

## *Commendable Christians in Contrary Circumstances*

### *1 Thessalonians 1:1–10*

Did you know that the real McCoy wasn't a McCoy? Actually he was born Norman Selby. He left his native Indiana in 1890 to pursue a career in boxing. A year later he began boxing professionally under the name "Kid McCoy." He was good. In fact, for the next decade or so he averaged a fight every month and won most of them by knockouts.

He was so good and so popular that others imitated him. All across the United States other prizefighters called themselves "Kid McCoy." The ensuing confusion was finally resolved in a marathon fight against Joe Choynski that took place on March 24 in 1899. The fight went an amazing twenty rounds. Kid McCoy hung in there and fought until he won, in spite of three broken ribs. The next day the sports columnist in the *San Francisco Examiner* reported the fight under the headline "Now you've seen the real McCoy."

It wasn't in a San Francisco boxing ring but in an ancient Greek city that the Thessalonians proved that they were the "real McCoy." In A.D. 51, St. Paul wrote a letter to them. He was really impressed with the Christian lives of these Thessalonians who were living for Jesus Christ in spite of contrary circumstances.

It was tough to be a Christian in the city of Thessalonica. Most people had never heard of Jesus Christ. Unbelievers were many and believers were few. The society was polytheistic and idols were everywhere. Polytheism permeated all of society – politics, business, social life, education, family and home. Add to that, rampant immorality. The famous sexual revolution in our country in the 1960's was tame by comparison to the things that were going on in Greek culture in the first century A.D.

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians he commended their Christian faith "*in spite of severe suffering*" (1 Thessalonians 1:6). Paul wrote to them in Greek and the Greek word he used to describe their circumstances was *thlipsis*, translated "suffering" or "affliction" in our English Bibles. It was

the word that Greeks used to describe what happened to a grape in a wine press when pressure would come from all sides until the grape would be crushed.

Does that ever describe you? Do you ever feel under pressure, squeezed from all sides? Do you feel pressured by work or school? Are you pressured by caring for young children as well as for aging parents? Are you facing bills that you have no way to pay? The question is, how do we live Christianly in every circumstance with those kinds of pressures? (I'll admit that "Christianly" is not a word in the dictionary but I think it a fit word to describe a lifestyle that reflects a commitment to Jesus Christ.)

Well, the Thessalonians did it! And they did it well enough for St. Paul to write a letter to them in 1 Thessalonians 1:2 in which he said, "*We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.*"

Paul picks up his pen and begins his letter in typical first century format. Each culture and era has its own style of writing. We say, "Dear whom-ever" and we conclude with "Sincerely" or "Faithfully" or "Lovingly" at the end of the letter. In the first century the author or writer's name was first and so Paul starts his letter to the Thessalonians, "*Paul, Silas and Timothy*" and then addresses those who are the recipients of his letter saying, "*To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

And so we have the secret to their success in living Christianly in every circumstance — they were in God. They were "in God" as a fish is in water or "in God" as we are in the air and have to breathe it for our very life existence. All of life for them was lived first and foremost in terms of God and that is how they lived Christianly in every circumstance.

Shortly after finishing graduate school and starting a full-time job, I bought the car of my

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dreams — a new Volvo. I was determined to give the car the best possible care so it would last as long as possible. I resolved to do all of the maintenance that was recommended by the manufacturer. So I took it in for the first treatment and it was expensive. I knew I was in trouble for two reasons. The air filter they put in had five-inch letters that said “UP.” When I saw the mechanic put those letters down, I had doubts about his level of competence. But I was even more concerned when after the tune-up the car went seventeen miles and then completely quit and had to be towed back in. This was a car that was running perfectly before the tune-up!

I figured that I could do at least that well myself without his help and without the high fees. So I went to the store and I bought all the tools that I needed to do my own tune-up. I even bought a book called Auto Repair for Dummies. I learned that essential to how a car runs is the timing and that the timing is set in terms of an arrow near the front of the engine labeled “TDC” which stands for “top dead center.” If the timing is off, you can buy new spark plugs and get new points and have everything exactly the way it’s supposed to be, but the car will not run well; in fact, it may not even start at all. You must begin with having the timing right in relationship to “top dead center.”

The same thing goes for our Christian lives. Top center for us is God. We must first be centered on him or the rest of life can never be tuned and we’ll never run smoothly. We can make every other adjustment and life will still be a rough ride until we are centered on God! That’s what the Thessalonians did and that’s why they were able to live Christianly in every circumstance. They were centered “*in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

I often see people who are tuning up all different parts of their lives. They want to get their finances fixed up so they see a financial counselor and cut up their credit cards, but life is still quite bumpy because they have not yet centered upon God. There are other people that need to fix up family relationships so they read books, go to seminars and get fine counsel, all of which is very good, only to discover that tuning up even that part of life is not enough to put life where it ought be. Others try to tune up their lives through a diet or exercise

program or system of goals, none of which seem to be quite adequate because their lives are not centered upon God. The Thessalonians who were “in God” learned how to live Christianly in every circumstance of life by being centered upon him.

Now you may ask, “How do we do that?” I can only give my personal experience. I set aside a time every day, preferably early in the morning, to be alone with God. I have a prayer list that begins, “Center on God.” I meditate on him. I reflect upon the truths of scripture for I want my centering upon God to be on his terms and not on my terms. I confess my sins and claim the forgiveness that has been promised through Jesus Christ. I go through my appointments for the day and commit them to God. I pray about my family, my finances and health and all of the circumstances of my life to bring them into line with the person and power of God — to center myself and all of life on God.

Sometimes I think of it in terms of a grade school experiment. Do you remember sprinkling a bunch of metal filings on a piece of paper and then the teacher would have you take a magnet and put it underneath the paper? All of those metal filings would line up in relationship to the power of the magnet. You could move the magnet back and forth underneath the paper and all of the little tiny pieces of metal filings would follow it around and stay in a line in terms of the power of the magnet.

Likewise, I seek to have every part of my life aligned in terms of the power of God so that I may be centered upon him. That’s the way the Thessalonians lived. That’s why they were able to live Christianly in every circumstance because they were God-centered.

Paul continues in 1 Thessalonians 1:3-5 and 10, recognizing the second way that the Thessalonians lived Christianly in every circumstance — by being faith-motivated. These verses are loaded with expressions of faith. Verse 3 says that their work was “*produced by faith*” and that they endured, that is they hung in there in tough times, because of their “*hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Verse 4 says that they believed that they were specially chosen by God. The Thessalonians were happier because they were chosen by God! Verse 5 tells us that their faith included the gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit “*and with deep conviction.*” This

was not some kind of superficial faith; this was with deep conviction. Then in verse 10 we read about the waiting “for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”

They believed that when the pressures were great, when the suffering was real, God was taking care of them. They really believed that the gospel is true, that the Spirit is strong, that they were chosen and that Jesus was returning some day to claim them and take them to heaven. They believed these things with deep conviction. They believed with all their hearts that whatever the worst things were that were to come, they would be preserved from the wrath to come. In other words, they took all of their problems and compared them to all of God’s promises. When they saw the comparison, they had the faith to believe that they could claim that power and truth and live Christianly in every circumstance.

The same works for you and me. Whatever we’re up against this week, as painful or as difficult as it may be, the truth of it is that if we’re faith-motivated, if we really believe all that God says, then, we too, may live Christianly in every circumstance. How do we do it? Well, we believe. We believe that God chose us; we believe that the Holy Spirit has power; we believe with all our hearts that Jesus Christ will one day come from heaven for us; we believe that we are safe from whatever the worst is that is yet to come. We believe it because it is true. And when motivated by this kind of faith, we can do more than just survive — we can live Christianly in every circumstance.

Once while on vacation I read Ken Follet’s book, On Wings of Eagles. It is the true story about two employees of Electronic Data Services imprisoned in Tehran during the fall of the Shah and the rise of the Ayatollah. Imagine what it was like to be an American in an Iranian prison with no charges filed against you, bail set at 13.5 million dollars, civil war in the streets, and the U.S. Embassy saying it can’t help.

The owner of Electronic Data Services, the flamboyant Texas millionaire H. Ross Perot, took things into his own hands and hired a paramilitary

team to rescue his employees out of the Iranian prison. It’s quite a story!

Do you know what kept those two men going when the food was bad, the conditions miserable, when they were plagued with fear and loneliness? Hope! They received word that Perot was going to help them. He sent messages, money and at one point he even visited them. He promised that he would rescue them. It was because of that hope that they were able to survive through extraordinarily difficult circumstances until they were rescued. All because they believed that a multimillionaire from Texas would keep his promise.

The Thessalonians had their faith in someone a whole lot better and richer than H. Ross Perot. They had faith in Jesus Christ himself and they got messages and help from him. Jesus encouraged them and promised that someday he would come and take them to heaven. It was because of their faith in Jesus Christ and the promises that he made that they were motivated to live Christianly in every circumstance.

Paul’s pen continues in verses 6 through 9, giving a third way that those commendable Thessalonian Christians lived Christianly in contrary circumstances. They were action-oriented. We remember that they were God-centered—and that’s great, and they were faith-motivated — and that was so very helpful. But they also did something. They were active, not passive.

There are some people who claim that they are God-centered and that God is the most important person in their lives, and that’s wonderful. They say they are faith-motivated, that they believe all that the Bible says and all that Jesus Christ promises, but they don’t do anything about it. But not so for these Thessalonians. They did something.

Paul tells us that at first they imitated Paul’s Christianity until they got going enough to imitate Jesus Christ himself. Kind of like priming a pump to get it started. They did something.

Then we’re told in these verses that they welcomed the teaching of Christian truth with joy — they were thrilled about it. They lived out their God-

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centeredness and their faith-motivation until people everywhere pointed to the Thessalonians as models of Christian living. They even went so far as to dump their idols so that everyone would know they were Christians – a costly thing to do in ancient Greece. It was tough. I'm sure in some ways it was tougher because of the actions they took. But it's because they were action-oriented that they were enabled to live Christianly even in tough times.

It's a good lesson for us to learn and live. Sometimes we feel like caving in or quitting when the pressures close in on us. Or maybe we start complaining or we withdraw and just do nothing. What we need is action! We need to get up, get going, do good for other people, help others and share Jesus Christ with them. We need to take responsibility and be action-oriented Christians and apply what we believe.

Some years ago I severely cut the back of my hand on a pane of glass. At first I thought it was simply a deep cut with a surprising amount of blood, but at the emergency room I learned that I had severed a tendon and chipped the bone. It required surgery and a cast. I had never had a broken bone or a cast before in my life. It totally changed my summer plans. It's hard to water ski in a cast! Toward the end of the summer I went back to the same orthopedic surgeon and he took off the cast. When I saw my hand for the first time it looked dead. Worse yet, it didn't bend anymore. It was absolutely as stiff as could be. The surgeon gave me instructions to keep working on bending the hand even though it hurt.

I worked and worked at bending it, day after day, but I still remember wondering if I would ever be able to touch the palm of my hand with my fingers again. The discouraging part was that no matter how much progress I would make each day, it seemed that when I wakened the next morning it was as stiff and straight as ever and I had to start all over again. I suppose that if I had left it alone and not done the exercises it would have stayed permanently in that position. But instead I took some action. I bent it and stretched it even though it hurt, so that it could become the way that it's supposed to be.

The same goes for living Christianly. If we just say we're God-oriented and we just say that we're

faith-motivated and we don't stretch and we don't bend, if we don't do something with the Christianity that we claim, eventually we become so stiff and rigid that we can never take the shape that God intended us to have.

Oh, those terrific Thessalonians! They did it all. They were God-centered; they were faith-motivated; they were action-oriented. They were probably perfect! No — they weren't perfect at all. When we read on in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we find they were anything but perfect. They had problems just like us.

You see, we can't control all our circumstances and you're just going to get frustrated if you try. But, we can be God-centered. We can be faith-motivated. We can be action-oriented. So let's do it! Let's live Christianly in every circumstance!

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