

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Thessalonika today is the second largest city in Greece.

In about 50 AD it received a visit from the apostle Paul on his second missionary journey.

Listen to the effect of his visit on some people after he had begun to tell people about Jesus Christ:

Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.
(Acts chapter 17 verse 4)

So you have a mix of people, both from Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds.

This is wonderful, as it shows the message about Jesus has burst out of its Jewish straitjacket and is at work amongst the general population. Wonderful. When he writes to these believers, as we read, Paul summarises the transformation Jesus made in their lives: They had:

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 rescues us from the coming wrath.

They'd turned from the stupidity of worshipping idols made by human hands to a real relationship with the true and only God whose Son, Jesus, is the ruler and judge of all humanity. Praise God! That's a kind of short definition of what it means and what it takes to become a real follower of Jesus – even today.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Turn from living our own way to Jesus whom we now confess to be the boss of our lives.

But, and this is what is just as interesting and important, that got them into all kinds of trouble.

It got Paul and his co-workers into trouble with the police, the Jewish leaders and the city authorities so they left.

And when they went down the road to the next city – the same thing happened.

But the believers they left behind had a rough time as well. There was a severe backlash.

In our epistle reading, however, listen how he describes this backlash:

1 Thessalonians 1:6: *You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.*

You suffered severely, he says, and he will spell that out more in chapter 2 from about verse 16.

But they still welcomed the message about Jesus – with joy.

What's even more extraordinary is that he says this makes them "*imitators of us and of the Lord*".

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

“imitators of us and of the Lord”. It’s a striking thing to say, isn’t it?

He’s saying – what happened to you imitates what happened to us.

Even then many people deeply admired Paul and his co-workers who travelled over dangerous roads in foreign territory to tell people who didn’t want to listen about Jesus, and kept at it in the face of threats of death.

It’s normal to be denied entry to a town because you’re a believer.

It’s normal to get arrested, spat on, be vilified, thrown into prison, yelled at, silenced and ostracised because you follow Christ. Normal.

In our country we are seeing more and more open opposition to the message of Jesus. Yes, some Christians have been behaving very badly and deserve the full judgement of the law, as the Royal Commission is saying.

Yes, some Christian men have beaten up their wives, and abused their children.

But we are seeing more than the justified reaction to such news. It’s not just that some believers are being seen rightly as evil.

Christianity itself is being seen as evil, along with all other religions.

It may well become worse.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Thessalonians chapter 1 is a very important reminder that to belong to Christ means to suffer.

To be unpopular. To be restricted. To be marginalised. To be persecuted. To be misunderstood. To be treated with contempt.

But did you notice that this is not just in imitation of the apostles of Jesus.

It's in imitation of Jesus himself:

1 Thessalonians 1:6: *You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of severe suffering you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.*

Suffering is what they handed out to our Lord. Why do we expect we will be treated any differently?

Rejection is what he experienced. Why do we think we will be warmly accepted when he was not?

Contempt was how they treated him. Why do we think they will smile on us in appreciation?

Death was how it ended for him. Would that be a surprise to us should we have to face it for Christ?

Despite severe suffering he continued to entrust himself to God who is faithful.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

These believers, *in spite of severe suffering* – threats, riot, rejection, perhaps even torture, still welcomed the message, still hung onto it with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus did – despising the shame of the cross for the joy set before him.

Is that you?

So well did these believers imitate the apostles and the Lord Jesus that Paul says something quite unusual about his own telling the message of Jesus.

So complete was these believers' acceptance of the message in the midst of being rejected and persecuted that he was almost out of a job.

Verse 7: And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell 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 rescues us from the coming wrath.

So complete was these believers' acceptance of the message that their lives demonstrated that God had chosen them. Their reaction to hearing the message about Jesus was that even though they saw in Paul that it would mean rejection and suffering, persecution and shame, they accepted that message as the life-changing power of God.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

And did you notice that it had changed their lives radically. Their lives were filled with and driven by the familiar trilogy of faith, love and hope.

Don't give up on Christ when the sneers come at work; when friends change the subject as you walk into the room; when kids at school laugh at you; when family think you're mad or worse.

Rejoice in the privilege of imitating the first messengers of Jesus – and Jesus himself!

Jesus himself, who suffered and died so you might be completely and utterly forgiven by God and live the transformed life as you wait for Jesus to return.