

# The Living & True God

## 1 Thessalonians 1:9

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**1 Thessalonians 1:9** - “For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” A study of the Old Testament prophets is most enlightening. One of the observations to be gleaned from such a study is that the collapse of the civilization is always preceded by the disintegration of the moral order and is always preceded by the people’s turn to false religions. In the Old Testament history of God’s dealings with Israel, they turned from God to gods conjured up in the minds of men to satisfy their personal needs, images of which they carved out of gold and silver and precious stones.

Reflecting on this truth today I am thinking about the moral decay we are experiencing in America right now and, the ultimate end such behavior in history has brought to its citizenry. Perhaps it should cause us to think about the cause of the breakdown in our moral order and what we must do to correct our course.

In the book of Job, Zophar, one of Job’s friends who came from afar to comfort him in the time of his great sufferings, asked him in **Job 11:7-9** - “Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than heaven-- what can you do? Deeper than Sheol-- what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea.” While Zophar was in error about many things, but he was right about that.

For me a study of God is an awesome experience. It is invariably laden with reverence and fear. It is not to be taken lightly. I am overwhelmed with inadequacy. My vocabulary is incapable of expressing even my lowest reflections upon Him, and the noblest thoughts of my little mind come very far short of His being. The apostle Paul must have felt the same deficiency when he wrote in **Romans 11:33-34** - “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?” Nonetheless, brethren, simply because we can’t drink the spring dry, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t enjoy a refreshing drink from its stream, does it?

To try to picture or visualize God as a man is cheapening. There seems to a modern attitude toward God to make Him as just one of us, to bring Him down to the level of the ordinary, to make Him One who tolerates all our diverse and coarse ideas and life-styles, and like a good servant, is always there when any of us needs Him to do an errand. Friends, not only is this a false image of Him, it is disgustingly humiliating to Him. As it was said of Athens when Paul visited there, so it can be said of America in these days, “There are more gods than men.” Further, it was said that in Athens it was “easier to find a god than to find a man.” Is it nothing short of idolatry that is invariably followed by collapse of the moral order which always precedes the fall of a nation.

Our national failure is the bankruptcy of our religious faith. There is a direct link between a person’s character and his perception of God. By that I mean, a person’s god determines the kind of person he is.

It is interesting that there are two people mentioned in the Bible who were singled out because they learned that God is not a man. The first was King Saul. In 1 Samuel 15, when Saul has disobeyed God in the matter of the Amalekites, Samuel, God's faithful prophet, said to him that because of his disobedience, God would remove him from being king, and that God was not a man that He should change His mind (1 Kings 15:29). The other was Job who in all his suffering and loss, sought to know why. He said of God in **Job 9:32-33** - "For He is not a man, as I am, that I may answer Him, and that we should go to court together. Nor is there any mediator between us, who may lay his hand on us both." In both cases, there is the honor of God above man, so that in neither case was there room for debate or adjudication of their cases. God's word and God's will are true and lasting. He is not a man that we may plea-bargain with Him.

In the first Thessalonian letter, Paul says to his friends that the report of their conversion had been spread everywhere throughout all of Macedonia and Achaia and even beyond. Their conversion was a remarkable one and had stirred up very many people. But one thing was for sure, they had "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God."

What does it mean, they had "turned from idols, to serve a living and true God"? On his second missionary journey, after he and Silas had been released from a prison in Philippi, they made their way southward down the peninsula to Thessalonica. Several reasons contribute to its prominence as a city. It was a commercial and political city of significance. It was thought at one time that it might even become the capital of the world. Unlike Philippi, which was a Roman colony,

Thessalonica was a free city. Its population was multinational—consisting of Greeks, Romans, Orientals, and a large community of Jews. However, it maintained—and still does—a strong Greek nature and culture, which means, of course, that its religion was that of many gods—idolatry.

So when Paul and his traveling companion arrived there preaching one living and true God, they were met with immediate opposition. You see, Christianity is not pluralistic. Nonetheless, we read in **Acts 17:4-6** - “And 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. But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, “These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”

Being driven from the city, they went on to Berea, then to Athens, then on to Corinth. And it was from there that Paul wrote this letter back to those converts in Thessalonica. And he says it was being reported abroad “what kind of reception we had with you, and how your turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.”

The turned to *God* from *idols* to serve a *living* and *true* God. Contrast that with our turn from a living and true God to serve idols. By that I don't mean that we with art and man's devices have carved our gods out of gold and silver and precious stones. No, we haven't gone that far. But we have our mental images of God that reduce Him to the

level of man or an idol. And if you think for a moment that that isn't true, you just need to read some of the things being published and talk with some people about God and/or about our moral and ethical living conditions in America.

American religionists are not worshipping the one living and true God of the Bible. We are not even reading and studying our Bibles. We are being blindly led by our feelings and our opinions about Him and His will.

Current religious thought is that those things are not important; it's how good you feel about some mystical, mysterious, unknown, and unknowable nonentity called a god that is important to most religionists. God is whatever you think he is, whatever you would like him to be—everybody to his own way of thinking. It is what I think he can do for me or what you think he can do for you, not about how we can together serve Him and worship Him in spirit and in truth. The American's god is not the "one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all" of us (**Ephesians 4:6**).

The Thessalonians turned to God from idols to serve a LIVING and TRUE God. My friend, the God of the Bible is a living God, as contrasted with the lifeless gods made by men in their own image. Demetrius the silversmith, maker of silver images of their goddess Diana in Ephesus said that "Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands" (**Acts 19:26**). Friends, he got that right. Man-made gods or images of God are USELESS because they are LIFELESS.

The God to whom the Thessalonians turned to is also described as being true. The word used for true in this verse means “real, ideal, genuine.” It means there is nothing false about Him; no pretense, no charade, It means God fulfills the meaning of His name. The Bible presents God as the Eternal One, from everlasting to everlasting: the One who was, and is, and ever shall be—Who changes not (Psalm 90:2; Malachi 3:6). The Bible says God is the Almighty One (Genesis 17:1) “who made the world and everything in it” (**Acts 17:24**). The Bible says “He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast” (**Psalm 33:9**).

Oh, the wondrous power of His Word—spoken or written! The God of the Bible is the Sovereign Ruler of all things both in Heaven and on earth (Acts 17:24) and He bears, upholds, regulates, and controls all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:1-3). The Bible pictures God as the One who is present everywhere. David asked in **Psalm 139:7-8** - “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.” The Bible presents God as the One who is all-knowing. It says in **Hebrews 4:13** - “And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” The Bible declares in **Proverbs 15:3** that “the eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good.”

The Bible says that “God is love: (**1 John 4:8**). It doesn’t say the “love is God.” In 2 Samuel 7:22 the Bible says there is none like God and there is no God besides Him. How dare mankind reduce Him to being just another one of us. The Bible describes Him as the One who

is absolutely holy, totally and completely pure, to whom no other compares. He asks in **Isaiah 40:25** - “To whom then will you liken Me, that I should be his equal, says the Holy One.” Holy and reverend is His name (Psalm 111:9). He says in **1 Peter 1:16**, “Be ye holy, for I am holy.” He further said in **Isaiah 45:23** - “I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, and every tongue will swear allegiance.”

Friends, I marvel that we can be so casual—even irreverent—about the one and only living and true God. We show casualness and callousness toward God in our life-styles. We show it in our conversation. We even show it, of all places, in worship by our attitudes, behaviors, lack of seriousness, and lack of respect for the modesty of attiring ourselves that is set forth in the Bible. Let us not create a new image of God into the likeness of what we want Him to be, but rather, let us respect and honor the being of God that is already presented to us in the Bible, and let us not be reckless with the living and true God. Reserve for Him the loftiest, hallowed, sacred place for Him in our hearts and lives. The loftiest recesses of our hearts should belong to Him. **Matthew 22:37-38** should be respected and adhered to: “. . . You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.”

Loving God makes a difference in the kind of life we live. God shapes our morality and defines our values. That is true with nations of people as well as with individuals. It is when men refuse to have God in their knowledge that unrighteousness prevails, and both private

and public behavior become disgraceful. Let us work earnestly to bring America, our world, our families and friends, and ourselves closer to the living and true God.

## **God's Plan for Man's Salvation**