship with God is that conversion produces recognizable fruit.

2) CONVERSION IS A RESULT OF A DECISIVE WORK OF GOD

If verses 1-3 describe what Paul sees in the Thessalonians and what should be visible in the life of any genuine Christian, verses 4-7 tell us how that good fruit comes to pass. In other words, what is it that gives birth to all of that good fruit? How do those virtues come to be in my life or in someone else's life? What's their origin?

Look at verse 4. "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you..." An arrogant Christian is a contradiction in terms. Why? Because the ultimate explanation for the presence of any good spiritual fruit in our lives – authentic faith, genuine love – isn't something you or I have done. It's something God has done and that before we were even born. Behind every work of faith, behind every labor of love, behind all steadfastness of hope, lies the sovereign, electing activity of God who mercifully and decisively intervenes in our spiritually dead hearts – not because of who we are or who he perceives we could become with a little help, but simply because of who he is, a God who loves the unlovely.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8, "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

From the very beginning of God's relationship with his people, he delights to act in such a way that he gets all the glory. Does a "work of faith" require something from us? Yes. Does a "labor of love" require something from us? Yes. "Work" and "Love" are active words. We are not passive. We must choose to trust and love. Paul is simply saying that the ultimate explanation for genuine faith, hope, and love in someone's life, the decisive cause of their conversion, is the sovereign activity of God.



No one is born with faith, hope, and love actively abiding in their heart. We're not naturally inclined to those things. We're naturally faithless, hopeless, and loveless. So what does God do? He intervenes. He breaks in. He takes the initiative to do in us what we cannot do for ourselves. He gives his chosen people a new heart. He makes them spiritually awake and alive to his trustworthiness, to his loveliness, causing faith and love to arise within them. He takes a heart that is spiritually dead and through his sovereign power, makes it spiritually alive.

It's a miracle. But it's not a mystery. The conversion of the elect is a result of two things. First, the gospel must be proclaimed. "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you (He's sovereignly intervened in your life) BECAUSE (verse 5) our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

What's the gospel? It's the good news of all Jesus has done through his life, death, and resurrection, to accomplish salvation from the judgment of God on account of our disobedience. When someone explains that good news, there are times it sounds like mere words, religious talk, in our ears. But then there are other times when the Holy Spirit takes those same words and brings them to bear in your heart such that you perceive and delight in them as the very power of God for the salvation of your soul.

That's what happened when Paul preached the gospel to the Thessalonians. His proclamation was accompanied with spiritual power, by the work of the Spirit granting the gift of faith in the hearts of those who listened. They believed they needed a Savior and that Jesus is that Savior. Brothers and sisters, that's what happens whenever someone becomes a Christian.

Conversion is not mental recognition of the truth of the gospel, agreement that the teachings of Jesus are helpful and wise, or heartfelt gratitude for the community of the church as good as all those things are. No. A genuine conversion is a result of a powerful work of God, accomplished through the preaching of the gospel, whereby the Holy Spirit enables you to recognize that you need a Savior and to trust Jesus as your Savior.

As such, conversion is a result of two things. First, the gospel must be proclaimed. That's the emphasis in verse 5. Second, the gospel must be received. Look at verse 6. "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit." When Paul proclaimed the gospel,

accompanied by the powerful, faith-granting work of the Spirit, the Thessalonians responded by receiving the gospel – they chose to follow Paul’s example and Jesus’ example of obedient trust and submission to God the Father, no matter the cost.

And in their case, the cost was significant. Their own countrymen (1 Thessalonians 3:14) began to persecute them on account of their faith. Choosing to follow Jesus didn’t make life easier. It made life harder. Think about that. How often do we shake our fist at God when we choose to trust Him, choose to obey Him, and things seem to get worse, not better? “I thought I was doing what you wanted me to do, Lord? Why haven’t you come through for me? Why am I still experiencing so much trouble within and trouble without?”

Well, for starters, it’s because you chose to follow a suffering Savior. Matthew 7:14, “For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” So why would anyone want to walk that road? Because it leads to life and because those who choose to walk it, following the footsteps of Jesus, are both always sorrowful and always rejoicing – groaning through tears with all creation, longing for Jesus to make all things new, yet casting our cares and sorrows on the Lord with the joyful confidence that our hope in him will not be disappointed.

Only the Holy Spirit can give that kind of joy in affliction, friends. He did it for Jesus. He is eager to do it for us too. The decisive cause of conversion is a work of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. When the gospel is proclaimed in power and received with joy, even in the midst of sorrow, a spiritual miracle occurs and a new life is born, fulfilling the sovereign plan of God. Man proclaims the gospel. Man receives the gospel. The work of God is decisive in both.

We’ve seen the result of a genuine conversion – faith, hope, and love. We’ve seen the cause of a genuine conversion. It’s not until the end of the section that Paul explicitly describes the nature of conversion. How exactly do all of those spiritual realities play out in the realm of human experience?

3) CONVERSION CONSISTS OF A REORIENTATION OF THE HEART

When the Thessalonians came to faith in Christ, they quickly became an example to all the believers (verse 7) in the whole region of Macedonia and in Achaia. It certainly helped that Thessalonica was situated at the intersection of several critical trade routes, boasting a mobile population of some 100,000 people – which was quite a large city at that time. The testimony of their conversion, the report of what



God had done in their life, “sounded forth” (verse 8) so far and wide that Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy didn’t even need to share the story.

So what were people saying? “Hey, did you hear about the Thessalonians? They started going to church. They got into the whole Jesus thing. They’re taking a new interest in spiritual things.” No. People reported (verse 9) “the kind of reception we had among you” (the effect of the gospel preaching he described back in verse 5) and “how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven...” (filling out in detail what he meant by “receiving the gospel” back in verse 6).

Friends, we live in a culture and a community that is still stepped in the vestiges of Christianity. If you ask a random person on the street around here if they are a Christian, all kinds of people will still say yes. But what does being a Christian actually mean? What does receiving the gospel actually look like in the realm of our experience? The experience of conversion is captured by a single phrase in v. 9. “You turned.” You turned “To God from idols.” You turned away from serving false gods and waiting for them to deliver you, to make everything wrong right, and turned toward serving the living and true God and waiting for Him to deliver you.

For the Thessalonians, the idols they turned from were physical images in physical temples. That’s certainly the case in some parts of the world today, but not here. In our city, in our community, our false gods are less obvious but no less real. What do we worship? What do we serve? What do we ask to make everything wrong right? We worship our work. We worship sex. We worship money. We worship comfort. We worship entertainment. We worship security. We worship our image. We worship the successes and achievements of our kids. We serve all of those things, waiting for them to deliver us, and make everything wrong right.

Friends, to the degree you do so, you’ve embraced a lie. There is only one living and true God and it’s not your career. It’s Jesus. There is only one living and true God and it’s not sexual ecstasy. It’s Jesus. There is only one living and true God and it’s not the money in your bank account, what people think of you, or what you think of yourself. It’s Jesus. Stop serving what cannot satisfy your soul. Stop waiting for what will inevitably disappoint you and will never make everything wrong right. Only Jesus can do that. Only Jesus will do that.

Conversion to Christianity doesn’t consist, fundamentally, in going to church.
Conversion to Christianity doesn’t consist, fundamentally, in cleaning up your life

and making better choices. Conversion to Christianity doesn't consist, fundamentally, in hanging out with Christian friends, singing Christian songs, or saying Christian prayers. Conversion to Christianity consists, fundamentally, in TURNING from false gods and waiting for them to deliver you TO serving the living and true God and waiting for him to deliver you. Conversion consists of a reorientation of the core allegiance and spiritual orientation of your heart. It's not about your religious brand. It's about your religious affections.

CONCLUSION

Why is serving and waiting for Jesus so important? Because he is the only one who delivers us (verse 10) "from the wrath to come." A day of accountability is coming, friends, and none of us will escape. You will be judged by God, not according to how you measure up to other people. You will be judged according to how you measure up to Him. His blinding holiness is the standard. His impeccable righteousness is the benchmark.

Unless you are found in Christ, unless you die following Jesus, trusting Jesus, waiting for Jesus, you will be found wanting and perish. No do-overs. No second chances. Wrath is coming. God's glory will be vindicated. Righteousness will be rewarded. Evil will be punished. The end is clear. God's already revealed the final chapter in the story.

Living in light of the end starts with choosing to follow the only One who can deliver us in the end. That's what conversion is all about. Choosing to receive the word of the gospel. Choosing to turn from idols to serve and wait for the living and true God. Living in light of the end starts with a critical turn. It starts with conversion. Conversion produces recognizable fruit. Conversion is a result of a decisive work of God. And conversion consists of a reorientation of the heart.

May no one listening to me this morning fail to end well because you failed to begin well. And if you have begun well, if you've made the critical turn, then resolve to spend your remaining years of waiting helping others do the same. Coming to faith in Christ isn't a religious option among equal competitors. It's your only hope for deliverance on the final day.