

OAK HILLS MISSION

Part 7 - And Lead Others to Do the Same

TEXT: 1 THESSALONIANS 1:2-10 (ESV)



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Oak Hills' Mission

Oak Hills' mission is to proclaim the whole Gospel to the whole person in our community and throughout the whole world, equipping individuals and families to:

- learn to know & enjoy God;
- respond to Him through authentic worship and godly living; and
- **lead others to do the same**
—all by the grace of God and all for His glory.

Our Call to Lead Others

As we near the end of this series, we come to the clause that prohibits any of us who consider ourselves part of the Church from coasting through a life built on the pursuit of privacy, comfort or control. As we've said a number of times, as believers in Christ, our faith is **not** a personal possession. Jesus calls us to be stewards of the message of salvation, and to invest our lives in the work of testifying to the astonishing grace of God. So a crucial feature to our understanding of God's call on this church—as with any church—is that He means to use us to lead other people around us in the knowledge and enjoyment of God, and in responding to Him through authentic worship and Godly living. Our text today from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians presents a beautiful picture of what this call to bear witness to Christ looks like. Let's read and walk through it.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

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, 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.

The Story Reaches Way, Way Back

On Wednesday, I woke in the middle of the night to find our 3 year old daughter Jane curled up next to me. Running a fever, she felt like a little space heater. How did she end up in our bed? Well, back in New York City in 1967, a young woman took a job taking phone reservations for Eastern Airlines. She caught the eye of a co-worker—a young man from Carmel, Indiana. Not long after they began dating, she became a stewardess for the now-defunct airline who moved her to their Atlanta hub. Smitten in love, the young man followed.



On the day after Christmas of 1968, for love and tax incentives, they decided to use their day off to go to the Atlanta Court House to tie the knot there in the office of the Justice of the Peace, with the judge's receptionist present as their witness. Hand in hand, the happy couple drove from that City Hall to the Atlanta International Airport, where he dropped her at the curb so she could report for her shift serving cocktails on the afternoon flight to Baltimore. As for him, he went home.

The story isn't hard to believe—young lovers following each other around the country, eloping and opting for gainful employment over a week in the Caribbean. This happens all the time. Still, the story is inestimably significant to me not so much for the details leading up to that wedding, but for what came of it—namely, Jane curled up beside me like a little burrito—because, as I'm sure you've figured, that couple was my parents.

My point is this: Jane didn't come to us by way of apparition or warm thoughts. She came by way of a long line of specific, actual events in particular places—like Atlanta, New York or Indiana. Why belabor this in a sermon about our call to lead others in knowing and enjoying God in worship and Godliness? Because behind our call to proclaim the Gospel lies a story we all share with every other believer—and it goes way, way back. Yet it remains filled with points of specificity along the way.

Every member of Christ's church shares this experience. Sure, details vary. For some the experience seemed to happen in a moment. For others, over a long period of time. For others still, it happened so long ago they have no memory of it. Still, for all of us who share this experience I'm referring to, we've had the rest of our lives redirected as a result. What am I referring to? Conversion. When we unpack our text from 1 Thessalonians, we discover quickly that we're getting more than a theology lesson from Paul (though we are getting that.) We are getting the retelling of a story, rich in detail. Let's walk through it.

Actual Conversion: Remember When?

From the opening verses, we see Paul knows those to whom he writes. They're clearly dear people Paul is proud to know. But I want to zero in on the word Paul uses—he *thinks* God always for them. And why? He remembers their work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope in Christ. This, you might recognize, is a familiar triad in Paul's expression of the evidence of real conversion—faith love and hope. (Gal 5:5-6, Eph 4:2-5, Rom 5:2-5, 1 Cor 13:13) For conversion to be real, these three must be found.

Notice the vibrancy of Paul's words—the *work* of faith, *labor* of love, *steadfastness* of hope. Paul hasn't just heard talk of their interest in faith, hope and love. Their faith, hope and love have hands and feet. This delights Paul because the activity of their faith is the evidence of something real inside them.

Also notice in our text, Paul gives us doctrine and story, and doctrine comes first. Doctrine always precedes story, because eternal truths existed before our stories unfolded. Paul begins with doctrine and then moves on to story under the beacon of doctrinal truth. **First doctrine:** Paul says he knows his friends in Thessalonica are *loved* and *chosen* by God for salvation because when he first came to them proclaiming Jesus, the Holy Spirit worked mightily among them, bringing full conviction. In other words, Paul's gratitude is pointed at God because the faith, hope and love he sees in his friends in Thessalonica came from God who loved and chose them before the world began. (vs. 2-5)

From there, Paul tells a story. He remembers coming to them on his 2nd missionary journey. (Acts 17) He and Silas had endured some tough opposition, but when they came to Thessalonica, though the response in the synagogue was hostile, "*some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.*" (Acts 17:4)

As Paul writes, he no doubt recalls details of that visit—where he slept, meals he shared, conversations late into the evening. He isn't just saying, "*I know you're Christians because I've heard about you.*" He's saying in effect, "*I remember preaching Christ to you and how you responded with conviction. And now I hear only how you are growing in Christ. You're even preaching Christ, just as I was doing when I first came to you.*" He remembers how their faith brought a measure of affliction, and yet how they received God's Word with joy. (v. 6) Their conversion story is a true story.

Conversion is real. It finds its roots in space and time. For each of us, that story began before the world was made. And yet, God is a God of means, using people and places along the way at specific moments in time to bring about specific events—like my mom and dad taking office jobs at Eastern or Paul and Silas arriving at Thessalonica with their bold and rather unpopular message. Paul knows his words didn't *cause* their conversion. God loved them and chose them long before that. But he also knows his own proclamation was instrumental in the process.

A Redirected Life: Now Look!

As a church, we misunderstand our mission if we think the church is mainly a place where leaders proclaim Christ and people come to listen. The people of the church have a responsibility before God—a direct command from Christ—to "*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*" (Mt 28:19-20)

Or to borrow from our own mission statement, we are not only called to learn to know and enjoy God and to respond to Him through authentic worship and godly living, but also **to lead others to do the same.** The Gospel doesn't only save our souls, it redirects our lives. Paul sees this in the believers in Thessalonica. Notice 3 observations Paul makes about them.

FIRST, THE THESSALONIANS HAVE TAKEN THE LEAD IN PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL THEY RECEIVED. In the regions near Thessalonica, the word of God has spread because of the witness of Thessalonian Christians. And it wasn't just that the Gospel was being preached. People were coming to faith in Christ as a result. So Paul and Silas would meet people and try to preach Christ to them only to find that some of them had already heard about and believed in Christ. How did they hear? The Thessalonians had come to them and told them. (v. 8)

SECOND, PAUL AND SILAS WERE PART OF THE THESSALONIANS' GOSPEL PRESENTATION. Notice a fascinating detail the Thessalonians must have been including in their testimony. Paul says, "*they report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you.*" (vs. 9) Paul and Silas preach Christ to some only to find that many not only know Christ; *they also know Paul and Silas.* The Thessalonians include Paul and Silas in their testimony because Paul and Silas were defining parts of their story of coming to faith. They were the ones who first shared Christ with them.

THIRD, THE THESSALONIANS' GOSPEL PROCLAMATION WAS DOCTRINAL. When the Thessalonians proclaimed Christ, they spoke of specific doctrines. In vs. 9-10, Paul tells what he hears when he meets folks who've heard the Thessalonian testimony.

1. The idols they once worshipped were false gods—dead gods—and they have since abandoned them to worship the one and only living and true God. (9)
2. This one, true, living God sent His son Jesus to deliver His people from His wrath, which Jesus did by dying and rising from the grave. (10b)
3. The Son of God, our Deliverer, Jesus Christ, will come again, and they are waiting for that day. (10a)

These believers in Thessalonica have taken their knowledge and enjoyment of God along with their worship and obedience, and have regarded it as a message they *must* proclaim. They must lead others as they were led to the astonishing grace of God. Notice what has happened: they have gotten a reputation for speaking convincingly, clearly and compassionately about the wonderful grace of Christ Jesus. They were never the *reason* for anyone's salvation—that honor belongs to God alone. And they were certainly not the *beginning* of anyone's faith either. That began before the world was made. (Eph 2:1-10) Still, they understood that they were *part* of God's design for the world around them to hear the Gospel. Their own conversion was a real, defining experience that redirected the course of their lives. Now look!

May Oak Hills gain that same reputation. If we are to be known for anything—may we pray that it would be that we were faithful, incessant, Biblically sound witnesses to Christ. May God, by the power of His Spirit, fully convict us of our call to lead others in the knowledge, enjoyment, worship and obedience of God such that it is said of this church, "*You have become an example, for not only has God's word spread from you in your community, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.*" (vs. 7-8) Actual conversion produces redirected lives. For every Christian we have a story to tell—a story to be told under the beacon of doctrinal truth. May God make each of us leaders in this, and may many come to know Christ through Oak Hills.