

# A field guide to the real thing

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good afternoon. Let me warmly welcome you to our Wednesday lunchtime talk. I hope you've had a chance to get some lunch. If you haven't, don't worry, there's plenty left, so please do stick around at the end and have some food then. Just before we get started, the next few weeks we're going to have a short series in the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. Now hopefully this will provide a great opportunity to invite people you know, perhaps people who aren't Christians, to come along and Phil Copeland is going to be taking those. There's flyers on your seats. Please do take those and use them to invite friends.

Well, let me pray for us as we get started. Lord God, we thank you for bringing us together today. We pray that you will help us to listen to you as you speak, as we come to your word. We need your help to understand, so please help us as we come to you. Give us ears to listen and hearts that long to understand. In Jesus' name, amen. Well, this week we'll be in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 once again, so please do turn with me to that.

You can find it on page 986 of our church Bibles, and I'll read the whole chapter. 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 labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you.

[ 2 : 02 ] 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.

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 rough to come.

I don't know if you've ever heard of the mineral called fool's gold. It's a rock that looks a bit like gold but it's not. Now if you don't know what you're looking for it's very hard to tell apart.

[ 3 : 15 ] It's shiny, it's gold coloured and it's in the ground. But try to sell it though and you'll look like a fool. Hence the name. But you can avoid all of that foolishness if you just have a field guide of what to look for.

Sharp edges instead of round edges. Characteristic sparkling instead of a shine. When you know what to look for then you'll be sure when you've found the real thing.

Well Paul is sure of the characteristics of real Christianity and he sees them there in the Thessalonian church. So he knows that they are the real thing.

That's what we saw last week. The Thessalonian church was the real thing. Now remember they were born into troubles. As soon as Paul preached to them they faced persecution.

And so looking at the shabby weakness of their faith they'd started to question whether they had the real thing. Surely if they believed the real gospel of a powerful king then it would look much more impressive than it did.

[ 4 : 26 ] But Paul assures them they are a real church. They're God's real chosen people. Paul wastes no time in assuring them of that. And so now just like the field guide that lets you distinguish between the real thing and the false thing.

In the rest of the chapter Paul lays out the characteristics of real Christian faith that he's seen in them. He knows the signs of the real thing and they're there.

There are four distinguishing features that Paul sees in them and it shows him that their faith is the real thing. So let's turn to look at those characteristics. The telltale features that the Thessalonians are the real deal.

Well the first telltale sign that they have genuine faith is that they've received the real message from real messengers. Look with me at verse 5.

Paul is sure that they are the real thing because they've received the real message and they received it from the real messengers. Now at first glance this verse can be a little bit confusing.

[ 5 : 35 ] Who is it talking about? Is it saying that the Thessalonians had deep conviction and power when they heard the gospel? Or does it say that Paul and his companions had deep conviction when they delivered the gospel?

Now whilst it's true that the Thessalonians did have conviction when they heard the gospel they were obviously convinced of what they heard. I think Paul is probably talking about himself and his companions delivering the gospel to them.

When Paul came to them he came with full conviction. There was no shadow of doubt in his mind. His message was true. He was sure of it. Paul was fully convinced about his message and he backed that up with how he behaved with them.

Notice the second half of verse 5 seems to flow from the first half of verse 5. They know that he never shied away from suffering for his message. They know that he acted in line with what he preached.

And they saw the effect the power of his gospel that it powerfully changed people in Thessalonica. They received the real message and they received it from the lips of real messengers.

[ 6 : 47 ] And that's a characteristic of real Christianity. The heart of our faith is a message that we've received from trustworthy messengers. I only have to look at the history of the church to see that.

People have passed on this message generation by generation with full conviction. And it has changed people throughout history. That's a pattern that starts with the apostles themselves. Many of them suffered and died for their message. They were so convinced that it was true that they gave everything for people to hear it. And the rest of history since is littered with examples of Christians who passed on the message of Christ with full conviction.

Backing up what they taught in the way they lived. That's a characteristic of the real Christian faith. Now it does have to be said that there have been many people as well in the past who have claimed the name of Christ but have not backed it up with their life.

Does that undermine what Paul claims here? His claim that Christians have the real message from real messengers. Well no. Because although we've individually received the gospel through many people in our own individual lives the prime example of this is the apostles themselves.

[ 8 : 06 ] They're the ones who have delivered this message to us through the written New Testament. Their lives were filled with this deep conviction. Their message was absolutely backed up with how they lived.

So no matter how badly behaved our contemporary messengers might have been the apostles stand as the chief witnesses to the message of Christianity. And they are real messengers.

So when we look at the way the message was delivered to us chiefly by the apostles themselves then we can be sure that we have the real thing. We have the real message. And if we have the real message delivered by genuine messengers well then that's a good sign that our faith is the real thing.

Perhaps you're here and you're not a Christian. Well if that's you then don't forget to weigh up this evidence when exploring whether or not we have the real thing. The Christian gospel has been delivered with real conviction by messengers who were willing to die to suffer to pass on what they believed and who were powerfully changed by what they taught so that they lived honorably amongst everyone they taught.

That should be a sign that the real thing is here. The second sign that the Thessalonians have real belief is that they imitate the messengers and even Christ himself.

[ 9 : 36 ] We've already spoken about how the Thessalonians faced suffering almost immediately and yet they embraced the gospel with joy. And by doing that they imitated Paul, Timothy and Silvanus and actually they imitated Jesus Christ himself.

Their imitation of Paul and Christ wasn't limited to this. They sought to live holy lives as well but their imitation reaches the pinnacle in this fact that they received the gospel with joy in the midst of much affliction and suffering.

Real Christianity has always brought affliction to Christians and yet real faith continues to joyfully follow the gospel even when suffering and affliction comes for it.

And it does so willingly knowing that it's the pattern that's always come before. Christ suffered Paul and the apostles suffered and many Christians have suffered since.

And perseverance in the face of difficulty is hugely difficult to manufacture if there's no genuine conviction behind it. Perhaps think about the last time you tried to persevere joyfully at a very difficult family meal.

[ 10 : 56 ] It's just about possible because you know the end is coming soon but to persevere joyfully for your whole life when your friends are dying and you might be next is impossible if you don't have a genuine faith.

And yet persevering with joy is exactly what the Thessalonians are doing. Now affliction doesn't have to be at the levels the Thessalonians were facing to make perseverance difficult.

Many of us have faced real difficulty as a church when standing for the truth and yet we met that affliction joyfully willingly accepting the message of Christ despite the difficulty it brought.

I'm sure there are many here who have faced rejection from family perhaps small scale perhaps large scale and that makes it very easy to give up on this faith if we don't have real conviction if only we weren't convinced it was true.

But our faith is the real thing and so we persevere with joy accepting the gospel in the midst of affliction. That's a powerful testimony to the rest of the world as well.

[ 12 : 10 ] When we see awful videos of Christians being executed for their faith well we wish we never had to face it but their perseverance with joy in the face of immediate real suffering is a sure sign that the real thing is here.

People just don't willingly die or willingly suffer for stuff they're not convinced is completely true. The Thessalonians imitate the messengers of Christ and Christ himself especially as they accept the gospel in the face of affliction.

That's the second sign that they have the real thing. The third sure sign that the Thessalonians have the real thing is that they live their faith openly publicly.

Now there are many people today who say that they would be fine with Christians as long as they would be happy to be Christians in private. As long as they weren't public about their faith.

I mean they say why can't Christians just be Christians in a corner somewhere and let the rest of us get on with our lives. Well the Thessalonians would be a huge disappointment to those who say that.

[ 13 : 22 ] Look at verses 7 through to 9. the faith of the Thessalonian Christians is so public that Paul compares it to a loud sound ringing out from Thessalonica.

I don't know how many of you have been in the countryside early on a Sunday morning when the air is still and quiet but through that from the village over the hill you hear the church bells ringing out. You can hear the bells ringing out through the countryside and everyone in the area knows that it is Sunday morning. Well the faith of the Thessalonian Christians is like that or like a loud foghorn blaring in the night.

It rings through the regions of Macedonia and Achaia so that the faith of the Thessalonians has become famous in the whole region. If you went up into the hills of Macedonia and listened to the village women talking you'd hear the news from Thessalonica that people there had become Christians.

And if you traveled to the markets of Athens down south you'd know the news. Greeks from Thessalonica had turned away from the gods of their ancestors and turned to the god of the Jews and someone called Jesus Christ.

[ 14 : 39 ] And so the number of witnesses to the real faith of the Thessalonian Christians has multiplied beyond count. We all know that the more witnesses you have on your side the stronger your case.

and so the public obviousness of the faith of the Thessalonians testifies to Paul that they have the real thing. It's a sure sign. And they've not been shy in sharing their faith either.

It's hard to know exactly what sort of evangelistic behavior the Thessalonians were involved with but it's clear that they didn't keep their faith to themselves. In fact Paul no longer had to say anything when he entered a new town because they'd already heard from the Thessalonians. Their real Christian faith doesn't allow them to hide it away and in fact their willingness to be open about what they've believed meant that many others believed the truth as well. The fact that Christians are open about what we believe that we teach the gospel publicly well it's a good sign that we have the real thing.

[ 15 : 44 ] real faith cannot be kept to the private corners of our lives. What would it say about Christianity if it was that small that it could be hidden away? If it's real how can it be kept private and quiet in a corner?

If it's relevant to real life as we say it is how could it be kept secret? Christians have never done that. They've never kept their faith private and that's a sign that it's the real thing. That we have the real thing. The Thessalonians live out their faith publicly. And the fourth and final sign and actually the pinnacle of all the signs so far is that they have turned to God from idols. That's what Paul says in verses 9 and 10. This is the crowning sign that they have the real thing. It's the source of all the other changes in the Thessalonians.

If we're considering the characteristics of real Christian faith then verse 9 is right at the heart of it. They've turned from the idols that they once worshipped and now they worship the real true living God and they wait for Jesus Christ to return.

[ 17 : 08 ] most of the church in Thessalonica were of Greek background and so they used to go to the temple and they used to bow down before idols. But they don't do that anymore.

Perhaps that seems like a simple lifestyle change but it's actually huge. Their lives used to revolve around sacrifices to the pagan pantheon. They rested on their relationship to idols, bound their fates up with the egos of the gods.

They were enslaved to darkness. And it wasn't just them, it was their parents and their parents before them and so on for thousands of years. And so were the people in the next town and the next town and the next town all the way throughout the world.

Listen to how Paul describes the darkness of the idol worshipper in his letter to the Romans. He says, they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and 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 to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than creator.

[ 18 : 33 ] For their whole lives and the lives of their ancestors, they'd been bound up in futile thinking and dark passions, enslaved to their foolish hearts and the creatures that they worshipped.

But that is not the case anymore. what did the gospel achieve in their lives? Well, it turned them away from the darkness that they were trapped in and it turned them towards the one true and living God.

Nothing else had ever achieved this for anyone. But now, they turn to the truth. Often you hear people opining about what real Christianity is and what it should do.

They say things like, real Christianity is the Christianity that stands up to big companies who exploit people. Or real Christianity is the Christianity that is nice to all people, that's meek and mild like Jesus was.

Well, if we think that's what real Christianity is, the real faith, the real thing is, then Paul disagrees with us. The real faith that the Thessalonians have is faith that has turned them away from idols that they worshipped, and has now turned them towards the living, true God, the real God.

[ 19 : 54 ] And more than that, they used to be completely hopeless in their futile thinking, but now they live waiting for Jesus Christ to return. This is the heart of real Christianity.

This is what the gospel does. It turns people from worshipping idols and turns them to the living and true God to wait for the day when Jesus Christ returns.

Now, as a relevant aside, it's worth thinking a little bit about the language of idols that Paul uses here. It's become quite popular to think of idols as anything we like too much.

Perhaps you've heard it used that way. Your car has become your idol or your children. But here, at least, Paul doesn't use the language in that way. Here, at least, there's a binary distinction.

You are either an idol worshipper or you are a Christian who has turned from idols. Everyone who is a Christian has turned from the idols. They are no longer an idol worshipper.

[ 20 : 54 ] By very virtue of being a Christian instead, they worship and wait for Jesus instead of worshipping idols. idols. That's the defining characteristic of the real thing, of the real faith that the Thessalonians have.

They might be asking themselves if they're real believers. And Paul says, yes, you've stopped worshipping idols and now you worship the true and living God. Nothing other than real faith in the real message can do that.

And that's true of real Christian faith today. It has turned us away from worshipping idols. Many of us were once atheists, devoted to cosmic indifference.

And many Christians we know have turned from the idols of Allah or Sikh gods or Hindu gods. Christians are those who've turned from idols and now worship the true and living God, waiting for Jesus Christ to return.

So if you're not a Christian and you wonder what the real Christian message achieves, what it is, it's this, the gospel turns people away from worshipping idols and turns them to worship the real God.

[ 22 : 11 ] Nothing else has been able to do that. And the fact that the Christian message does is a sure signpost to its genuineness.

Christians are the real things. So those are the things that Paul sees in the Thessalonian church that show him that the real thing dwells there.

Perhaps you need to be assured that you have it. Or perhaps you're looking for the real thing to believe in. Well, these are the sure signs of the real thing. Christians have received the real message from trustworthy messengers.

Christians have become imitators of those messengers, joyfully facing affliction for the truth.

Christians live their faith openly and publicly.

And Christians have turned away from idols and now worship and wait for Jesus Christ. But just before we finish, let me briefly draw your attention to the final verse of the chapter.

[ 23 : 16 ] Because in it, after assuring the Thessalonians that they have the real thing, he assures them of the final characteristic of Christians in this passage.

But instead of a signpost, a guide to the real thing, this final comfort takes the form of a promise that real belief in the real message gives.

And it's this, that Christians will be safe in the wrath to come. Paul has already said that the Christians are the people waiting for Jesus Christ to return.

So what will happen when he comes? Well, look at verse 10. Wrath will come. That's what Jesus will bring when he returns.

That sounds quite surprising. Why would people wait for that? But that's what is coming. That's the day that Christians wait for. But Paul gives them the great assurance of verse 10, that when he does return, when that wrath comes, those who have the real thing, as they do, will be safe.

[ 24 : 26 ] Jesus himself is the one who delivers them. That's what the real faith surely leads to. Both the real faith of the Thessalonians and real faith of Christians today.

Salvation when Jesus Christ comes back in judgment. Safety when that day of wrath comes. everyone is headed towards that day.

And anyone who hasn't got the real thing will have to face it as well. But they face it without the assurance Paul gives so wonderfully to the Thessalonian Christians.

But Christians who really do have the real thing will be safe when it comes. and so may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen.