

Flipped: Right Side Up

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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It's not news that our world is upside down. There's a pandemic out there. Racism is front and center. Political agendas abound. And the economy teeters on a trillion dollars of debt. It's so bad that global warming has taken a back seat. Our world is obviously a mess.

And if you live in a mess it affects you. People have lost jobs and opportunities. Some have lost loved ones. We've lost financial stability and mental stability. And that's a lot of loss! The world is upside down.

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So when I was about 10 I became the proud owner of a turtle named Poco. And a turtle might be a great option for you if you enjoy all the smells of a litterbox and the responsibility of feeding but want to get away from the comfort of a cat or the affection of a dog.

Turtles are great, and they are hardy which is good because one of the things that 10-year-old boys like to do most with turtles is flip them on their backs and watch them struggle to right themselves.

Now disclaimer: I do not condone the juvenile actions of my former self. Any turtle activist will tell you this is irresponsible and unkind. I'm just telling you this happened and admitting I'm a sinner – that's a bit of a theme here.

Anyway, if you can get past that then the cool thing about turtles is that a healthy one can flip itself right side up. And this usually happens in 3 distinct stages. First, when flipped upside down they will sit there all tucked into their shell and try to process what has happened. And turtles aren't known for their cunning intellect so you can watch the processors turn as they realize "Hey, that boy who feeds me, and on occasion cleans my water, has flipped me upside down, again." Realization is stage one.

Stage 2 involves some phenomenal ninja turtle skills. All six limbs start going crazy. Admittedly the tail is like an appendix in this task – it's pretty much good for nothing. But the neck and four legs all have a very specific job – find traction and hold onto it. And if you put your finger close to one of those limbs you can find out just how hard it can hold on.

And that's because this is a life or death thing for a turtle. In the wild when sick or unlucky turtles get stuck in this position they starve to death. Now mine didn't – I sold him back to the pet store.

But turtles that are successful in stage 2 – that find traction – eventually hit stage 3 where by using their mouth and fingernails they manage to flip themselves right side up.

And in this two things are certain. First, turtles are obviously much happier right side up, and second, boys should be supervised.

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Let's do some discussion. Go ahead and turn back to the people you were facing earlier. And we've got three questions on the screen for you to answer in 3 minutes.

- 1.) What is your name?
- 2.) Have you ever had a pet that did cool things?
- 3.) Thinking of your friends and family, what methods do they use to cope when life flips them on their backs?

Come on back together.

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Alright, today we are starting a new series titled "Flipped" where we will be looking at the letter of 1st Thessalonians. If you've got a Bible go ahead and open it there. 1st Thessalonians is just after Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians.

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As you are turning there here's the context. In Acts 17 Paul went to Thessalonica to preach. And a bunch of people got saved, both Jews and Greeks. And these believers went on to form a church. But then a bunch of Jews who didn't believe and got jealous and Paul had to flee the city.

And so as you could imagine things were not easy for the Jesus followers in Thessalonica. And so a little later when Paul was living in Corinth, he wrote this letter to encourage them to persevere in their faith in the midst of an incredibly upside down world.

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Just imagine how hard it would be to follow Jesus in 1st century Rome. If you follow Jesus you are saying no to either your Jewish roots or your Roman ones. You would stand out. Your family wouldn't accept you. You would be a weirdo at work. All the educated people would think you were foolish. Following Jesus in the first century would have been hard kind of like it is today. And choosing to follow Jesus would mean flipping your world upside down.

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Actually that's not quite right. Following Jesus has always started with the realization that your world is already upside down – you just hadn't figured that out yet.

You see Jesus always finds us upside down. If you weren't a mess when He found you then He hasn't found you yet. And it's from that helpless position that He empowers us to flip over and start living.

But here's the thing: when a person starts following Jesus they do this from the history they have. And so all the upside down aspects of life that they used to live in don't just disappear. So if you were a lusty, jealous, gossiping drunk before you come to Christ all these things don't just go away. Just like if you were a morally upright, goody-goody who knew you were better than everyone else that doesn't go away either.

And so Paul wrote this letter to teach and encourage these early Christians who had encountered the beauty of Jesus' grace not to give up pursuing Him; not to give up striving and struggling to follow Jesus, because this is where abundant life resides.

So let me read our passage. And wherever you are would you stand with me. This is Paul speaking. 1 Thessalonians chapter 1 starting in verse 1.

[Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Now 1st Thessalonians is special because it was the first book written in the New Testament. So Paul penned it in about 50AD, just 20 years after Jesus. Up to this point the church had just been telling the stories of Jesus over and over again – it was an oral culture. But in 50AD the church began transitioning to a written culture.

And it started with the book of 1st Thessalonians. So when the church in Thessalonica received this letter they realized it was special. It wasn't like Instagram where you tell everyone what you ate for breakfast. It was a letter that contained truth that would be good for all Jesus followers. And so they carefully transcribed it and sent copies to all the churches around them.

And in the years after this the same thing happened with the rest of the New Testament such that within a very short period of time Jesus followers all across the known world were reading the Bible that we've got today.

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As an aside, atheists will say things like "Hey, all that copying of the Bible, it's got to be full of errors." But one cool thing that separates the Bible from every other historical book is that the thousands of early copies we have prove that the Bible today is exactly the same as the one the first century Jesus followers read. This can be scientifically proven. If you are interested in how that works come talk to me.

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Anyway, in this first letter Paul wants to help the Thessalonians live right side up in the midst of a world very similar to our own. First century Rome was full of plagues and persecution and prejudice just like ours. So notice how right at the beginning Paul addresses this church in two ways.

First he gives their geographical address – he's writing to a church that can be found in Thessalonica. There's a physical address to this place. And interestingly, Thessalonica still exists. It's now called Thessaloniki, and there are still Jesus followers there. This is a city with a 2000-year-old history of following Jesus. Awesome.

But Paul gives a second address for these people as well. He says, verse 1, they are also found "in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

This is their “spiritual address” if you will. And it’s way more important than their geographical one. And that’s why this letter gets passed around. The Thessalonians realized that what Paul talks about here gets to the heart of every Jesus followers’ journey.

A Jesus follower is someone who, by God’s grace, realizes they are upside down and needs Jesus – that’s stage 1. And then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gives themselves to pursuing the right side up life He enables – that’s stage 2.

So don’t miss this – being flipped right side up is two things. It is something Jesus does for us in a moment, and it is something we do empowered by His Spirit, that takes a lifetime.

If it was one thing the church would be perfect and people would be lining up to get in here even more than we did today. Because how cool would it be to be perfect? Or at least how cool would it be to have perfect friends? Anyone up for that?

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But that’s not how it works is it – I mean it’s not how it works if you end up in church with me. I specialize in saying things that turn out to be hurtful. I neglect stuff I shouldn’t neglect. Pretty much my experience is that there are a whole bunch of things that I want to do, but instead I watch Netflix. And there are a bunch of other things that I don’t want to do that I keep doing anyway. And so if you go to church with me you end up getting poked in the eyes. Nobody better say “amen.”

But here’s the reality, I promise that if you’re here long enough I’ll get you. And you’ll get me. And we’ll get each other. And that’s because church is the place where we give each other lots of opportunity to practice looking like Jesus.

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That’s what happens here, and that was what was happening in Thessalonica. The world was upside down all around them. And into that world Paul writes 1st Thessalonians. And he writes to encourage them that there is joy in the midst of an upside down world when we are flipped right side up, and give ourselves to being flipped again and again.

So could you use some more of that? Is your life upside down and maybe you are realizing this for the first time? Do you need a Saviour? Or maybe are there still aspects of your life that are upside down. You follow Jesus but you keep going back to things that promise life but don’t deliver.

In either case Jesus wants to meet you there today. He’s not surprized by your situation. He loves you and wants to fill you with hope. So call out to Him: “Jesus, I want you to be king in my life. I want to leave upside down behind and start living in the abundant life you offer.”

If you call out to Jesus He will flip your world around, and He will empower you, by filling you with His Spirit. To live your life for His glory and your joy. So how does that work?

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Well, look at what the text says. Verse 3 is the central verse in this chapter. And here Paul talks about something that is foundational to life as a Jesus follower – life with Jesus is about faith, hope and love.

Now if that sounds familiar get this, this is Paul's first letter, so this is the third verse written in the New Testament, and it contains these three things – faith, hope and love. That means this is what following Jesus has always been about. And the New Testament is full of references to these things.

So let's zoom in a bit. Faith is how we get saved. Elsewhere Paul says:

God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

So salvation doesn't happen because of something we do, it happens because of something God does. And we receive it by believing or having faith.

But notice how Paul qualifies this – look at verse 3 again. He says:

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 1:3)

Here's what we need to see, Paul clarifies something about these things right from the beginning. And what he clarifies is that faith, hope and love aren't simply cerebral things, they are intimately connected with actions.

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Now as I say this you have to know this idea has been badly distorted. And this distortion is what the Reformation was all about.

So people have always tried to control God because if we can control something then we can package and sell it. And so in the Middle Ages, among other things, the church was selling indulgences to people. An indulgence was permission to sin once you give some money to the church. That's a problem. That's works salvation – do a good deed and get saved.

And that's not what Paul is teaching in this verse. But he is also not saying that works – good deeds, living a life of obedience doesn't have a place in following Jesus. You see belief in Jesus has always been more than just something that happens in our minds.

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This means it's not like belief in aliens.

So some of you probably believe in aliens. I won't ask for a show of hands, that might be embarrassing. But you think "In the vastness of the universe I just can't imagine we are alone." It's a fair point. But others of you would respond: "No, I think one species of sinners in the universe was probably enough for God."

But here's the crazy thing: people who believe in aliens, or don't, both buy coffee at Starbucks. We both wear blue jeans. And you can find both kinds of people in church. So belief or not about aliens has no affect on the way we live.

But that's not the way belief in Jesus works. Paul says the kind of faith, hope and love Jesus followers have is a very special kind. Jesus following faith results in work, its love leads to labour and its hope results in endurance. So following Jesus has always been a faith that works thing.

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And James agreed with this. Now he knew he was saved by grace not good deeds. James had Jesus as an older brother, so he had lots of first hand experience with Jesus, but still didn't believe in Him until He came back from the dead – how's that for pathetic?

So James knew the salvation he had received from Jesus was by grace. But he also wanted to make sure people understood that everyone who encounters Jesus' grace is transformed by it or they didn't receive it. So he said:

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?... Even the demons believe... and they tremble in terror. How foolish! Can't you see that faith without good deeds is useless? (James 2:14-19)

And in Thessalonians Paul is going to talk about this kind of faith because this is the kind of faith that will flip your world right side up. And this is the kind of faith that the Thessalonians needed. And it's the kind we need if we are going to live in the abundant life that Jesus wants for us. And Paul fleshes this out in the rest of the chapter. So in verse 4 he says:

We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be His own people. (1 Thessalonians 1:4)

So salvation always starts with God – He chooses us, we don't choose Him. And He calls us to be His people. But then in verse 9 he describes how the Thessalonians responded to God's love in faith. He says:

You turned away from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9)

Their faith resulted in obedience. You see following Jesus is a relationship of response. He loves us when we don't love Him. He finds us hiding in the garden behind fig leaves. He hunts us down when we are running away like Jonah. And He draws us back to Himself.

And then people who taste His grace, which is so beautiful and undeserved, respond by turning away from everything else and serving Him. This is the work we do that is produced by faith. And friends, if it is work then it is hard and takes time. And it's awkward. And sometimes there's thrashing involved.

But hear this, if you love Jesus and are seeking to grow in Christlikeness don't doubt your salvation because there are still aspects of your life that are on your back.

But also don't stop struggling against these areas. Every time a temptation shows up don't say "well, I guess I'm in." Thrash against it. Don't fall in love with being on your back. That's the road to death.

And so Paul encourages the Thessalonians to persevere in love and hope. And he does this by reminding them about their journey.

So notice the time language Paul uses. In verse 6 he says: "you became imitators of us and of the Lord." And verse 7 says "you became a model to all the believers." Becoming takes time – and as we will see over the next several weeks they hadn't arrived yet. And becoming takes time for us as well.

But it's worth pursuing because there is joy in it now and forever.

Look again at verse 6. It says:

You received the message with joy from the Holy Spirit in spite of the severe suffering it brought you. (1 Thessalonians 1:6)

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So maybe you are in a spot where you could use more of the abundant life Jesus promises. Maybe there are sins, idols, you still go to for meaning and comfort instead of going to Jesus. Or maybe you struggle with anxiety or depression and it's just hard living in an upside-down world.

Whatever it is look to the grace of God. He is the God who chases sinners down to flip them right side up. It's a little change to the metaphor but poet Francis Thompson describes this process calling Jesus the Hound of Heaven.

"As the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and unperturbed pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His Divine grace. And though in sin or in human love, away from God it seeks to hide, Divine grace follows after, unwearingly follows ever after, till the soul feels its pressure forcing it to turn to Him alone in that never ending chase."

Friends, it's not news that the world is upside down. But in the midst of whatever is going on for you, fall in love with the God who wants you to be right side up. The Thessalonians gave themselves to this and found it to be true, and it is true for us as well.

So if you've been chased down by God's grace then give yourself to faith that works itself out in hope and love. Resist the temptation to run. Thrash against it. Don't give in to being upside down. Instead relish the salvation Jesus has bought you. Choose obedience even though it is hard. Rejoice in it. This is the path to abundant life.