

# Would You Attend This Church?

Jonah 3, 1 Thessalonians 1

Last week we considered verse 4: “Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.” We showed how God from eternity past chose his people for salvation. Out of the whole number of mankind that God would create—all equally undeserving—the Father chose a people and gave them to the Son. Through the Spirit’s work of regeneration they would believe the gospel and commit their lives to the Lord. Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians was written to men and women who confessed Christ and gathered to worship with his church. It is intended for us as well. How can we know we are elect? Those who are born again—whose hearts have been awakened to righteousness by the Holy Spirit—deeply care. They want to know: Am I saved? Did Jesus really die for me? Am I truly trusting in Christ for salvation? Is my faith real? Is his finished work sufficient to save such a great sinner as I am? As we confess Christ and gather with his church to worship and express our love for him the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, chosen by the Father and given to the Son before time began.

Now Paul continues in verse 5, “For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.” I have three points: *what Paul didn’t have*, *what Paul had*, and *application*. First,

## 1. What Paul didn’t have

Remember the Billy Graham crusades? Billy Graham lived from 1918–2018. Beginning with his first crusade in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1947 he conducted 417 crusades, some which went on for weeks at a time. Over his lifetime he preached to over 200 million people in 185 countries. He preached in person to more people than anyone in history. More than three million people responded to his invitation to come forward and “accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.”<sup>1</sup>

The Billy Graham crusades involved lots of pre-planning. Long before Graham went into a town he sent a large advance staff to seek support from church and civic leaders. Prayer groups were organized, counselors were trained, a large choir was assembled and began rehearsing. Big-name musicians, such as Michael W. Smith, DC Talk, Amy Grant, and Jars of Clay, performed at his crusades. Celebrities sat onstage with him. He was a close friend of presidents—Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

Now contrast this with what took place when the apostle Paul came into town. Paul and his evangelistic team had no name recognition. Paul and Barnabas had been sent out by the church in Antioch. After the Jerusalem Council Paul wanted to go back and check on the churches he and Barnabas had planted on their first

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy\\_Graham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Graham), accessed 11-11-23

missionary journey. When the two of them couldn't agree whether they should take John Mark with them, they split. At the end of Acts 15 we are told that "Barnabas took Mark and sailed off for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and went off, commended to the Lord's grace by the brothers"<sup>2</sup>—apparently, the church in Jerusalem. Paul and Silas journeyed through Asia Minor and into Macedonia. In Philippi, after leading Lydia and the jailer to the Lord, they traveled to Thessalonica. Since there was a Jewish synagogue there, it was a natural place to begin. Acts 17 informs us that "according to his custom, Paul went to their meeting and for three Sabbaths he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, opening up and setting forth for them the fact that the Christ had to suffer and to rise again from the dead, and that 'this Jesus Whom I am announcing to you is the Christ.'"<sup>3</sup> Luke reports that "some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas." The text specifically mentions that there was a large number of devout Greeks. Here was God-given fruit, including Gentiles who were drawn to the message of the Hebrew Scriptures and looking for the Messiah. These Gentiles attended synagogue services but did not complete the process of converting to Judaism because they could not bring themselves to endure the extremely painful rite of circumcision, a surgical procedure undertaken apart from sterile operating room conditions and without anesthesia, and with the risk of death.

Now my question for you is this: if you had been living in Thessalonica when Paul and Silas came to town, would you have listened to them? Paul didn't come into town with a well-financed, smooth-running team. He didn't have advance men who could prepare the townspeople for his visit. Maybe you were one of the devout Greeks who were drawn to the message of the Old Testament and were looking for the Messiah. You had been attending synagogue for awhile—perhaps for some years. Maybe you were perplexed. What Paul was preaching made sense. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures and seemed to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was the prophesied Messiah. But you weren't sure. It was evident that the Jewish leaders hated Jesus and were totally dead-set against accepting him as the Messiah. And who were these newcomers, anyway? They claimed to represent the church at Jerusalem. But what was the church—Christians were a tiny minority in the ancient world. In some places today men and women running for public office mention their church affiliation to convince people that they are fine, upstanding citizens. But that is not how it was in Thessalonica in the first century. People there saw the church as a threat to the public order. You knew that if you listened to Paul and Silas you would incur the displeasure of the Jewish community. Your friends and associates would turn against you. You might lose your job or be shunned by

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<sup>2</sup> Jay Adams, *Christian Counselor's New Testament*, Acts 15:39–40

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the community. Should you risk all this by showing up to attend Paul's church? Furthermore, Paul and Silas's presence in Thessalonica had stirred up a riot. The citizens did not look on Paul's message kindly but viewed it negatively. It was risky business to throw in one's lot with Paul.

Paul didn't have status, prestige, worldly acclaim or official standing. He was an outsider, a member of a despised minority group. Paul himself knew this only too well. He would later write to the Corinthians, "being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day" (1 Cor. 4:13). In the public opinion of their day the Christians rated right down there with a burnt casserole that had to be scraped off a dish. Christianity was not held in esteem. The Jews of Rome knew this and would later tell Paul: "as concerning this sect, we know that everywhere it is spoken against" (Acts 28:22). There was no status in becoming a Christian.

There's a parallel in our Old Testament text. After Jonah had run away from the Lord and was swallowed by a great fish, after he had spent three days and nights in the fish's belly, where he called out to the Lord in repentance and promised to pay what he had vowed, and the fish vomited him up onto the land, Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, as the Lord had commanded. Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey to walk from one end to another. Jonah entered Nineveh and cried out "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Would you have listened to Jonah? Here is a man who suddenly appears out of nowhere. Nobody has ever seen him before. Jonah doesn't try to win the Ninevites over by flattery. He doesn't preach a message of positive self-affirmation. He doesn't preach health, wealth and prosperity. His message is negative—offensive. He cries out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Clearly, Jonah was not trying to win a popularity contest.

There are jokes about maladjusted people parading around in a public place wearing a sign, "The end is near," warning of doomsday. Normal people don't do this; only the disturbed, the unbalanced.

But here comes Jonah prophesying doomsday—the great city of Nineveh is coming to an end. What are the chances of anybody in Nineveh taking him seriously?—yet, amazingly, people do! We read that "the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them." Jonah's preaching set a pagan city afire. Even the king got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes, begging God for mercy. The king made a decree: "Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?"

People were warned to stop what they were doing—even the daily activities of eating and drinking—and get right with God.

This is utterly amazing! It was not the response Jonah had expected. It was not a response that made him happy. Jonah went out of the city, sat in the shade of a gourd plant and pouted, hoping God would destroy Nineveh anyway. But God relented and held off Nineveh's destruction for another hundred years. Here was a preacher whose preaching turned a whole city around; that certainly does not happen every day!

In the case of Paul, when he and his team came to Thessalonica preaching Christ, they did not have a message that would be universally appreciated. Christianity doesn't get that kind of reception. Paul would elsewhere teach God's people that "we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life."<sup>4</sup> When the gospel is preached, some reject it and die and go to hell. Others believe it and receive eternal life. The gospel doesn't have universal acclaim. It is not a message of earthly glory! Paul didn't have celebrity endorsements.

What is it that draws crowds today? Large sporting events such as auto racing, world-class soccer, and football; concerts with big-name artists. And yes, there are some megachurches that have crowd-pleasing entertainment and offer a veneer of religiosity with anonymity and few commitments. Dare I say it? Such churches are not run to appeal to God but to appeal to man—to give man what he wants, so he will keep coming back.

Paul didn't preach an appealing man-centered message but a God-centered, Christ-glorifying gospel. This plain-spoken, somewhat uncouth man arrived out of nowhere and preached Christ. Paul *didn't* have instant name recognition, a well-oiled advance team, endorsements by civic leaders, celebrities lining up to sit on the platform with him, top musicians to perform at his meetings, earthly fame and glory—none of that. Secondly, let's look at

## **2. What Paul *had***

Paul is writing a letter to the church in Thessalonica. He is not articulating arcane philosophy or theory. His message is personal. He writes as a man who has invested much sweat, toil and tears in an effort to see the establishment of Christ's church in Thessalonica. He deeply cares about these men and women and wants to see them thrive as a congregation. It is a love story—a story of God's love for his people in Thessalonica and everywhere, a God who in eternity chose a people for himself, gave them to his Son, who came to earth to redeem them and pour out his Spirit to guide them into all truth. As Paul writes, he composes the words

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor. 2:15–16

“knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance.”

Paul was convinced that the congregation in Thessalonica was made up of people who loved the Lord, who professed Christ, who gathered each Lord’s day to worship him, who were known for their good works, faith, labors on behalf of the needy, and patient hope as they awaited Christ’s return. He writes to encourage this young congregation to be faithful and steadfast in the Lord.

Paul had come to town, not with name recognition, not with a large, established sending organization, but with a heart of gratitude to the God who took the initiative to reveal himself to him when he was a murderous zealot, lost in his sins. The risen Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus and called him to preach his gospel. What Paul had was the *truth*, a message that burned within him, a message that had changed his own life and that he longed to share with fellow sinners—a dying man speaking to dying men.

Paul speaks of “*our* gospel,” not because it originated with the apostle and his team, but because it was embraced by them. The good news of Christ—and his saving work accomplished through his death, burial and bodily resurrection on behalf of lost sinners everywhere—was divinely revealed. It is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes. It is a message centered in Christ. The gospel is not a message of self-help—about steps we can take to save ourselves. The gospel is not about what *man does* but about what *Christ has done*. It is the good news that Christ saves sinners. Here is the only way of salvation for Jews and Gentiles—men, women and children from every culture, tribe, tongue and nation.

The gospel did not come in word only. It *did* come in word—it could not come without words, there is no no preaching of the gospel, or hearing it, without words, without articulate, understandable sounds—but it did not come in word *only*. The only way that a spiritually dead sinner can receive the gospel is by the powerful working of God’s Holy Spirit, giving spiritual life, enlightening their understanding, opening up their deaf ears, softening their hard hearts, and delivering them from the slavery of sin and Satan.<sup>5</sup> The gospel came to Thessalonica attended by the Spirit’s power and confirmed by changed lives, turning self-centered men and women into lovers of God, joining with his church in confessing Christ and gathering with his people every Lord’s day to worship him. If men and women love the LORD their God with all their heart, soul and might, if God is truly the most important thing to them, then worship is a delight, the joy of their life. Gathering for worship is the most important thing, the highlight of the week. The born-again person can say with the hymnwriter, “Praise

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<sup>5</sup> Gill, commentary (e-Sword)

to the Lord, O let *all* that is in me adore him.” The born-again person can say that; the unregenerate heart will never say that—he has no idea what it means.

The gospel did not come to the Thessalonians in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance. But to these Paul adds: “as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.” He has been speaking of the great change that the gospel has made in the lives of the Thessalonians; now he speaks of himself and his team: “what kind of men we were among you for your sake.” Why does he suddenly shift the focus to himself, Silas and Timothy? It is as if he had said, “Remember what we were when we came to you. We were just plain, ordinary men. We weren’t sent by the emperor. We didn’t come with an army. We didn’t engage the services of a public-relations team. We came with fear and trembling. We spoke with plainness and simplicity, without the enticing words of man’s wisdom. We supported ourselves by doing day-work. We endured public criticism and even persecution, just so we could preach Christ to you.

And you *listened!* You paid attention to our message. You hung on our every word as if your very lives depended on what we were speaking about. Your listening to us showed a Spirit-wrought change of heart.

### **3. Application**

It is no big deal if people follow a sports team, or a hit movie, or a theatrical production, or a big-name performer, or an inspiring politician, or an articulate orator. But if people listen intently to the simple message of the gospel, that *is* a big deal, for it shows the Spirit’s power to bring life from the dead. When Paul preached, he did not use enticing words of men’s wisdom. He didn’t have to. What Paul had was the *truth*.

Why would anyone listen to Paul? Because the Lord was drawing that person to himself, because the Lord had awakened his soul to his need of salvation, because he had become convinced, deep in his heart, that didn’t want to die apart from God.

The only reason to listen to a preacher is because he speaks the truth as it is expressed in God’s word. The preacher’s authority is the Bible, God’s inerrant and inspired word. If God speaks, then man must listen. God is the one with whom we have to do.

Luke tells us that after the Jerusalem Council “Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.” Paul and Silas were sent out by the church, which recognized God’s call upon their mission. So Paul’s mission had official church authority and oversight, unlike Billy Graham, who ran his own para-church ministry, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. This is important, for in the Bible missions is the work of the church, not of independent mission boards. If God has given a person gifts for evangelism, he should not seek to go out and do his own thing; rather, he should be under the authority and oversight of the church.

Graham and his evangelistic team did many things right. They established a code of ethics to protect against accusations of financial, sexual, and power abuse. It involved a commitment never to be alone with a woman other than his wife (which became known as the “Billy Graham rule”).<sup>6</sup> Graham was never accused of sexual impropriety, even though being on the road frequently necessitated his being separated from his family, sometimes for long periods of time.

Paul didn’t have name recognition, a well-oiled advance team, endorsements by civic leaders, celebrities sitting on his platform, big-name musicians performing at his meetings, or earthly fame and glory. This church doesn’t have any of these things either.

What Paul *did* have was the simple message of the gospel, a heart to see men and women come to faith, and the tenacity to stick to his calling, even under persecution.

Would you have attended Paul’s church in Thessalonica? Would you attend this church? Your answer will reveal your heart commitment. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy\\_Graham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Graham) accessed 11-11-23