

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

I Thessalonians to Titus

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: God Turns Scrap Metal into Gold

You became imitators of us and of the Lord... so you became a model to all the believers.

(1 Thessalonians 1:6-7)

It has been the dream of every alchemist ever since the dawn of history. Men have searched in vain for a way of turning scrap metal into gold. For all their failed experiments with lead and copper, not one of them succeeded. The only person who knew how to turn scrap metal into gold was a carpenter from Galilee.

Jesus of Nazareth knew how to work with wood, but he preferred to use a different material. He loved to search for weak and unimpressive people on life's scrapheap and to transform the cheap metal of their lives into purest gold. An impulsive fisherman named Peter; a prostitute named Mary; a traitor named Matthew; a cynic named Thomas – the people he chose were of basest metal. Yet after three years with Jesus, they became the golden boys and girls who led a movement that went on to change the world.

The apostle Paul was the consummate example of how God turns scrap metal into gold. He was a Pharisee and a sworn enemy of the Church who did all he could to suffocate the Christian movement in its early days. He was such an unlikely candidate for God's mercy that he reminds Timothy that "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.*"¹ If we want God to turn the scrap metal of our own lives

¹ 1 Timothy 1:15. Paul wants to encourage each of us that our lives can be transformed into gold too.

into gold, Paul is the perfect person to show us how. Jesus took him and transformed him into the writer of the thirteen letters which form half the books of the New Testament.²

This commentary covers five of those thirteen letters, and I have not simply grouped them together because they appear together in the New Testament. I have grouped them together because they form a discipleship training school for anyone who wants God to transform their life and use them to save more people from the scrapheap. God inspired Paul to write these five letters so that you and I could be instructed in how to work with God in turning cheap and nasty metal into gold.

Paul never intended to write 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Whenever he planted a church in a city, he always stayed to take his converts through his basic discipleship training school in person. Had his enemies not chased him out of Thessalonica after only three weeks, Paul would have founded a training academy like the ones we read about, in Acts 18 and 19, at the house of Titius Justus in Corinth and at the lecture hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus. It is only because he was forced to flee the city so quickly that he wrote **1 Thessalonians** as the first lesson in his training school, teaching us how to be **true converts**. It is only because he was unable to return that he wrote **2 Thessalonians** as a second lesson, which teaches us how to be **true warriors** for Jesus.

The last three letters that Paul wrote were to individual graduates of the first two lessons in his discipleship training school. Paul stayed longer in Crete than he did at Thessalonica, so he was able to take his converts on the island through the first two lessons in person. He then left behind one of his graduates to take them through lesson three, so his letter to **Titus** lays out the syllabus that we need in order to be **truly fruitful**. Paul teaches Titus how to create churches full of Christians who

² Paul wrote 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament. We look at the other eight letters in *Straight to the Heart of Romans*, *Straight to the Heart of 1 and 2 Corinthians* and *Straight to the Heart of Galatians to Colossians*.

shine like gold in the sinful scrapyard of the world. If they learn lesson three, he promises in Titus 2:10 that *“in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive.”*

Paul wrote to another of his graduates a few months later and gave him the syllabus for lesson four in his discipleship training school. He had left Timothy behind at Ephesus, home to one of the largest and most influential churches, so **1 Timothy** explains how his young graduate can help the Ephesians to become **truly mature** in their faith.

Shortly after sending the letter, Paul was arrested and taken in chains to Rome. Before he was executed, he managed to write a final lesson, which completed his discipleship training school: **2 Timothy** acts as Paul’s final will and testament in which he assures his converts that they are **truly ready** to continue the work after his death because God has turned the scrap metal of their lives into gold. The Emperor Nero could kill their teacher, but he could not stop a school full of students from going out into the world. Even today, almost 2,000 years after Paul’s execution, God still invites us to study these five letters and to learn with the Thessalonians and with Titus and Timothy.

I love these five books of the Bible because they take us straight to the heart of Paul. The New Testament is unique among the holy scriptures of the world for the fact that much of its teaching takes the form of deeply personal letters. God wants to help us to think like Paul, to feel like Paul, to have faith like Paul, and ultimately to make the most of our lives like Paul. God wants to take our own lives from the scrapheap and to transform them into gold, just as he did the life of Paul.

I also love these five books of the Bible because they show us how to transform the lives of others. Acts 9:25 refers literally to Paul’s converts as *“his disciples,”* even though they were first and foremost converts of Jesus. It’s as if God wants to remind us that he uses people like us to effect his work of transformation. He wants to equip us and use us to create a mighty army of

golden men and women who can, in turn, transform the world. Look around you. The world is in desperate need of such an army. For the sake of the hundreds of millions of people who are far from God and from his salvation, let's read these five letters and let's study them well.

The English poet John Milton urged his readers not to doubt that God can transform human lives, "*Of by fire of sooty coal th' empiric alchemist / Can turn, or holds it possible to turn / Metals of drossiest ore to perfect gold.*"³ Likewise, I also urge you not to doubt it as you read these five letters. God has given you a place in his discipleship training school. He has given it to you because he wants to transform your own life and to teach you to transform others.

He has done so because his desire has not changed in the past 2,000 years. He is still the God who loves to turn scrap metal into gold.

³ John Milton wrote this in 1667 as part of his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (Book 5, lines 439–442).

Lesson One – 1 Thessalonians:

True Converts

God's Extras (1:1–3)

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1 Thessalonians 1:3)

If anybody might have thought they knew how to turn scrap metal into gold, it was Paul. He was an expert in the Jewish Scriptures. He was an apostle and a successful church planter. In the two years before his arrival at Thessalonica in 50 AD, he had planted a dozen churches in Cyprus, Galatia and Philippi.

If anybody else might have thought they knew how to turn scrap metal into gold, it was Silas and Timothy. Silas was an apostle, a Roman citizen and an educated Greek speaker. He was a prophet and he had played a crucial role with Paul in planting the church at Philippi.¹ Timothy was young but he had already made some impressive sacrifices for the Gospel and to be part of Paul's church-planting team.²

Together, they had made a formidable team when they arrived at Thessalonica. The capital city of the Roman province of Macedonia boasted a population of over 200,000 people, which made it one of the largest cities in the world, but they were not daunted. By the time Paul and Silas were chased out

¹ Acts 15:32; 16:25–40; 1 Thessalonians 2:6. Silas was so good at Greek that he helped Peter write one of his letters (1 Peter 5:12). Silas was the Hebrew form of the Roman name *Silvanus*, which meant *Woody*.

² Acts 16:1–3. Circumcision was not just physically painful. It also meant associating with the Jewish race in a Roman Empire which was very anti-Semitic.

of the city three weeks later, they had made enough converts to plant a thriving church. By the time Timothy left a few weeks after that, the church was strong enough to stand on its own two feet without them.³ If anybody might have thought that they knew how to take people off the pagan scrapheap and turn them into gold, it was Paul, Silas and Timothy.

That's why I find the start of 1 Thessalonians so surprising. The three men who wrote this letter from Corinth in 51 AD do not fool themselves that they played the leading role at Thessalonica. Paul and Silas do not introduce themselves as apostles.⁴ They do not boast about their own credentials. They keep the focus on Jesus because Jesus alone played the leading role in the conversion of the Thessalonians. They worked hard with Jesus, but they never forgot that they were simply extras in the drama.

In 1:1, Paul places the focus firmly on Jesus.⁵ He tells us that Jesus is distinct from God the Father, but that he is nevertheless the God of the Old Testament. Paul says he is the *Kurios*, the Greek word which is used throughout the Greek Old Testament to translate the Hebrew name *Yahweh*. Jesus is the Lord, the great *I AM* who spoke to Moses at the burning bush, who appeared to Isaiah in the Temple and who finally came to earth as a human being.⁶ Paul does not use the word *Christ* as Jesus' surname. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*. Paul tells us that Jesus is the Lord and the Anointed One who always plays the leading role in true conversion. Anybody that he uses is simply one of his extras.

In 1:1, Paul also places the focus firmly on the Gospel. He

³ We can tell that Timothy stayed on at Thessalonica because he is mentioned in Acts 17:14 but not in 17:10.

⁴ This is particularly striking here because Paul introduces himself as an apostle in all his letters except for 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians and Philemon.

⁵ Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians with Silas and Timothy but, as with his other co-authored letters, it is clear throughout that Paul is the main writer.

⁶ John 12:41 says this explicitly. Jesus was worshipped as *Yahweh* from the very start of Church history.

always begins his letters with the blessing “*grace and peace to you*” because this is the essence of his Gospel message.⁷ Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God has reconciled us to himself and he has granted us a status we do not deserve. He has invited people who live in Thessalonica to make their new home “*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” The Gospel makes us citizens of the heavenly city, living in two places at once, through faith in the one who turns scrap metal into gold.⁸

In 1:2–3, Paul places the focus firmly on God’s activity. The reason he and his team were able to plant a church so quickly in Thessalonica was that God answered their prayers. Recognizing that they were God’s extras had not made them lazy. It had inspired them to cry out to God *always* and *unceasingly*.⁹ As a result, we read in 1:4 that God took the initiative, choosing to save many of the Thessalonians whom he loved. Luke tells us in Acts 17:4 that God “*allotted*” certain Thessalonians to the church, and Paul is not embarrassed to talk about God’s sovereign right to choose.¹⁰ He is delighted because he knows it means God’s extras can never lose. If they pray for God to act, he will never fail to play the starring role in the world’s salvation. The God who made the entire universe will hear our prayers and will transform scrap metal into precious gold.

In 1:3, Paul places the focus firmly on God’s work in people’s hearts. He does not feel the need to browbeat the Thessalonians into working hard, labouring diligently or enduring faithfully.

⁷ 1 Thessalonians was Paul’s second New Testament letter. Two years earlier, in 49 AD, he wrote this opening greeting in full to the Galatians: “*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

⁸ Paul says this again in 2:14, reminding us that the churches *in* Judea are also *in* Christ Jesus. See also Ephesians 2:6–7 and Philippians 3:20.

⁹ Paul returns to the theme of unceasing prayer in 2:13, 3:10 and 5:16–18. He saw no need to rush back to Thessalonica personally because he was so confident that God answers prayer.

¹⁰ The Greek verb *prosklēroō* means *to add by lot* or *to assign by lot*. Acts 17:4 is therefore not just telling us that individuals joined the church, but that individuals were joined by God to the church.

He knows that all these things are simply the natural fruit of anybody who has God's Spirit at work on the inside.¹¹ Paul simply thanks God for answering his prayers by filling their hearts with the faith that always makes people work hard, with the love that always makes people labour diligently, and with the hope in Jesus that always makes people persevere under pressure.¹² Paul was delighted to see the fruit of his letting God be God and of his being content to act as one of God's extras.

Later on in 5:8, Paul will say more about the power of *faith*, *hope* and *love* to transform people from the inside out. He will also refer to it in 1 Corinthians 13:13. But these opening verses of 1 Thessalonians should be enough to make us stop and consider whether we truly believe that the Thessalonians were transformed by the grace of God or by the brilliance of Paul. Do we truly believe Paul when he tells us in Acts 14:15 that "*We too are only human, like you*"?

If we do, we will not place the first-century Christians in a different category from ourselves. If we believe that Paul and his team were God's extras, we will expect the same power to be at work in our own lives. We will expect to see as many converts as Paul and to see their lives transformed by God just as rapidly as the lives of the Thessalonians. Are you willing to be one of God's extras and to place the spotlight on his power instead of on yourself? If you are, you are ready to see what God alone can do in a person's life when they let him play the starring role.

¹¹ Paul reinforces this in 1:6 and 4:9 by saying that their joy is "*joy given by the Holy Spirit*" and that they love one another because they "*have been taught by God to love each other.*"

¹² The Greek word for *hope* is *elpis*, which means *confident expectation* rather than wishful thinking. Knowing what is stored up for us in heaven (Colossians 1:5) acts as an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:18-19).

Chain Reaction (1:4–10)

The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere.

(1 Thessalonians 1:8)

Jesus didn't tell his followers to plant churches. He didn't tell them to change communities or to lobby governments. He simply told them to go and make disciples. If they made true converts, churches would naturally be planted; if churches were planted, communities would be changed; if communities were changed, governments would listen. True converts always unleash a Gospel chain reaction on the world.

When Paul was converted in 33 AD, it did not look much like an event that was going to change the world. His Pharisee friends were so appalled that they tried to kill him, and many Christians found it hard to accept that *"The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."*¹ Isolated by his conversion, Paul was catapulted into fourteen years of obscurity in which he studied the Scriptures in Arabia, Syria and Cilicia. At the end of those fourteen years, he looked no different on the outside, but there is nothing more powerful than a person who is truly converted on the inside. His example challenged Silas and Timothy to leave everything to work with him, and together they made radical converts like themselves in Thessalonica. They tell their converts in 1:5–6 that *"You know*

¹ Galatians 1:23. Paul describes the years immediately after his conversion in Galatians 1–2.

how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord.”

Many church leaders complain that their congregations do not follow them, but Paul tells us that people always follow their leaders. They may not copy what their leaders say but they never fail to copy what their leaders do. That’s the principle of the Gospel chain reaction. What is embodied by church leaders is replicated throughout the church body, and what is embodied by a church is replicated in those around them. If we want to see communities and cities transformed by the Gospel, we need no other plan than the one that Jesus has already given us: Go and make disciples.

Paul and his teammates became radical disciples, so they are able to remind the Thessalonians that they commended the Gospel to them *“not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.”*² Although Paul performed miracles of healing, he is talking here about the miracle of true conversion. He is telling us that when the Thessalonians saw what the Holy Spirit had done in his own heart, it convicted them deeply and made them want to be part of God’s Gospel chain reaction too. That’s why he and his team refer to *our* Gospel and not just *Jesus’* Gospel.³ When the Thessalonians saw how completely Paul and his team had embraced the Gospel, they could not resist their call to *“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”*⁴

When the Thessalonians believed the Gospel, they launched the next step in the Gospel chain reaction. Paul knew that they were truly converted because he saw straightaway

² Paul is not devaluing the preaching of God’s Word, as we will see in 2:13–16. He is simply pointing out that true faith in God’s Word is always marked by deep changes to a person’s lifestyle.

³ Paul knows that the Gospel belongs primarily to God the Father (2:2, 8, 9) and to Jesus the Son (3:2). He simply wants to emphasize that we make it our own when we take part in the Gospel chain reaction.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:1 echoes 1 Thessalonians 1:6. We make disciples by becoming true disciples ourselves.

such obvious fruit in their lives. They were as convicted of sin and as open to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit as he was. They allowed the Gospel to reshape completely their pagan way of thinking, and they let the Lord start turning the scrap metal of their lives into precious gold.⁵ When their friends rejected and persecuted them, just as Paul's had, they responded with the same joy that made Paul and Silas sing in their prison cell at Philippi. We cannot work up this kind of joy ourselves; it can only be worked out through the Holy Spirit, which is why it made the non-Christians around them sit up and take the new church's message seriously. Paul and Silas were not alarmed when they were forced to flee the city after only three weeks. They could see from the Thessalonians' joy in the face of suffering that they were truly converted. They had plainly become "*imitators of us and of the Lord.*"

The Gospel chain reaction continued. Paul and his team are writing from Corinth, the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia, and they can see the shockwaves of what has happened at Thessalonica all around them 350 miles away. When they planted churches in Berea and Corinth, they were helped by the fact that all of Macedonia and Greece were talking about the changes in Thessalonica.⁶ Paul modelled true conversion to the Thessalonians; they modelled true conversion to their city; this resulted in more converts who made the church a model to their entire region. When Paul tells the Thessalonians in 1:8 that "*The Lord's message rang out from you,*" he uses the Greek word *exēcheomai*, which means *to echo forth* like a cry in a dark

⁵ The Greek phrase which is translated *deep conviction* in 1:5 is *plērophoria pollē*. It means literally *a great amount of full confidence* that Paul's message was true.

⁶ Achaia was the name of the Roman province which comprised the Peloponnese, or southern Greece. "*Macedonia and Achaia*" is therefore roughly equivalent to the whole of modern Greece.

cave, because true conversion fills every corner and crevice of this dark world with the sound of life.⁷

Paul hasn't finished. He tells the Thessalonians that "*your faith in God has become known everywhere.*" Paul came to Thessalonica because it commanded the east-west trade route from the Adriatic to the Black Sea and the north-south trade route from the Aegean to Illyricum in modern-day Croatia. Paul has met Illyrian sailors at the port city of Corinth who convince him that the Gospel chain reaction is working fast. Seven years later, Paul could tell the Romans that "*There is no more place for me to work in these regions*" because "*from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.*"⁸ He had started a chain reaction of true conversion – first in himself, then in his team, then in the Thessalonians, and then across the entire eastern empire.

An anonymous monk lamented in his old age in around 1100 AD that

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was too difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realise the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realise that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.

⁷ Paul does not measure the health of a church based on the number of seats filled on Sunday but on how much the Word of God echoes forth from it from Monday through to Sunday.

⁸ Paul wrote this in 57 AD in Romans 15:19 and 23.

You are not an old monk so you still have time to learn the principle of the Gospel chain reaction. Paul and his team made radical converts in Thessalonica because they were radical converts themselves. Surrender your life completely to Jesus today and watch him set off a chain reaction in you. Watch him start convicting people around you to change until you can say with Paul and his team: *“You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord.”*