

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

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!

The apostle Paul doesn't seem to miss any opportunity to give *thanks* where *thanks* are due. The same adjective, *constantly*, appears in 2:13 as in 1:2 regarding Paul's position in his thanks to God. We could spend an entire lesson studying the value and importance of maintaining a stance of constant praise and thanksgiving to God. *The importance of gratefulness is confirmed by the thanksgiving introductions in almost every Pauline letter.*¹ Paul's constant thanksgiving while in the face of opposition and watching those he loved suffer is noteworthy.

In this portion of Paul's letter, we see him expounding upon his initial thanksgiving for the Thessalonians found in 1:2-10. The fact that the Thessalonians *received the word of God* for what it *really was*, a message not of men but of God himself points back to 1:5 - the gospel came to them in power. Paul elsewhere testifies to his dependence on preaching a simple gospel message rather than using persuasive speech so that the hearers would see a demonstration of the Spirit's power and *not rest in the wisdom of men* (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). This begs the question – what about us? Have we received the word of God for what it really is? Put another way, do we rise each day with a reverence for the Scriptures because they are the words of God to us? Resist the urge to hurry on and let that question sink deep. We don't hold a book in our hands with words from mere men – we hold the very words of God!

Paul recognizes that the Thessalonians demonstrate what is inevitable when the word of God is truly received– it is at work in the life of a believer. The phrase, *is at work*, is one word in the Greek: *energeō*,

¹ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Magnifying God in Christ: A Summary of New Testament Theology*, Baker Academic,

meaning to *be active, efficient, be at work (effectually in)*.² It is not difficult to see the English word *energy* in *energeō*. The message here is twofold. The word of God is at work in us as we receive it and the evidence of that reception is that we get to work for God. (Phil 2:13; 2 Tim 2:15)

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... (1 Thessalonians 2:14)

There's nothing that stings quite like a wound from your own people. A wound from afar certainly is capable of immense damage but there's something about the pain of an attack from someone who knows you a bit more intimately. We expect, at the very least, that those close to us hold us in enough regard than to ever be the cause of our suffering. Yet, more often than not we are left marred by the very ones we thought we could trust.

Consider this quote from D. Michael Martin in The New American Commentary,

It is unnecessary to pinpoint a particular persecution as the basis for Paul's comparison because the experience of Thessalonian Christians need not have paralleled the Judean experience exactly for the comparison to work. The primary feature of Paul's comparison is suffering at the hands of one's countrymen. Whatever mob-inspired (Acts 17:5) or officially sanctioned (Acts 17:6-9) punishments were meted out, that which both the Thessalonian and the Judean communities experienced was social rejection and the painful isolation that can result. Yet in spite of these, the Thessalonians, like the Judeans before them, persevered. Both the persecution suffered and the perseverance demonstrated provide evidence of a genuine faith. The gospel was worth suffering for. The Thessalonians' willingness to suffer persecution without relinquishing the faith demonstrated the great esteem in which they held this "word of God."³

Can we surmise that the Thessalonians saw too much was at stake - the spread of the gospel - to become incapacitated by the infliction imposed by their fellow countrymen?

Reflect on these words from Martin in the quote above. Let them seep into your heart and carry a weight as if hearing them from Jesus Himself...

The gospel is worth suffering for.

² Strong, J. (1996). *The New Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

³ Martin, Michael D. 1, 2 Thessalonians. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen, B&H Publishing Group, 1995. The New American Commentary.

Jesus demonstrated this with His own life and ministry.

⁹The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:9-11)

⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – ⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:7-8)

Read John 1:11 again from the New Living Translation,

He came to his own people, and even they rejected him.

Rejection.

Jesus experienced it from His own people. Yet, HE still went to the Cross.

Even in our anguish, in the jolting shock of rejection that leaves us temporarily paralyzed as if someone took the very breath from our lungs, we can find Jesus is *STILL* worth exalting and the gospel *STILL* worth proclaiming.

Still, the honest skeptic is wondering *how*.

The same way Jesus did - and consequently, the same way the Thessalonians did. The only way –

By acknowledging *What* is to come, *Who* is to return, and that *this* is not our Home. Life here on earth is not all there is. Paul recognizes the Thessalonians believing such because they were *waiting for the Son (1:10)*. If Christ is simply some hypothetical entity to us, if we don't receive His Word for what it truly is, then being victorious in the face of isolation, persecution, and rejection will not be obtainable.

BUT...

If we are consumed with the knowledge that we exist purely for the sake of His glory, for the interest of His Kingdom (1 Cor 8:6), the oddest thing begins to occur – strength rises. Pain becomes purposeful. Rejection extends an invitation to us for more intimacy with God. Anger is diffused by the same allotment given to us – forgiveness. (Col 3:13)

When we begin to filter every detail our lives through the lens of His Name and renown, we can begin to see suffering as an opportunity for the advancement of the gospel and personal identification with Christ (1 Peter 2:21).

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind... Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will reap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:1-2a; 17-21)

... 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! (1 Thessalonians 2:15-16)

If there's any proof that Jesus can yank the harshest persecutor and turn their position into one of a faithful follower, it is the life of Paul. Thus, we must not make the mistake of thinking any persecutor is beyond the reach of an Almighty God. However, this text does preach to us what can call down the wrath of God – hindering the extension of His message.

Who is Paul exactly talking about in this passage? Is he charging the Jews as guilty for the death of Jesus? But didn't the Romans kill Jesus? If we want to get technical, the answer to that last question would be yes. However, it is the sins of those for whom He died that nailed Him to that Cross (Heb 2:9). *Nevertheless, the Jewish people as a whole shared in the blame and said so. (Matthew 27:25) While implicating ourselves, we cannot exonerate them.*⁴ Martin argues that Paul's intended audience when he referenced "the prophets" is a little unclear. *Whether the prophets are Hebrews or Christians, still their persecutors displeased God*

⁴ Stott, John R. W. The Message of Thessalonians: The Gospel & the End of Time. Edited by Motyer, J.A. (OT) and Stott, John R.W. (NT), 1991. Inter-Varsity Press. The Bible Speaks Today Series.

and were hostile to all men in that they hindered the advance of God's message of salvation. ⁵

This brings us to the gist of the remaining piece of the passage. It is up for debate if the wrath declared here is a past event or a futuristic one. In fact, Martin argues that this last statement is perhaps the most difficult statement in the passage.⁶ Rather than becoming bogged down with the specifics concerning the *when* of the *wrath*, let's allow our focus to rest on this as we close:

To persecute God's people and His message is to persecute God Himself. (Acts 26:14-15)

But the Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness.
Psalm 9:7

⁵ Martin, Michael D. *1, 2 Thessalonians*. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen, B&H Publishing Group, 1995. The New American Commentary.

⁶ Ibid.