

January 17, 2016  
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## MAKING A HOCKEY STOP 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

When I was a junior in college I began dating a young woman who lived a few miles away from my school. She was the first girl I took out more than once while I was at school and turned out to be the only one. I thought she was terrific. We dated for about 3 months and I thought this relationship was going someplace. I was right. It was going into the dumpster. She informed me in as kind a fashion as possible that our relationship had run its course and it had no future. It had no future because she didn't want it to have one. I checked a little later to find out if this had been a moment of temporary insanity, but she assured me it was not.

I was heartbroken. I went into a spin, began hanging out at the 24 hour doughnut shop at all hours of the night, trying to ease the pain by medicating myself with jelly doughnuts. I tried to convince myself that I was better off without her. She lived on her family's dairy farm, and I told myself that whenever I encountered the unique smell that accompanied that establishment it reminded me of her. Yes, I was the poster child for sour grapes. I felt that loss for several years.

Hindsight, of course, is 20-20. I see that relationship far more clearly today than I did back then. Chiefly I see now that for me it was a rabbit trail. It did not have anything to do with the real direction of my life. And if I had even a hint of where my life was really going, of the woman God was going to give me as the love of my life I would not have wasted a moment on that doomed relationship. I certainly wouldn't have been heartbroken about its demise. This is no knock on that girl I dated. She was a very fine person. I'm sure she was a wonderful wife for the man she married a year or so later. But she was no Laurie Myatt. No one is. The takeaway here is had I known what awaited me it would have radically changed both how I acted and how I felt about that whole situation.

There are some truths that we can know about God and about our future that, if we truly come to grips with them, will radically alter what we do and how we think about our own lives. That happened with the Thessalonian Christians. We will see that today and hopefully learn from it as we take a look at 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10.

### THEY TURNED FROM IDOLS

The Christians of Thessalonica were sort of celebrities. Paul said in the previous verses that people in Macedonia and Achaia and really everywhere had heard

about them. Something unusual, something remarkable had happened with them. What was it that made these people so different from the world around them? What was so unusual that it caught the attention of people living far away?

The first thing we can see in these verses is they “turned.” On our way to church this morning we got off the freeway at Lomas Santa Fe Drive. When we got to the bottom of the exit ramp we made a 90 degree right turn onto the surface street. A couple of blocks down the street we made a left turn onto Stephens Avenue. The kind of turn Paul wrote about was not that kind of turn. It was much more radical.

When I was a couple of years out of college my brother inspired me and a number of other people, including some of my good friends, to think we could learn how to play ice hockey. We had all become fans of the Los Angeles Kings hockey team. We loved watching the game and thought it would be fun to play it. The big fly in that ointment was that none of us could ice skate, a kind of important prerequisite for playing ice hockey. Such a minor obstacle couldn’t stop us. A number of us bought hockey skates and sticks and set about trying to play hockey. This involved a number of outings to ice rinks to work on just learning to skate. You probably know how awkward that is. The initial sessions consisted of trying to move around a rink in some stilted fashion without getting killed. Eventually we got to the place that we could kind of move along the ice with some semblance of stability, at least as long as we were going straight. You’re not going to do much good in a hockey game if all you can do is go straight. We slowly began to master the skill of turning to the right and to the left. Slowly we got to the place where we could do that most of the time. But if you’ve ever watched a hockey game you know that’s not enough. The game can be flowing one direction and in an instant go back the opposite direction when one player steals the puck from an opponent. The only way you can play the game is to be able to do the same thing. You have to be able to skate in one direction and almost instantly stop and head in the exact opposite direction. This requires learning to do a hockey stop. This is a maneuver in which you suddenly turn your skates so they are perpendicular to the direction you are going and dig the edges of your blades into the ice to come to a dramatic and nearly instant stop. It’s not an easy maneuver to master. One night I was with a couple of friends at a rink and we were practicing that. One of my buddies thought he had the hang of it and was ready to try it at a higher speed. He got going at a pretty good clip then tried to jam on the brakes. Only instead of digging his edges into the ice all he managed to do was have them turn in a quick circle. He went totally out of balance and pitched over forward, hitting the ice face first. He ended up with stitches in his forehead and a broken nose.

That's a long way of saying the kind of turn Paul was referring to wasn't a turn to the right or the left. It wasn't veering onto a slightly different course. It was a hockey stop, followed by heading off full speed in the exact opposite direction they had been going. Those people had been pursuing and worshiping idols. Obviously most of the people in that church were Gentiles who had been steeped in pagan religions. They worshiped idols. That's what everybody did. It was the norm in their culture. If you didn't worship idols you were weird. In his commentary on the Thessalonian letters D. Edmond Hiebert wrote, "since idolatry was inseparably connected with all phases of pagan life, a conversion which led to the rejection and renunciation of idols was indeed a revolutionary experience."

Note his comment that idolatry was inseparably connected with all phases of pagan life. The worship of idols touched their business, their family, their friendships, their status in the community, their morality, their finances and their values. It impacted their moral decisions and how they treated other people. Turning away from those idols had the real possibility of impacting negatively many of those areas of their lives. It could have serious impact on family, friendships and business. But the Thessalonian Christians made that choice. They jammed on the brakes and headed away from those idols with all their energy.

It is easy for us to think this is at best a marginally interesting historical note but that it has nothing to do with us. After all most of us don't worship idols. We are quite clear that a manmade idol is powerless. Why worship that? So what does this have to do with us? The late Ray Stedman said, "Modern America is surely one of the most idolatrous countries the world has ever seen. We are surrounded by idol worship."

How can this be true? I don't see idols in most people's homes. I don't know many people who go to a temple and worship some statue. *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* says, "In the New Testament idolatry was extended to mean obsession with anything to the degree that it took the place of devotion to God." Colossians 3:5 affirms this when it says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." The same idea shows up in Ephesians 5:5, "For of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of God and of Christ."

Are people obsessed with anything to the degree that it takes the place of devotion to God? Just asking the question makes us laugh. Of course they are. There is a whole universe of things that people are obsessed with instead of God. Fame,

approval, money, beauty, status, possessions, success are just a few that would make that list.

Writer William Giraldi's father tragically died in a motorcycle accident at the age of 47. Every weekend his dad would cruise the highways with his biker friend. His motto for life was "ride hard." His insistence on insane speed resulted in his death. After his death Giraldi tried to come to grips with losing his father. He tried to understand. He visited the scene of the accident and went to the motorcycle shop that his dad had taken his bike to. One of the mechanics told Giraldi, "to go out doing what you love...that's the only way to die. It's honorable." But Giraldi wrote that his dad's Sunday rides had replaced God. They were a substitute savior. Reflecting on the mechanic's comment that it was honorable to go out doing what he loved Giraldi wrote, "Of course I don't believe that. There's nothing honorable about dying a violent death at 47 years old and leaving behind a score of family members whose lives are all ruined in some way."

Giraldi's dad had an idol, and it was riding his motorcycle. What do you think is absolutely essential for you to truly live? What is it that lights your heart on fire and brings joy? What is it that if you were to be deprived of it you feel life would become unbearable? Whatever that thing is, it is vying with God for position in your heart. It is a dangerous, potentially fatal idol.

Philosopher Charles Taylor said that all human beings experience 3 things at times: fullness, which is a feeling of euphoria and rightness when you are your happiest, emptiness, which is the exact opposite, that since that your life is utterly empty and useless, and the middle condition when things are basically just okay. It is in that middle condition we spend most of our daily lives. Taylor says we are all desperate to experience fullness and we structure our lives around the pursuit of it. The thing you believe brings fullness is your idol.

It is helpful for us to remember the true nature of idols. Why did people back in the day worship idols? They believed, or at least hoped, that they could influence some power that the idol represented to give them what they wanted. Two millennia ago it might have been sufficient rainfall for the crops, protection from pests, plentiful harvests, protection from bandits, fertility of crops, animals and yes, even wives. In her book, *Smoke On The Mountain* the late Joy Davidman, who was married to C. S. Lewis, wrote, "The essence of idolatry is its attempt to control and enslave the deity." Superstition, astrology, horoscopes, magic, witchcraft is not much different than idolatry. All of it is an attempt to bend some superhuman powers that exist out there to serve one's desires. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*

also said of idols that “they expressed (man’s) thoughts, desires and purposes...Idols were really expressions of self-worship.” Exactly. When we worship an idol, whatever it is, we are really worshiping ourselves.

Christians can actually distort the worship of the true God into idolatry. Behind idolatry there is always the god of self. The health and wealth gospel is nothing more than idolatry. It is an attempt to get God to serve our purposes. That’s obvious, but it can be more subtle. Every time a Christian becomes disillusioned with God or loses his faith because God has not given him what he wants or has allowed some disappointment or hardship in his life, he reveals that all along he was really worshiping an idol. His aim was not to worship God, but to convince God to serve him! He is not serving God, he is trying to use him.

1 Corinthians 8:4 says, “an idol is nothing at all in this world.” I don’t have much trouble believing that. Ganesha is one of the most widely worshiped Hindu deities. He has an elephant head and is supposedly known for removing obstacles. You can pray to that weird looking statue devoutly for hours every day and it won’t accomplish a thing. That’s because an idol is nothing. It cannot do anything!

I’d like to do a little math lesson here. In math the Transitive Property is that if  $A=B$  and  $B=C$  then  $A=C$ . Let A be that thing that you are certain you must get to have a full life. Then let B represent an idol. So  $A=B$  means this thing you are obsessing about is equal to an idol. But let’s let C represent absolutely zero. Nothing. 1 Corinthians 8:4 then would be stated mathematically as  $B=C$ . And idol equals nothing. Now do you see it? If  $A=B$  and  $B=C$ , then  $A=C$ . That thing you are obsessing about equals nothing! It is an illusion, a lie.

The only reasonable decision to make on a daily basis is to refuse to worship, to serve, to pursue that which is nothing. If that’s what you pursue what are you going to end up with? You will have nothing. Does anyone want to live his or her life in pursuit of nothing? I sure don’t. So let us make that hockey stop and sprint in the opposite direction. Let’s turn from our idols.

## THEY SERVED THE LIVING GOD

Having made that hockey stop though we don’t just stand still. We need to sprint in the opposite direction. Saying “no” to something is difficult if we don’t put something else in its place. I was reading something that was about losing weight and it suggested eating carrots instead of potato chips for a snack. The premise is that just saying “don’t eat potato chips” is hard to do unless you have something to put in their place. Unfortunately that presupposes that I eat potato chips because I

am hungry and need something to eat. Wrong. I eat them because I love their taste. Eating carrots isn't going to help with that. They taste all right, but they're nowhere close to potato chips. Do you see bags of carrots on the snack aisle next to the Doritos?

Maybe I got a little off point there. You understand that when you turn away from something you need to turn toward something else. To forego something it's best to replace it. This is especially true when it comes to worship. The undeniable reality is that every human worships something. Again I will quote Edmond Hiebert. He wrote, "Man's freedom consists in his liberty to choose his master, not to be without a master." Writer David Foster Wallace said the same thing. "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

What we need to do is replace the false gods we pursue with the one true God. The Thessalonians did that. The decision to turn away from idols had the potential of being difficult and costly. They needed something that would make that choice worth the cost. They found that something in the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice how the Lord is described. He is the living and true God. Success is not alive. Fame is not alive. Money is not alive. These things are inanimate just like an idol is inanimate. But God is alive. He is real. He is the living and true God.

Sometimes there is a certain unreality to our religion, isn't there? We mouth the right words of faith, but do we actually live like God is alive and real? Do we live as people who are children of the Almighty? Such people would be confident and optimistic about life because God is for them and with them. Such people would pray with expectation that God would answer them.

Have you heard of cargo cults? There are a number of forms of these, but the most interesting to me formed on some South Pacific islands during and after World War II. One of the classics is on the archipelago of Vanuatu 1000 miles north of Australia. The people who lived on those islands had been very isolated and had little to no contact with outsiders. When the war came to that area it brought first Japanese then allied sailors, soldiers and airmen to the islands. The people of those islands encountered things they had never seen before in the form of canned food, Coca Cola, clothes, basic medicines and weapons. These supplies were dropped in by parachute or airlifted in where there was an airstrip. Allied military personnel often shared their "cargo" with the locals. The islanders loved these exotic items. When the war ended the mysterious visitors and their incredible flying machines

disappeared. Disappointed, some of the islanders began to mimic the actions of their “heavenly” visitors, hoping their planes would return bringing more of the great gifts they had brought. They built a control tower out of rope and bamboo, a runway made of straw, they made clothes resembling military uniforms. They carved wooden headsets and exactly mimicked the hand gestures they had seen the visitors using on their airstrip. They believed if they faithfully reproduced these actions they would induce the visitors to return and bring more cargo.

Is that what we are doing when we worship our God? Is this religion as absurd as that? And is it really about getting more “cargo” for ourselves? And is it as foolish and empty as a cargo cult? No matter how much those people mimic the military people they had seen they are not going to influence them to airdrop or airlift supplies to them. Is our faith as empty and useless as that? No, our God is real. The Thessalonians understood that God is real. He created the heavens and the earth. He has the power of life and death. He actually physically entered the human drama in the form of Jesus Christ, when he was born as a baby, lived on this planet, was mocked, rejected, suffered and died here, only to come out of his tomb and live again. God has proven that he is real and that he is alive. It is this living God whom we serve.

It is interesting that the word Paul used in verse 9 that is translated “serve” is the Greek word *douleuein*. It is an infinitive formed from the root word that meant “slave.” Maybe you’ve watched *Downton Abbey* and observed the actions of the servants in that show. They served the nobles in that mansion, but that’s not the kind of service this word refers to. Those servants could quit at any time and go do something else. To be a *doulos*, a bond slave, means you don’t have that freedom. You belong to the master and you do whatever he says. You don’t have the freedom to say, “Oh, not today, Sir. I don’t feel like it.”

What would it be like to be a slave of the living and true God? It would mean that doing his will rules over everything else in our lives. It means that it wouldn’t just be a matter of doing routine religious rituals or duties. It would mean that God is real and present. It would mean we actually believe he is there and active in our lives and that we want nothing more than to do what he tells us. Our lives would be about one thing – doing his will and bring about his glory.

## THEY WAITED FOR THE SON

There was one more thing about the Thessalonians that made them so different from people around them. They were waiting for God’s Son to return to earth from heaven. They believed that he could come at any moment. They had some

confusion about that, which Paul will clear up later in this letter, but they believed he would come back in their lifetimes.

When we were awaiting the arrival of Leilani, our glorious granddaughter, I remembered the birth of our daughter, Carissa. Our doctor had pegged her due date at August 8. The month prior to that Laurie had an appointment almost every week with her obstetrician. Two weeks before the due date at Laurie's doctor appointment he informed her that the process of her baby coming had already begun. He said every indication was that it would be within 24 hours. He told her to go ahead and make an appointment for the next week, but she would not need it because her baby was on the way as they spoke. Imagine his surprise when Laurie showed up for her appointment the next week. He was apologetic, but even more certain that Laurie as about to deliver her baby. Once again he told her to make an appointment though she certainly wouldn't need it. There was a night when Laurie started having contractions and we were certain the big day had finally come. False alarm. Laurie went almost a month that way. I got to a place where I felt like it was never going to happen. I knew intellectually that there was a baby inside Laurie and that baby had to come out. I knew that Laurie had not just gotten morbidly obese in a remarkably short period of time and there was a baby in there, but it just began to feel like the baby was never going to finally come out. It had been so long it didn't seem like it was ever going to happen. It is easy for us to get to that same place about the return of Jesus to this earth.

When I was in late teens and twenties I read a number of books about the second coming of Jesus. I became certain that the time was near. Many Christians thought the same thing. World conditions matched up with what seemed to be described by Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and Jesus himself. It seemed like the Book of Revelations was about to unfold before our very eyes. It seemed almost certain that it had to happen by the end of 1980's at the latest. I told many people we needed to be ready, because Jesus was about to come back. It could be any day.

Forty years later we're still here and Jesus isn't. Those conditions which seemed to match up perfectly with the prophecies have changed. Now people are coming up with new explanations of how the world situation today is precisely what was described by the prophets. Surely now Jesus is about to return at any moment. There are churches and ministries that seem obsessed with prophecy and the "signs of the times." They are totally convinced that Jesus is about to come back. This is the time.



It could be, but it also may not be. The Thessalonians were certain that Jesus would come back during their lifetime, and they were wrong. I was sure Jesus was going to come back probably during the first half of my life, and I was wrong. I've had lots of company. There have been crowds of people, vast multitudes of them, who believed they were right on the very precipice of Armageddon and the blessed appearance of Jesus. And all of them have been wrong.

It's hard to wait. The longer the time goes on the harder it is. It is easy to become like I was during those last couple of weeks of Laurie's pregnancy with Carissa. Like me, we can easily have a sort of mental knowledge that it is going to happen, but to not really expect it. The more we build up that expectation that today is the day because we see the signs as we interpret prophecies only to be disappointed when it doesn't happen, the more we will begin to think it will never happen.

We need to shift our focus. We will visit this theme again later in this letter, but I exhort you even now, let's not get caught up in delirium that the signs tell us this is the time. That was never the point of the scripture's teaching about the second coming of Jesus. The point is for us to believe that he will indeed come back, though we do not know when. He will come like a thief in the night. I once experienced a thief coming in the night. It was shocking. It never occurred to us that such a thing would happen. So the point is that we must believe that Jesus will keep his promise. He will come back. It could be today. It could be this week. It could be this year. Or it could be in 200 years or more. Any of those times is equally likely. Let me repeat that: any of those times is equally likely. Therefore we should be as ready for him to show up today as we are for him to show up in a hundred years or more.

How will that affect us? How would it affect you if you knew for a fact that the Lord Jesus was going to return tomorrow? When I was a young I probably would not have been very happy about that. There were a lot of things I wanted to do before Jesus came back. My perspective on that has changed. There are many things that I still want to do and many that I enjoy, but I have come to understand that the pictures in the Bible of God's Kingdom speak to the deepest longings of our hearts.

Isaiah 11:6 says in that kingdom "the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them." That is a poetic and beautiful way of saying it will be safe there. It will be a place of real peace. Revelation 21:4 says in that kingdom "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or

crying or pain.” That kingdom will be more beautiful than anything we have ever experienced. All the joys of this world are merely the appetizers. The real meal is to come in that kingdom.

We can live then with hope and anticipation, eagerly looking forward to his coming, for it will be a huge relief. But that also means that we should be ready at any moment to stand before him. If we knew Jesus would come back tomorrow I think we would live today not with reckless abandon, but with enthusiastic abandon. The Bible tells us to be wise. So we need to prepare as though we are going to live out our years, however many we may have. But we need to have the attitude that this could be the very last day we have.

This past Christmas was nostalgic for me because though the arrival of Leilani was exceedingly joyful, it also was a loud reminder that life is changing for Laurie and me. It caused me to reflect on Christmas 1996. I remember very little about that Christmas. I remember that both Laurie’s parents and mine were with us that year. Laurie and Cherie helped put on a big children’s program at church that year. I remember through pictures that Laurie gave me a new pair of hockey pants for Christmas. I wish that I had paid more attention that year though, because though we had no idea at the time, it was the last Christmas I would ever have with my dad. He succumbed to cancer the following year and we never got to be with him at Christmas ever again.

The point of that sentimental journey is that today is the only day we can be certain of. Jesus could come back later today, or tonight or tomorrow or in a thousand years. So we should live each day all out. We should make the most of each moment. We should be totally present in everything we do this day and we should do it with all of our might. We should also remember this is what we were created for. Real joy, real life, will be experienced when we are with Jesus, so don’t get caught up in the empty idols of this world.

## CONCLUSION

Living by faith can be hard. It requires that we bet our lives on the premise that God exists and has made himself known. He is the living and true God. We cannot see him, hear him, or touch him, but we believe he is real. He has proven himself through the presence and actions of Jesus Christ and through fulfilled prophecy. At the end of the day it comes down to this: if God is not real and living then our faith is worthless. It is on a par with that of cargo cults. But if God is real and living then that changes everything. If he is real and living then to pursue idols is both evil and foolish. We must turn from it with all our energy. If he is real then we can be at

peace even in the most dire of circumstances. Our God is both for us and with us, so we can rest and be at peace. If God is real the most important thing we can do every moment of every day is serve him. What we do when we gather to worship is galactically important, and by comparison the next most important thing in our lives is trivial. And if he is real then Jesus will keep his promise to come back, and that could happen before our worship service is over. We should live with the encouragement, the hope, the joy and the urgency of his imminent arrival.