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The Gospel in Three Dimensions

Richard L. Smith

This study of 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 reveals that the passage presents the Christian life in simple three-point fashion, in terms of repentance, service to God and others, and our ultimate eschatological hope. These three points can be linked to God’s work on three levels—personal, corporate (within the body of Christ), and cosmic, respectively.

These days we can purchase books on many subjects like *Computers for Seniors for Dummies*¹ and *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Islam*.² (I have a volume entitled *Philosophy Made Simple*,³ which is an oxymoron for sure.) Indeed, sometimes it is helpful to present a concept as simply as possible. For this reason, this article might be called ‘The Gospel for Dummies’ or maybe ‘The Gospel Made Simple’ (though not simplistic).

First Thessalonians 1:9–10 presents a three-point outline of the gospel. In these verses, we find out how to become a Christian and how to remain one. Three terms are particularly significant: ‘turn’ (repentance), ‘serve’ (service, discipleship), and ‘wait’ (hope and sanctification). Understanding these words in context, along with their theological significance, provides a basic framework for understanding the gospel. In this passage, Paul also provides a summary of his evangelistic preaching in three dimensions: the personal (individual), church (corporate), and cosmic (eschatological).

Immediate context

First Thessalonians 1:4–10:

- (4) For we know, brothers 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. 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,

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1 Faithe Wempen, *Computers for Seniors for Dummies*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2022).

2 Yahiya Emerick, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Islam*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alpha, 2004).

3 Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

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

(8) For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

(9) For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

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

Notice first the focus on imitation (vv. 5b and 6). Like Paul, the Thessalonians experienced the gospel in word and power (v. 5). As with the apostle, their conversion produced both suffering and joy (v. 6). Second, because of these commonalities, the new converts served as ‘examples’ or ‘patterns’ (*topoi*) for others.⁴ Verses 9–10 indicate that their turning, serving and waiting replicated the conduct and understanding of the entire church. The new converts discovered service in terms of how to think and behave with reference to Jesus Christ.

Third, several creedal assumptions emerge from verses 9–10. Turning from idols to God presumes an understanding of religion in concert with the Old Testament (1 Cor 10:18–20; 2 Cor 6:16). The Thessalonians learned that their new faith and practice occurred within a vicious spiritual environment (Eph 2:1–3). In addition, their conversion presumed an understanding of the resurrection, the Trinity, justification and final judgement. Furthermore, waiting became a spiritual discipline since sanctification and glorification were not immediate (Rom 8:30). Their new faith was not utopian but eschatological, extending from eternity past to eternal heaven. Conceptually, they received a triangular jigsaw puzzle, as it were. The three corners were ‘turn’, ‘serve’ and ‘wait’. The sides and interior would be filled in through discipleship in the local church.

This passage as a gospel summary

First Thessalonians 1:9–10 provides a thematic gateway to the New Testament’s understanding of the gospel and an excellent outline of Paul’s message.⁵ He wrote about the Thessalonians, ‘You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.’ Beginning with the second half of verse 9, the passage consists of a subject, three main verbs and five explanatory clauses. Structurally, the text may be illustrated in this way in the English Standard Version:

| | | | |
|------|------------|--|------------|
| You: | turned | to God | from idols |
| | (to) serve | the living and true God | |
| | (to) wait | for His Son from heaven | |
| | | whom he raised from the dead | |
| | | Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come | |

4 The same linkage of imitation and example/pattern is found in Philippians 3:17 and 2 Thessalonians 3:9. (All Bible citations are from the ESV, unless otherwise indicated.)

5 For a recent discussion of this issue, see Antonio Pitta, ‘A Peg to Hang 1 Thessalonians On? Nature and Function of 1 Thess 1:9–10’, *Biblica* 101 (2020): 87–106.

The passage may also be displayed in a poetic format that refers to the past, present and future:

| | |
|---------|--|
| Past | you turned to God from idols |
| Present | to serve the living and true God |
| Future | to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. |

‘You’

The subject of the sentence, ‘you’, refers primarily to former pagan Thessalonians. Within the context of the verse, we may identify the subjects as idolaters upon whom the wrath of God was abiding. Testimony from the two Thessalonian letters reveals the previous mindset and lifestyle of these converts. They had been persecutors of Christians (1 Thess 2:14), sexually immoral and impure (4:3, 5, 7). They were enslaved in spiritual darkness (5:5–6), for they did ‘not know God and [did] not obey the gospel’ (2 Thess 1:8). They were ‘evil and wicked men’, lacking faith (3:2). This report is verified by Paul’s depiction of the hostile environment the new believers faced as repentant idolaters: ‘You received the word in much affliction’ (1 Thess 1:6; 3:3; 2 Thess 1:4, 6) and ‘much conflict’ (2:2). Like Paul, they ‘suffered the same things from [their] own countrymen’ (2:14; 2 Thess 1:5).

‘Turned’

The first verb, ‘turned’, carries a moral, intellectual and religious sense. It points to a change in understanding, belief and spiritual orientation. Scholars classify the verb within the semantic domain that includes ‘repent’ and ‘born again’.⁶ In other words, to turn indicates repentance and conversion. This nuance is clearly indicated in verse 9 using the twin prepositional phrases following ‘you turned’—‘to God’ and ‘from idols’.

Why turn? The answer is suggested in the text using the two infinitives, ‘to serve’ and ‘to wait’. Since infinitives can indicate purpose, as if to say ‘in order to’, the action of the passage may be paraphrased as follows: ‘You turned [repented or converted] *in order to* serve God and to wait for his Son who rescues us from the wrath to come.’⁷ In other words, they turned from dead and false imposters to embrace the true and active Christ, and they anticipated his promised return. Those who did not repent and did not serve the Son or wait for his deliverance remained without ‘hope and without God in the world’ (Eph 2:12). In short, to secure the blessing of deliverance from God’s eschatological wrath, the Thessalonians had to forsake idolatry.

6 Walter Bauer describes the meaning as ‘a change of mind ... especially a change in the sinner’s relation with God’, in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 301. Johannes P. Lowe and Eugene A. Nida place the term within the subset ‘change in one’s belief’ in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 373. A similar use appears in Galatians 4:9 with the sense of turning away: ‘But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back (*epistrephō*) again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?’

7 This is the case especially when following verbs of motion, such as ‘turn’, according to Joseph Smith and Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1963), 381.

'Idols'

Notice the twin adjectives attached to the noun 'God'—'living' and 'true'. The adjective 'true' combines the aspects of real, dependable and genuine versus the illusory, unfaithful and false nature of idols. The adjective 'living' indicates both 'alive' and 'active' as opposed to idols, which are dead and impotent. Paul and the New Testament more broadly share the Old Testament understanding of idols as lifeless, useless, empty, false, shameful, wicked and harmful depictions of deity.⁸

Consider these citations from the Old Testament regarding the vanity of idols: 'gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell' (Deut 4:28) and 'a god that cannot save' (Is 45:20b). Jeremiah 10:5 says, 'Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.' Nevertheless, idols are also spiritually destructive because of the demonic powers behind them (Mt 12:28; 1 Cor 10:20). In the words of Psalm 115:8, 'Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.'

Further, the Bible declares that perpetual conflict exists between God and all would-be divine imitators. Paul wrote, 'What agreement has the temple of God with idols?' (2 Cor 6:16). Jesus described this tension in clear terms with respect to 'mammon' (i.e. money; Mt 6:24). The following thematic depiction of this verse reveals the antithetical and antagonistic dimensions of idolatry:

No one can serve two masters.
 Either the one he hates
 and the other he loves,
 or the one he is devoted to
 and the other he despises.
 You cannot serve God and Mammon.⁹

Notice the various parallels and contrasts. The first and last sentences are indicative. Jesus states a simple fact that should be obvious to all: just as we cannot serve two human masters, we cannot worship two divine lords. The impossibility of dual servitude is self-evident, for it is impossible to serve both God and mammon (idols). The subject 'no one' reveals the universal nature of the dilemma and includes everyone in the impossibility. It implies that every person must serve one or the other, but not both. There is no neutral ground to which one can flee concerning idolatry.

The vocabulary of the other phrases further demonstrates this fact. 'To serve' in this context means 'to be a slave'. Slaves were very much aware of belonging to another. Such a relationship demanded absolute dependence, total commitment and exclusivity. By virtue of their position, 'masters' were the undisputed and final authority in the lives of their slaves. To 'serve God', therefore, implies a full, loving commitment to God. Likewise, 'to hate' was equally absolute and totalitarian. Hatred

8 Regarding the Old Testament roots of 'living', see for instance Deut 5:26; Josh 3:10; Ps 42:2; and for 'true', Ex 34:6; 2 Chr 15:3. Perhaps the most direct parallel for both terms is found in Jeremiah 10:10, 'But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King.'

9 K. E. Bailey, *Poets and Peasants and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 112.

indicates an aversion or hostility to a person. 'Devoted to' and 'despise' indicated irreconcilable opposites. 'Devoted to' meant 'to cling to', 'to join', or idiomatically 'to glue oneself to' and 'to become one with'. 'Despise' indicated a feeling of scorn and contempt, whereby one considered another worthless. Thus, to love and serve mammon (idols) meant hatred of God and, conversely, to love and serve God meant hatred of mammon.

Indeed, as this passage indicates, repentance from idolatry is central to the gospel. Idols come in all shapes and sizes for various individuals and groups. At a microcosmic level, idolatry manifests itself in the form of God-substitutes: relationships, goals, activities and lifestyles that demand our attention, affection, time and money apart from God and his law. Individually, idol worship involves the construction of one's identity and lifestyle independent of God as misplaced imitation (imaging Satan rather than God). In fact, at its root, idolatry is the sin of self-deification, aspiring to be 'like God' (Gen 3:5). At the macroscopic level, false gods and gospels appear in the form of alternative religions, worldviews and ideologies.¹⁰ For all these reasons, Paul summarized the three-dimensional gospel in terms of repentance from false gods, destructive communities and alternative religions.

'Serve'

The second verb, 'serve', can be defined as 'loving service', 'to serve the demands of another', 'to be under the control of some influence' and 'to be a slave'.¹¹ As we saw in our examination of Matthew 6:24 above, Jesus declared that service to God means 'enslavement', which implies absolute dependence, total commitment and exclusivity.

The slaves of Christ, however, are also 'servants of one another'. Christians are instructed, 'Through love serve one another' (Gal 5:13). Paul (Rom 12:7) and Peter taught that God gives spiritual gifts to the church for service: 'As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace' (1 Pet 4:10). Phoebe was called a 'servant of the church' (Rom 16:1) and Epaphras was affirmed as 'our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf' (Col 1:7). Likewise, Paul boasted that Timothy manifested his 'proven worth' because he 'served with me in the gospel' (Phil 2:22).

'Wait'

The third verb, 'wait', means to remain in a state of expectancy concerning a future event—to 'await', 'wait for', or 'wait until'. Depending on the context, the verb may be nuanced as 'sustained expectation',¹² 'suffering expectation' or even 'groaning expectation' (Rom 8:19). Clearly, the term implies an eschatological significance. The

10 The forms can be explicitly religious (Islam, New Age, Hinduism), ideologically secular (communism, National Socialism, Imperial Japan, North Korean Juche), or implicitly religious (consumerism, sports fanaticism, self-fulfilment, romantic love, gender).

11 Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 205.

12 G. G. Findlay, cited by Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 54.

context of verse 10 makes this obvious, since we ‘wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.’

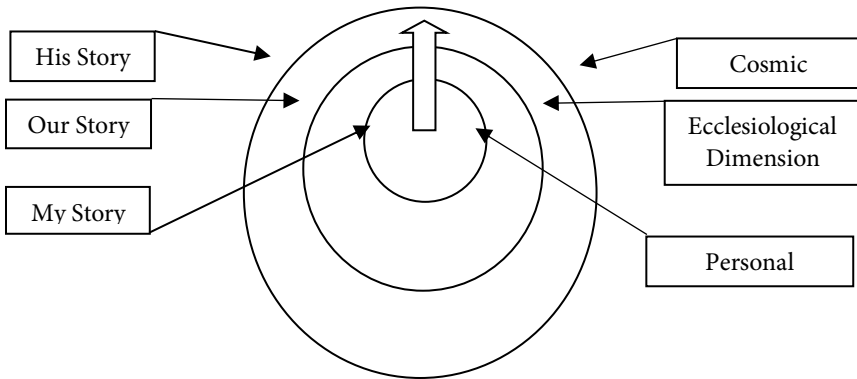
It is insightful to ponder the various aspects of our eschatological waiting within the broader New Testament. Not only deliverance from future divine wrath, but the believer’s future expectation includes ‘resurrection’ (Acts 24:15), ‘adoption as sons’ (Rom 8:23), the ‘Spirit of righteousness’ (Gal 5:5), ‘Jesus Christ to be revealed’ (1 Cor 1:7), ‘eternal life’ (Jude 1:21), ‘citizenship in heaven’ (Phil 3:20), ‘the kingdom’ (Mk 15:43) and ‘Christ to bring salvation’ (Heb 9:28). We are awaiting Jesus Christ, ‘until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet’ (Heb 10:13). We are ‘looking for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’ (2 Pet 3:13). Furthermore, the New Testament associates our waiting with ‘hope’ for the ‘resurrection of the dead’ (Acts 23:6), ‘glory of God’ (Rom 5:2), ‘riches of his glorious inheritance’ (Eph 1:8), ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’ (Col 1:27), a ‘crown’ (1 Thess 2:19), ‘the living God’ (1 Tim 4:10), ‘eternal life’ (Tit 1:2), and ‘grace’ (1 Pet 1:13).

The gospel in three dimensions

First Thessalonians 1:9–10 implies, as well, three dimensions of the gospel:

1. Personal and individual: You (personally) turn, serve and wait.
2. Corporate and ecclesiological: You (as the church) serve God and others.
3. Cosmic and eschatological: You (together) await the ‘new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’.

These ideas can also be demonstrated pictorially:



Our personal and individual salvation (my story) is crucial, basic and glorious. But the gospel is not just about us. Our personal redemption from sin and Satan is necessary and magnificent. And our individual reconciliation with God and others is restorative and precious. But these blessings are not the end of the story, for we are not redeemed for our sake alone. In fact, our individual stories are defined by the church, the redeemed community of God (our story). We do not serve and worship God in isolation or autonomy. Our identities and destinies are determined by God’s mission in the world through the body of Christ. Most importantly, our redemptive stories and the story of the church’s mission are ultimately defined by the eternal and cosmic, Trinitarian mission of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (his story).

In terms of the passage from 1 Thessalonians 1, serving is the fruit of repentance in three dimensions. On the personal level, service means being a disciple, follower or worshipper of Jesus Christ. Within the ecclesiological dimension, serving means, simply, loving one another. In the words of Galatians 5:13, as quoted above, Christians ‘through love serve one another’. On the cosmic level, we serve the true and living God, the gospel, as well as God’s mission in the world. For this reason, Paul identified himself variously as a ‘servant of God’ (Tit 1:1), ‘servant of Christ Jesus’ (Rom 1:1), ‘servant of this gospel’ (Gal 3:7; Col 1:23), and ‘servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God’ (Col 1:25).

Similarly, Titus 2:11–14 summarizes the three dimensions of the gospel (personal, ecclesiological and eschatological) with reference to the mission of God:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age [personal], waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ [cosmic], who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works [church].

The converts in Thessalonica had turned (‘renounced ungodliness’), served (‘zealous for good works’), and waited (‘for our blessed hope’). This meant transformation in three realms:

- Personal: Repentance from a pagan lifestyle: hedonism, immorality and idolatry
- Church: Repentance from a cultural identity based on participation in pagan communities (spiritual and civic), as well as from economic dependence upon patronage and guilds
- Cosmic: Repentance from pagan worldviews (*Pax Romana*, for example) and false religiosities (polytheism)

The three-dimensional gospel, therefore, can be summarized with reference to this passage but also with reference to the broader biblical worldview. In the beginning, because of his great love and glory, God created a physical environment in which to tabernacle with the crown of creation, mankind. Humanity’s great reward and goal is the presence of God himself. Ever since the entrance of sin, all that God does is redemptive and re-creative, designed to make us holy so that we can dwell with him forever in a holy environment. The incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ accomplish this plan, because Jesus finishes the work that Adam and Israel failed to do. The project manager, so to speak, is the Holy Spirit, who will bring about the ‘renewal of all things’ (Mt 19:28) in a ‘new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells’, to use the words of 2 Peter 3:13. In short, God is in the process of populating his church, and one day he will dwell with us forever in his kingdom, his new tabernacle, the entire earth and the renewed creation—to his glory and our everlasting blessing.

Alternative gospels

Within the spiritual environment dominated by sin and Satan (Eph 2:1–3), however, the antithesis of the three gospel dimensions (personal, church, cosmic) is mani-

festes as an idolatrous trinity of false gods, substitute communities, and alternative gospels:¹³

Antithesis of ‘my story’: It’s all about me—self-deification, autonomy, and personal fulfilment

Antithesis of ‘our story’: It’s all about my family, race, clan, gang, team, social class or nation

Antithesis of ‘his story’: It’s all about my religion, myth, worldview, utopia, or ideology

The recipients of Paul’s letter in Thessalonica had been redeemed from this idolatrous trinity. According to Colossians 1:13–14, ‘He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.’ On the ecclesiological level, they became members of the body of Christ, the church, whose task is to communicate the good news throughout the earth. In this way, they participated in God’s mission of re-creation through the redeemed community. For according to Ephesians 3:10, God’s plan is fulfilled because ‘through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.’ On the cosmic level, the Thessalonians discovered that ‘if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come’ (2 Cor 5:17). They were incorporated into God’s redemptive plan, his ‘new creation’, which began in Genesis and which will be fulfilled in Revelation. In the ‘new heaven and new earth’ (Rev 21:1), they will receive an ‘eternal inheritance’ (Heb 9:15) and a new ‘citizenship’ (Phil 3:20) in a new, God-centred civilization (Revelation 21–22).

Conclusion

The Thessalonians discovered the three-dimensional gospel in this passage. The terms ‘turn’, ‘serve’ and ‘wait’ were shorthand for Paul’s evangelistic preaching. His readers learned how to think and live by applying his message. They embraced their roles in God’s redemptive drama. They discovered where they came from, where they were and where they were going, according to the biblical worldview. They became active participants in God’s redemptive plan.

‘Turn’ implied a crowded and competitive context which was inherently polemical, since repentance entails a holistic change of affiliation. ‘Serve’ indicated personal realignment with something far bigger than personal destiny or well-being, as converts became members of the *ekklēsia*, called out from other worldviews and called for or before the Lord to fulfil his agenda on earth. ‘Wait’ implied an ‘already–not yet’ dynamic, an eschatological trajectory that would climax in a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet 3:13).

Thus, even though our personal salvation is glorious, the gospel is not just about us individually. We do not serve and worship God in isolation. Our gospel is not homocentric, for we are not redeemed for our sake alone. In fact, our individual stories are defined by the church and our destinies are determined by God’s mission

13 For an insightful discussion about self-idolatry and identity in modernity, see Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021).

in the world through the body of Christ. And the church's mission is ultimately defined by the eternal mission of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

First Thessalonians 1:9–10 tells us how to become a Christian—by turning from idolatry to the living and true God. It tells us that the Christian life is all about service to God and others. The disciples of Jesus Christ also wait and pray with the aspiration, 'May your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6:10, GNT).

The Christian gospel is simple, but it is not simplistic. It is more than a remedy for personal sin and broken relationships. It is not a formula for a successful life or prosperity. Rather, the gospel is a manifesto for a new, eschatological civilization. It is about a new Eden, paradise restored and the everlasting tabernacle of God on earth. The gospel concerns the ancient promise of God fulfilled: 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God' (Rev 21:3).