

# 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

Intro May 5, 2007 Real Change

He could be any passenger waiting for a flight, sitting patiently on a red plastic bench in Charles de Gaulle Airport's Terminal One, luggage piled neatly by his side. He sips a cup of hot chocolate and scans the crowd, occasionally cocking his head to listen to the airport announcements. But Merhan Nasseri is going nowhere. He has been waiting for a flight out of France, he says, for years. Nasseri was expelled from Iran in the 80's for his political views. Through a series of fateful missteps, he landed in Paris in '88 without any documents. Since then, Europe's increasingly stiff stance toward refugees and his fragile mental state have kept him at the airport in legal limbo. His is a story of broken hopes and bureaucracy, of a trip across Europe in search of a homeland that became a journey into mental chaos and despair.<sup>1</sup> His life, recorded in his diary, was published as a novel and made into several movies, including Tom Hanks' *Terminal*.

After 11 years of waiting, in September 1999, the situation reversed. French authorities presented Nasseri with an international travel card and a French residency permit. Suddenly he was free to go anywhere he wanted. But when airport officials handed him his walking papers, to everyone's surprise, he simply smiled, tucked the documents in his folder, and resumed writing in his diary. He was afraid to leave the bench and table that had been his home for eleven years.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Tom Hanks' character in the film *The Terminal*, Nasseri did not live in the duty-free transit area but simply in the departure hall, in the circular "boutiques and restaurants" concourse on the lowest floor. He could have at least theoretically left the terminal at any moment, but change for him came at too great a cost. The publicity surrounding the movie did not change Nasseri's position. By the end of '05 he was still there, surrounded by a huge number of boxes (in rather bad shape). Some months ago, Nasseri fell ill, was taken to the hospital and upon his release the French Red Cross guided him to a new home in Paris.<sup>3</sup>

Can you imagine a more unnatural home than an airport? It is bustling, it is interesting, but it's not home. For many of us, our lives are more like Nasseri's than we can imagine. We live as though everything is normal, but we live without a home. We know we should change, but do not. Yet God changes us.

We seemingly live without documentation, waiting for a home we do not yet possess, but no longer fully welcomed in our present land. So we sit, waiting for change that never comes. We sit, because we don't know what change looks like and what change we do know needs to take place is far too difficult, too frightening. Change is something none of us like. Mark Twain once said that the only person who likes change is a wet baby. So we sit.

But while we may want to be different yet resisting change God changes us. That is what our passage points out. Paul thanks God for the work He has done in the church in Thessalonica as the people have responded to the gospel and in turn became an example for Christians in the surrounding lands. But what we need to recognize is that real change comes about in ways we do not expect. While we are waiting in this terminal of life, with the hustle and bustle of people moving around, we are being changed. The key for us is to know what real change is and how it comes about. READ 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

As we have seen so far in this brief letter and from Acts 17's account of the church's founding by Paul and Silas, the agent of change has been the Word of God. That focus remains in these verses as well. Real change comes about in conjunction with God's Word, so that we will see that:

Real change communicates God's Word and conforms to God's Word.

## REAL CHANGE COMMUNICATES GOD'S WORD v8

Nasseri who camped in Terminal 1 of the airport, went largely unnoticed, his worldly possessions stacked on a cart. He positioned himself on the bench and kept to himself. He spoke to no one and no one bothered him and nothing changed. But for real change to take place there must be a proclamation of God's Word. Notice in v8 as he speaks of the effect the believers from Thessalonica have had on their neighbors: "the word of the Lord sounded forth from you"

It may have been that they, following Paul and Silas' model, sent out some of their own to tell their friends and relatives throughout the region the good news of Christ. But Paul praises not so much their action of going out, but God's Word going out. What was in the forefront of their lives was what God says in His Word.

The word sounded forth ... a word used of a trumpet blast; the sound of rolling thunder, this word gives us our word *echo*. Paul uses the perfect tense, meaning this has taken place in the past, but the sound is still heard, the echoing of God's Word continues.

What went out were not just their words, not cute aphorisms about God nor just quoting passages from Scripture. Paul builds on the word of the Lord sounding forth but adding in parallel fashion that their faith has gone forth everywhere.

The one defines the other: the word of the Lord and their faith. When someone's life is radically changed by God, the focus is on God's work of grace in their lives, but that grace has form and substance. It is not enough that they repeated Scripture, but these words affected them, so that what goes out from them are life changing words. Their reception of the Word and their faith in God was shown as true because they *did* something with the Word of God.

We are not stuck in a terminal, just biding our time till we get to heaven. The good things God has done in us by means of his Word should be shouted out to those around us.

These believers, from whom the word of the Lord sounded forth, were caught between two worlds, the Greco-Roman world, with its demands of its cultural worship and obedience to the state and the world of Christian faith. The afflictions they endured were a byproduct of this change. Yet, their reputation was established as they responded to the affliction with joy. (7; 2:15)

When American financier John Pierpont Morgan died in 1913, his last will and testament revealed his faith in Jesus Christ. He had prefaced his specific bequests with these significant words:

"I commit my soul into the hands of my Savior, in full confidence that having received it and washed it in His most precious blood He will present it faultless before the throne of my heavenly Father. And I entreat my children to maintain and defend, at all hazard, and at any cost of personal sacrifice, the blessed doctrine of the complete atonement for sin through the blood of Jesus Christ, once offered, and through that alone."

Those words must have left a lasting impression on his heirs. Morgan's commitment to Christ was remembered in his death. Will it take that for you? What is your reputation? Not just in the context of good times, but like these believers, when affliction comes, is your faith, flowing from the Word of God, the major theme that is heard?

## **REAL CHANGE CONFORMS TO GOD'S WORD** v9-10

But change is not communicating the truths of God's Word, there's more. Our lives must change. In v9 Paul describes the great change that took place in their lives.

**They turned...** This describes what happens when we place our faith in Christ, what can best be termed *conversion*. To turn involves two phases: turning from and turning to. Real change involves both, an aspect of the Christian life which is hard for many people.

To conform to God's Word, we must turn to God, from idols. There is no syncretism. It is not a both/and. This was a part of how Paul presented the gospel. In Acts 14:15 he called on those in Iconium to turn from that which is empty to the God who made all things. God can not be added to a long list of important aspects to one's life.

So here Paul gets to the core of what change is all about. It is a turning from ... to.

We can't have both, for as the West African proverb wisely points out: "The man who tries to walk two roads will split his pants."

Change takes place when we conform to what God's Word commands us. There are two aspects of this conversion, this turning which Paul describes.

### **Conforming to God's Word changes us to worship God**

Worship that conforms demands we turn from that which is false

What the Thessalonians turned from were idols, the pagan false worship of the ancient world.

The word for idols was first used by Homer some six hundred years before this to refer to phantoms or any immaterial form, a reflection in water or an idea in the mind. In the ancient world the word was not used to refer to their gods, because they assumed they were real. The word *idol* by its nature is a put down. If an idol is something that is empty, void of anything real, to say *American Idol* is a redundancy.

Idol implies the absence of any being behind it. It is a flight of fancy. As we read earlier from Jeremiah 10, they are impotent to act. They can not effect real change, doing neither good nor

evil. But so that we don't dismiss this as something so foreign to whom we are, when we understand that an idol is any person or thing that has usurped in the heart the place of preeminence that belongs to the Lord, then we will see we daily manufacture idols.

Augustine aptly identified idolatry as **worshiping** anything that ought to be **used**, or **using** anything that is meant to be **worshiped**.

In his book *The Brand Gap*, Marty Neumeier presents disciplines that help companies effectively create, cultivate, and protect their unique brands. Brand loyalty becomes the pagan worship. Using language not of a Christian critique, but a casting of our world with pagan imagery, Neumeier uncovers some interesting ways that corporate brands affect individual consumers:

Depending on your Unique Buying State, you can join any number of tribes on any number of days and feel part of something bigger than yourself. You can belong to the Callaway tribe when you play golf, the VW tribe when you drive to work, and the Williams-Sonoma tribe when you cook a meal. You're part of a select clan (or so you feel) when you buy products from these clearly differentiated companies. Brands are the little gods of modern life, each ruling a different need, activity, mood, or situation. Yet you're in control. If your latest god falls from Olympus, you can switch to another one.<sup>4</sup>

We look to those idols to change us, thinking we are in control, but they control us. But what is doubly sad is that which we want to control us, the idols we bow down before of happiness and security, of sex and pleasure, of power and status ... are empty and powerless. They are shadows of something far better. Instead we are called to turn from them, to serve the living and true God.

Worship that conforms demands we turn toward that which is true

If we want to experience real change, we must understand that at the core of our idolatry is not ingratitude for what God has done, but misguided gratitude. Idolatry at its heart is about serving the wrong thing. Whatever is the ultimate object of our worship is what we serve and we will serve whatever we think meets our needs.

For this reason Paul uses an unusual term in the ancient world for worship, saying that real change means turning from serving that which is empty and false, to serve the living and true God. This link between worship and service is made in Romans 1:25 where Paul makes it clear that the object of our worship always becomes the master of our behavior. Idolatry, whether in the age-old worship of nature or in the modern worship of ourselves, is consequently the same: worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator

Change comes as we recognize that our worship is to be of the living and true God.

These terms help us clarify what our turning should look like. Worship, our purpose in life is to be directed toward that which is living, it is relationship based. This is something that our image conscience culture will never deliver. This is something that any object we seek to obtain or any goal we think will satisfy us. If all you want is happiness, you have missed the mark. If it is a satisfying marriage, you are an idolater. For our goal in life, for there to be real change in us we must serve the living God.

Worship means we are in relationship with the triune God.

What is more, it must be true. While we live in a culture that debates the validity of any truth claim, we know that for something to change us, it must have some basis in reality. It must never change. It must be true. (See John 4:24 – worship in spirit and in truth)

### **Conforming to God's Word changes us to persevere for God**

But to maintain this service, to continue to worship, to see change through, we must persevere. That is the final aspect of conforming to God's Word.

Conversion is not about what list of sins we cease and good things we do. It is about serving God and waiting for His Son. Up to this point, Paul polemic against idolatry could work for a moral Jew, but this second aspect sets it apart as distinctly Christian. And it is here we find what our life will look like as we wait.

The word *wait* in v10 is not the impatient finger drumming waiting we do in a traffic jam, a baby to finally fall asleep or for me to stop droning on, but the patient trusting, the eager

expectation of something better to come. The one we are to wait for is the Son, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

The deliverance Paul speaks of here is in the present tense. It is something that takes place here and now. This is not referring to some time in the future in which Jesus will come to our aid, but a present removal from wrath.

This is a critical aspect to hold on to if we are going to change. If change means I must turn from idols, to God and serve him alone, then I am in deep trouble. But if change also means I have to wait patiently for Jesus to come again ... I am not much better off. But here we see the gospel give us hope for real and lasting change.

The wrath mentioned here is what awaits us if we don't change, but Jesus' deliverance is promised here and now because of the line which precedes: whom the Father raised from the dead. That little refrain gives us comfort. Here the gospel confronts and comforts us.

That Jesus was raised reminds us that he died. He died because of the Father's wrath was poured out on him. For you to experience the change we all long for, real and lasting change, we must be changed, we must see the idolatry that pervades our lives and serve God, not ourselves and desires. But change will still not come. Final change comes as we wait for the final day. But we need not fear the wait, for Christ comes to complete his work in us, not consume us in his anger.

Change should not frighten or anger us, rather change conforms us to God's Word through the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

The trouble with change is that we go about it all the wrong ways.

We think if we clean up the outside, God will be pleased with our intent. That conforming to His Word is a matter of lifestyle, of productivity, of getting rid of idols and serving God. The trouble is change like that is nothing more than putting lipstick on a bulldog.

Do you know what it means to put lipstick on a bulldog? Rather than deal with an ugly and nasty problem (apologies to bulldog owners), we make superficial changes and try to pass them off as real improvements. The result of this cosmetic effort is that the bulldog's appearance hasn't improved, but now it's really angry.

When we feel sorry for doing wrong or for getting caught, it is nothing more than a spiritual cosmetic. When we conclude that we have done wrong and need to do better next time and that is enough to create real change – pucker up, here comes the Maybelline. Some of us have spent years before the mirror applying lipstick ... and we are very angry.

But true repentance occurs deep in our hearts and results in a visible difference in our actions. When we turn to Christ and yield ourselves to Him, He produces real change—not just a cover-up. Change comes not when you change yourself, but when you turn from the idolatry of your own efforts, your own power to make a difference and finally see that you need to serve a God who will change you.

What lipstick are you putting on your bulldog face? What pitiful attempt are you trying to make, perhaps for all the right reasons, to be better, to be different? You may think spending more time with the kids is a good idea, but that is not real change as a father. Tithing is certainly a fine idea, but that is not real change. Those, in the end, may be just new and improved idols. What about for us as a church. Did you think this building was a good change? Nothing wrong with it, but it too can be lipstick on a bulldog, it will be an idol, if we think that this is what is necessary to get us to reach out and grow.

Mr. Nasser waited in the terminal, but never stepped out. Change became impossible. So he lived between two worlds, afraid to move. With all the appearance of a traveler, he sat each day, waiting for something, but doing nothing. He looks like he is going to change planes, but never does. Is that the story of your life?

If we wish to see real change, we must live a life of conversion, of being changed by God's grace, of daily turning from the idols we erect every morning, seeking how to best serve the living and true God wherever he has placed us and to wait. We must wait, final change is not here, but in waiting we hold onto the hope that we are now being delivered from the Father's wrath for the Son is raised from the dead. Change begins here. Feeding on God's promise found in the meal before us.

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<sup>1</sup> A Man Without a Country. 12/25/97, E. Neuffer, Boston Globe.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from: Ray Moseley, "At Last, Airport 'Prisoner' Gets His Walking Papers," Chicago Tribune (9-21-99)

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merhan\\_Karimi\\_Nasseri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merhan_Karimi_Nasseri)

<sup>4</sup> Marty Neumeier, The Brand Gap (AIGA, 2006), p. 41