

4. What it means to be a Christian: Waiting for God's Son from Heaven

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 March 2010

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Now we're continuing in a short series in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, and this is the last sermon in that series. So I'd like to read the whole of the chapter. I don't think you have your Bibles today, you only have in fact verses 9 and 10 printed, but I will read the whole of the chapter so as to get the setting and the context for these verses that we're looking at today.

So here we go, 1 Thessalonians 1, chapter 1. It is co-authored, well it's really written by Paul, but it's co-authored with him by his friends Silas and Timothy as well, to the very young church of Thessalonica in northern Greece, written probably in the year 48 AD.

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace. 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 labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you. Because 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 prove 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 the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

[1 : 44] 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 the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned 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 delivers us from the wrath to come.

Amen. This is the word of God, and may it indeed be a blessing from God to us today. Now, throughout this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, Paul the Apostle is lovingly assuring, or reassuring, his young Christian friends at Thessalonica that they really are Christians.

That's the agenda, really, in this first chapter. He's reassuring these very young Christians that they have been converted, that they belong to Christ. Look back to verse 4.

If you haven't a Bible, you can't do that, but I'll just read it again. For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you because... Because. So what Paul is saying in these verses, is that he's reassuring these Christians that God has chosen them.

[3 : 05] In other words, they really do belong to Christ, because of various things. And after that because, and right the way through to the end of the chapter, Paul lists a number of facts about the Thessalonians, which demonstrate, beyond any doubt, that they really have become Christians.

So, just to run through these very briefly, he speaks in verse 5 of the way in which they received the gospel message. Not as mere words, not as hot air, but with the powerful sense of conviction that comes through the Holy Spirit.

He then tells them in verse 6 that they were prepared to receive this gospel message in the midst of real affliction, vicious persecution. And his point is that you don't endure persecution if you're simply a fair-weather believer.

If you've accepted the gospel and then you're prepared to take opposition for it, it shows that you mean business. He then goes on in verses 7 and 8 to tell them that this news of their conversion has been going up and down the bush telegraph in Greece, from Macedonia, that's in northern Greece, right down to Achaia in southern Greece.

It's a little bit like saying the news of your conversion is being noised abroad from John O'Groats to Land's End. And then in verse 9, Paul tells them that the reality of their faith is proved by the fact that they've decisively broken with their former idols.

[4 : 27] They've turned from idols and they have turned to God to serve the living and the true God. So he's saying to his friends at Thessalonica, my dear brothers and sisters, look at your lives.

Look at the radical change that has come about. That sort of change simply does not happen to people unless they have truly come to Christ. Now friends, these words obviously have a message for us today because all of us need to know whether or not we are Christians.

The question, are you a Christian, in the end, is the most important question that can be asked. And if you're not sure, this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians will really help you.

If you line your own life and thought and behaviour up against the lives of these Thessalonians, as Paul describes them, and then ask if these things are true of you, then you'll know.

So for example, you need to ask, have you received the Gospel with a sense of conviction? Or has it simply been like hot air, mere words? Are you prepared to endure affliction, even perhaps persecution, for the sake of Christ?

[5 : 38] Do other people know that you're a Christian? Has the report about your faith been noised abroad to your friends, your relatives, your colleagues and so on? Do they know about it? Or is it a kind of hush-hush private affair?

And have you quitted your idols? Have you turned to the living and true God to serve him? Now there is one more defining mark, hallmark you might say, of the true Christian that Paul shows us, and it's in verse 10.

And that's really what I want to speak about this afternoon. So according to verse 10, which you'll see on the sheets there, Christians are those who wait for the Son of God to come from heaven, the one whom God raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Now that is our verse for this afternoon. So let me ask you to forget everything else for these next few minutes. Forget the weather, which isn't very pleasant. Forget Mr. Cameron and Mr. Brown. Forget Celtic and Rangers. Even Partic Thistle, if you can better forget them. And we'll see if we can work out what the Apostle Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, and by implication to us, here in verse 10.

[6 : 51] Now the heart of it is that the Christian is in waiting. Waiting for an event which is quite beyond our experience.

An event which will come to the world from beyond the world. And that is the coming of Jesus, the return of Jesus from heaven. Waiting for his Son from heaven.

That's the way Paul puts it in verse 10. So I want to take this in two stages. First, the Christian is in waiting for the Saviour.

The Christian, if you like, is a gentleman in waiting, or a lady in waiting. And this waiting is a matter of joyful anticipation. There'll be a certain apprehensiveness too, because the coming of the Lord will be a dreadful day, but it will be a wonderful day.

Matthew Henry was a fine Bible commentator of the late 17th and early 18th century, and he wrote this about verse 10. This is one of the peculiarities of our holy religion, to wait for Christ's second coming, as those who believe he will come, and he will come to our joy.

[8 : 04] Now, when Matthew Henry describes this as a peculiarity of our faith, he means it's something unique to Christianity. There's no other faith that looks forward to the end of history and expects a deliverer to return.

So Christian people wait for the deliverer, the rescuer, because, although he has accomplished our rescue by means of his death and resurrection, he has not yet gathered us in, finally, to our eternal home.

The fact is, and it's patently and rather painfully obvious, we're still very much here in the old world, this veil of tears and decay. I don't know about you, but the house that I'm living in, I don't mean the house I live in in Ayrshire, but this house that I'm living in, my physical body, is beginning to show certain signs of decay.

I'm getting lumpy and bumpy and saggy and baggy and a bit creaky and cranky. And although my eyesight is not very good, I suspect looking around here that some of you are feeling rather the same about the body that you live in.

And just look at the old world that we're still living in around us. It is piercingly, heartbreakingly beautiful at times, not least up in the highlands in the month of May when the sun is shining. [9 : 15] But it's unbearably ugly for a lot of the time, particularly as regards human behaviour. This old world we live in carries all the hallmarks of decay.

To borrow another phrase from Paul the Apostle, it is in bondage to death. And we need to be rescued finally from it. So we who are Christians are waiting for our rescuer to return from heaven so that we'll be taken by his power from this old world and able to take our place in the new creation where the Bible assures us that there will be neither mourning nor tears nor pain nor death.

So if you're a person who is looking forward with anticipation to Jesus' return from heaven, then almost certainly you are a Christian. You're looking for your final salvation.

Really, to be a Christian is to look at life through what you might call bifocal lenses. You know those bifocal glasses with a bit at the top separated from a bit at the bottom. And in the top part of the lens, that's for your long distance vision, isn't it?

So you can look up. I can see a long way up George Street looking out through the window there. If I had my bifocals on, I'd be able to see all of that. But then the bottom part is for looking at stuff close to hand, what you're reading and so on.

[10 : 32] Top part and bottom part. Now the Christian, in a sense, is bifocal. Of course, we're looking carefully at what goes on immediately around us, our immediate life.

We've got to do the nuts and bolts of life. We have to pay the bills and do the shopping and rear our children and love our neighbours and get on with our work, earn our keep and so on. But also, we're constantly keeping our eyes on the far distant horizon as we wait for that great moment when our Saviour will return from heaven.

So while we work and are busy, we also wait. And we wait with real longing. We're rather like the schoolboy who longs for the summer holidays.

We're a bit like the survivors of the Titanic disaster. Those survivors who were floating out on the calm ocean on that morning in April 1912 in life rafts and life boats waiting, looking, scanning the horizon for the rescue ship to come, which indeed eventually it did.

So Christian people get on with our life now. There's plenty to do and we're busy. But we're waiting for the great future. when I was living in Burton-on-Trent some years ago, I remember one evening we had a church prayer meeting on a Wednesday evening and just before the prayer meeting started, there were a number of folk gathered together in the hall where we were praying and two of our lady members of the church rushed in, rather flushed and excited looking in their faces and I said to them, what's been going on?

[12 : 03] And they said, well, we were walking up such and such a street about ten minutes ago on our way here to the prayer meeting and as we walked up the street, suddenly there was an enormous and blinding flash and a huge noise and so we looked at each other and we said, is this it?

Is he here? It was a tremendous moment. Actually, it was the 5th of November. What was going on was a firework party in somebody's garden there but I was so pleased to realise that these two women were looking for the return of Jesus.

That was their first thought when this loud flash and bang that he had perhaps returned. It's a good sign. So there's the first thing. The Christian is in waiting for the Saviour.

Now second, the Saviour will deliver the Christian. Look at the final phrase there in the verse. Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

That's the way Paul puts it here. Now these final words in verse 10 are a splendid answer and a very clear answer to the question, what does Jesus save people from?

[13 : 07] Now it's a curious fact but I do think it is a fact that a lot of people are confused about what Jesus saves people from. If you were to take a sample of the British public and ask them who they believe Jesus is, I'm sure a considerable proportion of people would say that they believe that Jesus is the Son of God and not a few would say that he's the Saviour.

But if you then ask them, if he's the Saviour, what does he save people from, that's when the confusions would quickly come to light. And I suspect that very few people would say that Jesus delivers his people from the wrath to come.

But it's what Paul the Apostle says here and it's an essential part of Paul's Gospel. So much so that if we drop it or forget it we shan't understand the Gospel clearly.

Let me put it like this. The focus of Paul's Gospel is primarily beyond the end of this world. And exactly the same is true of Jesus' Gospel.

I don't mean that Jesus and Paul have different Gospels. Paul's Gospel is Jesus' Gospel. They both teach the same thing. Jesus taught people a great deal in the Gospels about the end of the world, about his return, about the great day of judgment.

[14 : 28] A great deal about the final separation between those who belong to him and those who have refused him. Jesus and the Apostles consistently teach that all who turn to him in trust and love and repentance will be saved and delivered at the time of his return.

But those who refuse him will be refused by him. This is the ultimate irrevocable separation of those bound for heaven from those bound for hell.

To be in hell is to be not delivered from the wrath to come. Now friends, we mustn't be frightened by this teaching because if we refuse to think about it or if we say I don't really want to touch that we will never properly understand the biblical Gospel.

I try these days as much as I can to listen to religious broadcasting on the radio because I want to know what other people are saying and how congregations are being taught. So whenever I can I listen to the Sunday morning service that comes on Radio 4 at quarter past eight in the morning and thought for the day at 7.45 in the morning during the weekdays and other religious programs as well because I want to know what's going on.

But in many years perhaps 20 or 30 years of listening to these broadcasts I cannot remember a single occasion on which any speaker has seriously opened up the subject of the wrath to come.

[15 : 53] It's a most striking feature of the age that we live in. But here we have a teaching which is central to the biblical Gospel and yet our society has put its fingers into its ears and has said we cannot tolerate that kind of teaching.

It's as though people are saying there's quite enough in the world to fray our nerves as it is. We've got climate change we've got suicide bombings and terrorism we've got economic crisis drug addiction obesity so much else.

Don't give us the wrath to come as well. That was okay perhaps for the 18th century but we can't bear it in the 21st. And thus the Gospel is gagged and domesticated and trivialised and we close our eyes to the reality of what certainly will happen in the end.

Now the consequence is that much Christian preaching and teaching today deals only with what goes on in this world. This is what I mean by domesticating and trivialising the Gospel.

God almost becomes reshaped and his role is seen to be only to help me and my friends to live a happy and fulfilled life in this world. Now don't misunderstand me once we become Christians we certainly will live a happier and more fulfilled life in this world.

[17 : 14] We shall learn to love other people better. We shall learn to live more responsibly and much more besides. Being a Christian makes an enormous difference to the kind of life that we live this side of the Day of Judgment while we're still on the green side of the turf.

But if you had asked Jesus what it was that he came to save people from he would not have replied I came to save people from lack of fulfilment or from aimlessness or from depression of spirits or from a loss of personal self-esteem.

he would have replied I came to earth to save people from the wrath of God and from eternal ruin. My gospel is an eternal gospel.

It's about eternity. I've come to rescue people for eternal life. Whoever believes in me will not perish but will have eternal life. Now this is Paul's gospel as well.

Do you remember how he says in 1 Corinthians if for this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all people most to be pitied. It's a pitiful thing a piteous thing to reduce the glorious gospel of its eternal proportions and to think only of this life.

[18 : 31] If we think of Jesus only in terms of how he makes us feel better about ourselves and better about other people the wonder of real salvation has passed us by. Let me come at this now from a slightly different angle.

Why is it why should it be that people bristle up at the idea of the wrath of God? Isn't it because we see people men and women being angry with each other sometimes and instantly and instinctively we recoil from it.

Sometimes we witness two people in the street or in a public place shouting at each other with real anger and we feel hurt don't we and grieved at such difficult and bad behaviour.

Human anger is so often wrong and ugly it's unrestrained and it's full of hate. So we see that kind of unrestrained anger and we can assume that God's anger is the same kind of thing volatile uncontrolled hateful and we think well if God is angry God is immoral he's hardly better than we are. Now to think like that is to make a basic mistake. The mistake is to think that God's anger is of the same kind as our anger but it's not.

[19 : 52] God's anger is his settled permanent consistent opposition to everything that is wrong. There's nothing capricious or uncontrolled about his anger.

God is always fundamentally opposed to lying to stealing to adultery to covetousness to murder to idolatry and every form of rebellion against his holy love.

And if he were not consistently opposed to all human sin what kind of a God would he be? For example if he hated cheating one day and was angry with cheating one day but then turned a blind eye to cheating the next day he would be inconsistent.

We wouldn't know where we were up to with him. And if he were inconsistent like that he would not be moral and he would not be trustworthy. It's good and right and true that he should be always consistently angry with human sin.

Let me give a simple parallel. In our law courts we expect the law to be opposed to wrongdoing all the time. We know that it's right for judges and magistrates to pass sentence on those who have been convicted as wrongdoers.

[21 : 05] And if the magistrates don't pass the appropriate sentence we know that justice has not been done and rightly we're not happy about it. Where laws have been broken we expect the law to punish the wrongdoer.

It's the same in a school. If school rules are broken we expect the authorities the head teacher and so on to punish the pupils who are out of line. If that doesn't happen then chaos quickly reigns in the school.

And should we not expect God to punish those who treat him with defiance especially those who spurn the redeemer the rescuer that he has sent.

Many folk take up a very inconsistent position on all this. They expect the law of the land and the law courts to punish the wrongdoer. They expect the head teacher in the school to punish the pupil who breaks the rules.

But then they say God shouldn't behave like this. God ought to turn a blind eye to those who rebel against him. But Paul is teaching us that if we expect justice in this world how much more should we expect it from the living and true God.

[22 : 12] The whole story of the Bible inevitably moves towards the great day of judgment. And on that great day of judgment God will inevitably express his wrath against all who have rebelled against him.

All those who have not taken refuge under the protective wings of Jesus Christ. Why do we deserve his wrath? Because we're all guilty. We have not loved and served God with all our hearts.

We deserve his anger and it will come to us if we don't put our trust in the only one who is able to deliver us. That is why Jesus came to save us from God's righteous anger which will be revealed at the return of Christ.

Christ. So friends let's rejoice that the world and history is as God has made it. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God God would have been perfectly justified in washing his hands of the human race forever.

But he didn't. So much was God committed to us in love that he was determined to send a rescuer. Of course he must express his anger towards the unrepentant in the end.

[23 : 24] But the rescuer came to save all who will come to him to save us from that wrath. And you'll notice I'm sure how Paul also mentions the resurrection of Jesus there in verse 10 how God raised Jesus from the dead.

Why should Paul mention that here? Well simply because a Jesus whose bones were still mouldering in Palestine could not deliver anybody from the wrath to come. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead to demonstrate to the waiting world that the Son of God is alive and immortal and will return to judge and to save.

The resurrection of Jesus is important not only because it signals the death of death but also because it assures us that our judge and saviour is alive and powerful and will at the appointed time complete his work when he separates the sheep from the goats saying to those who belong to him

welcome to my kingdom but to those who have rebelled against him.
depart from me. So let me ask do you believe these things about Jesus? Are you waiting for him to return?

Do you believe that when he comes back he will deliver his people those who belong to him from the wrath to come? If you do then Paul the Apostle would assure you just as he assured the Thessalonians that you really are a Christian.

[24 : 56] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Dear Heavenly Father we pray that you'll have mercy upon each of us and that you will open our hearts and ears and eyes to understand and gladly to receive the gospel.

and we pray for any here who have never yet bowed the knee to the Lord Jesus and we ask that you will help them lovingly to turn to him in repentance and faith even today and that you'll build us all up in our trust in you and not least in our expectancy as we look forward to the great day of the Lord's return which we pray that you will hasten and these things we ask in Jesus name Amen