

This morning I am beginning a new sermon series through the New Testament book known as 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD.

If you're unfamiliar with the Bible, there is the Old and New Testament. The New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus, and contains four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke & John – which tell the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. After that is Acts, which was written by Luke as a sequel to his gospel, and tells the story from Jesus' ascension to heaven to the spread of Christianity and the rise of the early church. One of the most prominent figures is Paul, who was a Jewish religious leader named Saul who was miraculously converted by Jesus and then went around preaching the gospel of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and starting churches. The rest of the New Testament consists of letters, many by Paul, that outline the significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and deal with issues that arose in the various churches. The New Testament ends with Revelation, a very different kind of book about what is going on spiritually behind the scenes of our every day life.

Before we dive into the letter, I want us to read about Paul's experience in Thessalonica in Acts 17:1-10:

*Acts 17:1-10 - When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to **Thessalonica**, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. ⁴ Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few **prominent women**. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, ⁷ and Jason has welcomed **them into his house**. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." ⁸ When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. ⁹ Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. ¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.*

Paul, along with others including Silas, who is mentioned here, and Timothy, visited Thessalonica, which was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, part of modern Greece. Paul preached in the synagogue that Jesus was the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for, proving to them that Jesus died and rose again. Some believed, but others formed a mob to start a riot, claiming that by calling Jesus a King that he was in opposition to Caesar. And so, Paul and Silas had to escape. But eventually he wrote two letters to the young church, with this one dating to about 52 AD, 2-3 years after he left Thessalonica. We are going to spend at least two weeks in chapter 1 of that letter. With that context in mind, let's read the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians:

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 - Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. ² We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. ³ We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. ⁷ And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸ The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia-- your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, ⁹ for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

There is a lot in this chapter about the relationships between Paul and the Thessalonians. I'm going to focus on that next week. For today, I want to focus on the main message that Paul brought to them, which in verse 5 he calls "our gospel," from the Greek word "euangelion" – good news, and what this chapter teaches us about what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus.

What do we learn about being a Christian?

1) God is the initiator of our faith

Look back at verse 4-5:

⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

God has chosen you. The gospel came to you with power, with the Holy Spirit. Paul is clear: before they believed, someone was pursuing them, calling them, drawing them. Specifically, God is the initiator of their faith and ours. This is common language from the beginning of God's relationship with His people:

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 - *The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

Look at that: God chose you, not because of anything great about you, but just because He loves you. And it continues in the New Testament:

Ephesians 1:3-5 - *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--*

If you believe in Jesus, if you trust Him for your salvation, it is only because **God chose you** first and brought you spiritual life. I used to think it was that I had chosen God, that wasn't God lucky that I chose to be on his team. But it was He who chose me. In fact, consider what the Bible tells us is the difference between someone who is a Christian and someone who is not:

Ephesians 2:1-5 - *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.*

It's not that you were once bad but now you're good, or that you were once ignorant but now you are enlightened. No – you were spiritually dead, and now you are spiritually alive. You could not give yourself physical life, and you can not give yourself spiritual life either. You were incapable of choosing God if God did not take the initiative. We can only believe because He first chose us. Or as John put it:

1 John 4:19 - We love because he first loved us.

God is the initiator of our faith. In fact, the word gospel, euanglion, translates as “**good news**” – not good advice about what you need do to be saved or to earn heaven or reach God, but good news about what God has done in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to save you.

Paul knows that God has chosen them because he sees the power of the Holy Spirit at work in their lives. He sees evidence that a power from the outside has entered and transformed their lives, that they are not who they once were. Paul sees evidence of regeneration. He sees spiritual life in them. **He sees a reorienting of their lives from self-centeredness towards God.** That is the primary evidence of salvation. Is the Holy Spirit producing fruit in your life? **God is the initiator of our faith – He chose you, and He gave you spiritual life by His Holy Spirit.**

Just as an aside, I know I say a lot of words up here, but my desire is that the words I speak would be accompanied with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. This this thing we call is not meant to be a soapbox for me to share my thoughts and wisdom. We preach what the Bible says because we believe that it is God's Word, the sword of the Spirit according to Ephesians 6, that His Holy Spirit speaks to us through it as we come with a posture of submission to His authority. The best thing you can do as you prepare for Sunday is to ask the Holy Spirit to speak through me, and to help these words come alive to you, to apply them to your life, that you might know Him better and become the person He has created you to be.

Why does it matter to know that God is the initiator?

It is meant to give you comfort and assurance, to trust that God not only began this good work in you, but that He will complete it, because He is always working for your good.

Philippians 1:4-6 - *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

And it is also meant to see that your life has purpose. You are not an accident, but you have been called by God for a purpose:

Ephesians 2:10 - *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

God is the initiator not only of our salvation but of our sanctification – our spiritual growth. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that enables us to overcome every sin and struggle and addiction, if we will only **stay connected to the power source**. Think of Jesus' words:

John 15:4-8 - *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ "I am the **vine**; you are the **branches**. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

The Bible speaks of walking by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit. And when we are walking with the Spirit, the Spirit produces good fruit in us:

Galatians 5:22-23 - *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control.*

Paul knows the Thessalonians are believers because of the fruit he sees coming from their lives:

³ *We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The bottom line is this: if God is the initiator of our salvation, and if the Holy Spirit is the power for our sanctification, then **how are you staying plugged in to that power source?** You eat food daily because it energizes and gives you strength, and most of you wouldn't dare miss a meal, let alone a day.

Matthew 4:4 - *Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man **does not live on bread** alone, but **on** every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Pray, read His Word, be in fellowship with other believers, walk in obedience to Him. Stay plugged in to the source of your power. Let Paul's prayer for the Ephesians be my prayer for you today:

Ephesians 1:17-20 - *I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,*

The same power that rose Jesus from the dead lives in you! Do not allow yourself to get away with any excuse for sin, for addiction, for anger or hatred or evil thoughts. Turn again and again to the power source, the Holy Spirit of God.

So if God is the initiator of our faith, what is our role?

2) Our role is to repent and believe

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 - *They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

Chapter 1 closes with this statement that sums up the gospel message very well. They turned – repented – from idols – from false gods – to serve the living and true

God, and they put their hope in Jesus. Our role is to repent from our sin and self-centeredness and to believe, to trust, to hope in Jesus for our salvation.

Now, of course when Paul was writing, idols could be much more tangible. The Thessalonians could see Mt. Olympus, where the Greek gods were supposed to live, 50 miles south from where they lived. And they believed that if they gave their idols the proper respect and worship that they would get rain for their crops, or protection at sea, or other needs met. But an idol is more than just a statue. Idols are anything that we look to other than God for our salvation, our hope, our comfort. Even Paul knew that:

***Ephesians 5:5** - For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

Any immorality, impurity, or greed is not just sin but evidence of an idol. It is evidence that there is something that you are looking to besides God for your salvation or joy or comfort. There is something else that you are worshiping and sacrificing to and living for. **An idol is anything that is more important to your identity and happiness than God. It is anything or anyone that you are looking to in order to give you what only God can give you, to give you significance and security.** Anything can be an idol – a specific relationship, money, status, reputation, the approval of others, brains, beauty, love, sex, freedom, individuality, morality, a politician or a social cause. In fact, good things in our life are especially likely to become idols, things that we elevate above God and look to for our identity and happiness.

Underneath these idols are often deeper idols. The desire for approval. The desire for security and control of the environment. The desire for power and influence. The desire for happiness or peace. As John Calvin said, the human heart is a perpetual idol factory, constantly manufacturing things that we look to instead of God for our significance and security. And so we turn to YouTube, or shopping, or mindlessly surfing the Internet, or social media, or alcohol, or flirting, or work, or leisure, or a hobby, instead of to God, hoping that it will give us what our hearts are longing for.

Listen to the counselor and author David Powlison – *“Has something or someone besides Jesus Christ taken title to your heart’s functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight? To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? What do you really want and expect out of life?”*

What would really make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success?"

What are you looking to in order to provide you these things? But here's the thing: idols can not deliver on their promises. They will not save you. **Our idols take hold of our emotions**, filling us with fear, anger, guilt, disillusionment or despair if they are threatened or lost. Even when we actually achieve them, they can prove to not fulfill, to not deliver on their promises. As Jeremiah put it:

***Jeremiah 2:12-13** - Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD. ¹³ "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*

Back to 1 Thessalonians:

***1 Thessalonians 1:9-10** - They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

They turned from their idols to serve the living and true God. He is the living and true God, unlike the dead and false idols. **My relationship with an idol is that if it gives me what I want, then I will continue to worship and serve it. But if it does not, I will scrap it for something else. But God is the living and true God.** He is true regardless of circumstances. He is Lord. And so I will be faithful to Him even if it means severe suffering, as Paul saw in the Thessalonians:

***1 Thessalonians 1:6** - You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.*

In the end, the question is not "does this work for me?" but "is it true?" Is Jesus who He claimed to be? Is He God in human flesh? Is He the Savior, the only way to God? Is He Lord of Lords? Is He the living and true God, the way, the truth, and the life? If He is, then align your life with the truth. Turn from your idols and live for Him. Make Him Lord of your time, your money, your relationships, your sexuality, your work, your family, your everything. Turn from idols, from whatever you are trusting in today, and serve the living and true God. Put your hope in Jesus. In the words of Jonah:

Jonah 2:8-9 - *"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹ But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."*

Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. Looking to anything other than God for your significance, security, or acceptance will only let you down. What idols do you need to smash this morning? What do you need to turn from, that you might live for the true and living God instead?

⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

God has chosen you. He has given you spiritual life by His Holy Spirit, and provides the daily power you need for your spiritual growth. Turn from your idols to trust in Jesus, to serve the living and true God.