

1 Thessalonians 1

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to the second passage that we read in Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica, his first letter, and we read the whole of the chapter, but we're going to be focusing our attention on the last couple of verses of this chapter.

Now, this evening, we're going to participate in the Lord's Supper, and in the words of institution, Jesus tells us that whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

And it's those words particularly that will lead us into what we want to look at in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. We participate, we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

So, there is this backward look as we remember the death of Jesus, but as an intrinsic part of the sacrament, there is also this looking forward to Jesus' return, and we participate until He comes. And there's this sense of real expectation that should mark our participation. This focus on the second coming of the Lord is an ever-present focus in the New Testament.

[1 : 28] One very helpful New Testament writer and author, Leon Morris, who's written many excellent New Testament commentaries, assures us that there is a reference to the second coming on average once every 13 verses from Matthew through to Revelation.

Now, I haven't checked if he's got that right. I'm sure he has. If you want to check it, you can do that, but I'm sure there are better things to do with your time. But it's very striking, this piece of information.

And I think it's striking also because I wonder, I certainly speak for myself, but I think it's perhaps true of many of us, that we don't have that same focus in our lives, in our thinking that the New Testament has on our Lord's coming again.

We participate until He comes. And in so many other various ways, His second coming is brought to the forefront of our attention, or certainly that's the intention.

With this in mind, I want to consider this evening a gospel story where this Christian hope awaiting the coming of Jesus figures prominently.

[2 : 44] And I'm referring to the believers in Thessalonica and their story as it was told by many and related back to them by Paul. And we're going to focus our attention on verses 9 and 10, where we have this summary of their story.

The order of events is that their story has become known in the provinces and beyond the provinces that they were part of, and Paul then heard their story.

And so now he writes to them and says, I've heard the story about you. And then he summarizes what he had heard. There in verse 9 in the second half, they tell. They tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

The they there at the beginning of that sentence, they tell how you turn to God refers to the believers everywhere that are spoken of in verse 8.

Your faith in God has become known everywhere. And so everywhere they speak of this faith of the believers in Thessalonica.

[4 : 05] And they told Paul about them also. And we all, I think, love a story.

So what we want to do is explore this story, this very brief story, this story told in few words, this gospel story concerning the believers in Thessalonica.

And each of the actors in the story has a part to play. And we find three actors in the story.

We have Jesus, a prominent actor in the story that is told. We have God, the Father, also prominent in the story that is told.

And we have the Thessalonians themselves. And each has their part to play. And so the way we're going to think about the story is to consider each of the actors in the drama and see what part they play in the drama, in the story of the coming to faith, the gospel story of the believers in Thessalonica.

[5 : 13] As we do, as we think about the part that Jesus played and plays, as we think about the part that the Father plays, that it would be cause for thanksgiving. That as we, after having given some thought to these verses, as we gather around the Lord's table, that we would gather around with that sense of thanksgiving for what Jesus did for them and what He does for us, what the Father did for them and what He does for us.

But also, as we think of the Thessalonians and the part that they play in the story, that that would serve as a challenge to us to follow their example.

Well, let's consider Jesus first. Then, consider what is said concerning the living and true God, a reference given the context and given what we read in these two verses, particularly a reference to God the Father, and then also the Thessalonians.

And as we think of these three actors in that order, that will involve looking at the text in reverse order, because the two verses, or it's really just one and a half verses from the second half of verse 9 through to verse 10, it's at the end that we're told about Jesus, about what He does, and then as we go backwards, we read of the Father's involvement, and then at the beginning, we're told of the Thessalonians.

And so, we'll do that. We'll go in that backward or reverse order. What part, then, does Jesus play in this story? Well, the most prominent aspect of what Jesus does, the part that He plays in the story is there in front of us very clearly.

[6 : 54] Jesus rescues. We're told there at the end of verse 10, Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath. Jesus saves.

Jesus rescues His people. He rescues the believers in Thessalonica. Now, that language of being rescued, of being saved, of being redeemed is familiar to us.

It's the heart of our gospel vocabulary. And if we were to be asked, if I were to be asked, if you were to be asked, well, what are you rescued from? You had to answer that question.

I would imagine that the answer we would ordinarily give is that we're rescued from our sin. We're rescued from our guilt.

And, of course, that is true. But it's interesting that here Paul focuses on a reality, an aspect of Christ's work of rescue on behalf of His people, an aspect that is perhaps often left unmentioned, perhaps even sometimes removed from the gospel story, that Jesus rescues us from the wrath of God.

[8 : 09] He rescues us, the language that we have here is, He who rescues us from the coming wrath or anger. What do we make of this part that Jesus plays in the gospel story of these believers?

That He rescues them from the coming wrath. What do we say? What do we think about this notion of God's wrath or God's anger?

I think we need to begin by acknowledging what it is not. God's wrath, God's anger is not vindictive. It's not capricious.

It's not the evidence of any lack of control. God doesn't lose His temper. We do. We fly off the handle. We get angry in that way.

That is not what is being said of God. God's wrath, God's anger is His holy and active opposition to all that is evil.

[9 : 11] We acknowledge God's wrath first and foremost because it is the clear testimony of Scripture. But I have to say, going beyond that, and of course that is reason enough for us, but going beyond that, I find it difficult to think of anything more horrendous than if God were incapable of anger.

Many are horrified at this talk of God being angry. It doesn't tie in with their view of God. And yet, what a terrible thing it would be if God were incapable of anger.

It would be an awful thing for the living and true God to be so indifferent to evil that He is not angry with evil. And we would be faced with a very real and horrifying prospect that the wicked would never be called to account.

That is more horrifying, way more horrifying than to recognize the reality that a holy and just God is a God who knows what it is to be angry with wickedness and indeed with the wicked.

God is a God who is provoked to anger by our sin, by our wickedness. But of course, here in our text, the reference is to a particular and future expression of God's anger.

[10:33] We're told, Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath. It's clear that Paul is speaking of something in the future. It's also clear that he's speaking about something very specific.

It's not some vague reference to some time in the future. No, it is to a specific event in the future that Paul is directing our attention and says that we are rescued from that, from this coming wrath. Of course, the clear reference here is to the day of judgment, when Jesus returns and He will judge the living and the dead. And Jesus says that in, or what Paul says is that Jesus' part in the gospel story of the believers in Thessalonica is that He rescues them from that day of God's wrath.

And of course, that's true for all of us who are believers. We are rescued from condemnation and the experience of God's anger on that day. We are rescued by Jesus.

It's interesting that even in the manner in which Paul expresses himself, and up until that final statement that he makes, he's addressing the Thessalonians, he's speaking about what God has done for them.

[11:53] But in this final part, when he speaks of being rescued from the coming wrath, he includes himself and indeed all believers who rescues us. Not only who rescues you, but who rescues us from the coming wrath.

Paul recognizes that all of us are subject to God's wrath. All of us would rightly fall under His condemnation, but Jesus rescues us from that.

And of course, the manner in which Jesus rescues us is because He drank for us the cup of God's wrath.

We're reminded of His agony in Gethsemane. Let this cup pass from me. And this agony, of course, was a product of His appreciation of what it is that He was to endure on the cross as He bore the wrath of God.

He drank the cup of God's wrath that we might be spared from drinking it, that the believers in Thessalonica would be spared from drinking it.

[12:59] Of course, at the Lord's table, we're especially reminded of this sweet exchange. Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath that we might drink the cup of God's loving kindness.

Jesus then, what does He do? What is He doing? What will He do for the Thessalonians in their gospel story? Well, He rescues them from the coming wrath. But I think there's another less explicit recognition of what Jesus does in the two verses, and it's that Jesus reigns.

And I mention this simply in reference to what the text says concerning where Jesus is coming from. Notice there in our passage, Of course, the principal focus here is on this waiting on the Son's return.

But the manner in which that's described is also in a way that we're given the information as to where Jesus is now. Where will He come from? Where is He as we await His return?

Well, He's in heaven. We wait for His Son from heaven. And what is Jesus doing there in heaven? Is He simply waiting for the appointed time, the day set, for Him to return and to judge the living and the dead, to gather His own to Himself?

[14:28] Is He passively waiting there? No, of course, there in heaven He reigns. He ascended on high, seated at the right hand of the Father, reigning over all, reigning from heaven over the universe.

Jesus rescues His people from the coming wrath, and Jesus reigns in heaven over all on behalf of His people, on behalf of us.

He is reigning now as King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus, then, the one who rescues, the one who reigns.

But in these words that Paul relates for us, this story of the Thessalonians, their gospel story, there's also reference, there's also information concerning the part played by God the Father. What does God the Father, spoken of here as the living and true God, what part does He play in this story? Well, the most prominent part that He plays is told there in verse 10.

[15:42] The Thessalonians, they wait for His Son from heaven, whom He, that is the living and true God, raised from the dead. The Father, His part, the part that is spoken of here, the part that He played was to raise Jesus from the dead.

Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath as He tasted death on the cross. And the evidence, the confirmation that He drank that cup fully and exhaustively is the resurrection.

The Father vindicates the work of His Son by raising Him from the grave. This is the work of the Father in powerful vindication, raises His Son back to life.

This is what the living and true God has done. He has raised His Son from the dead. But what else does He do, particularly in relation to the Thessalonians?

Well, the way I'm suggesting how we could describe this in the outline is that God receives. What do I mean by that? The report that Paul was given made it clear that the Thessalonians turned to God.

[16:59] They tell how you turn to God. And we'll come to that in a moment as we think of the part that the Thessalonians play. But, of course, implicit in this statement that they turned to God is the reality that God received them with open arms.

That as they turned to God, He was ready and willing to receive them and to embrace them and to welcome them into His family.

God receives those who turn to Him. Just as Jesus spoke of in no way casting aside those who turn to Him, so the Father welcomes those who turn to Him.

Maybe the visible picture that comes to our mind as we think of this wonderful truth is the picture painted in the parable of the prodigal son. And the Father's delight in receiving the prodigal home. As He turns from a life of no meaning or purpose destined to destruction and returns home, He is welcomed lovingly and graciously and enthusiastically and joyfully by the Father.

[18:16] So, God received the Thessalonians. When they turned to Him, He received them and welcomed them to Himself. But then we want to think also concerning the part that the Thessalonians play in this drama, in this gospel story.

And there are, in these two verses, three verbs that describe, at least in a measure, their part in this drama.

They turn, we're then told that they serve, and then, more intriguingly, we're told that they wait. Let's think of these three verbs that we find in verses 9 and 10 concerning what the Thessalonians had done, or in some cases are doing.

First of all, they turn. Verse 9 and second half, they tell these reporters, they tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

The believers in Thessalonica, largely of a Gentile background, turn from their idol worship they had been participating in, and they turn to God.

[19:36] I think the word order that we have given here is significant. They tell how you turned to God from idols. And I think the significance of that is that the primary movement, it would seem, certainly from the manner in which Paul describes it, the primary movement is towards God.

They turn to God. And that, as a consequence, necessarily involved a turning from idols. But the principal movement is towards God.

And that's important. The principal motivation for the Thessalonians becoming Christians was that they were drawn to God.

It's not primarily, or it was not primarily a dissatisfaction with idols that led to the turning, but rather the drawing power of the living and true God.

And as they were drawn to Him, so they turned to Him. And as they do, necessarily, they leave behind the idols, lifeless idols, leaving behind lifeless idols as they turn to the living and true God.

[20:49] Of course, as we describe it, it becomes clear that though this is something that the Thessalonians did, they turned to God. They did so because God, by His Spirit, was working in them, drawing them, enabling them to turn to God, to see in God and in the gospel that which was beautiful and attractive and necessary for them.

And as I say, as a necessary consequence, the idols that they had been loyal to are left behind. We tend to think of this turning or repenting as a one-off movement.

There's a real sense in which we are ever called to turn to God. And as we turn to God, so to leave behind idols, all that which would take the place that God deserves in our lives.

They turn. But they turn, and then also we're told that they serve. They tell how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

God does not call us to a quiet, sedentary life, but to a life of service. We are called to the exclusive service of our God.

[22 : 10] And everything we do, we do as an act of worship or service to God. How did the Thessalonians serve? Or how did they become faithful servants?

Well, in the preceding verses, I think we're given a clue as to how they became useful, faithful servants. They did so by imitating Paul and imitating the Lord.

Of course, in imitating Paul, there's a sense in which they were imitating the Lord. We know how Paul spoke in those terms. Imitate me as I imitate the Lord. Well, you have this kind of picture painted here in verse 6.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord. And as they did, so they became useful, faithful servants of God, the God that they were called to serve.

We'll come back, as we just say a few words following our participation in the supper. We'll come back to the nature of their service, what it is that they did in the service of God.

[23 : 13] We'll leave that just for the moment. Then the third thing that we're told that they do, the part that they play in this story, is that they wait. They tell, are you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven?

I wonder, how does that strike you as part of a gospel story, that the believers wait for Jesus and His return from heaven?

They're rescued to wait. If that does strike you as a little odd in the story, maybe it's because you and we have lost a sense of our ultimate destiny as believers.

In the words of the Negro spiritual, As believers, we are, in the words of Paul to Timothy, to long for His appearing, the appearing of our Savior.

This waiting that is spoken of here, it's not a passive waiting. This is the excited waiting of a child for Christmas, eager for the day to arrive, can't wait for the days to pass when Christmas will come.

[24 : 36] There's excitement, there's expectation waiting for this day that has been set. Indeed, when Jesus returns, all our Christmases come together in one.

We gather at the table this evening until He comes, and we wait expectantly and excitedly for His return. So, this evening, as you come to the table, thank Jesus for rescuing you from the coming wrath.

Thank the Father for vindicating His completed work of salvation on the cross as He raised His Son from the dead.

And commit yourself to a life of service until, and indeed beyond, His eagerly anticipated return.

Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for the story of the believers in Thessalonica.

We thank You that as believers we have a story to tell, the story of Your work in our life.

[25 : 49] We thank You that it is a story that has begun, but that it is a story that is ongoing. We thank You for the story as we look ahead to what is yet awaiting us.

We do pray that we would be increasingly believers who are marked by those who wait expectantly for the coming of our Savior, that we would be those who long for His appearing.

Forgive us when we become so comfortable in this life that we have little thought for what awaits us. We do thank You for this great inheritance that is ours and this great day that is approaching when our Savior will return and draw us to Himself.

We thank You that on that day when the great day of judgment is inaugurated, we can approach it with a sense of confidence, not in ourselves, but in our Savior who rescues us from the coming wrath.

We thank You that it is a day when all wrongs will be righted, when justice will prevail. And we ask that we would look forward to that day and knowing that it is a day that will come, a day that has been appointed, and a day when Your glory will be revealed so wonderfully in this world.

[27 : 16] And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.