

THE WORD OF GOD AT WORK IN THE BELIEVERS

Ben Janssen | **1 Thessalonians 2:13-16** | October 11, 2020

¹³ And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!

We are several weeks into our study of the letters to the Thessalonians. One thing we've seen clearly in 1 Thessalonians is that it is a letter of encouragement, not rebuke. The Apostle Paul writes this letter to encourage the new Christians in Thessalonica to not lose hope, to not falter, to persevere in their faith. It's not that he is worried that they will fall away from their faith in Christ; he has seen real evidence of God's grace in them, and he writes this letter to encourage them by telling them about that grace that he sees in them.

Sometimes we need the encouragement of others because they can see God's grace at work in us more clearly than we can. We recently received a very encouragement note from a believer in another state who saw our church's monthly prayer guide. She wrote:

...it brought tears to my eyes. Wow. I can't say I've ever seen a prayer guide like it. It was full of grace and truth. It was comforting to read through and pray through. It was calming to my heart, and I didn't realize my heart wasn't calm. It encouraged me in the faith and in who God is.

I share this note of encouragement because all of us, through our Missional Families, are taking the responsibility to put these prayer guides together each month. I'm sure many of us who have worked on them might have wondered how important this task is. Getting a note of encouragement like this should put a little fuel in the tank to keep on going, knowing that God is at work in us as we put the prayer guide together.

That is how Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians intended to encourage the believers there. The Christian life is not easy. We need encouragement from others, like a coach who can see how we're doing, the dangers that are ahead of us, and what we need to make it through. In the four verses before us today, Paul urges us to find encouragement in the power of the word which sustains us as we come into conflict with our country which sits under the final judgment of God.

THE POWER OF THE WORD

First, we should find encouragement in the fact that the word of God, when it is received, is sure to do its work in our lives.

The Approach of the Word

Verse 13 finds the Apostle giving thanks to God once again for something he saw in his ministry to the Thessalonians. You'll recall that in chapter one Paul was giving thanks for the astonishing effects of gospel ministry. He rejoiced that the word of God came to the Thessalonians "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess 1:2-5). He returns to this theme again here.

He remembers how the Thessalonians received the Word of God, the Word that they heard from Paul and his team. Notice the two verbs *received* and *accepted*. The first verb refers only to the fact that the Thessalonians heard the Word of God as Paul and his team proclaimed it to them. There's nothing extraordinary about it. It's what's happening right now as I'm reading and preaching. It's what happens when you open your Bible and read.

The Reception of the Word

But the second verb, *accepted*, refers to the Word of God not merely being heard but being approved and eagerly embraced.¹ It's one thing to hear the Word. It's another thing to embrace it.

Everyone needs to hear the Word. Everyone can hear the Word. But not everyone will embrace it. The Word of God is heard but not received by hundreds and thousands of people every single day.

Paul is giving thanks that in Thessalonica the Word was heard; it is a great and awesome privilege to get to proclaim the Word of God to anyone at any time. Plenty of people do not even hear the Word.

But he is particularly thankful that in Thessalonica the Word was not only heard but also accepted, embraced, and believed.

The Persuasion of the Word

But there's one last element to his thanksgiving. Not only was the Word of God heard and not only was it accepted, but it was accepted, Paul says, "not as the word of men but as what is really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

He gives thanks that the Thessalonians did not receive the word of God as the word of men. That is, they recognized a distinction between the Word of God and a human message. They recognized the sacredness of the Word of God and its transcendence over all human philosophies.² They did not accept Paul's message because they found Paul to be persuasive but because they found the message he proclaimed to be persuasive.

Now think about it for just a moment. We are creatures who live by persuasion. We hear messages, ideas, philosophies, news, advertisements, instructions, commands, possibilities, and we act according to what we find persuasive. We do this day by day, moment by moment. We don't even know we are doing it most of the time.

The reason Paul gave thanks was because he saw that these believers in Thessalonica were acting like those who found the word of God to be persuasive. They were not simply doing what Paul

wanted them to do. They had been converted, not by the words of men, but by the very word of God. And this greatly encouraged Paul and his team of missionaries. It should encourage all who believe, all who are persuaded by the word of God.

CONFLICT IN OUR COUNTRY

Now at the end of verse 13 and on in to verse 14, Paul explains why the Thessalonians' acceptance of the word of God was encouraging and one way it become obvious that they had indeed accepted the word of God as indeed the *word of God*. He saw the word sustain them in the inevitable conflicts they experienced with their own culture, in their own country.

The Living and Abiding Word of God

If indeed the Bible is what it claims to be, the word of God, then to embrace the Bible is to embrace the same power that made light shine out of darkness (2 Cor 4:6). It is to possess "the immeasurable greatness of his power" who raised Christ from the dead and seated him "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:19-21). It is to be "born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable" because we're talking here about "the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet 1:23). If the Bible really is the word of God, then to not merely hear it but to accept it is to accept a word that, as Paul says in verse 13, "is at work in you believers." "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

The word of God does not lie dormant in the life of anyone. It is the word of God! If it has been received it will be at work. If it is not at work in someone's life, it is not because it has lost its power but because it is not there. It has not been received, not as what it really is anyway. It just may be that many who say they accept the Bible have accepted it in the same way they accept some other book, some other "word of men."

Similar Family Characteristics

How does the word of God "work" in the believers? Paul says in verse 14 that he saw evidence of God's word at work in the Thessalonians because they "became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea."

There are plenty of ways in which Christians and churches in one place will be different from Christians and churches in some other place. But they cannot be entirely different. Not if they believe the same gospel. Not if they have received the same word of God. Not if they worship the same God. There must be some real similarities if they possess the same DNA having been born of the same word of God.

And these kinds of similarities are natural not forced. Have you ever noticed any similarities between you and your parents or between you and your siblings? Maybe the same smile or walk? The same laugh or same nose? Have you seen how you imitate them, without even thinking about it? That's the kind of imitation Paul is writing about in verse 14. He knows that they have rightly

received the living word of God because he sees the same kind of characteristics in them that he saw in other churches.

Wherever the gospel is received, there will be some imitations. We might rightly praise our diversity. But we should also expect a lot of similarity in the churches where the same word of God has been received.

No Longer at Home

One thing that Paul noticed in this emerging church in Thessalonica is that they “suffered the same things” from their own “countrymen” as the churches in Judea had suffered from the Jews. It was this family trait of suffering at the hands of one’s own culture that Paul saw as evidence that they had truly accepted the word of God.

Judea, of course, is where the church had been born. Most of the first Christians were Jews who converted, having accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah. This was a controversial stance to take. But it became even more controversial as the Christian mission spread to the nations. Jewish zealots seemed to have started to pressure the Jewish Christians in Palestine to abandon their faith and stick together with non-Christian Jews over against these Gentiles who were also converting to Christianity.³

The same thing was now happening in Thessalonica. It was not foreigners who were giving these new believers a hard time, but rather their next-door neighbors. People who were just like them. As we’ve seen before, the problem with embracing Christianity in Thessalonica is that it was viewed as a political threat against society. Not against one particular political party, but against the whole society. Against all the political perspectives. Christianity was not seen as a threat to one particular power, but to the entire national power. This is why it was viewed with such hostility and why the Thessalonians became so hated by their own compatriots.⁴

If indeed it is a family trait to suffer at the hands of those who are just like us, then the church should always be leery of peace that comes to them externally. There can be no “party of Jesus,” for his kingdom is not of this world. No Christian should ever feel quite at home in any other society of men.

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

But that doesn’t mean that religion doesn’t mix with politics. That it is something entirely different. No, the Christian religion is entirely political, offering a better alternative to all human politics. It is a competing ideology. It does come to bear on our politics.

This becomes palpable in how Paul wraps up this section. In verses 15-16, he denounces those unbelieving Jews who persecuted Jewish Christians in Israel. In so doing he suggests that the church should find encouragement in the word’s eschatological hope, in their deliverance from wrath, from the judgment of God.

Anti-Semitism?

What Paul says in verses 15-16 might come across as anti-Semitic hate speech, but that cannot be substantiated. Paul is a Jew himself, and he speaks elsewhere of his deep love for his fellow Jews (Rom 9:1-5). These anti-Jewish statements are to be understood in a context in which Christianity was trying to find an identity separate from the mother religion from which it emerged, from the mother religion which was a constant threat for its survival.⁵

In fact, the reason Paul pens these harsh words is not so much to denounce anti-Christian Judaism, but rather to encourage the Thessalonians who are also suffering at the hands of their own countrymen, that is, at the hands of mainly non-believing Gentiles.⁶ If we do indeed seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then we can take encouragement and comfort and hope in whatever suffering, in whatever discomfort, we experience in our own home land. It is a sign that we have indeed accepted the word of God.

Knowing the Opposition

So what Paul says in these verses against the anti-Christian Jews is what typifies the behavior of all who oppose God and his kingdom. And that would include not only the atheist next door but also the law-abiding American patriot who clearly loves his country but not so clearly the kingdom of God.

The ones who “killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets” include not just the Jewish leaders in that day and not just Pontius Pilate and not just the Roman soldiers. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, preached that all who “resist the Holy Spirit” are guilty of the same crimes (Acts 7:51-52). It’s not just unbelieving Jews who drove out Paul and his team of missionaries from Thessalonica but also anyone today who expresses intolerance to the message of the gospel in our workplaces or in our politics or in our schools. Those who oppose God’s kingdom have no intention of pleasing God but themselves first and foremost.

And in so doing they “oppose all mankind” as verse 15 says, and verse 16 explains that they do this “by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved.” The logic is sound, even if Christians today don’t see it so clearly. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news of great joy for all people, then any attempt to limit the spread of this news is “not only a personal attack” against Christians, “but also an attack against humanity, blocking the way to the hope of salvation.”⁷ It would be like possessing the cure for COVID-19 but preventing the word from getting out where one could go to get the treatment. No, this would be even worse. For in this case we’re talking about an illness that does not merely affect all humanity but has rather infected us all, so that we carry in our bodies a sentence of death, a sentence so powerful, so prevailing, that many just do not believe there could possibly even be a cure.

Wrath Has Come at Last

But there is a cure. That is the good news. At the same time there is only one cure, and that means that any who reject it are finally and hopelessly lost.

And that's what Paul means at the end of verse 16. Those who do not listen to the gospel are not neutral to its message but are always resisting it, filling "up the measure of their sins." He is echoing the biblical theme "that the sins of a people come up to their complete measure before divine judgment is poured out upon them."⁸ Those who suffer at the hands of those who oppose God must not become discouraged if it seems that God will not deliver them. Judgment day is coming.

But then Paul says, "wrath has come upon them at last." He's saying that judgment day has already arrived. How can he say that when he and his audience are still suffering? He can say it because believers in Christ may be sure of deliverance from the wrath to come (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9). Just as sure as we can be that we have escaped God's wrath, we can be sure that those who oppose God remain under it.

If you are in Christ, if you are united to him by faith, then you can rest assured that salvation has come. No matter what happens in the future, you are secure in him. He is your king. You are his subject. The kingdom of God is your inheritance. What more could you want?

But if you are not united to Christ, you are already under his judgment. No matter what happens in the future—come riches or political victory—you cannot be secure, for your hope is in sinking sand.

This is not an evangelistic text, but rather a text to encourage the believers who suffer at the hands of their neighbors or the hands of their government. You need not fear. You need not falter. In Christ you have a sure and steadfast hope of salvation.

But if you are shaken this morning, if you fear the future and have no hope, I urge you this morning to come to Jesus. Come now and claim him. Do not delay. Wrath has come at last upon all who oppose God and his Messiah.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1982), [45](#).

² Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), [140](#).

³ Robert Jewett, "The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation," *NTS* 17 (1970-71), 202-206, cited in Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), [113](#).

⁴ Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, [113-14](#).

⁵ *Ibid.*, [118-19](#).

⁶ This "attack on the Jewish people is also indirectly an attack on those who oppressed the recipients of the letter." *Ibid.*, [114](#).

⁷ Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, [146](#).

⁸ *Ibid.*, [147](#).