

the upside-down life

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Acts 17:1–10; 1 Thess. 1

BUILDUP THEME



INTERNALIZE GODLINESS

God expects us to show Christ in our character and actions.

MEMORY VERSE

1 Thessalonians 1:8

An auction house in Tahiti sold a landscape by Paul Gauguin after the artist's death in 1903. The auctioneer called the painting "Niagara Falls," believing it showed water plunging over rocks. Amusingly, the painting was upside down and sold that way. Gauguin's painting showed cottages of Breton Village under a fresh coat of snow, not Niagara Falls. The painting is now more appropriately titled "Breton Village under the Snow." It is hanging in an art museum in Paris, right side up, of course.

1. When have you said, "Oh, it's upside down!"?

2. What did you say once you turned it right side up?

Paul's missionary team shared and showed the gospel in Thessalonica while on their second missionary journey. Their witness and testimony changed lives so radically that some said the missionaries had turned the world turned upside down. This study will challenge you to consider whether your witness and testimony are turning your part of the world upside down.

Bible Study

While in Troas on his second missionary journey, Paul received a vision during the night of a man calling out, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" Paul heeded the call and headed to the region of Macedonia, along with Silas, Timothy, and probably Luke (Acts 16:8–10).

After establishing a church in Philippi, Paul went to Thessalonica (17:1), a major port city and Macedonia's capital. Thessalonica was near an important Roman road called the Egnatian Way, which ran between Byzantium in the east and Dyrrachium in the west. The city was busy and heavily influenced by the pagan Greek culture of the day.

One Message

Paul followed his usual pattern of going to the synagogue to preach (17:2, 3). For three Sabbath Days, he used the Scripture to prove to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah and that He had to suffer and then rise from the dead.

3. Read Acts 17:2, 3. What essential truths did Paul likely include in his message about Jesus' suffering and resurrection?

Paul likely used Scriptures like Isaiah 53 to help the Jews understand that Jesus suffered for them. God had planned Jesus' death in eternity past and was pleased to crush His Son as the offering for the sins of all people, including the Jews listening to Paul in the synagogue (Isa. 53:10).

4. Read Acts 16:19, 22, 23. What would Paul's audience have learned about Paul from the fresh stripes on his back?

Paul's verbal message about Christ's importance matched his life's message about Christ's importance. He practiced what he preached. He shared that Christ served us by dying for us so we might serve Him now and glorify Him for eternity. Paul devoted his life to serving Christ His Savior (Phil. 1:20, 21).

Two Responses

Paul's unified message had contrasting effects on his listeners. Luke's account continues with the two opposite responses. Paul persuaded some of the Jews to trust Christ (Acts 17:4). They joined Paul and Silas right away. Many of the God-fearing Greeks, both men and women, believed the gospel as well. All these new believers joined together to form the Thessalonian church.

5. Read Acts 17:4. Why would anyone want to join missionaries who had just suffered a beating and had just run for their lives from the neighboring town?

The unbelieving Jews didn't like Paul's authentic message and sacrificial service, and they felt threatened by his growing number of followers. They had to change the narrative or lose their power and influence, so they gathered a group of idle, unemployed loafers, formed a mob, and incited it against the missionaries. Since Paul and Silas were staying at the home of a believer named Jason, the mob attacked Jason's house. The Jews wanted to put Paul and Silas on trial (17:5).

When the mob could not find the missionaries, they dragged Jason and some of the other believers to the city's magistrates (politarchs), claiming that the men were causing trouble wherever they went (17:6).

The missionaries and other Christlike believers in Thessalonica changed their world by turning people to Christ. The new believers' lives turned upside down. Each one had new loyalties, new friends, a new love, and a new mission. The gospel was changing people's actions and attitudes in Thessalonica and giving them a new identity.

6. How did your life "turn upside down" when you trusted Christ as your Savior?

Turning the world on its head begins by dedicating oneself to sharing and showing Christ. Christ works through resolute believers to bring radical change to people's lives.

Because of the missionaries' teaching about "another king," a reference to Jesus, the Jews accused Paul and Silas and the new believers of treason against Rome. The authorities took money from Jason and the others as a "guarantee" they would cause no more disruptions due to Paul's preaching. Then they let them go. But the Jews, no doubt, would stir up more trouble as the believers continued to share the gospel. So, the new believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea, an out-of-the-way town (17:7–10).

7. Read Acts 17:9, 10. What do you think about the rulers' attempt to stop the spread of the gospel by taking money from some of the new believers?

The Thessalonian rulers had no idea what the missionaries had unleashed in their city by sharing and showing the gospel of Christ, but they soon would. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians a year or so later reveals a quickly spreading gospel.

Evidence of Christlikeness

While still on his second missionary journey, Paul sent Timothy to check on the new believers in Thessalonica. Timothy returned with an encouraging report, and 1 Thessalonians is Paul's response. Paul wrote his letter from Corinth to acknowledge the Thessalonians' Christlikeness and to encourage them to continue in their walk with the Lord.

Paul opened his letter by emphasizing the Thessalonians' new standing "in God" and in "Christ" (1 Thess. 1:1). The Thessalonians had once been in the world and in sin. Through Christ, the believers became children of God the Father and entered a life-changing relationship with Him.

Paul prayed the Thessalonians would know grace (God's favor and help) and peace, a greeting he commonly used in his letters. The Thessalonians, who were in the middle of persecution and unease, needed God's supporting help and peace.

Paul thanked God for the new believers in Thessalonica and felt

compelled to pray for them every time he thought of them (1:2). They had much to learn and faced serious opposition. Paul was confident his prayers would help, and they did.

Paul noted the Thessalonians' work of faith (1:3). He did not mean they had gained salvation through good works. Rather, their strong faith and belief had led them to do good works. Their works were evidence of their faith and of their thankfulness for salvation (Eph. 2:8–10; James 2:17, 18). True faith in Christ will show in a believer's works for Christ.

Second, Paul noted the Thessalonians had labored in love (1 Thess. 1:3). By "labor" Paul meant working hard to the point of exhaustion or even against opposition. God's love working in their hearts overflowed to those around them. The new believers labored to show God's love through their service to others. Only those filled with the love of Christ would selflessly serve Him when facing dangerous and troubling times.

8. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:3. What compels a believer to work to the point of exhaustion for Christ?

Third, Paul noted his thankfulness for the Thessalonians' constant hope (1:3). Their "hope" was a deep expectation that Christ would return for them. Bravely, they had continued serving God even under persecution, knowing that their time to serve Christ might end at any moment. Their hope drove them to use their time wisely, buying up opportunities to serve the Lord while they could.

Election to Christlikeness

The Thessalonians' faith, love, and hope revealed they were true believers. These qualities served as evidence that God had elected, or chosen, them for salvation (1:4). The truth that God ultimately works in people to draw them to Himself so that they respond to Him in faith should encourage us to be faithful witnesses. A person should never use election as an excuse not to witness. The Bible is clear that God chooses to use believers to share the gospel (Matt. 28:19, 20; Rom. 10:14, 15).

We know from other passages that God loves the world and doesn't want anyone to die without trusting Christ (John 3:16; 2 Pet. 3:9). God's love motivates Him to choose some to salvation, including

the Thessalonians in Paul's day. So, Paul added that God elected the Thessalonians because God loved them.

9. On what basis does God elect some to salvation?

Empowerment for Christlikeness

Paul depended on the Holy Spirit to empower and guide his preaching (1:5). And he counted on the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of those who heard the gospel. The Spirit didn't disappoint. He used Paul's preaching to convict the Thessalonians of their sin and changed them when they put their faith in Christ.

Paul added that he and Silas were living testimonies of the Spirit's power. As mentioned earlier, the missionaries suffered a beating in Philippi before arriving in Thessalonica (Acts 16:22, 23). Their confident and enthusiastic preaching despite their wounds and bruises provided compelling evidence of the Spirit's power in their lives.

10. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:5. Who has shown you what it means to live by the Spirit's power?

Walking by the Spirit

The Thessalonians imitated both Paul's example and Christ's example of responding to persecution joyfully and faithfully by the Holy Spirit's power (1 Thess. 1:6). In turn, the Thessalonians' lives had become examples for other believers in the region of Macedonia and then beyond to the region of Achaia. They were walking by the Spirit, and it showed (1:7). People began talking about them, noticing there was something unusual happening in their lives.

Paul wrote that the Thessalonians' testimony had "sounded" out the word of the Lord (1:8). The "sound" was like a trumpet blast. Paul used that comparison because actions consistent with the gospel often sound out louder, clearer messages than words alone. All

believers have the Holy Spirit and the opportunity to be a “trumpet blast” in their worlds.

11. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:8. What opportunities do you have to demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is at work in your life?

Worshiping God

People in the areas surrounding Thessalonica continued to report the Thessalonians’ faith, and Paul had heard reports of their faith as well (1:9). The Thessalonians had made a dramatic change from the worship of false gods to the worship of the true, living God. The Thessalonians’ false gods included the Greek pantheon of Olympian gods. The founders of Macedonia named the region after Makedon, the mythical son of Zeus. Mount Olympus is visible from Thessalonica.

The Thessalonians’ “turn” to God was final. They didn’t add God to their worship of false gods; they worshiped Him exclusively. Like the Thessalonians’ worship, our worship of God should be obvious to the world too.

12. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:9. How do you make your worship of God obvious in your life?

13. What might you do to make it more obvious?

Waiting for Christ

The Thessalonians waited for Christ’s return (1:10). That doesn’t mean they sat around. It means they anticipated it and looked forward to it. It motivated them and carried them through when they experienced persecution. They knew their suffering wouldn’t last. God raised Jesus from the dead, and Jesus promised His followers

He will come again. In the meantime, the Thessalonians served their living Savior, Who had already delivered them from sin and would certainly deliver them from God's coming wrath.

Christ will remove all believers from the earth and take them to Heaven at the Rapture. Shortly after the Rapture, the Tribulation will begin on earth. During the Tribulation, God will pour out His wrath on unbelievers. God's coming wrath also includes His condemnation of unbelievers to the Lake of Fire. That will happen at the Great White Throne Judgment just before eternity begins (Rev. 21:11–15).

14. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:10. How should Christ's any-moment return affect your daily life?

Christ didn't return in the days of the Thessalonians, but that doesn't mean they were foolish to wait for His return. Their awareness of Christ's any-moment return helped them focus on using their days to serve the Lord. Christ's any-moment return should be on our minds every day. It should motivate us to serve the Lord while we can.

Application

15. What message does your life send to your fellow believers? How about to the unbelievers you interact with?

16. What would it take for you to live the "upside-down life" the new believers in Thessalonica lived?

17. Whose life do you want your "upside-down life" to impact for Christ?