

Record of Sermons delivered during the month of November 2020

(added progressively after each Sunday)

(see following pages)

Romans 15:1-13

True Brotherhood

Romans 15:13

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

This chapter not only follows but expands on the previous one. In Chapter 14, Paul introduces the term of a 'weak' Christian, which implies that there is also a stronger Christian. This is made explicit in the first verse of Chapter 15. ¹ *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

So what is it to be either a 'strong' or a 'weak' Christian? At first, emphatically, we must understand that in each case Paul is talking to and about Christians. More than that, not the nominal Christians – that inflate the numbers of the visible church from those of the invisible, or true Church, at a particular place and instant of time – but true believers. True adopted sons and daughters, whose spirits are 'in tune' with the indwelling Spirit of Christ. There is no doubt that Paul means Christians who have the various freedoms that the Gospel provides. (See copy of the article from the Reformation Study Bible – p 1835. *Christian Liberty: How free am I?*) The freedom from attempting (and failing) to earn our own salvation by vain works of the law; the freedom from the penalty of our sin; the freedom to enjoy all good things provided by God; the freedom to do as we please given that we avoid those things that are not good in God's eyes (about which His Law kindly tells us) and those things that hinder our growth in grace (even though they may be good for others to do).

What makes a Christian 'weak' in this context? Given each being: a 'brother and sister for whom Christ died'. (1 Corinthians 8:11¹ and Romans 14:15²)

The KJV uses the phrase: *bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves*. This may have suggested the physical, mental and emotional weaknesses, rather than a weakness in spiritual development. And our responsibility towards our 'brothers in Christ' certainly applies here. But the more recent translations (not available to the writer of *Matthew Henry's Commentary* on Romans) use the word *failings*. So we look again, briefly, at what Paul says in Romans 14 and in 1 Corinthians 8. In each case the 'weak' is a brother or sister, who has not fully realised the freedom available to Christians. They are fully saved – there being no condemnation for them. But they are missing out. Now the situations are different:

- In 1 Corinthians 8, the issue is in the eating of meat that, while bought on the open market, had first been slaughtered as a pagan act of sacrifice. In this case, the relatively recently converted Gentile, had been a participant at that sort of pagan ceremony and had scruples about eating such good food (generally the quality of animal offered at sacrifice was superior to the general market). The

1 ¹¹ *And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.*

2 ¹⁵ *For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.*

Jew on the other hand has come to believe that all pagan worship is vain and worthless and meat is meat however it is prepared for eating. In this case the Jew is generally the one with the stronger understanding of the Christian faith, while the Gentile (particularly in a pagan city like Corinth) has still to come to terms with the new freedom the Gospel brings and is at this stage weaker in his understanding.

- The ethnic roles are reversed in Romans 15. Showing that 'weakness' is not a matter of being either previously Jew or Greek. Here while the matter was related to food, it did not have to do with scruples generated by previous involvement in religious sacrifices but to the dietary laws that were appropriately given to the traditional Jew of the Old Testament administration of God's growth path for them. This was part of the conditioning of the Jewish Nation to see their God as unique and themselves as set apart for Him, while awaiting the rest of God's plan of Salvation of the Jew and the Gentile, which would lead to the Saviour. To Christ being 'all in all' (Colossians 3:11). However the Jews in Rome were the 'weak', still nursing scruples hanging on from a superseded and no longer necessary developmental aid. The 'strong' in this case was the converted Greek who was free to eat meat and vegetables in any worthy combination.

But Paul's point is more than these circumstances and what had caused them. The issue is one of Christian unity in the local Church in all circumstances even at the moderation of the absolute exploitation of one's otherwise liberty as a Christian.

Yes the 'strong' Christian could do what ever pleases him, provided –

- his 'pleasure' was what his 'new heart' desired – the one instructed by the Spirit,
- was pleasing to God,
- brought glory to God, and
- did not hinder his own or his brother's growth in grace.

And so we return to the exhortation of Paul.

Verses 1 & 2:

There are three things for us (especially if we are the 'strong') to do:

- The strong are to *bear with the failings of the weak ...*
The church is a fellowship which, like a chain, is only as strong as its weakest link. The strong are to use their strength, not in selfish enjoyment of their liberty, but to support and bear up those who do not share their strength. It is the strong who are to consider and bear with the weak, and not the other way round. The stronger a believer is, the more tenderness and consideration the Lord expects him to exercise towards those who nevertheless enjoy the same salvation. The scruples of the 'weak' are [then] to be observed by the whole fellowship. A person who is strong enough to live without scruples is strong enough to bear with the scruples of others. The Apostle's concept of true brotherhood is that the strong bear the heaviest responsibility in expressing it.³
- No one is to please himself ... (15:1)
This is a way of saying the same thing in a different manner. Selfish thinking destroys fellowship. If I am a truly regenerate person, this is a thing of the past.

I may no longer think of myself alone. I am part and parcel of a brotherhood whose welfare is infinitely more important to me than my own personal wishes.

- Each one is to please his neighbour: for his good and to build him up ... (15:2)
Think of it – a fellowship where the chief interest of each is the spiritual welfare of the other! This is what the Apostle envisages that the local church should be like.

When Paul called on us to be ‘living sacrifices’, these are some of the special things he had in mind.

Three reasons for doing so:

- The example of Christ ... (15:3,5)
You name His Name (call yourself a Christian), so you should follow His example. If you are the ‘strong’ why would you be annoyed at giving up your liberties for someone weaker. Even someone with sincere scruples that don’t normally affect you. Christ was free from all yet he deliberately chose to bear with the weakness of others. He constantly put God before everything, even though it brought reproach on Him – as quoted from the Messianic Psalm 69:9. *⁹For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.*

How slight, by comparison, is any sacrifice we are called to make.

- The encouragement of Scripture (in general) ... (15:4)
This point about Christ came from the Old Testament Scripture, showing that Scripture is there for our learning. Neglect any part at our loss. It gives us steadfastness, comfort and stirs up hope. The comment from Paul, at this point, is designed not only to remind us of the abiding value of Scripture, but also that it ranges wider than the solitary teaching on Christian liberty. We must be attentive to what the Scripture says on every subject, otherwise any particular one we are studying will be studied out of perspective and given a significance it may not deserve.
- The attributes of God ... (15:5)
Recognise who God is. He is the Patient One, who does support the weak. It is His will that like-mindedness and harmony should prevail in His church. May this be granted you so that you are found to be living the example of Christ. *⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

Three results.

When we do act in the way commanded, and for the reasons given, a number of good things result:

- Building up ... (15:2)
Not only am I built up spiritually, because I submit to God’s commands, but my brother is also because he has not been caused to stumble. In this way the whole church is benefited.

- Unity ... (15:6)

When Paul talks about the church glorifying God with one accord and voice, this is where each person is concerned about the welfare of others. Resulting in trust, affection, harmony and a unity of motive and purpose.

- Praise ...

Paul's instructions are designed so ⁶ *that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

A mere professed union of those who are still suspicious of one another leads to the indictment that: ⁶ *And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,*

*"This people honours me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me; (Mark 7:6)*

Consistent with the earlier comment about the scope of teaching that needs to be taken from Scripture, Paul now turns from the specific issue of adjustment of Christian freedom for the common unity and good of the local church, to that of tensions between those of different backgrounds. Jews and Gentiles. This mixture always allowed the possibility that one group might consider itself superior to the other.

One thing to do: (15:7)

Both sides (what ever the cause of difference) are to accept each other not in a condescending way: not as greater or lesser, or even something different, but as the same. As equals. You are not to belong to one group in the church rather than to another. Each is to accept the other. Freely with a real welcome, without question, always fondly and without any reservation. Isn't that how Christ has received each of us? Do the same and it will bring glory to God!

Paul knew that the local church always has the potential for division. Selfish considerations are always the reason. These must be entirely put away.

It is the great principle of our own acceptance by Christ that should be our constant reminder and motivator.

One reason for doing so:

Calvin summed this up by saying, "This is why it is right that they should remain united together, and not despise one another, because Christ despised neither of them."

(verse 8) Paul reminds the Jews that Christ came to them first. His earthly ministry was substantially to the 'lost sheep' of Israel. Hearing this the Gentiles are not to despise the Jews, because Christ came to them first. In so doing fulfilling the promises made to the Jews. (2 Samuel 22:50⁴ & Psalm 18:49⁵)

(verse 9) Then to the Gentiles: Though Christ's coming to the Jews was a fulfilment of the Old Testament, so was His coming to the Gentile. The Scripture makes it clear that

4 ⁵⁰ *For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations,
and sing praises to your name.*

5 ⁴⁹ *For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations,
and sing to your name.*

He was not the God of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles. (verse 10) The song of Moses also revealed that the Gentiles would join the people of God in the worship of God. (Deuteronomy 32:43⁶)

(verse 11) In Psalm 117⁷ all nations, which includes the Gentiles, are called upon to praise God. How could this be if there was to be no mercy for them. Clearly then they were going to be treated equally with them who were at that time God's people. And (verse 12⁸) Isaiah 11:10 specifically states that the Messiah will include Gentiles in those He would save.

Paul's point is that it has always been God's purpose to save Jews and Gentiles. Having repeatedly made this clear in His Word. Neither is an afterthought in His plan. It's impossible to see how either group could be cool to each other, They cannot give other that unqualified acceptance.

One result: (15:13)

'The local church should not be characterised by friction between various factions of its fellowship, but through the joy and peace that come to all through believing. Where these things are found there is hope, of which the source is the power of the Holy Spirit.' ¹³ *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*

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**Pray for God's grace, through the Spirit of Christ to live in us all, that we may live the new life made possible by the Spirit, for all the saints present today.
Amen**

6 ⁴³ *“Rejoice with him, O heavens;
bow down to him, all gods,^[1]
for he avenges the blood of his children^[2]
and takes vengeance on his adversaries.
He repays those who hate him^[3]
and cleanses^[4] his people's land.”^[5]*

Footnotes:

1. Deuteronomy 32:43 Dead Sea Scroll, Septuagint; Masoretic Text *Rejoice his people, O nations*
2. Deuteronomy 32:43 Dead Sea Scroll, Septuagint; Masoretic Text *servants*
3. Deuteronomy 32:43 Dead Sea Scroll, Septuagint; Masoretic Text lacks *He repays those who hate him*
4. Deuteronomy 32:43 Or *atones for*
5. Deuteronomy [32:43](#) Septuagint, Vulgate; Hebrew *his land his people* .

7 ¹ *Praise the LORD, all nations!
Extol him, all peoples!*

8 ¹⁰ *In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations enquire, and his resting-place shall be glorious.*

Christian Liberty: How Free Am I?

REFORMED theology was born in the shadow of Roman Catholic legalism, and for this reason Christian liberty has always been an important facet. This emphasis is rooted in the fact that the New Testament sees salvation in Christ as liberation from sin and corruption, and the Christian life as one of liberty—Christ has freed us for freedom (Jn 8:32,36; Gal 5:1). Christ's liberating action is not primarily a matter of sociopolitical or economic improvement, as is sometimes suggested today, but relates mainly to three specific points.

First, as Christians we have been set free from the Mosaic Law as a system of salvation. Being justified by faith in Christ, we are no longer condemned by God's law, but graciously acquitted on the basis of Jesus' merit (Ro 3:19; 6:14–15; Gal 3:23–25). This means that our standing with God (the "peace" and "access" of Ro 5:1–2) rests wholly on the fact that we have been accepted by and adopted in Christ. It does not, nor ever will, depend on what we do, nor will it ever be imperiled by what we fail to do. As long as we are in this world we live not by being perfect, but by being forgiven.

All natural religion, then, is negated, for the instinct of fallen humanity, as expressed in every form of religion that the world has ever devised, is to suppose that one gains and maintains a right relationship with ultimate reality (whether conceived as a personal God or in other terms) by disciplines of legal observance, proper ritual and asceticism. The world's faiths prescribe these disciplines as a means of establishing one's own righteousness—and Paul observed unbelieving Jews engaged in these very practices (Ro 10:3). Paul's experience had taught him the hopelessness of this enterprise. No human performance is ever good enough, for there are always wrong desires in the heart, coupled with a lack of right ones, regardless of how correct one's outward motions may be (Ro 7:7–11; cf. Php 3:6)—and it is at the heart that God looks first.

When we seek righteousness before God through keeping the law, the law arouses, exposes and condemns the sin that permeates our moral makeup, making us aware of the depth of our guilt (Ro 3:19; 1Co 15:56; Gal 3:10). So the futility of treating the law as a covenant of works, and of seeking righteousness by it, becomes plain (Gal 3:10–12; 4:21–31), as does the misery of not knowing what else to do. This is the bondage to the law from which Christ sets us free.

Second, as Christians we have been set free from sin's dominion (Jn 8:34–36; Ro 6:14–23). We have been supernaturally regenerated and made alive to God through union with Christ in his death and risen life (Ro 6:3–11), and this means that our deepest desire now is to serve God by practicing righteousness (Ro 6:18,22). Sin's domination involved not only constant acts of disobedience, but also a constant lack of zeal for law keeping that sometimes deteriorated into positive resentment and hatred toward the law. Now, however, being transformed in our hearts, motivated by gratitude for acceptance

through free grace, and energized by the Holy Spirit, we "serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Ro 7:6). This means that our attempts at obedience are now joyful and integrated in a way that was never true before. Sin rules them no longer. In this respect, too, we have been liberated from bondage.

Third, as Christians we have been set free from the superstition that treats matter and physical pleasure as intrinsically evil. Against this idea, Paul insisted that we are free to enjoy as God's good gifts all created things and the pleasures that they yield (1Ti 4:1–5), provided only that we do not transgress the moral law in our enjoyments nor hinder our own spiritual well-being or that of others (1Co 6:12–13; 8:7–13). The Reformers renewed this emphasis against various forms of medieval legalism.

Fourth, as Christians we are free from the regulations that others add to the teaching of Scripture in the matters of faith and worship. To submit our consciences to such human additions to Scripture—or, worse, to submit by blind obedience to such requirements—is to violate the liberty of conscience that God grants (cf. *WCF* 20). Fifth, as Christians we have been set free from self-righteousness in which we compare our behavior with that of others and judge ours to be a lot better in God's sight. Sixth, as believers we have been set free from the urge to arrange the many laws in order of importance. To do so we have to introduce more laws—laws to tell us which laws are most important. Hence, by the end of the Old Testament period there were 613 different rules or laws in addition to explanations about them.

Nevertheless, there are still ways in which believers have not yet been completely freed by God. For one thing, although we are free from the dominion and condemnation of sin, we are not free from its presence and influence. As long as we are in this life, we are continually subjected to temptation (1Ti 6:9), drawn in by the lure of the sin that continues to indwell us and surround us (Ro 7:14–25; Gal 5:17) and plagued by demonic forces (1Co 7:5; 1Ti 4:1; Rev 16:14). Our individual freedom from sin's presence awaits our release from our mortal bodies, and our complete freedom from the presence of sin in creation awaits Jesus' return and the restoration of all things in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21:1–5).

Nor are we free to exercise our liberty in harmful ways. For example, as Paul made clear in his discussion of questionable matters such as eating food sacrificed to idols (Ro 14; 1Co 8), believers have an obligation not to exercise their freedoms in ways that may cause other believers to fall into sin. Further, God has not freed us from obedience to the law. Although such obedience cannot merit our salvation, nor can our breaking of the law condemn us, the law is still our moral guide. Jesus himself affirmed the law's abiding validity in the life of every believer (Mt 5:17–19), and Paul went so far as to refer to it as "the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).

Romans 15:14-33

Paul's Work and Plans

Romans 15:30

³⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,

At chapter 15:14 a marked change comes over Paul's way of writing. So far the style and content might have disguised the fact that it is a personal letter. But now the personal style returns as he speaks openly to the Romans about his work and future plans. We see more of him as a person. We have learnt about him from his doctrine, but now we can learn from the example he sets.

The overview of this passage (v 14-33) passes through seven phases:

- Paul recognises that he has spoken to them 'very boldly by way of reminder' in the preceding chapters, but not because they are unable to teach each other, but that he wants to remind them of the essentials. The basic Gospel truths. Elsewhere, in his first letter to Timothy, he points out that the false teaching that Timothy would have to stem is brought about by teaching that 'loses the plot' – the basic Gospel truths – and causes argument and discord in the local church by those who promote controversial speculation about myths and genealogies.
- Paul feels that he is the right person to teach these basic truths because he is the commissioned, Apostle to the Gentiles. Commissioned and trained by the risen Person of Christ. Whatever Paul says in this way is as if, it comes from Christ, Himself. And this applies not only to the hearers in the First Century but equally to us in the Twenty First.
- Further, Paul describes his ministry in priestly terms: That the Gentiles converted by his preaching are an acceptable offering which he is able (like a priest) to present to God on their behalf. In the Old Testament administration, there were two main offerings offered through the priest: the sin offering for remission of sin, which is now replaced by the once for all sacrifice by Christ; and the burnt and thanksgiving offerings made in gratitude and giving service and honour to God. Now all people must bring themselves and all they have as offerings in gratitude to God. We must, in response to Christ's sacrifice for sins, offer ourselves as "living sacrifices". (Romans 12:1)
- Looking back over his 20 years of ministry as an Apostle he has no reason to be discontent, since what has been done has been Christ's work where Paul has been but the conduit. In this way he glories in the work of Christ over a wide geographical area, where the constant aim was to preach Christ wherever He was not already Named (known and accepted).
- For the future he now looks to ministry being extended to the west – even to Spain. This endeavour will at last bring him to Rome as it will be 'on his way'. He expects the Christians in Rome will see their duty to 'help him on this journey'.

- As an aside he mentions another act of mercy and duty that first needs to be completed: The saints in the broad area of his missionary activities – Macedonia to Achaia – have been pleased to make a contribution, to be carried by Paul to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Here he makes the observation that the Gentiles in general have received the spiritual blessings of the Gospel through the agency of mainly Jews in Jerusalem initially.
- He closes the passage with a request for prayer and then a benediction.

Of course the latter part of his intended plan did not occur. He did eventually get to Rome but only because the riot which broke out in Jerusalem due to his visit resulted in his being arrested and prosecuted. As a Roman citizen he was entitled to appeal to Caesar, but this meant his transport to a jail in Rome.

The Power that energised and upheld him as he did his work.

In verse 15 he talks of ‘the grace given me by God’. This stresses the point already made in chapter 10. He was not a self-appointed preacher, who had proceeded to the work merely on the basis of some personal desire. He had been appointed and sent by God. Other terms he uses are also significant. Such as: ‘in Christ Jesus’ (v 17); ‘except what Christ has accomplished through me’ (v 18); and ‘by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God’ (v 19). The power of his ministry did not lie in his own gifts, accomplishments, intellect or abilities. None of these things could take the credit. There was only one explanation for it all – God was with him! The Spirit of Christ had given him divine assistance, and had blessed the work!

The Result of the work.

What was the results of such a ministry? The answer is at the end of verse 18: the Gentiles were obeying the Word of God. The evidence of this was to be heard from their lips and seen in their lives. Paul makes a similar point in verse 21, where he quotes from Isaiah 52:15. This is the verse which refers to the surprise of both kings and nations when they see God’s Suffering Servant exalted. Paul uses the verse to describe the outcome of his own ministry. The heathen were seeing, and the ignorant were understanding.

From what Paul says about his work we learn how God’s cause is advanced in the world. When men who have been gifted and commissioned by God authoritatively declare the Gospel of Christ, and when God, by His Spirit, is with them as they do so – then men and women are brought to see and to understand what God has said, and to obey it in life and lip. We need to learn this lesson and to learn it well. Let’s abandon all evangelism that is inconsistent with these principles. Let’s beseech God to raise up Gospel preachers, to apply their ministries with spiritual power, and to grant that the result will be the fruit of changed and obedient lives.

Paul’s heart.

God’s cause advances by means of Gospel preaching, as we have seen. But we must not think that the adoption of a technique, even a biblical technique, will get God’s work done, Even to pray the blessing of God’s Spirit upon it is not enough.

Preaching is the flow of God's truth through personality. It requires a certain sort of man. What sort of man was Paul? Let's see him unveil some of the inner recesses of his heart.

His concern for the lost.

What thoughts were in his heart towards the lost? He relentlessly yearned for their salvation. In verse 22 he tells us that it was his fruitful ministry among the Gentiles that had kept him from fulfilling his personal desire to visit the Romans. This desire was immense, but he had not allowed it to interfere with his ministry to those without Christ. Every desire had to be subservient to his supreme task. In this respect, although he had done so much (v 19), he could never be satisfied that he done enough. As long as there were lost men and women, there must be attempts to reach them. Was Spain without the Gospel? Then he must go there. The Apostle was constantly planning new enterprises, and could not rest until all had heard the saving Word. He was no armchair theologian. A deep understanding of the Gospel and zealous practical evangelism are not mutually exclusive.

His desire to benefit the Romans.

But his large heart also entertained thoughts towards the Romans. In verses 14-15 he reveals that his letter to them was only for their benefit. He was well aware of their knowledge, all their good points, and their ability to teach each other. But he felt that he must clearly remind them of the truths that they already knew. This is why he had written, admittedly somewhat boldly for someone who had never met them. It is not that he had no desire to see them. This had been his unabated longing for many years, but an opportunity had never presented itself. But he would come on his way to Spain, whenever that might be. He looked forward to being practically helped on his way by them, and to being heartened and encouraged by the enjoyment of their company for a while (v 24). He was confident of coming to them 'in the fullness of the blessings of Christ'. (v 29) This means that he expected his ministry to be attended by those blessings which the Gospel of Christ tends to produce. He anticipated a visit that would be spiritually fruitful.

His care for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

In addition to the believers in Rome, Paul's heartfelt thoughts went out to the poor saints at Jerusalem. He wished to minister to them, too and had arranged to do so in a practical way (v 25-27). As he wrote the epistle he was about to set out for Jerusalem, carrying a substantial gift from the Macedonian and Achaian churches for the poor believers there. This collection had been entirely voluntary, and a great source of pleasure to the churches involved. In many ways Paul regarded the carrying of this gift as the climax of his eastern ministry. The Gentiles owed their spiritual enrichment to Jews, and he considered it very fitting that the Jews should be materially enriched by the Gentiles. Many Jews nursed grave doubts concerning Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, and the arrival of this gift must have done much to allay their suspicions. He had been involved in something

similar before, when the Antioch church in Syria had sent a gift to alleviate the famine distress of their Judaeian brethren (Acts 11:27-30; 12:25).

All these references enable us to look into the heart of Paul, who thus sets before us an example for all Christians to follow. We see him as utterly selfless and outward-looking, and burning with concern for the welfare of others. His deepest desires were the salvation of the lost and the spiritual and material welfare of the Lord's people. Such is the heart of the man God uses.

Paul's plea.

But was this zealous Gospel preacher, this selfless and loving Christian, some sort of superman? No – in and of himself he was as weak as the rest of us. It is precisely for his reason that he closes this section with a sincere and earnest plea.

What does he plead?

What he pleads is that his readers should 'strive together' with him in prayer (v 30). This is strong language. He is urging that they should give themselves to the task with effort and importunity. He requests that they should do this together in the local church, and they should do it together with him. Letting the prayer be addressed to God, and let it be specifically for the Apostle.

Why?

Why should they do this? They should do it 'by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit' (v 30). Christ's cause is at stake, and they should do it out of regard for Him. They should do it also out of sheer love, stirred up by the Holy Spirit, out of love for the Holy Spirit Himself, because of the love the Holy Spirit has for them.

How?

How should such prayer be framed? Verse 31-32 reveal that the requests made should be definite and specific. ... Paul requests prayer that he might be delivered from the schemes of the unbelieving Jews in Judaea. Acts discloses that these were particularly fanatical in their opposition to his ministry. He was also anxious that the gift he was carrying should prove acceptable to those for whom it was intended. Perhaps he was afraid of his motives being misinterpreted. In any event, he commends the project to his reader's intercession. Finally, he asks for them to pray that his visit might be with joy, in fulfilment of God's will, and that he might find refreshment in their company.

Having opened his heart to them in this way, he closes the section with a brief benediction: 'May the God of peace be with you all'. (V 33)

What we need today.

This brief glimpse of Paul's work and plans shows us where our need lies today. We need men who will preach the Gospel, and do so everywhere, with spiritual power and lasting fruit. They need to be selfless, hearty and sacrificial. They need to be conscious of their own weakness and therefore anxious to enlist the prayers of other believers on their behalf. We cannot all be such Gospel preachers, but we can all pray for those whom the Lord appoints to this holy task. From this very day let us never be distracted from earnest, united and specific prayer for all who are engaged in declaring the Gospel, and let's do it 'by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit'.⁹

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**Pray for God's grace, through the Spirit of Christ to live in us all, that we may live the new life made possible by the Spirit, for all the saints present today.
Amen**

9 Quoted from Stuart Olyott at pp 191-196: *The Gospel As It Really Is. Romans Simply Explained.*

Romans 16

Personal Greetings and Final Instructions

Romans 16:27

²⁷to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ!

This chapter begins with a commendation to ‘our sister Phoebe a servant of the church’. It was she who conveyed the letter to the Roman churches. Then follows an acknowledgement of the people Paul knows (at least by name and reputation) who are currently living in Rome. This list and some of the descriptions of the persons named give us an insight of the nature of those early churches.

There being hard workers for Christ there: Priscilla and Aquila; Mary; Urbanus, Tryphena; Tryphosa; Persis. The early church knew a good deal about labour and effort for the Gospel’s sake.

Those who exhibited courage and steadfastness: Priscilla & Aquila (v 3 & 4); Andronicus & Junia (V 7); Apelles (V 10).

In the early church there was affection – the very sending of greetings demonstrates this: Epaenetus (V 5); Amplias V 8); Stachys (V 9); Persis (V 12); Herodian (V11); Rufus and his mother (V 13). The whole atmosphere which permeates this section is one of sincere affection.

The barriers which divide the world were not allowed to divide the church: Urbanus (V 9) bred in the city with country-fellow Stachys (V 9) are mentioned together; Hermes (V 14) was a slave, as were some of Aristobulus’ household (V 10) yet they were in the same church as Herodian (V 11) who was probably a member of the powerful Herod family together with Julia (V 15) who was likely from the imperial household.

We conclude with extracts from the ‘Closing comments’ of Stuart Olyott on Paul’s letter to the Romans.¹⁰

“We now come to the final paragraphs of this important letter. What things does the great Apostle feel he must say before he signs off? What themes are to be his closing words? What echoes does he desire should be sounding in his reader’s minds as the scroll is rolled up? Let us see.

Warning.

First of all, he pleads with them to heed a plain warning. Their spiritual health depends on it. Everything he has said can be undone if they do not listen.

When is this warning to be heeded?

Is the Apostle simply seeking to forearm them against some future possibility? No, it is to be heeded now as he writes. Even a church which can be described in terms that he used in Romans 15:14 needs to take heed. No church, however mature and well established, is free from the danger he is about to mention.

Of what does the church need to be warned?

The answer is in verse 17. It is those people who would divide it, and cause it to stumble spiritually. They do this by spreading doctrine which is contrary to the Apostolic doctrine which the church had learned. Who can estimate the importance of correct doctrine? True doctrine establishes a Christian church, and departure from it destroys it. Paul had given the Romans an authoritative statement of the Gospel. He asserts that those who divide and destroy the church can easily be recognised, for they depart from the truth he has expounded. He is clearly not talking about ignorant and immature believers, who don't always understand what they are being taught. His reference is to those who propagate views which are at variance with Apostolic teaching.

What are the principles which motivate such people?

He tells us in verse 18. They claim to be servants of Christ, but in fact their basic desire is not to serve Him, but to indulge their own appetites. Their own interests and satisfaction are of paramount importance to them, and take priority over the interests of truth and the benefit of others. This is their true character, and it needs to be recognised. Paul's comments reveal that just as there is a connection between true doctrine and godliness (as previous chapters have demonstrated), so there is a connection between false doctrine and selfishness.

Why are these people so dangerous?

It is because they appear so plausible (16:18). They are interesting, arresting, convincing and pleasant speakers. Ordinarily people are easily deceived by them. They cause the unsuspecting to be wooed from the truth to damning error. Their whole approach is serpent-like. It is fatal to judge a person by his style, manner, or ability to speak. Truth is the criterion, and is to be considered above everything.

In verse 19 Paul expresses his delight that the Roman's obedience to the Gospel was a widely-known fact. How glad he is for them! But his greatest desire is that they should develop powers of discrimination. He wants them to be quick in recognising what is good. But when it comes to error, he wants them to be 'thick', or unintelligent.¹¹

How are these false teachers to be treated?

The inspired Apostle's answer in Verse 17 cuts right across many modern attitudes. He declares that they are to be marked, noted and stigmatised. The true church of Christ is to have no contact with them. They are not to be received, or listened to, or permitted into dialogue. Revealed truth cannot be treated in the same way as human

¹¹ Olyott's way of drawing the contrast between being wise as to what is good compared with how one should be towards evil is prompted by the Greek word *akeraios* (ak-er'-ah-yos) – used only 3 times in the NT – being translated as 'simple' in the KJV. The ESV uses 'innocent'. Strong's Concordance for word 185 gives: (lit: unmixed) simple, unsophisticated, sincere, blameless.

thought and error. This one verse alone is enough to show every Christian that he has no biblical right to remain in any situation where error regarding the Gospel is either taught or tolerated. For instance, he cannot be biblically obedient, and yet remain in the World Council of Churches, or one of its affiliated bodies, because there damnable heresies are both propagated and discussed as if they were legitimate Christian insights. Only the Apostolic Gospel which we have studied is the true Gospel. Anything which is a departure from it, or a compromise of it, is to be treated as the Apostle says. It is true that Christian believers are to display boundless charity to all men and women. It is also true that they are to be uncompromisingly intolerant of error.

From what is the church to take encouragement in this situation?

In verse 20 Paul assures us that the final victory is in the hands of the God of peace, not the perpetrators of division. He will shortly tread the devil under our feet.¹² Until then we, as soldiers, are to battle with error. But soon we shall receive our discharge, and shall stand on the neck of everything satanic. This should also encourage us not to fraternise with the enemy, lest we should be crushed with him. What grace we need to prevent us doing these things! Perhaps this explains the benediction at the end of verse 20.

Greetings from ...

Having given us this stern warning, the Apostle has two more errands to perform before the letter finishes. Perhaps he originally intended to sign off at verse 20. but then felt he should not do so until he had sent greetings from the believers who were present with him. What a balance there is in this godly man! We see him utterly intolerant of error, but then we immediately see his heart unveiled again as he conveys affectionate greetings from brother to brother. It is the same man, who has a heart full of both grace and truth – not perfectly, like our Lord (John 1:14), but sufficiently for us to recognise him as the most Christ-like man who ever lived. With one breathe he contends for truth, and with the next he pronounces a gracious benediction, and passes on brotherly regards.

Let us see from whom the greetings come. '**Timothy**' is his right-hand man, and '**Lucius**' is possibly (but by no means certainly) Luke. Is '**Jason**' the one who was his host in Thessalonica? (Acts 17:6-7,9). '**Sosipater**' was one of the missionary team who accompanied Paul at the start of his ministry. '**Tertius**' wrote the letter down as the Apostle dictated it, and is the only named amanuensis in the New Testament. Perhaps he was a professional. He was certainly a Christian and, in accordance with the spirit of charity which prevailed in the early churches, he sends his greetings 'in the Lord'. It is entirely appropriate that the one who did us the immense service of writing down this uniquely valuable letter should be permitted to send his personal greetings.

The greetings of this humble scribe are followed by that of '**Gaius**', Paul's host at the time, who is possibly the Titus Justus of Acts 18:7, who lived next door to the synagogue. The whole church of Corinth met in his house. But the whole church of

¹² Note the prophecy of Genesis 3:15

Christ, everywhere, should remember his home with gratitude, for within its walls this glorious epistle was written.

'**Erastus**' was the city treasurer of Corinth. A pavement bearing an inscription with his name has been unearthed there, but the Erastus who laid it was the city's clerk of works. Is it the same Erastus? If so, was he later promoted to treasurer, perhaps because of his trustworthiness and faithfulness? Or was he demoted, perhaps because he became a Christian? We shall never know.

Nor shall we ever know precisely what '**Quartus**, a brother' means. Does it simply mean that he was a Christian, present as Paul wrote? Or is there some other reason for mentioning him – for example, was he Tertius' brother, they being the third and fourth children in the same family?

At this point Paul once more pronounces a benediction (16:24) and closes his letter. But the fire burns in his heart again, and he decided there is a further thing that he must say. He chooses to consolidate everything he has written by leaving some powerful notes ringing in his readers' minds. He does this by means of a closing doxology.

Closing Doxology

The closing lines are an inscription of glory to God. They underline various truths and, like the close of a great symphony, leave a majestic chord sounding in the ears. The music of the epistle does not weakly fade away. The final chord is glorious, satisfying and memorable.

The God who establishes His people

It sounds out loudly who God is (16:27). He alone is God, and he only is wise. He is worthy of all honour and glory. He is everlasting. And yet he may be both approached and known through Jesus Christ. He is well able to establish those who are converted to him, and this fact is one of the distinctive teachings of the true and only Gospel which Paul preaches (16:25).

Paul is signing off but, as he has said earlier, he hopes to see his readers in the foreseeable future. However, he may never reach them. Yet they are not in his hands, but in God's! And the God of whom he speaks is this God! Could they be safer than that? We should be humbled by the implied reminder that it requires the power of Jehovah to establish and keep the people in the truth. They are not able to continue without him. But with him they are able to continue – even if there are no human supports!

The mystery now revealed

The final chord also proclaims the privilege of living in the New Testament days. Verse 25-26 direct us to the fact that the Gospel is a 'mystery'. In English we use the word, 'mystery', to refer to a perpetual perplexity, but in the New Testament it refers to something hidden which is later revealed. The Gospel is a mystery. It is a system of truth

which the mind of mortal man could never have discovered. It was eternally in God's mind, and later revealed in time. Through the long centuries it was made progressively known by the prophets, but now, at the time Paul writes, is fully known. The verses go on to tell us that it has been made known to all nations. It has been made known through the Scriptures, which are no longer the exclusive possession of the Jews, but the property of all. It has been made known to all by the command of the everlasting God. It has been made known with the purpose of bringing people to the obedience of faith. It is an 'open secret'.

These words must have filled the original readers with a great sense of gratitude. How privileged they were to live in such days, and to be the recipients of the everlasting Gospel, now fully unveiled! Surely they must have gladly joined Paul in his final ascription of praise. Can the effect on us be any different?

The message we proclaim

But ascriptions of praise must be accompanied by practical action. The great priority of the Christian church is mentioned here. It is 'the preaching of Jesus Christ' (16:25). The command of the everlasting God has ensured that the unveiled mystery is now known throughout the world. It comes as a scripturally presented message to all nations. If this were not so, we ourselves would never have entered into 'obedience to the faith'. Others have passed it on to us, and shall we now remain silent and keep the message to ourselves? Let us rather proclaim the glorious Gospel to all people everywhere, so that there shall be an ever-swelling chorus declaring: to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

[2201]

**Pray for God's grace, through the Spirit of Christ to live in us all, that we may live the new life made possible by the Spirit, for all the saints present today.
Amen**

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Conversion

Colossians 3:1

'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Imagine a Sunday in a city in North Eastern Greece. The Year is AD 52. The city is called Thessalonica. Notice some of the people walking through the streets this morning – mostly ordinary working people – they speak Greek. There are also some others we note. Jews who can be from some of the best and influential and richest families of the city. Their walking journey can be quite lengthy since the city is large, perhaps 200,000 inhabitants. However these people are all heading for the same place this Sunday morning – which is not yet a special day of the week. It won't be for some 400 years.

As they make their way they pass very many merchants and shop keepers and a particularly large number of Roman soldiers. Why? Well this city is on main trade route to what is now Turkey, but then was the Roman province called Asia. This route passes through the city and is a gathering point for people from all over the Roman Empire, who are passing in both directions.

There are also a large number of sailors to be seen. Because Thessalonica is a port where many ships bring a variety of people. Costumes, languages and customs from every nation conceivable are found in this city.

The people we are concerned about may look up as they walk. There towering over the city is a very impressive mountain – Mt Olympus. In looking up they can't fail to remember their earlier years in the city and all the influences of the cultural, family and formal education they have had. They were taught and used to believe that Jupiter (called Zeus in the earlier Greek culture, but appropriated by the Romans to be called Jupiter) had come to that mountain gathering all the god's of Greece for a great Council. They can't forget what they learnt as children from school and home, since on every street corner and even in the middle of the street there are signs and statues and idols and temples and burning of incense and sacrifices and flowers. Idol worship all around them!

At last our special people, who have come from all over the city arrive at a house. Possibly the house belonging to Jason (Acts 17:7). This is the house where the new Church of Jesus Christ meets in Thessalonica. (We are reminded that for 400 years the Christian Church didn't have special buildings of the kind that we now know.)

This Lord's Day there is special excitement for that Church. There's always excitement, but today it is special. "During the meeting we're going to have a letter read to us. A letter from Paul. It arrived during the week!" One or two have had a preview. "So what sort of letter is it?" Paul is known to be someone who 'doesn't mince his

words'. "Well it's an affectionate letter – that's a relief. It's a 'heart to heart' letter, a personal letter that is basic, simple and informal."

Paul? Well everybody in this Church knows Paul. Not so many months before Paul had arrived. He had terrible bruising on his face, his back was striped and so it was with Silas, who was with him. Young Timothy had also been with them. The first thing they had done was to go to the Synagogue as Paul always did:

There Paul had opened the Jewish Scriptures – which we call the Old Testament – and three Saturdays running, he had reasoned from the Scriptures and had shown the Jews that when the Messiah came – the Christ – he would have to die; he would have to rise again; "And this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ!" Quite a few Jews had been converted and even more Greeks, because there were 'God fearing' Greeks who went to the Synagogue – even though they could only occupy the gallery. And also a substantial number of leading women in the city had also been converted.

But the Jews who rejected the message had stirred up a riot. Paul and Silas had had to leave in a hurry at night. This letter then was the first real contact that Paul had had with this Church since.

Of course Paul had sent Timothy back on several occasions for brief visits, to see how the new Christians were getting on. Paul himself had wanted to come back, as he will tell us in this letter. But he'd never been able to do so. However for the first time since he left that earlier night we have Paul making direct contact with these new Christians.

Being written in AD 52 this letter has the distinction that, with only the possible exception of Galatians, it is the earliest Christian document that we have.

What will Paul write about? If you were going to write to a group of sincere Christians who have no mature leaders? Christians who had only been Christians for a few months. What would you write about? What would be your subject? Paul writes in Chapter 1 of the 1st Letter to the Thessalonians about Conversion. Their Conversion! So we look in our Bibles to see what he has to say:

There will be six points to note followed by 4 lessons of application, which will take today and next week to complete.

1. (Verse 1) Here Paul writes to them about the 'facts' of their Conversion.
*¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.*

What does the word 'church' mean? It means 'called out'. So Paul, Silas and Timothy, these three marvellous preachers, who in a sense are here this morning, the co-authors as it were through Paul say, "You are from Thessalonica, but more importantly you have been 'called out'. They still live in Thessalonica so in that sense are Thessalonians, but as the church, they have been 'called out' and have been made different from the rest of those who live in the city.

If you are 'called out' and therefore leave somewhere, then you must go somewhere. Paul tells the Church in Thessalonica that they are now, *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. Physically still in that city but spiritually with God and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹³

This world is divided. All our associations and groupings are divided. Our environs are divided. Into people who are 'called out to God' and to those that are outside God. Those who are 'in' Jesus Christ and those who are still in 'sin and misery'. Those who have been rescued from that and are considered to be 'in' God. They know God as 'their Father', submitting to Jesus Christ as their Lord. They have been 'called out' to be different.

Paul is talking about the 'fact' of their Conversion. "You are one of those people", he says, as he is writing to them.

So in what spirit does Paul write to them? He says, "*Grace to you and Peace*". It's a friendly greeting. "But it's God who sends the greeting. It's Jesus Christ who sends the greeting to you. You Christians who know what the fact of Conversion means – God Himself is coming to meet you. Jesus Christ Himself is coming to meet you. You the local Church."

Here then is the fact of their Conversion.

2. (Verses 2 &3) The Effect of their Conversion.

² *We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers,* ³ *remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

"Here we are in Corinth," says Paul, as he actually was. "I'm writing to you and I'm thinking about you all: every Christian amongst you. And when I think about you all, I thank God for you".

Because when Conversions take place the first effect, always, is on those who observe the Conversion. Now if Conversion was a work of man. If it were something you could do for yourself, Paul would have to write to the Thessalonians and say, "Congratulations on converting yourself." But instead he says, "*We give thanks to God, always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers.*" Because this wonderful calling by which people leave and become, is a work of God.

Every Conversion, which we will see again shortly, is part of a plan – and not an accident – that God does. We must thank God, for Conversion whenever it oc-

13 In a later letter, the one to the Colossians, Paul develops this concept further. In recognising that while Christians still bodily live in the world, their true spiritual selves are in heaven. So it behoves them to recognise that: the way that they, as heavenly citizens, live their physical lives on earth must be consistent with this heavenly life both now and of course in eternity. Col 3:1-5a, **Put On the New Self:** ¹*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*

² *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.* ³ *For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* ⁴ *When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

⁵ *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:*

and Eph 2:6, ⁶ *and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*

curs.

“But I know you’re converted”, says Paul, “Because I can see the fruits of Conversion in your life. This Conversion isn’t just a sort of change of belief. It’s a change of you. (Verse 3) ³ *remembering ... your work of **faith** and labour of **love** and steadfastness of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.* And for the first time in all Christian literature, we have Faith, Hope and Love – this wonderful triad – together.

Faith is knowing the truth, believing it to be true and putting all your weight (effort and trust) upon it. If you’ve really got Faith, then it’s a faith that will move you to work. Because your putting all your faith in Jesus Christ, therefore you can’t live the same. You’ve got to live in the light of what you believe to be true.

Love is not a sort of tingle down the back. But it is seeking the good of the other even if I have to shed blood (mine) to do him good. Jesus Christ loved us like that. Here is this new community in Thessalonica, where they labour in their love. They actually go out of their way and spend energy to try to do each other good.

*... and steadfastness of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.* They know that Jesus Christ is coming back. They can’t wait for the day, but they realise that they have to wait for the day. And so they live steadfastly (patiently in KJV) waiting for the end of the world.

And binding all that together is the phrase *before* (in the presence or sight of) *our God and Father.* They realise that all they are and all that they do all they believe and all the labour of their love and all their hope: all these things, are taking place, not a million miles from God, but in His immediate presence.

The effect of Conversion is to bring people to that point, where they believe and love and hope and where their belief and love and hope is something real and tangible and visible. They are living in the consciousness of the presence of God, whom they once fled and ran away from.

3. (verses 4 and 5a) Because after the fact of their Conversion and the effect of their conversion, he explains to them the cause of their Conversion.

How is it that each of you are Converted? Is it that you had superior intellect or some marvellous intuition, which other people don’t have. The answer is in verse 4: *For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that He has **chosen** you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.*

Chosen! That is elected. For an election you need a candidate, someone is chosen. Some people believe that God chooses us because He knows we’re going to chose Him. In which case it’s conversion which causes election! But Paul says that it’s not that way around at all. He says to them that he knows

they're Converted, thus he knows their gracious election by God.

The reason for your Conversion is that God chose you. Every Conversion takes place because of the eternal plan by which God chooses these people before the foundation of the world, for reasons only known to Him. Not for any reason in the person concerned.

But Paul says that he has another proof of your Conversion and another explanation for your Conversion. Another proof that you have been elected.

(Verse 5a) ⁵ *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction ...* Now to you hearing this today you realise that in all preaching and also this preaching, words are used. Teaching uses words. But often the words used don't have any effect on certain people. They're sitting there, the words are spoken and to them it's just words and more words ... For people before they are Converted, it can sound like waves – like a flowing torrent of water coming at them. In fact what happens to unconverted people is the words that come from the preacher's mouth just flow over or past them with no effect. Not actually 'moving' them at all. It's words only.

But then, something happens in Conversion. The words that have been going over or passing by. Leaving people 'cold'. Suddenly are coming with power. The waves of words now 'shake' the person. They have an effect on them. Seized and taken hold of. The effect of this newly powerful preaching is that they begin thinking holy thoughts: about God; invisible things; sin; the judgement; the Cross; the resurrection. That's because the Holy Spirit is working. Sometimes suddenly, while at others, not so suddenly, they come to be sure that what is being preached is true. *With full conviction (much assurance in KJV)!*

That's how God brings His elect people to be converted. It doesn't come in words only. It does come in the word but also in the power of the Holy Spirit with full conviction. People then are transformed by the word.

Today we pause at this point to note that next week we will expand the next 3 points that are briefly named as:

4. (verse 5b and 6) The circumstances of their Conversion.
5. (verses 7 and 8) The repercussions of their Conversion.
6. (verses 9 and 10) Their Conversion causes them to turn to God from idols and wait for His Son from heaven.

Finally next week will conclude our exposition of 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 with 4 points of application or teaching.

[2386]

Pray for God's grace, through the Spirit of Christ to live in us all, that we may live the new life made possible by the Spirit, for all the saints present today. Amen

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Conversion – Part 2

1 Thessalonians 1:10

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

Last week we commenced our study on Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Right from the start we find that Paul was talking about their Conversion:

We've seen the facts of their Conversion; the effects of their Conversion; and the cause of their Conversion is the election of God, God choosing them; and the call of God as the Gospel came to them with life changing power.

4. Now look at the circumstances of their Conversion. Verse 5b and verse 6: *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,*

When God converts people, they don't just drop out of the night. Men and women are involved. The word is made powerful by the Holy Spirit. That word is the word of Scripture. But the Holy Spirit never works in a vacuum. Not just bringing the message in a vacuum to people. The word comes from the mouths of men and women. Sometimes in their writing. But nevertheless through them. Even through the words of their lives.

These Thessalonians were converted precisely because Paul, Silas and Timothy came. And they didn't just preach. The Thessalonians could see these people and they could see that they were different. They could see that they believed and were on fire by the very truths that they proclaimed. There was a sense of personal conviction. And there was something inside the Thessalonians even before their Conversion which made them say, "These men are different!"

It also made them say, "I'd like to be like them." So they were attracted by the power of the message but also, despite all their imperfections, by the character and personality and 'presence' of those preachers. So their conversion has been a transformation by the word but it was also following the preacher. And in following the preacher who announced the word they found that they were actually following the Lord Himself.

That was the circumstances of their Conversion. But there is more at the end of verse 6. The world can never understand the end of verse 6. Because we're so influenced by Freud and his modern day accomplices, that we think we can only have one emotion at a time. The Bible tells us that you can be sorrowful and joyful at the same time. Here are these people who are absolutely struck and bowled over by the difficulties which are besetting this new Christian church and yet they are receiving the word with much joy.

They are shaken by all this persecution and hate that is unleashed against these

new Christians yet they know the word is true. There is something inside them that is 'warming' them. Encouraging and heartening them. You might be known as a Christian where you are during the week and you are at least treated with some reservation if not worse. But if you're a true Christian it doesn't take your joy away! You may have unconverted relatives, who don't understand you. Who think you have become some sort of religious 'nut case'. It hurts, what they think and say, (sometimes what they do). It doesn't take the joy away. Does it! If the joy comes from the Holy Spirit. It doesn't come from the circumstances.

And so at that early Christian Church it was able to be said that though they *received the word in much affliction, (but) with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ...*

5. Now to verses 7 and 8. We've seen the facts, the effects, cause and the circumstances of their Conversion, now we find that their Conversion had certain repercussions. We take a stone and drop it in still water and there is an immediate effect of the stone striking the water's surface, but then the ripples of this spread from that source. The repercussions. So when a person is converted he himself is transformed. There's an immediate effect on his life and the life of the Christians who see what happens, but there is also a wider effect which is very soon noticed. That's what is described in verse 7. ⁷ *so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*

Greece was divided into two great provinces. In both these provinces there were people who were saying, "That's what a Christian should be like!" Who were they pointing at? The Thessalonians! Then we read verse 8: 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.* So these merchants passing through and the sailors coming from the port and the Roman soldiers marching in both directions on this major trade route passing through the city, some of them are touched by the Gospel through the Christians there. They go on in all directions and even to distant countries. Everywhere! So wherever Paul goes and from wherever he gets news. He is hearing that people know what's going on in Thessalonica!

They are changed people in Thessalonica. They've been changed by the Gospel from Paul. The Gospel of Jesus – who's another King! You see you can't keep Conversion to yourself! Any true Conversion is visible and able to be reported on. Even though there is no stereotype of Conversion, no standard essential pattern in the New Testament.

6. Now to verses 9 & 10 which give us some further details of their Conversion: ⁹ *For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you,*
For Paul, wherever he goes, he's now in Corinth. People say to him, "We heard what happened in Thessalonica. How you went in and preached and how these people welcomed the message." Do you today welcome the message? Are you welcoming the message? "And how they turned to God!" That's what Conversion is. It's turning to God. Not turning to the BRPC. Not turning to evangelicalism. Not turning religious. It's turning to the God who is revealed in Scripture.

Well if you are going to turn 'to' you have to turn 'from'!

You turned to God from idols! Now you don't bow down before these idols anymore. You don't go into the shrine any more. You don't cut flowers and spread them here. You don't make the sacrifices anymore. You don't regard Olympus with superstition. You've finished with that. You've cut clean with that. You realise that was all error. You can no longer live as though, that is true.

You turn to God from idols, to **serve** the living and true God. When you were a pagan you were content to throw a few flowers, sacrifice a few animals and leave a few fruit. And then go off and just live as you please. But now you've turned to God and you realise that you live in His sight – as Paul explains – you realise that worship isn't just a thing that you do a couple of times a week. A few gifts that you give out or a few places that you go to. But worship is what takes place all life long. Which is why there was no Worship Service in the early Church. You can't find one. There was never one! They had Teaching Services, because Worship was what went on 24 hours a day. Because they **served** the living and true God.

In every dimension of their life. In every aspect of their character and existence.

The details go on in verse 10: ¹⁰ *and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

You know that this world isn't going to grow cold or grow too hot – burn out or freeze out! By itself or by us! It will be Christ who ends this world. Which Christ? Which Son? You know that on a certain Sunday morning in Palestine in what we number as the first Century, God raised Him from the dead. We don't proclaim: Christ was risen. We proclaim: Christ IS risen. In the Old English the meaning is very accurate indeed. It means something has happened and has remained happened. (Perfect tense in Biblical Greek?¹⁴) Christ was raised from the dead and remains alive. And He's coming back again! They knew that and lived in the light of it. He *delivers us from the wrath to come*: Because the people outside God will be outside God eternally. People who at the end time are outside Christ will remain outside Christ eternally. When God, through Christ, ends the world and calls to end the universe, only those who are His, will be in the place of joy and happiness and all the others will be in 'outer darkness'.

The only person who has delivered anybody from the anger of God is God's dear Son. You are that people says Paul. Who have been delivered from the wrath to come through Jesus Christ.

As we conclude there are four lessons or applications:

- Conversions happen. Who would ever have thought that in a place like Thessalonica, these Pagans, these wealthy Jews, these working class people who believed in all sort of fables and superstitions. Who would ever have believed that they would have become Christians?

If you pass through Bunbury streets and see the people there and the types of

¹⁴ The perfect tense in Greek is used to describe a completed action which produced results which are still in effect all the way up to the present. Sample translation: "I have believed."

man-made religions they practise, including humanism, often you could be tempted to say to yourself: "Could it ever happen to them?" Yet even here you may see people you have given up on will be worshipping God in some true Christian Church, saved by the power of the Gospel. Conversions happen. Conversions will happen, God willing.

That neighbour who appears antisocial and of dubious honesty. God knows, may be Converted through God's Grace and become the greatest proponent of the Christian faith in a generation. It happened to Paul!

We should never be pessimistic, Conversions happen. The question this morning is has it happened to you?

- What Happened? What happened then and now is a miracle! People who are outside God. Want nothing to do with God. Who worship other things. Who have other values. Living for themselves or other things. They turn to God, and love Him and wait for His Son, have belief and hope and love. A miracle! Should you need to go home this morning and admit to God that this miracle hasn't happened to you. And pray to God that it will.
- How it happens. Conversions happen through human instrumentality. Normally Conversions don't happen unless Christians go to people. Most Conversions happen because a Christian enters a life of somebody. Whereby that Christian has had the opportunity to explain the Word. Which the Holy Spirit then takes hold of. We can't argue people into the Kingdom. We can't even love them into the Kingdom. Though none-the-less we should love them anyway. They come, through human instrumentality when we explain the Word. That's why we should make ourselves available to Gospel preaching as often as possible to develop our ability to pass it on. Even this, of course is nothing, unless the Holy Spirit blesses the preaching and the learning. That is it must always be the Word **with prayer**. Prayer for the blessing of the Spirit in what we do.
- Why it happens. Verse 4: It happens because God has decreed it will happen. That's why the cause of Christ is in **safe hands**. God has decreed that it will happen, but that doesn't lessen your responsibility and doesn't lessen our responsibility to proclaim the message that God has decided will happen, so that everything is safe and we admire the love. The love of God. He could have left us in our sin and He could have left us in our misery. He could have left us to go to hell. But He stepped in and by His wonderful message of the Cross, by His own working of the Holy Spirit, He Converted us. Our reaction to this is to thank Him for our own Conversion and for the Conversion of every other person that we have ever heard about.

The first Christian document of all starts by talking about Conversion.

[2073]

**Pray for God's grace, through the Spirit of Christ to live in us all, that we may live the new life made possible by the Spirit, for all the saints present today.
Amen**