**Turn to God from idols** 16/7/23 dkm

Read: Romans 6, 1Thessalonians 1

Text: 1Thessalonians 1:9-10

Psalms: 115:1-9, 94:9-15, 139:1-10, 117

India is renowned for its idols because the many gods of Hinduism are represented by images carved in wood or stone, or fashioned from brass or clay. We saw idols in the form of elephants, snakes, monkeys and man throughout the city where we lived, and in every village. Every twelve years millions of Hindus gathered on the outskirts of the city to take a dip in the ‘holy water’ of the Ganges. We saw them erect a huge, 10m idol of Shiva, one of their gods, pictured with bluish skin and four arms holding a cobra and trishul. Looking around the city were we now live, we do not see Hindu idols all over the place, but some are appearing nowadays. What about other idols or carved images, some seen outside churches! These may not be as grotesque as Shiva and snakes, but they are carved images nevertheless.

The Greeks and Romans had their man-made gods, represented in idols of wood, stone and metal. Such images have been discovered and put on display in galleries around the world. We went to such a display in Canberra some years ago because I wanted to learn more about the culture into which Paul first preached the gospel. We saw similar displays in galleries in Europe. Greek gods were deified men and women from their myths and legends. They had different gods for different needs, just like the Hindus, and indeed the Canaanites before them, a god for the weather, for fertility, for love, for learning, for money, and so on.

What is interesting is that the things represented by these gods are still worshipped today; love and sex, money, family, education, science, and the climate, for example. We may not have images of these gods but they can be there as gods in our hearts. You, like me, probably think, ‘I do not worship idols’, but turn back a page in your Bible and read Colossians 3:5. Paul calls sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and covetousness or greed, idolatry. And in Ephesians 5:5 he calls an immoral, impure, or greedy person an idolater. Paul assures us that such a person has no place in the kingdom of God but is under the wrath of God. So idolatry exists in our society as much as it did in ancient Greece or modern India.

The apostle Paul ends his prayer of thanks to God for the Thessalonians rejoicing in their conversion, their becoming true Christians after hearing the gospel preached and being touched by the Holy Spirit. He had given thanks for their changed lives, for evidences of their faith, their love, and their hope seen by everyone who knew them or heard about their transformed lives. In these closing verses he takes them, and us, to the heart of their transformation, to their conversion. This conversion can also be called, being born again, going for death to life, or from dark to light (John 3:3, Eph 2:1, 5:8).

The apostle identifies three things that happened in the hearts and lives of this believers in Thessalonica, and indeed in us if we are truly converted. Firstly, they turned to God from idols, secondly, they went on to serve the living and true God, and thirdly, they waited for Jesus to come from heaven.

**1. Turn to God from idols**

Many who were persuaded by the preaching of Paul were devout Greeks (Acts 17:4). They were probably God-fearers who heard Paul in the synagogue at Thessalonica. Such Greeks were attracted by the moral standards of the Jews and their monotheism, but were still involved in the worship of idols. They were ripe for the gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to touch and change their lives. This change was obvious to all. They threw all idols out of their house and stopped going to the local temple; no more sacrificing to demons (1Cor 10:20). Some Hindus think they can add Jesus to their list of gods but true converts threw out all the gods they once worshipped and burned their pagan books (Acts 19:19).

Speaking of Hindus and the Hindi language, I like the word they have for repentance which literally means to ‘turn the mind’. In Greek the word for repentance is literally ‘to perceive afterwards’, but the word translated ‘turned’ in verse 9 means the same thing. It means to turn completely around in your thinking and your living. If you were a smoker you will know that it is no use stopping for just a day or a week. I knew a lady who stopped drinking, except on Fridays! Many think they can be Christian by coming to church on Sunday, or every other Sunday, or at Christmas and Easter. Paul thought these Christians at Thessalonica might have become such Christians, going to the temple on Saturday and church on Sunday! But no, they had turned away from idols, throwing them out, burying them, burning them or whatever, never to be seen again. They had turned to God, who filled every desire of their new hearts; they were new creation in Christ Jesus.

Idols are not necessarily images carved out of stone or crafted in metal. Mind you, we have plenty of such images around us. I have a neighbour with four expensive cars and a motor bike, and another with two cars, a boat and a caravan. And what about young people with their mobile phones! Ligon Duncan in his new commentary, which I waited for before starting to study Thessalonians, describes and idol as whatever brings us satisfaction and security, or delight and hope. Many find delight, satisfaction, and security in their house or in their car- and maybe their boat and caravan. Some are quite satisfied with their savings, shares, or superannuation, which they keep a close eye on. Some find delight in gambling, but there is not much security in this! In truth, there is little security in any of these modern day idols; a house be consumed by fire in an instant.

If you claim not to be an idolater, let me challenge you with three questions asked by Duncan in his book. Firstly, what do you think about when you are not thinking about anything else? As human beings made in the image of God we are thinkers, always thinking except when asleep. When bored at work or in church, what do you think about? It may be a worry, or you might switch to thoughts of pleasure or security, or even fantasies. I am challenged about my browsing on the internet, or thinking about jobs around the house that distract me when reading my Bible, or even in prayer. Years ago I sat at the back of a lecture theatre and noticed lots of computer screens were not taking notes. In Philippians 4:8 Paul tells us to meditate or think on things that are true, are pure, and are lovely. Note that in verse 9, God is the true and living God; our Lord is also pure and lovely.

Secondly, how do you spend your time and energy and resources? What do you do in your spare time? There is a children’s story about a king who counted his money every day! A friend spends his time watching the price of shares. Others spend every spare moment on the sports field; as a teen I hurried to finish work so I could play cricket. Many spend every spare moment browsing the internet or watching TV, sometimes watching defiling things like pornography.

What about the way you spend your energy and resources- any idols that get the bulk of these? Do you think that if you have ‘turned to God from idols’, God should get a greater share of these? Have you thought of giving everything to God, all your time, all your energy and all your resources? God is no man’s debtor. Make your work time, your family time and your leisure time all a subset of God’s time! In other words, you are always reading your Bible, praying or in church, except when serving the Lord in other ways, like your day job!

The third question is: What disappoints you? What would absolutely crush you if you lost it or failed at it? I have heard of teenagers sobbing uncontrollably when parted from their mobile phone! But we don’t have any idols do we! Some make their spouse, or lack of a spouse, an idol. Family, wife, husband or children can become an idol. Many think they are good people because they put family first but Jesus says he must be first. Unless our ultimate source of satisfaction and security in life is Jesus, we are idolaters. Remember, any lust of the flesh or of the eyes is an idol that must be put away, with Jesus being put in its place.

**2. To serve the living and true God**

Whatever idol you have in your life be sure that it will not last; it will not satisfy and it will not give you security. Moses, wise servant that he was, chose to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin (Heb 11:25). The huge statue of Shiva that I mentioned was consumed in a flood soon after the Hindus bowed down to it. If you have a person as your idol at least it is a living idol, but is it ‘true and living’, an idol that never fails? Only God is unfailing in love for us and only God lives for ever and ever. So only God is worthy of our worship; why worship something less than God! Why indeed! Why do we make idols in the first place? Idols are man-made gods, gods that man makes and controls. The true and living God is not under our control. He is separate from his creation, which itself is finite in time and space.

While we are made in the image of God, God is not a man. We are to worship him in spirit and truth. We are to live for him and serve him with all our being, all our energy, our time and our resources. The word ‘serve’ could be translated ‘slave’. Upon conversion we stop being slaves of Satan and become slaves of God (Rom 6:20-22). But God is such a benevolent boss or ‘slave-master’ we delight to serve him; his yoke is easy and his burden light (Mat 11:30). Moreover, his reward is greater than anything found in this world, namely everlasting life (Rom 6:22, 23).

**3. To wait for His Son from heaven**

Conversion means turning, and serving, and waiting. Be sure that conversion does not mean freedom to do as you like- that would be to return to idolatry. It means free to serve God; what we call sanctification (4:3). If you want to get married, and stay married, you must change the way you live, especially when you have children. When you become the ‘bride of Christ’ you have all Christ’s children to serve; let us serve one another in Christ. You have the gospel of Jesus Christ to take into all the world.

Idleness is not the way of serving the Lord. Waiting for Jesus to come does mean being idle either. Paul reprimands some at Thessalonica for thinking like this (5:14, 2Thess 3:10, 11). Waiting for the Lord means serving him more sincerely and seriously, trying to hasten the day of his coming (2Peter 3:12). God has set a day when Jesus will return and it will not be changed, but keeping busy in His service will make the wait seem shorter!

Is the return of the Lord Jesus or ‘*Parousia*’ part of your thinking today? It is not central to the preaching in many churches today. But it was in Paul’s day, as we see here in verse 10. In fact, it is the focus of these two letters to the Thessalonians. After dying on the cross and being buried, God raised Jesus from the dead. He did this for us and for our salvation. In his death he suffered the wrath of God that was upon us for our sin. Also included in the gospel is the return of Jesus on the clouds of heaven (Mat 24:30). This was not an addition to simply comfort the persecuted Thessalonians. They found comfort in this truth, but it is a truth no Christian can overlook or ignore (1Cor 15:19). Jesus is risen from the dead and has ascended into heaven, from where he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

When Jesus returns it will be in judgment upon this world. We are in the last days, but the last day is yet to come. The wrath of the Lamb will come as a great shock to his enemies, to any and to all who have rejected or ignored the call of the Saviour of the world (Rev 6:16). They will flee from his wrath but find no place to hide; kings and rich people and all who hate Christ and his people will be judged. The God of justice will deliver justice on that day.

In Jesus Christ we are delivered from the ‘wrath to come’ (1:10). Every believer will suffer in this world, because this world hates Christ (John 15:18). But for those who are in Christ, suffering will come to an end when Jesus returns, and the suffering of those outside of Christ will begin! Paul writes to comfort those who have ‘turned to God from idols’. Are you comforted by his words? Are you living like a person who truly believes Jesus might return next week, or even tomorrow?