

“A Suffering Church”

October 8, 2017

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

I. Introduction

Although Paul, Silas, and Timothy had ministered in Thessalonica for only a short time, they had seen many turn to Christ. But because of the immorality and strong pagan religious culture in the city and because the teachings of Christianity were new concepts, Paul had been concerned that, after they had been forced to leave the city, the Thessalonians' faith might have faltered. So, after allowing time for the persecution to die down, Paul sent Timothy back to check on the church's progress—as Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 3:5**, “When I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.” Paul's concerns proved unfounded; he wrote in **1 Thess. 3:6**, “But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you.”

It wasn't easy being a Christian in Thessalonica where believers daily faced persecution and suffering—they were a suffering church. So, when Timothy brought back his glowing report, Paul was filled with thanksgiving and gratitude for the Thessalonians. Wanting them to know about his appreciation for their continued walking with the Lord and to further their training, although at a distance, Paul wrote this letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul was always thankful for the privilege of ministry and he never failed to recognize that it was God who brought about the change in hearts. He had already expressed this to the Thessalonians when he wrote in **1 Thessalonians 1:2**: “We always thank God for all of you.” In the first verses of today's Scripture, Paul gave another reason he had for constantly thanking God for them, i.e., their acceptance of the Word of God—some receive the Word of God.

II. Some Receive of the Word of God

Paul was thankful that the saints in Thessalonica had the right spiritual attitudes toward the Word of God. This helped them to endure the suffering that came their way.

A. First, they appreciated the Word. Because of its location on the Egnatian Way and because of it being a port town, the city attracted many false philosophers and religious teachers. The Thessalonians had heard a wide range of human teachings. Some speakers must have been very moving and inspirational. But the Thessalonians didn't receive Paul's teachings as the word of men; they received it as the Word of God—the true message of salvation from Almighty God. The Bible *is* the Word of God—[2 Timothy 3:16](#) says, “**All Scripture is God-breathed.**” [Turn to 2 Peter 1:20-21.](#)

B. They accepted the Word. The Thessalonians didn't just recognize Paul's teachings as the Word of God, i.e., something unique; they accepted the Word of God—they took it to heart, so to speak, and made it part of their lives.

Many people are careless hearers and do not apply themselves to really listen to the teaching of God's Word. As those about whom Paul wrote in [2 Timothy 4:3](#), such people have “**itching ears**” and only want religious entertainment. Some are just too lazy to apply themselves and pay attention—[Hebrews 5:11](#) says that they “**are slow to learn.**”

By accepting the Word, the Thessalonians worked at understanding the Word of God and then received it into their hearts. By meditating—thinking on it, it became part of the inner man. Meditation is to the spiritual life what digestion is to the physical life. If you don't digest your food, you will die. It takes time to meditate, but it is the only way to accept or appropriate the Word and grow.

C. Finally, they applied the Word. They obeyed the Word by faith, and the Word went to work in their lives. It isn't enough to appreciate the Bible, or even to accept it. The Word of God must be applied

in each Christian's life—turn to James 1:22-25. Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

The Word of God has in it the power to accomplish the will of God—Luke 1:37 says, “Nothing is impossible with God.” Someone has written that “*God's commandments are God's enablements.*” In Mark 3:1-5, Jesus commanded the crippled man to stretch out his hand—the very thing he could not do. But he heard Jesus' words and accepted them as the Word of God. He trusted the word, obeyed the word, and was made whole. When we believe God's Word and obey, He releases power—divine power—that works in our lives to fulfill His purposes.

For the Thessalonians, another proof of their complete acceptance and application of Word of God—the Gospel—was that, as well as imitating Paul and Silas and Timothy and the Lord (1 Thess. 1:6), they also imitated the believers in Judea, who like the Thessalonians were “God's churches ... which are in Christ Jesus.” And even as the believers in Judea suffered persecution from their own people, the Jews, the Thessalonians, immediately after receiving the Gospel, “suffered from your own countrymen.” In particular, Acts 17:5-7 identifies those persecutors as unbelieving Jews and their Gentile accomplices.

III. Some Reject the Word of God

Not everyone who hears the Word of God accepts and applies it; there are those who reject the Gospel as being the Word of God. As he thought of the persecutions that come to Christians, Paul was reminded of the unbelieving Jews who were the exact opposite of the believers in Thessalonica. He listed 3 results of rejecting the Word of God.

1. They killed those bringing the Word of God; Paul wrote that they “killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.” Paul wasn't instigating anti-Semitism; he was simply stating a fact of history. Obviously, it was not all the Jews of all time who were responsible for killing Jesus Christ. Only those of the Jewish mob that insisted that Pilate carry out the crucifixion of Jesus were guilty of murdering Him. The Romans also participated in the trial and death of Christ, and, for that matter, it was

our sins that sent Jesus to the cross—[Isaiah 53:6](#) says, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

2. A 2nd result of rejecting the Word of God is that **they are hostile to the saints**. The Thessalonians honored the messengers of God, while the Jews were hostile to the same gospel preachers. They tried every way conceivable to prevent them from preaching their message of salvation. They refused to believe the Gospel, and they resented it being preached so that others might be saved. They rejected God’s truth, and tried to protect their own man-made traditions. Speaking to the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law, Jesus said in [Mark 7:8](#), “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” Paul wrote that this hostility “to all men” and the rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ also displeased God.

3. **The wrath of God has come upon them**. The 3rd result of the Jews’ hostility to God’s Word and His saints is that “[The wrath of God has come upon them](#).” God patiently waits as sinners rebel against Him, and He watches as their measure of sin and judgment fills up. When the time is up, God’s patience will end and judgment will fall.

In one sense, judgment had already fallen on Israel; they were a scattered people and their nation in Palestine was under Roman rule. But an even greater judgment was to fall in the future—in A.D. 70, the Roman army would destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and end the period of God’s patience with His chosen people. But it also points to the coming judgment of all who reject God and His Word—[John 3:36](#) says, “[Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.](#)”

IV. Out of Sight, but Not Out of Mind

Paul hadn’t been in Thessalonica for a long before he was forced to leave. Even though he had known them for only a few months and had been away from them a short while, he longed to be with

them in their growth and their persecution and suffering. He wanted them to know that they were out of sight but not out of mind—he was still with them in his heart.

Paul made every effort possible to return to them, “but Satan stopped us.” How Paul was stopped isn’t stated. It may have been a legal barrier to his return, it may have been his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7), or it may have been poor health—we don’t know. No doubt Timothy informed the Thessalonians about the circumstances that made it impossible for Paul to visit them.

But Paul didn’t look back and give in to regret and remorse. Instead he looked ahead and rejoiced. For the Christian, the best is yet to come. Paul looked ahead by faith and anticipated seeing his friends in the presence of Jesus Christ in glory. He may receive a crown, but Paul said that the saints themselves would be his crown when he met them at the judgment seat of God. When he looked ahead to that time, they brought joy to his heart. Paul looked ahead and rejoiced.

When the Christians at Thessalonica read this letter, it must have encouraged them. They were going through intense persecution and suffering; some may have been tempted to give up. “Don’t give up!” was Paul’s counsel. “Lay hold of the spiritual resources you have in Jesus Christ. You have the Word of God within you, the people of God around you, and the glory of God before you. There is no need to give up.”

V. Conclusion

Today, as in Paul’s day, the same choice exists: receive God’s Word or reject God’s Word. In Joshua 24:15 Joshua said, “But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” In Matthew 12:30 Jesus said, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” According to God’s Word there are only 2 choices with 2 completely different results. Those who choose wisely, i.e. they choose to believe and obey the Word of God and honor other believers by

imitating their lives; such will persevere to eternal glory. Those who choose poorly, i.e. they reject the Word of God and hinder those who preach it; such people will ultimately suffer eternal condemnation—[turn to Revelation 20:11-15; now look at Revelation 21:1-4](#). These are the results of the 2 choices: the lake of fire or heaven.

As the American society continues to move away from Christian ethical teachings and values, as it transitions, like Europe has already done, from a Christian to a post-Christian culture, those who seek to live in accordance with the Gospel of Jesus Christ can expect to experience trials and persecutions similar to those of the Thessalonians and to those in other parts of the world even today. Let me give you a list of possibilities:

- An honest employee is fired for disrupting a company's plan to scam consumers or for blowing the whistle on corruption and fraud;
- A law enforcement officer is ostracized and pushed out of line for a promotion by her fellow officers because she refuses to lie in order to cover up misconduct by another officer;
- High school students experience hostility in taking a stand in an environment where social status and standing is heavily dependent on the extent to which one uses alcohol and/or drugs or is sexually active;
- A person is fired because he has a Bible in his bookcase at work;
- A student is sent to the principal's office because he/she is wearing a T-shirt with a cross or the name of Jesus on it.

We shouldn't be surprised; [2 Timothy 3:12](#) says, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." But the Word of God within us is a great source of power in times of testing and suffering. If we receive the Word of God into our hearts, accept it into our minds and apply it in our lives, then we will have the power of the Holy Spirit within us. He will give the victory-- [1 John 5:4](#) says, "Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our

faith.” We may not escape persecution and suffering but we will be victorious over it and when we stand before God we will hear, **“Well done, good and faithful servant”** (Matthew 25:21)—*“Welcome home.”*

“Don’t give up! Lay hold of the spiritual resources you have in Jesus Christ. You have the Word of God within you, the people of God around you, and the glory of God before you. There is no need to give up.”