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# THE LATE AWAKENING: THE GOSPEL TRUTH

NEIL DOWNEY



## THE GOOD NEWS IN 1 THESSALONIANS

The following is an excerpt from *The Late Awakening*, a CruPress eBook by Neil Downey. What follows is an examination of the Apostle Paul's use of the word "gospel" in the book of 1 Thessalonians. Useful for a five-part gospel-centered small group discussion or personal bible study, this look at Paul's life and ministry helps uncover our own daily need for the gospel.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE GOSPEL GURU

When it came to the gospel, the Apostle Paul was a guy who "got it" (understatement of the day). His writings, his ministry, and his entire post-conversion life seem to be saturated with the gospel. So what makes him so different from us? What caused Paul to be so passionate about the good news? What caused him . . .

To proclaim, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24).

To become "all things to all people . . . for the sake of the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:22-23).

To confront Peter for "deviating from the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:11-14).

To describe how he was compelled to proclaim the good news: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

To declare himself "a servant of the gospel" (Ephesians 3:7).

To have the optimistic perspective that his imprisonment "resulted in the advancement of the gospel" (Philippians 1:12).

To implore young Timothy to "join me in suffering for the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:8).

In order to gain some insight into Paul's zeal, it's time for a little Bible Study. Let's examine the five times Paul uses the word "gospel" in his first letter to the church in Thessalonica (aka 1 Thessalonians). These passages reveal much about Paul's heart, his purpose, his reason for existence.

But first, a little background: the book of Acts records that Paul's stay in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey was relatively short (possibly only three weeks, maybe a few months) and dangerous (hunted by a mob, escaped in the night). But it was also relatively fruitful.

*As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am*



*proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. (Acts 17:2-4)*

Apparently, after Paul left town, the new believers in Thessalonica were persecuted by some zealous Jews and annoyed Gentiles, so Paul sent Timothy back to check on their status. When Timothy rejoined Paul, he brought encouraging news: the believers were not just surviving the persecution, but thriving in their new faith. The gospel had taken root in their lives and was growing. So Paul wrote a letter to these new Christians to encourage them and to reflect back on his time with them.

Okay, now that we know the backstory, let's look at those verses, shall we?

## PART I: POWER SURGE

*...because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. (1 Thessalonians 1:5)*

Paul's life had been radically altered. He went from being a zealous persecutor of the church to a passionate evangelist and church-planter. Why the dramatic change? Simply put, he encountered the power of God in the person of Christ.

The story of Paul's conversion on the Damascus road recorded in Acts 9 is pretty dramatic: the blinding light, the voice from heaven, the healing by Ananias, the baptism. Paul encountered the risen Jesus and was never the same again. He was transformed from Christ's enemy into Christ's apostle. Even his name was (eventually) changed from Saul (the name of Israel's first king), meaning "asked of," to Paul, meaning "small" – which was fitting for someone who considered himself "the least of the apostles." Augustine sums up the transformation well. He writes of the apostle, "When he was Saul, he was proud and exalted; when he was Paul, he was lowly and little."<sup>1</sup>

Paul's message to the Thessalonians was marked by the power of God (which is how he describes the gospel in his letter to the church in Rome). The Holy Spirit had softened their hearts and Paul was convinced that the same gospel that had changed his life nearly twenty years earlier would change their

lives, too. Throughout his ministry, Paul was never confident in his own oratory skill or wisdom. He placed his trust in the power of the gospel message because to him, the gospel was so much more than just words.

A few years ago, *Campus Crusade for Christ, Canada* changed its corporate name to *Power To Change*. At first, I found this a curious choice for a name: it reminded me of an infomercial I once saw at 2:00 AM. But the more I think about it, the more I realize how the new name is relevant to the human experience. The only way people can change – really grow, really mature, really transform – is by the gospel: "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

One of the most exciting things about being in ministry is seeing changed lives. Not long ago I was sitting around a table with a group of seven guys who were in various positions of student-leadership in the Cru movement at the University of South Dakota. I asked them, "How many of you became followers of Jesus sometime within the last four years?" Six of them raised their hands. I know the stories of all six guys: their lives have been transformed. Not just their behavior but their entire reason for being. To paint a picture of the gospel's power, here's some autobiographical prose from Marty, one of the students whose life was radically altered:

### Names Changed for Protection

*Marty Schoenleber III*

*Rappin' bout things you know*

*Growin' up in the Brook*

*Mama in the window*

*Starin' to catch a look*

*F'indin' where you at*

*Out in the cul-de-sac*

*Wonderin':*

*When you comin' back again?*

*Back inside*

*Inside? Please*

*Gangstas come 'n' get some*

*Rap about coke in your system*

*On the side of the stree'*

*Talking smack to a tree*

*Like it's yo best frien'*

*Feels like the Brook night never end*

*Come back again*

*Still wonderin'*

*Will I ever break this life?*



*Still feelin' like I'm under the knife*

*No beat a capella*

*Like yo' hangin' with the poor fella*

*I spent time sitting in the back seat of Sakins' car*

*Bleedin' out my nose and jaw*

*Comin' to the realization*

*Life's harder when you fight for your own nation*

*Nation of one*

*And in my face I've had a gun*

*For friend*

*Six feet away*

*Ever been scared to death?*

*If you know culture then you know the smell of meth*

*Like your sister's cat pissed on your best friend*

*'Til his teeth get loose*

*From drug abuse*

*Methamphetamine overuse—*

*Never again*

*Christ inspired*

*But yet third time still wonderin'*

*Will I miss my boys if I never see 'em again?*

*Yes, I miss them*

*And I pray everyday that they're doing better too.*<sup>2</sup>

Full disclosure: not every dude involved in Cru can tell pre-conversion tales of glocks, gang fights, and cocaine. But they all have a story to tell about how, by the power of the gospel, they've been “rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son” (Colossians 1:13).

In case you were wondering, it's not just guys who have experienced life change. In my time doing college ministry, I've seen God dramatically change the hearts of women, also. Scores of young ladies – who once searched for love in empty relationships, looked for their value in drugs and body image, and generally lived empty lives – have now found hope in the gospel. Mary Kassian (author, speaker, and professor of Women's Studies at Southern Baptist Seminary) describes the reality of this gospel transformation: “Over the years, I've witnessed thousands of women come to a place of healing and wholeness through the redeeming power of the unvarnished foolishness of the gospel.”<sup>3</sup>

*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)*

**For discussion/reflection:** *How has the power of the gospel tangibly altered your life? What has been the biggest transformation in your character?*

## PART 2: DOUBLE DOG DARE

*We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. (1 Thessalonians 2:2)*

What makes people do dangerous things? Sometimes it's the adrenaline rush that accompanies cheating death. For others, maybe the promise of glory or riches awarded for bravery and valor. In some cases, it's sheer insanity or inanity (see any episode of *Jackass*). But I don't think Paul fits into any of these categories. He risked his life (and eventually gave his life) for something he deemed more valuable. Take a look at his daredevil resume:

*Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. (2 Corinthians 11:24-26)*

Paul's passion for the gospel and zeal for seeing God glorified in the lives of people drove him to do some treacherous stuff. He didn't exactly play it safe and he attempted some feats that I'm sure left his friends shaking their heads in disbelief. In fact, his life would be a great action movie. (Although it's hard to picture who would play the lead role. Vin Diesel?) If *Dos Equis* existed in the first century, Paul could have been the spokesman because he was, perhaps, the most interesting man in the world. “I don't always preach. But when I do, I prefer the gospel.”

But this life of courage in the face of danger wasn't one that he just fleshed out on his own. The Holman Christian Standard Bible translates 1 Thessalonians 2:2b “we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel to you in spite of great opposition.” God provided Paul and his companions – and countless missionaries since – with divine boldness to declare the gospel. Paul wasn't afraid to take risks, to spiritually pioneer new areas, to dream big.



In my various roles and responsibilities in ministry over the years, I have tended to be relatively cautious, to be satisfied with mediocrity, to settle for the status quo – mostly because I was afraid of failure and of my image taking a hit. I can't tell you how many times I've had a chance to speak the gospel to somebody and totally wussed out. But the goodness and grace of God has also empowered me to "dare to tell" people the gospel in spite of (some slight and vaguely perceived) opposition. I pray that I will be sensitive to the Spirit's leading and strengthened by the Spirit's power in order to tell people the greatest news they'll ever hear.

Tim Tebow is an enigma. He is an incredibly nice guy but an unbelievably tough guy. He is fiercely competitive but remarkably humble. He is harshly criticized but ridiculously popular. While he quarterbacked the Denver Broncos during the 2011 season, a remarkable pattern emerged. During the first three quarters of most games, he appeared to be the most inept passer in history. But in the fourth quarter, he turned into John Elway, winning games with last-minute heroics.

Tebow is one of the most famous athletes in the world, so much so that his name has become a verb with two meanings (tebow: 1. To drop to one knee in prayerful reflection. *"That dude was tebowing in the middle of a busy crosswalk."* 2. To mount a comeback win in dramatic fashion, in spite of having been outplayed for the vast majority of the game. *"The Chicago Bears just got tebowed."*)

Ever since his freshman year at the University of Florida, Tebow has been famous not just for football, but also for his faith. He has consistently used his platform to boldly tell people about his relationship with Christ. It appears that he never misses an opportunity to deflect attention from himself and give all the credit, thanks, and glory to Jesus. He doesn't let critics shut him up because he seems to realize that his time in the spotlight could end at any moment and is therefore using every opportunity to tell all who will listen about the goodness and faithfulness of God. Maybe "tebow" should have a third meaning: *"to declare the gospel boldly."*

**For discussion/reflection:** *When have you "dared to tell" people the good news in spite of real or perceived opposition? When have you chickened out? What was the difference?*

## PART 3: PLEASE PLEASE ME

*For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. (1 Thessalonians 2:2-4)*

I am a huge people pleaser. As stated earlier, I really want people to like me. So I tend to be motivated by this stupid desire to manage my image: not saying "no" to enough requests, half-heartedly agreeing with people when I should be wholeheartedly disagreeing, saying things people want to hear instead of speaking direct truth. This is an area where I can – and must – learn from Paul. What was Paul's motivation for "not trying to please men?" He was passionately in love with Jesus and wanted more than anything to please him. Paul realized that being "entrusted with the gospel" was no small thing.

In the movie *Gran Torino*,<sup>4</sup> Walt Kowalski (a crusty, bitter racist portrayed brilliantly by Clint Eastwood) befriends his teenage Hmong neighbor, Thao. Their relationship has a rocky start, due to the fact that Thao tries to steal Walt's beloved 1972 Ford Gran Torino. In an attempt to reform Thao, Walt teaches him how to work hard, gives him tips about women, and demonstrates how to talk "guy talk" – essentially mentors him (in sometimes profane, sometimes amusing ways) in how to be a man. Toward the end of the movie, Walt displays an enormous amount of trust by lending Thao his precious Gran Torino. Thao is blown away. He can't believe it! Being entrusted to drive the very car he tried to steal? This is a big deal – and a loose parallel to how God entrusted Paul, his former enemy, with the gospel.

When somebody hands over something of value to you (either a vintage car or the gospel), the right response is to care more about pleasing that person than looking cool in front of your punk friends who want to go joyriding. Okay, the analogy kinda breaks down here, but you get the idea.

Being God's ambassador is an enormous privilege. He has transformed us from his enemies into his children. And He has entrusted us with being his representatives to a world that desperately needs to be rescued. So why do I still make decisions based on how it will affect my image and popularity instead of



on trying to live for the One who loves me and gave his very life for me? The answer, I think, is simply spiritual myopia: I tend to be very shortsighted, focusing on here-and-now, day-to-day temporal things and unable (or maybe unwilling) to see the big picture of God's calling and God's kingdom. And the only cure for this nearsightedness is to daily fix my eyes on Jesus. As I look to him and I'm reminded of his sovereignty and his love, it's my prayer that my people-pleasing tendencies will evaporate.

**For discussion/reflection:** *What keeps you from wanting to please God instead of pleasing people? You've been entrusted with the gospel: what will remind you of its value?*

## PART 4: SHARE AND SHARE A LIFE

*We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.* (1 Thessalonians 2:8)

Sometimes I view people as something less than human beings. Don't get me wrong; I generally like people. It's just that they often wear me out or mess up my agenda. At times, I've seen people as commodities: "Look how many people came to our meeting tonight!" or "I've got to recruit three more guys to attend this conference." I've also treated people as annoyances, thinking that their problems are interfering with my desire to go home early and watch Sportscenter.

For most of my adult life, I've been an optimistic extrovert; the life of the party, always wanting to spend more time with people. If there are essentially four personality types – Lion (decisive), Beaver (industrious), Otter (outgoing) and Golden Retriever (dependable) – I was an off-the-charts Otter. But the older I get, the more introverted and grumpy I become; perhaps more Honey Badger than anything. Now, when given the choice to go to an event with friends or stay home and relax, I'll choose the latter option nearly half the time. So this gradual shift (from sanguine to melancholic) has been a convenient excuse for me to be pretty lousy at loving others. Several times I have said (half-jokingly) that ministry would be great if it wasn't for the people.

Some people view Paul as a ministry machine – and yes, he is probably the most influential evangelist,

church planter, theologian, and author in the history of Christianity. But he wasn't just about cranking out the numbers. He had genuine care and compassion for people, and poured out his life for them. He shared the gospel with people: not just because it was strategic but mostly because he loved them.

One of the greatest benefits of my years of college ministry has been the chance for Jenny and I to pour our lives into people. Students have come to our house to eat with us, babysit our kids, help us haul furniture, play board games, do laundry – you name it. We have laughed hysterically, cried deeply, listened intently, confronted lovingly, and counseled carefully.

We've had some students that we have angered or disappointed by telling them things they didn't want to hear. And we, in turn, have been frustrated and saddened by the choices some have made. But this is what discipleship is all about: doing life together – and life can be messy. In trying to establish an environment of grace and truth, we have seen people grow, while we have grown immensely, ourselves. And although time and geography obviously limit our interaction with our former students, we are still close with dozens of former disciples (beyond just being Facebook friends).

Chase is one of those people. I first met him in 2003 when he was a freshman frat boy at the University of South Dakota. After he convinced 17 of his fraternity brothers to attend our screening of *The Passion of the Christ*, I could tell he was a natural leader. It didn't take long for Chase to take the reigns of the Greek bible study on campus, which, since I was the staff guy in charge of the Greek ministry, allowed me to meet with him often for one-on-one discipleship.

Meeting with Chase was often the highlight of my week. Despite our age difference (and the fact that he's a fan of both the Yankees and Iowa Hawkeyes, which is evidence of my failure as a discipler), we really enjoyed spending time together. In addition to coaching him in ministry skills, I got to help him walk through life – family struggles, decisions about the future, dating issues, and lots of other categories of growth. And, now that he has graduated and lives only a few minutes away from my house, he has become even closer to me and my family – my boys love being babysat by a 6'2" football coach!

Chase and other students like him have blessed us in ways that I can't express. The relationships that we've



developed over the years help us to understand the deep bond Paul felt with his disciples. They truly have “become so dear to us.”

**For discussion/reflection:** *What are the benefits of sharing life with other believers? What prevents you from sacrificially investing in the lives of others more than you currently do?*

## PART 5: HARD WORKIN' MAN

*Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you . . . We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith. (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 3:2)*

Several times over the years, I have been told that when recent college graduates apply for their first job, kids from the Midwest get bonus points because of the classic Midwestern work ethic. Personally, I think people just invented this myth so they wouldn't feel so lousy about growing up in flyover country. But even though I'm a small town kid from the Great Plains, I'm not particularly diligent – I'm not afraid to work hard, I just prefer to work smart (or not work at all.) Although I grew up on a farm until I was 12, my hayfever and my general aversion to getting dirty kept me from being a typical hardworking farm kid. But staying inside the house for most of my childhood gave me an incredibly important skill: I can sing the theme song of nearly every '80s sitcom.

Paul, however, was no stranger to the concept of hard work. In fact, he refers to himself (and fellow believers) in terms of labor quite often.

*Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. (Romans 16:12)*

*Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)*

*Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. (2 Corinthians 8:11)*

*We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. (Colossians 1:28-29)*

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Colossians 3:23-24)*

*We continually 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)*

Paul didn't just hang out with Timothy and Silas in order to have good bible study buddies. Nor did he travel around the Mediterranean region in order to sample the food and experience the culture so he could eventually write a foodie memoir. He knew that his calling – his job, his task – was to be a missionary of the gospel. Sometimes he got paid for his labor. Other times he had to supplement his income by making tents. But nothing kept him from working hard for the Lord and encouraging others to do the same. He did this with pure motives – not in order to earn favor with God, but out of gratitude and love for him.

At a regional Cru staff meeting a few years ago, Pastor Brian Loritts implored us (in a somewhat Pauline manner) to work hard. I'll never forget his words: “People in ministry are some of the laziest people I know.” This should not be. Now, I realize that some people in ministry (and nearly every other vocation) spend too much time working and not enough time enjoying and investing in their families and other important relationships. But that's not how I typically roll. I need a kick in the pants every once in a while, reminding me that I am God's bondservant – that he has the right to my life and I need to yield to his will and work hard for my master. When I'm breathing my last breath, I don't want to look back on my life and wonder how things would have been different if I had given it my all. I sincerely want the Lord to tell me, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

**For discussion/reflection:** *What motivates you to work hard? What prevents you from working hard? How hard to you work for the cause of the gospel?*



## CONCLUSION: THE BIG PICTURE

*The broader biblical meaning of the Christian gospel . . . (includes) the existence of the living God and his coming into history with imperial authority over all things as the long-awaited King of Israel and Lord of the universe. This King was Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. He fulfilled the Old Testament expectations of the Son of David, died for our sins, was buried, and rose again triumphant over Satan, death, and hell. He promised his own Spirit to be with us and help us. On the basis of his death and resurrection, the gospel promises a great salvation – eventual healing from disease and liberation from oppression, peace with God and others who believe, justification by faith apart from works of the law, forgiveness of sins, transformation into the image of Christ, eternal life, and the global inclusion of all people from all nations in this salvation.*

*(But) the best and final gift of the gospel is that we gain Christ . . . Focusing on facets of a diamond without seeing the beauty of the whole is demeaning to the diamond . . . If you embrace everything . . . about the facets of the gospel, but do it in a way that does not make the glory of God in Christ your supreme treasure, then you have not embraced the gospel . . . If we do not see him and savor him as our greatest fortune, we have not obeyed or believed the gospel.*

As Jesus carried out his three-year ministry in Palestine, he proclaimed different aspects of the gospel in different places and with different people because the appeal and emphasis of the gospel was (and still is) dependent on the audience. “Come to me . . . and I will give you rest,” which was a facet of the good news that appealed to people who were “weary and burdened,” was a much different message than “repent,” which is what the self-righteous Pharisees needed to hear.

But no matter which facet of the gospel holds the most appeal for you – the removal of guilt, the promise of heaven, etc – please don’t miss the point, the end goal, the ultimate gift of the gospel: *God himself*. The gospel is good because it gives us God. Knowing and cherishing God is the pinnacle of human existence. As I’ve been caught up in this Late Awakening to the gospel, this has been the most important thing I’ve learned. And it is my prayer that you and I can honestly echo these words of Paul to the church in Philippi:

*But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11)*

Amen.

## NOTES

1. St. Augustine, Tr. 8 in ep. Jn. (SC 75:342) quoted on <http://ntstudent.blogspot.com>
2. Marty Schoenleber, “Names Changed for Protection,” (unpublished poem)
3. Mary Kassian. <http://www.girlsgonewise.com/archives/362>
4. Gran Torino. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Perfs. Clint Eastwood, Christopher Carley, Bee Vang. Matten Productions, 2009.
5. Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Treasure Tree* (Nashville: Tommy Nelson, 1992)
6. Bryan Loritts. TCX ’03, Campus Crusade for Christ Upper Midwest regional winter conference, Minneapolis, December 2005.
7. Piper. *God is the Gospel*, 26-38.