

The Gift of Suffering

^{5b} You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶ 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,

⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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,

¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

1 Thessalonians 1:5b-10

The First Written Martyrdom Outside the NT

BORN IN 69 A.D., he was said to have been converted to Christianity through apostles. Irenaeus, the great second century church Father from Lyons (France) heard him preach when he was just a little boy, and related that he was



the personal disciple of none other than the Apostle John. The man's name is **Polycarp**, and it means “**much fruit.**” He became bishop of Smyrna after being installed *by John* himself, the same man who wrote to this church in his book of Revelation.

Polycarp was extremely old for his time when he died. He was no less than 86, but this date could be off, since the

record of this age says that he had *known Christ for that long*, meaning he was undoubtedly unconverted prior to that for some time. Other than his unique place as a transitional figure between the Apostles and the Church Fathers, Polycarp is known for something else. **The story of his death** “**is the oldest written account of a Christian martyrdom outside the New Testament.**”¹

The account is riveting. Sometime in the middle of the second century, the town of Smyrna had had enough of Polycarp and his “**atheism,**” for the good bishop had been

¹ **Michael William Holmes**, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 222.

preaching that there is only one Lord and one True God, and Caesar and the pantheon of Rome and Greece were not him. So, because he was telling people they should not worship the gods, he was an atheist. The noblemen of the city, both Greek and Jew, set out to find and kill the old man.

When he first heard of this news, he was undisturbed, but his friends persuaded him to withdraw to a nearby farm. While praying “for everyone and for the churches throughout the world, as was his constant habit” (MPoly 5.1), he fell into a deep trance where, three days before his arrest, he saw a pillow being consumed by fire. He told those who were with him, “It is necessary that I be burned alive” (5.2).

Betrayed by his own household, about suppertime, mounted police and horsemen set out, armed as though chasing a dangerous criminal (7.1). They found him in bed, and though he could have escaped he refused saying, “May God’s will be done” (7.1). All who saw him marveled at his age and wondered why in the world people were so eager to arrest an old man (7.2). But arrest him they did, and soon he was taken on a Great Sabbath before the leaders who tried to persuade him to just say, “Caesar is Lord and offer a little incense” (8.2).

“I am not about to do what you are suggesting to me,” he replied. Thereupon they led him to a stadium full of hungry lions, and I’m not referring to the caged animals eager for their next meal. The crowds were ravenous. They wanted blood.

Suddenly, many heard a voice from heaven say, “Be strong, Polycarp, and act like man” (9.1).

Then, he was asked one last time to swear an oath and revile Christ. “For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? (9.3). I am a Christian. Do you want me to persuade you?” (10.1).

“Persuade the people!” (2) came the retort. “I have wild beasts; I will throw you to them, unless you change your mind” (11.1).

“Call for them! For repentance from better to worse is a change impossible for us; but it is a noble thing to change from that which is evil to righteous” (11.1), he said.

“I will have you consumed by fire, since you despise the wild beasts. Change your mind!” (2).

“You threaten me with fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant

of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. Why do you delay? Come, do what you wish” (2). As he spoke these and many other words, he was inspired with courage and joy, and his face was filled with grace, so that not only did he not collapse in fright at the things which were said to him, but on the contrary the proconsul was astonished, and sent his own herald into the midst of the stadium to proclaim three times: “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian” (12.1).

Just then, the voracious crowds roared out with seething anger and a loud shout, “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods! Burn him alive!” (12.2-3).

Quicker than words, they collected wood and prepared a pyre. Polycarp stripped naked, but as they were about to nail him to the wood, he said simply, “Leave me as I am. I will not move.” (13.1-3). So they tied him instead and as he was bound like a splendid ram chosen for a great sacrifice, he prayed, “O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, that I might receive

a place among the number of martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life” (14.2).

At that moment, behold a miracle. The fire took the shape of an arch and completely surrounded the body. There was no smell of burning flesh but rather of baking bread (15.2)! The man was not burning. They ordered the executioner to stab him with a dagger, and when he did, so much blood gushed out that **it extinguished the fire** and everyone who saw it was amazed “**that there should be so great a difference between the unbelievers and the elect**” (16.1). News spread quickly of these things.

Imitators of the Persecuted

As we continue this morning with the introduction of 1 Thessalonians, we are met in the middle of **vs. 5** with what will become a reoccurring theme. **Suffering for Christ**. Not just suffering in general. Everyone suffers in general with bad health, bullies at school, jobs they hate, natural disasters that take their homes, and so on. That is not what is in mind here. It is something very different, something that quite honestly, I don't think many have begun to internalize,

though I will say many have a terrible fear of it, so much that anything that even hints at a change of our way of life such that we might have to undergo this ourselves is met with harsh resistance.

At first, we do not see this in the text. We left off here, “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake” (1Th 1:5b). Taken out of context, this could mean almost anything. Is the Apostle saying that they were nice? That they were kind? That they were good moral examples?

This statement has a context which is vs. 6. “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.” Though this is the answer to “what kind of men we proved to be,” we still do not have enough to go on until the second half of the verse. It begins with “for² you received the word...” something we saw earlier in 1Th 1:5a. But it how they received it that is the key. “... in much affliction.” *This* is how they imitated them and the Lord. This is what they imitated.

I need to say something important about being imitators of the Apostles here. We live in a day when many preachers

² The coordinating conjunction *gar* (“for”) is not present there. Instead, you have the participle form of the verb “receiving.” This is the way the Greek sentence connects the second half to the first. “For you received” is a fine English equivalent.

are not only not worth emulating, but positively mocking. Their way of life is materialistically extravagant (“I need another jet”) and morally bankrupt. Beale writes, “Paul’s divinely powerful and effective proclamation illustrated by his godly way of living.”³ And Leon Morris says, “No preacher can expect a hearing for his gospel unless it is bearing fruit in his own life.”⁴ These words are incredibly important, because the gospel is accompanied with power because those who preach it are themselves transformed by it. If a preacher is not himself being changed from one degree of glory to another in humility and godliness, he is a whitewashed tomb.

But let’s take this father, because it is not merely their moral example that is in view here. Recall that when Paul, Timothy, and Silas came to Thessalonica ([Acts 17:1ff](#)), the Jews of that town who hated Christ formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, attacked the house of Jason, dragged Jason and other brothers before city authorities, shouted false charges to the crowds, created serious doubt in the minds of

³ G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 54.

⁴ Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 47.

the authorities against the Apostles, all of which forced Paul and Silas to flee away at night to Berea lest they be **killed**. Then, of course, there if the Lord Jesus himself who became the Great Suffering Servant who was **betrayed** by his own friend with a kiss, **arrested**, **brought** before the council, **punched**, **spat** upon, **flogged**, **whipped**, **crucified**, **mocked**, **tempted**, and finally **killed**. In both instances, the great affliction was entirely religious and focused solely on the claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and King of the world.

It is not too hard to see how this brutality would have continued immediately after Paul and Silas left Thessalonica. Luke tells us that “**some of [the Jewish Rabbis], a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women**” of the city were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas (**Acts 17:3**). That’s a fairly good-sized group of brand-new Christians. So, with the Apostles out of the way, it is obvious that the leaders of the mob immediately went after these new converts, hoping to dissuade them from confessing Christ. What they endured in the absence of the Apostolic leadership is so significant that it could easily be considered the main theme of these two letters.

Now let me ask you, when the gospel is proclaimed in the United States, is this what happens? I know we are moving closer to it every day, but if you take anyone from Whitefield and Wesley to Billy Sunday and Billy Graham as examples, you don't find **affliction**. You find news **affiliates**—broadcasting or writing about the event in the newspapers of the day. It's viewed as a **spectacle**, but not particularly **despicable**. It's much more often the case that you have **celebrity** attending this rather than **suffering**. I'm under no delusions that this America—present on our soil since prior to the founding of this nation—is not going to exist for much longer. But as we see starting immediately, maybe that isn't such a bad thing. Why?

The very next words are that they received the word in much affliction, “**with the joy of the Holy Spirit**” (**1Th 1:6b**). That is, in the midst of their suffering the Apostles preached the word with joy and in the midst of their suffering the Thessalonians received and kept on receiving the word with joy. What little suffering for Christ we here today endure that we beg God to keep from us with much fear and worry, they joyfully endured ten thousand times worse without fear or worry at all.

Thanksgiving is coming up, and for most people this is a day of family, feasting, and fun. It is a delight to celebrate and be thankful to God. This same kind of joy or delight is how the Thessalonians bore their affliction. This is truly unthinkable to the world. As the Martyrdom of Polycarp puts it, “The whole crowd was amazed that there should be so great a difference between the unbelievers and the elect.”

Does it seem impossible? If you marvel at this, do not. For all this means is that you have not yet been put through the crucible. You know what a crucible is? It is a ceramic or metal container in which metals or other substances may be melted or subjected to very high temperatures. This has become a metaphor for the suffering that God brings into our lives. Polycarp would call it God’s will for us.

So why not marvel? Because the text says this joy comes from “the Holy Spirit.” It is the Spirit who lives in his people who at just the right and necessary time grants joy inexpressible that many millions of saints throughout time in their darkest hour have known. As earlier in Polycarp it says, “The fire of their inhuman torturers felt cold to them, for they set before their eyes the escape from that eternal fire which is never extinguished, while with the eyes of their

heart they gazed upon the good things which are reserved for those who endure patiently, things ‘which neither ear has heard nor eye has seen, nor has it entered into the heart of man’ but which were shown to them by the Lord” (MPoly 2.3). This joy is not something you need to dig up from somewhere deep inside of yourself in hopes that it will somehow gurgle to the surface. Rather, it is a fountain that God puts in your soul when you are converted, which springs up and bubbles over at just the right times so that it extinguishes the pains that torture burns into the hearts of ordinary men.

In their place? The cool, refreshing waters of the joy of the Holy Spirit. This is why it says that Stephen, the first Christian martyr, “full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, that is⁵ Jesus standing at the right hand of God ... and as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them’” (Acts 7:55-59). Forgiveness. Boldness. Joy.

⁵ On this translation see [Ralph P. Martin](#), “A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5-11,” in *Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 111 n. 3.

It is for this reason that G. K. Beale reminds us—with something many will not even begin to understand—that suffering for Christ, like faith, is actually a *divine gift*.⁶ “For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Php 1:29). Granted? When you think of gifts, you probably think of birthdays or Christmas presents you want to open so badly that you can't sleep the night before. I'm certain you do not think of being brutally beaten with sticks and stoned or burnt alive or crucified. But I'm telling you, the early church understood in a way that is perhaps unique to history that suffering was a gift, the divine will of God so that they could be counted worthy of Christ.

That doesn't mean you just wait for it. In fact, it may not come at all. Though this will: **Jonathan Edwards** was very wise when he resolved, “To think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.” And “When I feel pain, to think of the pains of martyrdom, and of hell.”⁷ **Justin Taylor** summarizes

⁶ G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 56-57.

⁷ Edwards, Resolutions 9 and 10. In **Steven J. Lawson**, *The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008), 158.

why. “The thought of dying, though repulsive to most of us, brings an uncanny clarity to life.”⁸ In these ways, you can do things to prepare yourself, even as you may trust because of Scripture that the Holy Spirit will not only not leave you in such a time, but will actually supernaturally empower you to consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds (**James 1:2**), as another early martyr and half-brother of the Lord Jesus himself begins his letter.

Example and Witness

Next, it is important to consider what a remarkable grace was given to these Thessalonian Christians. “... so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (**1Th 1:7**). This is another part of this mysterious gift. In this case, the one gift now extends to many (**Rom 5:15-17**). If the Martyrdom of Polycarp tells us anything, it tells us about the effect his death had on others. It concludes, “He proved to be not only a distinguished teacher, but also

⁸ Justin Taylor, “Some Confessions from Lessons Learned in the Crucible of Suffering,” *The Gospel Coalition* (Dec 6, 2010), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/some-confessions-from-lessons-learned-in-the-crucible-of-suffering/>

an outstanding martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, since it was in accord with the pattern of the gospel of Christ” (MPoly 19.1). In other words, his death was ordained by God, in part, so that you might learn by his example how to walk in his footsteps, who himself walked in the steps of our Lord Jesus (22.1).

Paul does not end it here, however. “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” (1Th 1:8-9a). There are a couple of things going on here.

Somehow, news had spread all the way to Paul in Corinth about the story of Thessalonica. Indeed, the word had spread all around basically Greece itself that something remarkable had taken place there. Under intense duress and mighty affliction, the Thessalonians not only did not give up their newly born faith, but they actually grew stronger and bolder *because* of the persecution. But it was how they received that affliction that got people talking. And talk

they did. People from all over the region told this story as they came to Corinth. And what were they saying?

It is almost as if they heard that the Christians were singing as they were threatened with death. Along these lines, there is a remarkable story I heard this week of a young ten-year-old black boy named **Willie Myrick** who was kidnapped right in front of his house in Atlanta back in 2014. If you've heard the story, he had absolutely no idea who this man was, but as he was driving off, probably to his own death, he started to sing:

Every praise is to our God.
Every word of worship with one accord
Every praise every praise is to our God.
Sing hallelujah to our God
Glory hallelujah is due our God
Every praise every praise is to our God.

For three hours he sang this song, over and over again, while the kidnapper yelled and screamed for him to stop. Finally, he was driven mad by the words, pulled the car over and

demanded the kid get out immediately. What kind of a person starts singing praises to God while he is being kidnapped? A Christian person, that's who.

This new spread: **They received the word with great joy in the face of affliction and they boldly told anyone and everyone** about this gospel while faced with imprisonment, beatings, confiscation of property, financial ruin, even death. Curiously, 100 years later, it would be Polycarp who would continue this tradition. We read, **“Although he was martyred in Smyrna along with eleven others from Philadelphia, he alone is especially remembered by everyone, so that he is spoken of everywhere, even by pagans”** (MPoly 19.1). But it is not merely the receiving with joy that was so remarkable here, though that all by itself is enough to make total reprobates sit up and take notice. **“Why in the world are these people behaving such?”** Here we need to turn to their hope.

The Gospel and Its Demands

The answer is the first part of this statement. **“For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in**

Macedonia and Achaia...” (1Th 1:8). The “word of the Lord” earlier in the greeting is the Gospel. “Our gospel came to you not only in word...” (1Th 1:5). In other words, the suffering with joy was accompanied by the opening of Thesalonian mouths and their proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord.

The chapter really ends on this note, as Paul explains exactly what people were communicating to him such that it made is so that “we need not say anything” (1:8). There is this phrase around that goes, “Preach the Gospel, if necessary use words.” Often attributed to Francis of Assisi, the popular albeit very strange medieval monk was a tremendous preacher, using words sometimes as often as five sermons a day!⁹ Francis did say something to the effect of “All the Friars ... should preach by their deeds,” but this as essentially an exhortation to remember that what you say and what you do need to line up.

But the Gospel is first and foremost what is said. It is not mere actions, but news. This news is not “be nice” or “be happy in the face of suffering” or even “love your neighbor

⁹ An interesting article showing how this is a misattribution is Glenn Stanton, “FactChecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi,” *The Gospel Coalition* (July 10, 2012), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>.

as yourself.” Some of that is law, which isn’t bad, of course. Rather, it is good. Some of that remarkable. How could anyone do that? Some of that is common sense. But the Gospel is much more than this. Thus, we end the chapter with what the Gospel is as told to us here. It can be summarized here as a **turning**, a **serving**, and a **waiting**. And, of course, the object of this turning, serving, and waiting is critical.

The Apostle says, “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” (1Th 1:9-10). This is Thessalonians summary of the Gospel. Let’s look at each in order.

First, the Thessalonians “**turned to God from idols.**” There’s a lot here that needs to be understood properly. First, there is a “turning” (*epistrepho*). In a few instances, the LXX translates the Hebrew *shuv* (Gen 24:4; Jdg 17:3; 2Sa 17:3; 2Kg 4:22; Ps 67:23 LXX; etc.) with this word. *Shuv* is often translated “**turn**” or “**return**,” implying movement from one direction to another. But it is also translated it as “**repent**.” For example, “Yet if they turn (*shuv*) their heart in

the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent (*shuv*) and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, 'We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly...' (1Kg 8:47).

I think the popular understanding of “repent” is that someone says they are sorry for some sin(s) they have committed. In other words, **to be sorry** is to repent. “I’m sorry I behaved that way, mom. I repent.” I suppose it’s kind of like the time when David caught Saul in a cave, cut off a piece of his robe, but refused to kill him. Then Saul responded to David saying, “**Is this your voice, my son David? And Saul lifted up his voice and wept**” (1 Sa 24:16). In a later story he tells David who has acted better than he again, “**I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Behold, I have acted foolishly, and have made a great mistake**” (1Sa 26:21). You see, the idea is that of being sorry for a sin, admitting it, and stopping it.

That is part of repentance for sure. But ask yourself a question. What good did it do Saul or others like Esau? It tells us that after he sold his birthright for a pot of porridge

that Esau “desired to inherit the blessing, [but] he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears” (Heb 12:17). It was too late. He could do nothing to undo what he had done. By itself, being sorry for your sins isn’t true repentance. Even stopping them isn’t true repentance. What’s done is done.

“Come again,” You say? That’s right. With the Thessalonians, their “turning” is much more basic and vital than crying and feeling sorry. It is a turning “to” something. It is a turning “to God.” Who is God? Paul goes on to say he is the “living and true God” (1Th 1:9b). Both of these words can be misunderstood.

We might think of the opposite of “living” as we try to understand its meaning. The opposite of “living” is “dead.” Therefore, the true God is alive while all others are dead or, better, have no existence. This is a common assumption, found in many commentaries. But the OT is replete with the gods having real existence (they are sometimes called angels, angels have real existence; they are sometimes called demons; demons have real existence; etc.). The Psalms even command the gods to praise Yahweh (Ps 97:7). Thus, it would appear that the opposite of living is something else

here. I suggest that **living here means Source of all life**. Jesus said, “**I am ... the life**” (**John 14:6**), not meaning that everything else is dead or nonexistent, but that he is the Source of life. Thus, the living God means that he is the Source of all others’ life. He is the Source of your life. He is the Source of angels’ life. He is the Source of Satan’s life (he will talk about Satan later in the letter). No other God is Life.

Second, **he is true**. The opposite of “true” is “false.” But “false” can have very different meanings. It can mean “wrong.” Like a buzzer in a game show. This is very similar to what we said previously about death or nonexistent. You might take “false” as meaning that there is only one “right” God. This is true, but it doesn’t go far enough. The word can mean “treacherous” as when Sméagol is fighting with Gollum about Frodo, “*Of course he did. I told you he was tricky. I told you he was false.*” Many of the gods are actually called tricksters by those that worship them (imagine that!), like **Loki** in Nordic religion (and Marvel comics) or closer to home, **I’itoi** the creator trickster god that our missionary to the Tohono O’odham Indians John Kortie told us about re-

cently. This is what I believe “false” means. It means, as Augustine discusses in *City of God* (Books 8-10), that only God is Trustworthy.

This then is the God that they turned to. And this turning leads to “[serving](#).” “[To serve the living and true God](#).” Now we are starting to get a better idea of what repentance actually is. It is moving into the service of God. As this is God who is being served, it is [service to a Master](#). Throughout Paul’s letters, he calls himself God’s *doulos* (servant or slave). It is not begrudging servitude, or the slavery of a taskmaster. It is thankful because of the joy God put in his heart. Paul has enlisted in the army of God.

But we can say more. This turning to necessarily meant a [turning “from.”](#) They turned “[from idols](#).” Like “Living and True,” “[idols](#)” is a [word fraught with misunderstanding in our age of secular antisupernaturalism](#). Most people think it means “fake” or “made-up.” Again, the same idea we have seen, that an idol has no real existence. At best, people think it is something you put before God like coveting.¹⁰

¹⁰ **Going Deeper.** Twice Paul refers to coveting as idolatry ([Eph 5:5](#) and [Col 3:5](#)). The context of both is curious. But first, coveting is the tenth commandment, and someone has said that it is a summary of the other nine. Violating all the other nine is in one way shape or form, coveting. Paul uses coveting as his example of sinning in [Romans 7:7-8](#). It is an intensely internal sin,

Some will point to something like **1 Corinthians 8:4** and the ESV, “**We know that ‘an idol has no real existence.’**”¹¹ Therefore, idolatry has to be nonsupernatural by definition. The problem is, a little later he tells the same people in the same context **not to sacrifice to demons**. “**What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of**

one that people may never see. And in the two lists of the Ten (**Ex 20** and **Dt 5**), there are several things we are not to covet.

What is curious to me about the two references in the NT is how they are put in the context of sexual sin. These were deeply religious people and these two letters are, especially for Pauline epistles, filled with supernatural ideas. I am suspicious that what may have been going on here is something akin to OT syncretism of temple prostitution or using the body as a means of worshipping evil entities. I’m not suggesting that these Christians were going to the cult centers and doing this (I suppose they might have), but that the idea was being carried over into their thinking. Certainly, sexual sin was highly spiritual and religious (it remains this today, though people hardly recognize it). For this reason, idolatry and adultery are often linked in the OT. Of course, he goes on to list other sins, but it is like the sexual sins and the coveting of them were the gateway to the rest (we see the same thing in Romans 1 with homosexuality) and that the other sins flourished because through these sexual activities, people were, in effect, offering themselves as servants to Satan.

¹¹ This difficult verse has too many land mines to try and safely disarm here. For example, notice the quotations around “an idol has no real existence.” Many scholars think this was a quote, but they are not sure where (an early catechism, a Corinthian belief, etc.). Also, “no real existence” is literally “a nothing.” But what does that mean? It could mean that for Christians they are to be considered as nothing, even if they truly exist. Or, it could mean that they do not exist. The problem is, idols, of course, do exist. So is Paul saying that what lies behind an idol does not exist, i.e. a demon? This is where **1Co 10:21-22** needs to interpret this verse (not to mention 8:5-6!).

the Lord and the table of demons” (1Co 10:19-21).¹² Demons are obviously quite real. And people are “captured by [them/Satan] to do [his] will” (2Ti 2:26). In other words, they serve these evil creatures. Service!

Thing is, many people don’t realize it at all. “I do not worship demons. I’m not a Satan worshiper. I am not his servant.” Knowing this consciously or not, it doesn’t alter the fact that everyone is born into this kingdom and they must be set free. Perhaps understand what a literal idol was can help you see this better. An idol was a three-dimensional object cut out of stone or wood that was believed to be akin to a house. John Frame explains,

In paganism, the relationship between the [statue] and the god is more than merely pictorial, or even representative. Something of the sanctity of the god attaches to [it] ... In other kinds of paganism, the relation between the [statue] and the god ... may be thought of as a sacramental conduit of divine influence...¹³

¹² We could think of other examples. The Psalm says, “For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols” (Ps 96:5). “See!” people shout. The gods do not exist. Problem is, the LXX reads, “All the gods of the nations are *demons*.”

¹³ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 454. I have replaced “image” with “statue,” because technically speaking, paintings or drawings were not considered idols.

The demon was united to the idol by inviting the spirit to enter it, sort of like unsuspecting kids do when playing with an Ouija board. Then, through the secret arts and with the help of herbs, gems and odors, the idol was believed to become inhabited. Then it was said that the statue could speak, engage in prophecy, and other things. Because it was an idol, people thought they could control the deity. One scholar puts it this way,

When a non-physical being manifested in a statue, this anchored the being in a controlled location where living human beings could interact with it through ritual performance . . . In order for human beings to interact with deities and to persuade them to create, renew, and maintain the universe, these beings had to be brought down to earth . . . This interaction had to be strictly controlled in order to avoid both the potential dangers of unrestricted divine power and the pollution of the divine by the impurity of the human world. While the ability of deities to act in the visible, human realm was brought about through their manifestation in a physical body, manifestation in one body did not in any sense restrict

a deity, for the non-corporeal essence of a deity was unlimited by time and space, and could manifest in all its “bodies,” in all locations, all at one time.¹⁴

If this is what idolatry simply was in the ancient world, then you can see the supernatural ideas behind fleeing “from idols.” Do you see what’s at stake here? It is much more than just not putting the Broncos before God. Rather, it is the very worship and service of the gods and of demons and of Caesar, which is the very reason, ironically, that the Jews in Thessalonica tried to get Paul killed. It is why they called Polycarp and other early Christians atheists. The Christians were literally destroying the worship of the gods. Because this God demanded allegiance to himself in the form of turning *from* them *to* him.

Make no mistake, this is spiritual warfare of the first order. It was taken so seriously that in early baptismal rites, just before baptism, the convert was sometimes exorcised of demons and then had to pledge fealty and lifelong service to

¹⁴ Gay Robins, “Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ASOR Book Series 10; ed. Neal H. Walls; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 1-2. Cited by Michael Heiser, “What is / are (an) Elohim?,” Evangelical Theological Society Meeting, 2010. <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/WhatisareanelohimETS2010.pdf>

Jesus Christ while renouncing all of the pomp and circumstances and lordship of Satan. This is what Esau and king Saul and Judas would not do, though they all had a form of repentance and were sorry for the things they were doing. How do you suppose this goes over in the spiritual realm when people renounce their kingdom for that of the kingdom of God? We can tell from the intense persecution in this city and others what the answer to that question is.

This confession of the Gospel reaches its crescendo in the last verse. For now the living and true God to whom they have turned is combined with “**waiting for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come**” (1Th 1:10). This actually gives us the basic gospel message and the reason why these people could actually know that what they were doing was good and true. It is all about Jesus and what did and who he was. We have here three things.

First, **waiting**. This is the major theme of the verse. The Thessalonians waited, and waiting very patiently. They turned to God and waited. Who likes waiting? Get me in a long line at Lakeside and you will see my answer. Of course,

as a kid it was different, because I had never been there before. But after a while? Meh, not so much. But what if that long line is so that I can meet Phil Mickelson or Jack Nicklaus for the first time. Now, I'll eagerly wait, because I anticipate.

What do the Thessalonians anticipate? Being “**delivered from the wrath to come.**” This explains their intense desire not to go to hell and suffer God's wrath. Many people today think this is nonsense, foolish rubbish. But not these people. Not Polycarp! **They know what their own sins deserve,** and they know that God is just and holy. They eagerly anticipate being saved from this wrath. And they believed it so strongly that they joyfully went to the stake. They know that Jesus endured this wrath for their own sake so that they might not have to suffer eternal wrath in hell. Do you see then how, strangely, belief in God's future wrath, when understood the right way, can actually create unspeakable joy on earth today when you suffer for the Name of Jesus? This is truly a great gift! Only those with full assurance of what Jesus did for them personally can have this. Do you? Do you have assurance that you will be delivered from the wrath to come?

How many you have such assurance? Two ways. First, know that this Jesus is **the Son** of this living and true God who was sent “**from heaven.**” That is, he did not begin to exist in the womb of the Virgin. Rather, he was in heaven and came down to us in taking our form and likeness. How? Because he is the true and living eternal God himself. The only-begotten of the Father.

Second, God “**raised him from the dead.**” Do you hear the theology that percolates throughout this chapter? This is **basic Christian doctrine.** Creedal stuff. The stuff upon which all the rest is built. Jesus died for our sins, but who cares if he is still in the grave? He is not in the grave. He rose. He rose from the dead, a victor of the dark domain. He arose from a beaten, battered, crucified, nailed, speared, suffocated body into a glorified body that could be touched and felt, that could eat and talk, but which was not subject to decay or rot or death. He rose after three days in a tomb sealed by the guards of Rome itself. He arose, and he showed himself to many people and the world has never been the same because of it.

Beloved, trust in Christ, turn, and follow him. If you turn from the darkness of the kingdom of Satan in which

you live, the master that you serve, knowingly or not, if you turn to this God, then you will have hope unspeakable. It may begin as a mustard seed, but when and if that time comes, it will grow to an oak, solid and firm and mighty and majestic. And nothing men do or say will be able to dissuade you from confessing Christ as the king. That's the news that has gone out from Polycarp and the saints in Thessalonica. Its sound still rings out loudly like a church bell calling all people to worship the living and true God who has made himself known in his Son Jesus Christ.

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