

CHANGED LIVES

by Ray C. Stedman

The Thessalonian letters of the Apostle Paul were written to a young church that was situated in an extremely dangerous world. Within twenty years of their writing, the whole of the ancient East was convulsed in warfare and rebellion. In 70 A. D., the armies of Titus surrounded the city of Jerusalem. Following a bloody siege, the city was overrun, the temple destroyed, and the Jews taken captive. The movements that culminated in these events had already begun when this first letter was written. Thus it is clear that the Thessalonian Christians were facing extremely perilous times.

We too are living in dangerous times in this 20th century year. Many years ago, Dr. E. M. Blaiklock, who was then Professor of Classics at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, visited our fellowship and said something which I have never forgotten. This renowned Biblical scholar declared: "Of all the centuries, the twentieth is most like the first." We can, therefore, feel very close to this young church in Thessalonica.

Many today sense an approaching world crisis. A nervous, jittery stock market; a growing sense of cynicism and distrust of the political process; an increase in drug and alcohol dependency, with the resultant physical and mental toll in human lives; scientists tinkering with our genetic make-up and actually developing a business of selling fetal tissues; all portend a frightening crisis looming on the horizon of our times. Add to this the now familiar threat of AIDS, the spread of famine in many countries, and, of course, the ever-present threat of nuclear warfare, and it is clear that something terrible is about to happen. We are living in a world in crisis.

In 1980, leaders from all over the Western world attended the First Global Conference on the Future, held in Ontario, Canada. I quote the sobering words of the chairman of that conference: "The bad news is that the end of the world is coming. The good news is, not yet. But the decade of the '80's is going to be the most important in human history. If we don't make the right decisions, the odds of us going beyond this decade are very slim. The danger of war and the collapse of Western civilization is a very real possibility."

Even earlier, in 1972, a group of international industrial leaders and thinkers, called the Club of Rome, suggested six proposals that humanity must put into effect if we are to survive on this planet. I will only share the first, very significant proposal, with you:

"The survival of this planet necessitates new forms of thinking that will lead to a fundamental revision of human behavior, and, by implication, of the entire fabric of present-day society."

That simply says that if we cannot discover how to change people, there is no hope for saving the world from ultimate collapse. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." There is no way out unless society can find a means of fundamentally changing human beings.

Right here is the glory of the gospel for the gospel changes men and women. Paul's letters to the young church at Thessalonica were written because people there had found, in the good news about Jesus, a way to be changed in themselves. The focus and purpose of their lives had been drastically altered and redone. That is what these letters clearly reflect.

Paul himself had founded this church in Thessaloniki (as it is now called). It is today a bustling center of northern Greece, and it is one of the few New Testament cities that is still flourishing. The ancient gate through which the apostle entered the city is still standing. It spanned the Egnatian Way, the Roman road which ran from the Adriatic to the Bosphorus. After Paul and his friends had been treated shamefully in Philippi, they journeyed on some fifty miles west to Thessalonica. Paul remained there at least three weeks and probably longer, but he was able to minister in the synagogue for only three Sabbaths.

The Jews of the city became so enraged by his teaching about Jesus that they created a riot and took Paul's host, Jason, captive, holding him responsible for the apostle's behavior. Paul left the city, traveling south to Berea and there began to preach again. The Jews from Thessalonica, however, followed him, creating

another uprising in Berea. Finally, Paul was sent on alone to Athens. He remained but a short time there, and then went on to Corinth. It was from that city, in the year 50 or 51 A.D., that he addressed this letter to the new believers in Thessalonica, only a few weeks old in Christ.

Here is his introduction to them:

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

We give thanks to God always for you all, 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. {1 Th 1:1-3 RSV}

Notice that Paul gives a double address for the church, one geographical, the other spiritual. They lived in Thessalonica but they are also found "in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ." Of the two, that address is the more important. If we have come to Christ, we must see ourselves as primarily new creatures "in the Lord Jesus Christ," and "in God the Father." The apostle will stress this truth throughout this letter.

Paul is continually thankful in prayer for these believers, for three things:

1. Their faith,
2. Their love, and
3. Their hope.

In the New Testament, those are always listed as fundamental characteristics of those who have come to Christ. You recall that at the close of that wonderful 13th chapter of First Corinthians, Paul says, "and now abide faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love," {cf, 1 Cor 13:13}. These three qualities, says the apostle, will never end.

But specifically, as we see here, it is not merely faith, hope, and love. It is faith which works, a love which labors, and a hope which endures. Paul puts it that way so that we may see these as the great motives of the Christian life. If you have true faith; if you have love, born of the Spirit; and if you have hope in the coming of Christ, you will be motivated to live as you ought today. That is the point he is making, as we shall see throughout this letter.

This opening section provides a glimpse of the working of the apostle's mind. I never tire in reading Paul's letters, to note how his mind works. He has a marvelous ability to summarize many things in a single verse, and then amplify them again in steps which are easy to follow. That is what we have here. These phrases, "the work of faith, the labor of love, the persistence of hope," constitute an outline of chapter one: The "work of faith" is explained in Verses 4-5 and Verse 9; the "labor of love" is described in the latter part of Verse 5 through Verses 6, 7 and 8; and the "persistence of hope" is found in Verse 10.

What is this "work of faith" that Paul speaks of? He sums it up himself in Verse 9. There he speaks of how the Thessalonians had "turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God." That is faith at work. Faith is not merely belief; it is something that changes you. Faith makes you turn from what is wrong to what is right, from dark and hurtful things to right and true and healthy things. And, especially, faith will turn you from the worship of idols to God.

Notice the direction of this action: to God, from idols. It is not put the other way around. You do not leave your idols for some reason and then painfully try to find God. What happens is that you discover something of the beauty, the glory and greatness of God, and, seeing that and wanting it, you are willing to forsake the cheap and tawdry things you have been trying to satisfy yourselves with.

Modern America is surely one of the most idolatrous countries the world has ever seen. We are surrounded with idol worship.

I once heard of a Chinese man who visited here and was asked upon his return to China whether Americans

worshipped idols. "Yes, they do," he reported. "They have three of them. In the winter they worship a fat man in a red suit. In the spring they worship a rabbit. And in the fall they sacrifice a turkey!"

We chuckle at that, but these are not true idols. They are myths and legends for the most part (except for the turkey, thank God!).

Many of us would label television as an idol. Too many spend far too long glued to that staring eye which feeds all types of ideas and emotions into our minds. But I do not think that television is an idol. It is, rather, an altar upon which are spread offerings and sacrifices to the great god of Self. Television panders to our lust for comfort and entertainment. It lures us to think always of our own comfort, our pleasure, our fear of boredom or desire to be either thrilled or scared by watching some spectacle or event. It encourages us to focus upon ourselves.

The new book, *The Habits of the Heart*, by a group of contemporary psychologists develops the thesis that television causes Americans to forget how to serve. Perhaps in a Christian congregation this is not nearly as evident as it is in the world at large, but we face it also in the body of Christ. Jesus said that he came "not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give himself," {cf, Matt 20:28, Mark 10:45}. That is where true richness and fulfillment come from. When we demand to be ministered unto, to always have something titillating our senses, the end is loneliness, emptiness, and ultimately despair. The proof of that is visible everywhere today.

America worships not only Eros, the goddess of sex, but Baal, the erotic deity associated with fertility rites. Baal worship in the ancient world encouraged degenerate practices of the most licentious kind. It is the reason for the loathsome practices evident in our country today. Baal worship is manifest in the rise of homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. It is behind the pornography that pervades almost every aspect of life in our times. More than that, Americans are worshipping the god Molech, the terrible furnace god into whose fiery mouth parents in ancient times threw their own children, destroying them to relieve the guilt of their own consciences. This is with us yet today, manifested in skyrocketing cases of child abuse and child molestation. What will turn us from these degradations?

Paul tells us in Verses 4-5:

For we know, brethren beloved by God, that he has chosen you; for our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. {1 Th 1:4-5a RSV}

That is how people are changed, idols are cast aside, and a new life begins! It involves two factors: the election and calling of God.

It begins with election. "We know, beloved by God, that he has chosen you." Note the first thing, "beloved by God." Everything starts with God's love for us. The world at large conceives of God as perpetually angry with them. Most Americans feel that God looks upon them as a defiant, rebellious lot who refuse to have anything to do with him, who ignore his teachers and suppress his word.

But God does not look at our lost race that way. The truth is found in John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," {John 3:16a KJV}. God's sees us as victims, deluded and deceived. Alluring philosophies have throttled our love, and captivated and gripped our minds. Almost in total ignorance, we pursue these things that destroy us. Although we never intended to do so, most of us have already seriously messed up our lives. But then we learn the incredible truth that God loves us, that he gave his only begotten Son for us. It is in the cross that we see the love of God displayed. Paul so states in Romans: "God has commended his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," {cf, Rom 5:8}.

It is also in the Scripture that we learn that he has chosen us. How do you know that God chose you, out of the millions who have lived on earth? The answer is, you began to be drawn toward God, to sense a desire for him. The calling of God by means of the Spirit awakens a hunger within. If you are longing to be different, if you want to be more than you are now, you have tried to change and you cannot, but you want to change, you find the words of the gospel, the songs and hymns of Christians attractive, you are being

drawn by the Spirit! Jesus said, "No one can come to me except my Father draw him," {cf, John 6:44}. When the good news came to Thessalonica, people began to feel inside themselves a desire to have this Jesus who would make such a tremendous change in their lives. They responded to love and thus revealed they were the elect of God.

Paul goes on to detail the steps necessary to God's call.

First, "our gospel came to you in word." The Scriptures were preached, the truth was declared. The apostle spoke to them about the promises of God in the Old Testament. The book of Acts records of his preaching in the city of Berea that these Bereans were more noble, more open, than those in Thessalonica in that they "received the word with all readiness of heart and searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so," {cf, Acts 17:11}. It is through the Word of God, through the declaration of these great promises, and the telling in simple narrative of the story of Jesus, that men and women are awakened and moved toward God.

The second factor in God's call is the power of God, the gospel came "in power." It is real, compelling, gripping. The gospel has the ability to compel because it is not mere legend or myth. Christmas is much more than a beautiful story that entrances people and helps them forget the ugliness of the present. It speaks of real events. Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem. The shepherds did come. The angels sang their great promise of hope. A flaming star lit up the heavens with glory. All of this actually happened. Jesus did live. He did move among men. He died a felon's death upon a cross. He was raised from the dead. All of this marks the power of the gospel. When the Thessalonians believed they sensed the power of it in their hearts. They were actually changed. They were different.

Also, says Paul, the gospel came "by the Holy Spirit." Behind the power was the reality of God himself. His Spirit could touch the human spirit. He could actually minister to the deepest needs in human lives. The Spirit of God fills the human spirit. He begins to minister to our minds and our hearts from within, opening them up to understand these events.

Finally, the gospel came "with full conviction." It moved the wills of the Thessalonians. They acted, they did something about it: They yielded their lives to God.

Some of you here may have been coming to this church for years. You have been hearing the gospel but you have never opened your hearts to God. But that is the final, necessary step. Ultimately, the will must be moved. Jesus said in Revelation, "Behold I stand at the door (the door of the heart) and knock. If anyone hears my voice (feels desire), and will open the door (invite him to come in), I will come into him and live with him and he with me," {cf, Rev 3:20}. That is what happened in Thessalonica.

That is "the work of faith." Until you have actually received Christ, you have not exercised faith. You can believe the story to be true, but until it moves you to receive the Lord you have not exercised faith.

The "labor of love," which Paul describes, is amplified, beginning with the last part of Verse 5:

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For 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. For they themselves report concerning us what a welcome we had among you, {1 Th 1:5b-9a RSV}

That describes love at work. It involves three specific steps.

Here is the first sign of love at work. It changed the attitude of the Thessalonians toward their afflictions. Instead of wearisome complaint there was "joy inspired by the Spirit." They were going through much pain. They were ostracized at their work, hounded out of their homes, arrested and put into prison for their new-found faith. But, says Paul, they had learned to see these afflictions in a new way. The result was joy, joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. They were responding to God's love by loving him in return and

welcoming the opportunities to bear suffering for his name's sake.

Jesus taught us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God. But there is always something before that, something which many people do not seem to understand. God asks us to love him only because he has first loved us. Then he gives opportunities of trial, pressure, hardship and affliction to allow us to see for ourselves what kind of a solution he can work out. That is what Paul describes. The Thessalonians stopped complaining and started rejoicing. How we need this today! We must understand that afflictions are sent to give us a chance to demonstrate how God can sustain us and show his work in our lives. These Christians were rejoicing in their afflictions. It was part of their labor of love.

The second mark of love's labor was that they shared the good news throughout Macedonia and Achaia. They did not do it by means of great crusades or campaigns. There were no citywide meetings in a rented stadium. We can do that today, and thank God for it, but that is not what the Thessalonians did. They simply shared with their neighbors and friends what God had done in their lives. They explained the new joy and peace that had come into their hearts. Then, when their friends began to ask questions about what had happened, they invited them over and shared from the Scriptures what their faith was all about. Through the quiet, almost invisible, network of what we would call home Bible studies, they shared the good news. Silently, without fanfare, the gospel spread throughout this whole area of the Roman Empire. The entire countryside was stirred by what was happening in people's lives.

In Thessalonica the city fathers described Paul and his friends by saying, "These men who have turned the world upside down, have come to our city as well," {cf, Acts 17:6}. That is the way the good news was spread abroad.

The third activity by which love's labor was evident among these Thessalonian believers was the way they displayed a daily trust in God's care. "Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we do not need to say anything," says Paul. They believed that God was their Father and would take care of them no matter what happened. That simple faith had become very evident in their lives.

Last week I received a letter from two of our missionaries in Guatemala, Ron and Gretchen Bruno. Gretchen wrote of an incident that had encouraged her greatly. A poor widow in one of the congregations in Guatemala was down to her last twenty cents and without food. She began to pray about her problem. As she was praying, she felt a deep conviction that God was telling her to go to the large supermarket in town the next day and fill up several carts with groceries and take them to checkout stand #7 for check out. This was not just a vague feeling on her part but a deep, Spirit-born conviction. She went to the supermarket the next morning, loaded enough groceries into carts to last two or three months, and took them to checkout stand #7. Just as she got there the cashier closed the stand to go out to lunch. She suggested that the woman take her groceries to another stand, but the woman said, "No, I cannot. My Father told me to take these through checkout stand #7." So she waited while the clerk went to lunch and came back again. The clerk was surprised to see the woman still there, and started to check out her groceries. Just then an announcement came over the loudspeaker: "This is our seventh year of business and we are pleased to announce that whoever is checking out at checkout stand #7 gets free groceries."

Now I am not telling you to do what this woman did. What I am saying is that we are to believe that God cares for us, that he is a loving Heavenly Father, and he has a thousand and one ways of meeting our needs, but he hardly ever does the same thing twice! The unchangeable fact is that God loves us. We belong to him.

The Thessalonians demonstrated that so effectively that their faith had been reported everywhere. These people had an invisible means of support, a resource that others knew nothing about, but the fact of it was evident in their confident behavior.

That brings us to "the endurance of hope," referred to in Verse 10:

... and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. {1 Th 1:10 RSV}

A striking feature about the Thessalonian letters is that each chapter in both letters ends with a reference to

the coming of the Lord. At Christmas we look back to his first coming, but in the early church there was little mention of that. There are references to it. They rejoiced in it, and it is right to celebrate it. But, for them, they believed that he was coming again. Their hope lay in that. They believed what the angels had said to the disciples on the Mount of Olives, "This same Jesus whom you see going into heaven shall so come in like manner," {cf, Acts 1:11}. It was the ever-present hope of the early church, and that hope became the dominant theme of these Thessalonian letters. This verse looks backward to the resurrection, "Jesus whom God raised from the dead." That fact was their answer to the threat of personal death. This was their ground of confidence for victory over death. Jesus had said, "Because I live you shall live also," {cf, John 14:19}.

I believe the Scriptures teach that every believer at his or her death is caught up in the return of Christ; that then, for each of us, we become part of that great eternal event which later will come crashing into time.

"When is Christ coming?" is a question we frequently hear asked today. The answer, of course, is that he is no further away than your own death. You may not be here tomorrow. If that is so, for you Christ has come; the return of Christ is accomplished. Jesus promised, "If I go away, I will come again and receive you unto myself," {cf, John 14:3}. This marvelous promise is very clearly stated in the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel.

But Verse 10 not only looks backward to the resurrection, where we see our victory over death assured, but it also looks forward to a time that Paul calls "the wrath to come." That is not hell. He is not talking about the fact that Christians are delivered from the fires of hell. John 5:24 records the words of Jesus, "He that hears my word and believes in Him that sent me has everlasting life and shall not come into judgment, but is passed from death unto life." The Thessalonians knew that already. They had learned from Paul that they would not come into that judgment. But here he is talking about a coming wrath. The use of the present tense indicates that it is something yet future. Jesus, he says, would also deliver them from that wrath.

In the Old Testament this period is called "the terrible day of the Lord," {Joel 2:31 KJV}. It is a time when God's judgments will rain down upon the earth. Jesus himself described it as the "great tribulation, which has not been since the creation of the world, nor ever shall be," {cf, Matt 24:21}. That time is yet ahead. It was for them and it still is for us. But throughout these letters we learn that God has a plan to deliver his own from that "wrath to come." Christians shall have victory even over the approaching crisis of the world.

But, more than the certainty of heaven, or their escape from the agony of living, is the promise is that he who comes even now rules in the affairs of men. Intertwined with the promise of John 14 that Jesus would come again is the promise that he will come to live within us now. He said, "I will not leave you orphans. I will come and make my home in your heart," {cf, John 14:18, 14:23}. The wonderful paradox that Christians possess is that though the kingdom of Christ is yet coming when Jesus will return to this earth, yet he is already here with us now. He is leading us, fulfilling us, ministering to us, guarding us, and even now, ruling in the affairs of men.

The question this raises is, "What does this mean to you now?"

Christians have no business to be discouraged, defeated, or despairing. If we succumb to any of these moods, it is because we have forgotten these great truths.

But here in troubled Thessalonica, those truths were to be living, vital, and fragrant in the hearts of these believers.

Surely God is calling us back to this again in our dark hour of history.

Title: Changed Lives
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in First Thessalonians
Scripture: 1 Th 1:1-10
Message No: 1

Catalog No: 4089
Date: December 6, 1987

[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Ray Stedman Library](#)

Copyright (c) 2010 by Ray Stedman Ministries. This material is the sole property of Ray Stedman Ministries. It may be copied for personal non-commercial use only in its entirety free of charge. All copies must contain this copyright notice and a hyperlink to www.RayStedman.org if the copy is posted on the Internet. Please direct any questions you may have to webmaster@RayStedman.org.