

# Foundation Truths (1 Thess. 1:9:10)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of a solid foundation in the Christian life, built on the four elements of God's worthiness, waiting for His Son from heaven, the resurrection of Jesus, and deliverance from the wrath to come.*

**Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 1:9

**Topics:** "Hope in Christ", "Worship"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the foundational truths of the Christian life as illustrated in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, where new converts turned from idols to serve the living God and await the return of Jesus. He highlights the importance of recognizing God's worthiness and the necessity of a heart fully devoted to Him, which was evident in the exemplary character of the Thessalonian believers. Sparks explains that their faith was rooted in the reality of Christ's resurrection and the hope of His return, which provided them with assurance and purpose amidst trials. He warns against the dangers of idolatry and the need for believers to understand their deliverance from impending wrath through Jesus. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deep commitment to God, recognizing Him as the only true source of hope and life.

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## Transcript

"Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians has been divided into five short chapters which can all be read in about ten minutes. Certain things emerge even as we are reading. The first is that this was written to comparatively new converts so that we can learn something about how they started and had been progressing so far. It is a message about the beginnings of the Christian life. Then we are impressed by the exemplary character of these young Christians. The apostle had no fault to find with them, but everything to commend. He wrote that he gave thanks to God always for them all; and he went on to say that they had become an example to all that believed. Best of all we can find here some definition of the gospel which produced such Christians. Paul called it "our gospel" and recalled that it came to them in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the last two verses of the first chapter he made a few concise statements which represent an epitome of this gospel. It needed a master hand to gather such majestic truth into the compass of four simple clauses, but here they are:

1. "Ye turned unto God from idols to serve a living and true God".

That is the first stage of the Christian life. It might be argued that these had been pagans in a pagan world with its system of idol worship, so the comparison cannot fairly be made between them and people of our own 'Christian' society. My answer is that it is quite right in principle and in fact to class all unsaved people together. The principle is that the idea behind the word 'serve' is that of worship, which is really 'worth-ship'. These people had devoted themselves to other objects than God, and wrongly imagined that these were the things of real worth. What belongs to God and is not given to Him but to some other object is really idolatry. And what all men do, in many forms and in different ways is to give their lives in service to false gods.

So the first stage of a true Christian life is this - the realisation and recognition that God is worth your giving everything to Him. He is worthy to have the worth-ship of your life, to have all that you have and are laid at His feet. So when Paul and his companions (for he wrote in the plural) came to this people, he set forth in the first place the worthiness of God to have all their lives, and to have them altogether. As he spoke of the living and true God the Holy Spirit made them realise how different they had been and how unworthy had been the course hitherto. We can only see the worthiness of God in Christ, and it is to Him that the Spirit testifies:

'Marvel not that Christ is glory

All my inmost heart has won.'

That is where it all begins. Anything less than that, anything other than that as a beginning will find us out sooner or later. He is One who, by reason of His self-manifestation and of the great work He has done for our redemption, is worthy to have everything that we count worthwhile in life.

As we go on in the Christian life, it is upon that very thing - our foundational beginnings - that we are tested again and again. It comes up repeatedly - Is Jesus Christ worthy of this? Is God worthy of this? Is this something which is too valuable to give up to Him or for Him? What place does He have in comparison with this? And if at the beginning there is any faultiness or weakness about that, we shall find ourselves sooner or later held up until we have got through on the sheer and direct question of whether He is worthy.

These Thessalonians made such a good start, and then went on to become such exemplary Christians because they settled it very thoroughly in their hearts at the beginning that there was nothing in the world worth receiving their worship compared with Him. It indicates the deep and large place which they gave to the Lord Jesus from the very start. All along the way we have to face this test - 'is the Lord worthy of this? Is He big enough even for this?' So it comes back to the simple question - which often is not so simple - as to whether He has captured and captivated our hearts and been given first place there. You can go bounding on in your Christian life if this is settled. You will make little or no progress if you have questions and controversies in this connection. If we harbour reserves, if we want our own way, if we want to serve our personal interests, then we do not go on but are held up.

These Christians made swift progress because there was no division of heart between them and the Lord about anything. Through the Scriptures the Lord brings us the challenge as to whether this is foundational in our walk with Him. After all the Lord is not satisfied for us just to have head knowledge about Himself and His truth. He does not accept our informed minds, even though they hold orthodox views as to His cross, His church and whatever. The Lord looks right down into our hearts to enquire what place is given there to Him. He is less concerned about the spiritual information which we hold in our minds and much more desirous of being given the full worship of our hearts. From the first moment the Thessalonians

determined to worship God. That matter was fully settled, and so it was possible for Paul to thank God always for them. He saw that they had no personal interests and no wishes of their own. They were devoted to the Lord without reserve and were right out for Him. Such people always provoke praise to God.

"A living and true God." That is why He is worthy of worship. If we give our lives and pour them out in any other direction than for God, we are pouring treasure into the sand. There is going to be no return. That will be an end in itself, and will produce a death from which there is no return. God, however, is living and true. Everything else will prove false and empty. If there is one thing about Christian life it is the absolute reality of God. For our flesh it is not always quite pleasant to face that reality, but it is at least reality. Far better to come up against God as reality even in a painful way, than not to know who God is and where. Far better to have a living God who checks you up, if necessary who chastens you, than to have a god who is no God at all.

## 2. "...to wait for his Son from heaven..."

Many people have failed to recognise that this waiting for the return of Christ is part of the foundation of Christian life, and part of the gospel by which we are saved. To wait for His Son from heaven. What did this mean to the Thessalonians? In this brief letter Paul had much to say to them about the coming again of the Lord Jesus. Amongst a great many other things, it means that all our personal hopes and our hope for the world is bound up with the kingdom of Christ. Apart from His coming and bringing in His kingdom there is no hope at all. So it was that the Thessalonians realised that until they knew Christ they had been wearing themselves out for things which offered no solid hope. Life had been an enigma, a tragedy, until they were able to expect this eternal kingdom of God's Son.

When they came to the Lord they did so on this basis, namely that God's Son is coming again and will put everything right. The one hope for mankind is the coming kingdom. It is one of the strange enigmas that the world still has false hopes of putting itself right. Someone has said that 'all we have learned from history is that we have learned nothing from history', and that is just what is happening. Men are getting into deeper and deeper mire and perplexity, not seeing any way through, and yet all the time they are seeking for expedients to save the situation and rescue the world. But it is a counsel of despair. The Word of God makes it perfectly clear that there is no hope for humanity apart from Jesus Christ being in the place of absolute Lordship in His kingdom. The Thessalonians came to believe that. They did learn something from history. What they learned was that it gets you nowhere - except into more and more trouble, more perplexity and final despair. Then they saw that God's Son is coming from heaven to set up His kingdom and they knew that when that happened all would be well with God's redeemed humanity.

This is fundamental. Let us get it settled right at the beginning, not as a mere study of prophecy about the Second Coming, but as a fundamental conviction that our hopes do not rest on any prospect in this world, but only on the sure and certain expectation of the personal role of Christ. He is coming, and when He comes all will be well. We shall be lifted above that which now limits us. Is it not remarkable that when we Christians sing a hymn about the coming of the Lord something seems to be released? It is not just that we have a lovely idea, sing about it and so feel better, but rather that the Holy Spirit comes to us in full measure as we concentrate on the coming Lord. After all the Spirit is working everything in the light of that day, and when He finds the people of God in harmony with Him, He gives a wonderful sense of uplift and life. How many people in sufferings and trials have been lifted clean out and up just by being reminded that Jesus is coming again?

Many years ago I used to visit an old couple who were so poor that they lived in one room. The old man had not moved out of his armchair for twenty years, and as he could not be left alone, his wife rarely went out of the house. They had nothing in this world. Were they unhappy and depressed? Not a bit of it! I used to pay them a regular visit every week and they were always a rebuke to me. They always gave me a smiling welcome and wanted to know what I had been preaching about. And their hope? The coming of the Lord. Right to the end they lived rejoicing in this expectation. Now it was no false hope in their case, even though the Lord did not return in their lifetime. The hope is valid to us all and the Holy Spirit bears witness that this is the goal to which He is leading us - the coming kingdom. If you read on in this letter you will find that the Thessalonians knew quite a bit about adversity - they "received the word in much affliction". They knew ostracism, they knew persecution, they knew what it was to be frustrated in their business life by reason of their faith. They knew physical suffering and inward distress, but they went on. They were examples to others. Why? Just because they were looking for God's Son from heaven. It was a basic part of their faith in Christ.

### 3. "...whom he raised from the dead..."

The one they were waiting for, the one in whom they were trusting, was the one who had been raised from the dead. What did that mean for them? There is only one who can raise from the dead, and that is God. So if God raised Jesus from the dead it is a clear proof that in His opinion the work for which He came into the world had been perfectly completed. We know that Jesus had died in order to accomplish full redemption for sinful mankind. He died to deal with the whole sin question and to take away condemnation from believing men. This work had been completed to God's own satisfaction, as He attested by His act of raising Christ from the dead. The debt had been fully paid. The condemnation had been wholly taken away. This is the meaning of the resurrection.

This was a key point in Paul's preaching. It had been received by the Thessalonians who now knew that the whole sin question was for them a settled matter. Forgiveness is secured; salvation is established; God is satisfied. How important it is that we should all have this great truth built into our spiritual foundations. So many Christians suffer from a sense of accusation and condemnation which completely undermines this fundamental fact of the finished work of Christ. It is true that we still make mistakes, we blunder, we default, we err, we sin, but we must never allow satanic forces to rush in with their persistent suggestion that the work of the cross is not enough and that we can again be brought back on to the ground of condemnation. If we do give any ground to the accuser we shall never make the kind of spiritual progress which was evident in the Thessalonian believers. On the contrary we shall find ourselves living a very jerky kind of Christian life, going on for a bit, then pausing, coming up only to fall down again. Those who get into that kind of repeated condemnation become a playground for the Devil, never going on steadily in the way that makes it possible for God's servants who labour among them to say that they thank God on every remembrance of them. God raised His Son from the dead! This is a basic truth which will bring us deliverance. Moreover we are told that He "raised us up with him" (Ephesians 2:6). Therefore we have no right to be downcast. We need not reason or argue about the matter but just rejoice, as the Thessalonians did, that it has all been fully and finally settled by the resurrection from the dead of our crucified Saviour.

### 4. "...even Jesus, who delivereth us from the wrath to come."

This clause brings a shadow into our thinking, a shadow which we would much rather avoid, but which is nevertheless a part of the foundation of our faith. For the Word of God declares again and again that wrath

is coming. It is coming. Paul's words carry no vagueness or doubt but declare quite clearly and definitely that there is coming a day of God's wrath. If we ask why it has to be, the answer is that it was never originally appointed for man but was intended for Satan and his angels. We are back to our original words about idols. There are only two gods in this universe. One is the true God whom we serve and the other may have various forms and representations but is really the god of this world, Satan. It is true that the number of those who would actually claim to be Satan-worshippers is comparatively small, but this does not alter the fact that man is a worshipping creature and either worships the true and living God or allows His rival to take His rightful place in the life, and so gives the 'worth-ship' to the Devil. Satan's first approach to man is always the attractive one. He started as the most beautiful of all God's creatures (Ezekiel 28:12-15). "Even Satan" says the apostle Paul, "fashioneth himself into an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). It is in this guise that he seeks to capture men's hearts and obtain their worship, and when he gets it, then he drags his followers into the same condemnation which God has prepared for him. That is the terror of the gospel. It is real but it is not for the believer, for God delivers us from it, because we accept the redemption so freely provided in the Lord Jesus.

This was the fourth element in the foundation of the exemplary Christian experience of the Thessalonians. They knew of the wrath to come, but they also knew that it was not for them. And they were able to proclaim a similar deliverance for all who would receive their testimony. God's people are free people. They do not dread the future; they do not live under the shadow of judgment. There are no dark clouds of condemnation on their horizon but only the bright Morning Star of their coming Lord. However much progress we make in the Christian life we must never forget these basic facts. Indeed it is on such a foundation that we can make the kind of progress which provoked such glad recognition by the apostle Paul in regard to the church of God in Thessalonica.

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