



Sermon Transcript

May 5, 2019

When Jesus Turns Your Life Around

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 5, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Steven Durgin. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

The Thessalonians' Faith and Example

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly^[a] mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers^[b] loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Introduction

I was recently grabbed by an article headline “GPS Horror Stories.” And you get the extreme ones where someone pulls a U-Turn into a lake because they weren’t paying attention, or the woman in Boston who turned when her GPS said to and got her van stuck on train tracks and had to abandon her vehicle. But I’d like to read you this one, entitled, “Continuing on and on and on.”

Continuing on and on and on

It reads “All Sabine Moreau wanted to do was pick up a friend from the train station, which was north of her home in Hainault Erquelinees, Brussels. But when the GPS directions took her south instead of north, Moreau didn't question it. She stuck by her GPS when she saw the signs for the German towns of Frankfurt, Aachen, and Cologne. And when the lengthy trip forced her to refuel twice, and pull over to catch a few hours of shut-eye — Moreau didn't question the machine even then. Only when she entered the Croatian capital of Zagreb did she finally realize something was up. Her friend at the train station and her son had also caught on, and her son called the police. When Moreau finally returned home, all she said by way of explanation was, "I admit it's a little weird, but I was distracted.”

Many of these GPS horror stories have to do with incorrect turns, incomplete digital maps, and wrong directions. But the worst of the stories are those with wrong destinations. If the destination is wrong, everything else is wrong. And those who suffer by GPS might have been spared if they had only checked their destination. And if you’re a Christian this morning, let me caution you, it is all too easy to assume that just because you got saved 20 years ago, that you aren’t guilty of distracted driving in your spiritual life.

Today we begin our new series, “When Jesus Turns Your Life Around.”

That’s what he does. It’s a theme you hear in every testimony, because when your heart has the wrong destination your life has the wrong direction. That is, when your heart treasures, or wants, or values the wrong thing, you will chart out your courses accordingly. It’s a twofold problem. The path is wrong because its end is wrong. The plan is wrong because the goal is wrong. The directions are wrong not necessarily because they won’t get you to where you want to go, but because where you want to go is no

good.

We may laugh at how extreme Sabine Moreau's mistake was, but how many of us are sure that our hearts have the right coordinates plugged in at all times? And when I speak of destinations, I'm not even talking about heaven, I'm talking about every day. Is Jesus the desire of your heart?

Maybe Proverbs 14:12 rings a bell? "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." The Bible cautions us about our desires because they shape our destination and therefore our day to day paths. What about, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"? And I think of the letter to the Romans which says that unbelievers "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up *in the lusts of their hearts* [that's a desire word] to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and *worshiped* and *served* the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

In this series, we will explore and experience many ways in which Jesus turns our lives around. But I think it's fitting that Paul begins his letter to the church in Thessalonica with not just any turn around, but with the turn of all turns: what or whom we worship, which governs the direction of our lives. Is Jesus the desire of your heart *today*?

When your heart has the wrong destination your life takes on the wrong direction. But the good news this morning is that Jesus can turn your life around. And each of us needs some turning, don't we?

Meet me in 1 Thessalonians 1 verses 1-10.

The Text

¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ^{5a}because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in

power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

^{5b}You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The Point

Hallelujah. Folks, today, we are going to look at three things:

- What Jesus does: He turns our lives around. (VERSE 9)
- How he does it: He does it through the Gospel and the Spirit at work in community. (VERSES 4-5)
- What we do with it: Grow in Faith, Love, and Hope. (VERSES 8-10)

What Jesus Does

First, What Jesus does.

Paul vividly remembers his first impressions of the Thessalonian Christians. Thessalonica—modern Thessaloniki—was, and is, a thriving seaport in northern Greece, roughly 200 miles north of Athens. Paul had come there after preaching in Philippi, further east. The story of that journey is told in Acts 16 and 17. And after a very short time--perhaps one month!--Paul had to flee from this fledgling group of Thessalonian Christians because of intense persecution. We know from Acts 17:7 that word got out to Caesar that these Christians swore allegiance to another king, namely Jesus. And they got run out of the city. So if it was that bad for Paul, what became of--his imitators--those he left behind?

They believed. They formed an assembly of faithful believers after a short time with Paul and his companions.

Imagine that. From say, April 1st to April 30th. Someone comes into your life and tells you this crazy message about a man you probably haven't heard of who died and came back to life and did signs and wonders and taught the Jewish Scriptures and claimed to be the Son of God. You believe it at great social cost, and start meeting at least weekly. And your teacher leaves, and he prays, and he hopes that your new faith family stays alive. And you do.

The remarkable thing was the instant effect the gospel had had. At the heart of it—and this is never far from Paul's mind throughout the letter—was a call to worship the true God rather than idols. A call that the Thessalonians answered: they lived differently than the people around them, and went against the cultural grain, at great personal cost, because Jesus turned their life around.

To do without idols, was simply unheard of in Paul's world. It would be like asking people in a modern city to give up using cars, computers and cell phones. Idols weren't fluff. They weren't equivalent to America's picture of privatized religions. The gods of Greek and Roman paganism had a functional and social importance and they were everywhere.

I'll paraphrase N.T. Wright here, who says, "If you were going to plant a tree, you would pray to the relevant god. If you were going on a business trip, a quick visit to the appropriate shrine was in order. If you or your son or daughter was getting married, serious and costly worship of the relevant deity was expected. At every turn in the road the gods were there: unpredictable, possibly malevolent, sometimes at war among themselves, so that you could never do too much to try to keep these gods pleased, making sure you'd got them on your side."

So Paul writes to these dear, suffering Christians and he tells them how he prays for them constantly, how fondly he remembers their coming to faith, and how encouraged he is that Timothy's report was solid: these believers are still following Jesus. What can explain that kind of change despite circumstances? New coordinates in their GPS, a new destination in their hearts and a new direction for their lives. They turned.

The word 'turned' in verse 9 is as close as Paul gets to a technical term for conversion itself, what happens when someone stops going in one direction, toward one

destination, and turns around and begins going the other way. Something Sabine Moreau would have benefitted from. When people are lost, it's usually not because they think that South is North. They've often got the wrong coordinates plugged in and they're distracted.

But this is the word of the Lord for us this morning: Jesus can turn you from serving idols to worshipping God. He can. Whatever your vices, whatever looms large over your life and threatens your peace, He is able to set you free from it and turn you toward himself. Whatever distracts you from loving him above all things, whatever hinders your joy from finding its root in him, whatever eclipses your obedience, whatever wrong destinations you plug into your GPS, Jesus can turn your life around. And we see Paul celebrating this because he's seen it.

How He Does It

But second, Paul recalls *how* God turned their lives around. He does it through the Gospel and the Spirit at work in community. (VERSES 4-5)

⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ^{5a}because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

Paul had gone around preaching this crazy message that a guy named Jesus had died and then come back to life. And perhaps most people would dismiss this sort of thing, but some in Thessalonica, *some* found that something happened to them when they listened to his message. They felt a strange power grip them—the power that, Paul would tell them, was the holy spirit at work (VERSE 4-5).

These listeners would understand what he was saying. It would grasp their hearts and minds. So much so that these listeners became *believers* and *followers* of the same Jesus that turned Paul's life around, and as they became imitators of him (VERSE 6), they saw this gospel begin its work of transforming their hearts and their lives.

Brothers and sisters, if that's how God turns lives around then we need the gospel! And we don't just need it once a week on Sundays! When we go and get coffee together, we need to hear that Jesus is better than financial security. When we get together for a meal, we need to be told that Jesus is better than pornography, or else it will have undue power

to entice our imaginations. We need to have good news plugged in to the GPS of our hearts, so that we don't go plugging in other destinations when our brothers and sisters aren't looking. We need the gospel! And we need to pray for the filling of the Holy Spirit. Because without God we can't do this. We can't live. Is anybody desperate for Jesus this morning? We need to hear good news from each other and we need God himself through his Spirit, and we need to see both at work in life-on-life fellowship.

That can't happen if nobody knows how sinful you are. It can't. It is a family deal. The gospel must be preached to your hearts by people who know and love and live alongside you with openness and trust in the Holy Spirit of God. That's how he does it. Now, what do we do with it?

What We Do With It

Follow along with me in VERSES 2-3.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,

³remembering before our God and Father your work of **faith** and labor of **love** and steadfastness of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And then continue with me down in VERSES 8-9, where we see those same three things.

⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. [That's faith]

⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you [that's love], and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven [that's hope]...

When Jesus turns your life around by the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, what do we do with it? We grow in Faith, Love, and Hope. (VERSES 8-10)

Faith. These Thessalonians are so on fire for Jesus, that they both persevere and they share the treasure they've received, telling people the story and power and love of Jesus.

Perseverance of faith.

Suffering is mentioned here; it get's fleshed out later in the letter. But from what I can tell, they followed Jesus despite persecution and deaths in the family. Now, Paul doesn't spell out why some of them had died. We know that formal persecution of Christians didn't take hold until later in the 50s, but it's still possible that individuals were beaten and killed. And we've got sources that indicate that social harassment and ostracism was strong.

So imagine that you gather here this Sunday, and then hear mid-week that one of your mentors in the church was killed or harassed for practicing the way of Jesus, or for deciding not to take part in a religious or social event. And imagine what it might be like to fear for your life, or your job, or your reputation just by gathering in this place.

That's the experience of our brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka. When we gathered here to celebrate Easter Sunday, our family in that country was assaulted, suffering the worst attacks ever recorded against Sri Lanka's Christian minority, who make up just 7% of the 21 million population. Do you feel how real this is? I am sure that Sri Lanka's Christian minority feels constant pressure to live in a way that makes sense to everyone around them. But they persevere in their faith.

Sharing of faith.

They share Jesus with the region. Paul's not just talking about a neighborhood influence here. To give you a sense of scale, it's like if WEFC planted a church 200 miles South in Philadelphia, and we heard about what was going on with that community of believers without having to hear directly *from* that community of believers. Paul's verbiage here in VERSE 8 is translated "sounded forth." This is the Greek word from which we get the English word "Echo." Nobody had to say, 'Have you heard about those weird Thessalonians who are going around talking about someone called Jesus?' because everybody who had heard about them was telling someone else without being asked. That's the meaning of what Paul says here: the message was echoing.

This group of believers, who Paul spent maybe one month with, are making so much sound, and their reputation is so conspicuous that the wider region knows about it. The news of their faith reverberates throughout the hills and valleys of Greece and beyond.

I don't pretend that there aren't huge differences between that time and place and our time and place. But we are an assembly of 400 strong, and people across the street from this building don't really know what happens here, and don't really know what we're

about as a people. Jesus has turned our lives around, so we ought to grow in faith; to exercise that faith by making some noise in this neighborhood.

Love. Love—which, as Paul will show later in the letter (4:9–12), is a very practical thing—it requires the kind of effort we associate with hard physical work. Love also means being welcoming and hospitable, not only to the gospel message but to people. Look at VERSE 9.

“For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you”

Per Timothy’s report, love marks this group of believers. And we grow in love by laboring to understand and serve each other even in the difficult details of life.

Hope. Hope needs patience, which is also demanding. Look at VERSE 10.

“to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”

We grow in hope as we anticipate Jesus and wait for his return.

It is our goal as a body to grow in faith, love, and hope together. That’s what we do when Jesus turns us away from idols and towards himself.

Conclusion

Is Jesus the desire of your heart? Is he the destination in your daily GPS? Is he the aim that steers your words with your spouse or your loved ones, is he the center of your daydreams, does he fill in the blank “if only I had _____, I’d be happy”? For our well-churched Christians, do you read the Bible to know the Bible or to know God? Do you pray to check off a box and assure yourself that you’ve prayed, which is a form of self-worship, or do you pray to be with him and choose him and obey him?

Through the power of the Gospel message and the Spirit, at work in our relationships, God’s grace is poured into our lives, we see our idols lose their power as we find all safety, all significance, and all joy in a generous, loving, merciful God. Turn your back on whatever else you worship, and turn toward serving the true and living God.

If you're like me, we still have some turning to do. We continue our journey toward Jesus by our **faith** in him, who empowers us do the hard work of **love**, and to wait with **hope** for his coming kingdom.

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What are some modern day idols in our culture? What functions as a god, a thing we can't be without, or a prize that steers our decision-making?
2. Personally, what is one idol that Jesus has turned you away from? What role, if any, does that former idol have for you now?
3. How might a typical day of your life improve if Jesus was the governing desire of your heart—the destination of your daily GPS? Think faith, love and hope! Get specific and practical.

Diving Into The Word

Taking It Home