

Strength For The Battle

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

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In 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20, Paul says, “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators...”—or “followers”—“...of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?” The word is “parousia” or “appearance.” “For you are our glory and joy.”

In our study of 1 Thessalonians, we’ve discovered in chapter 1 that the church was a model church. It was an elect church, an evangelistic church, an expectant church—looking for the coming again of Jesus Christ. In chapter 2, we saw that Paul was a model minister. Now our text today, 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20, is the first part of Paul’s autobiography, which goes from 1 Thessalonians 2:13 to 3:13. In Paul’s autobiography, he defends himself against the critics who said to the believers in Thessalonica that Paul didn’t love them, didn’t care about them, is not really an apostle and had left them and didn’t return. This is Paul’s apologetic, personal defense of his commitment and love of the believers in Thessalonica.

The one theme that runs through the whole passage is basically Paul saying to them, “I love you.” Paul talks about being taken from them, trying to come back to them, that they were his “joy” and “crown.” So Paul is affirming to them that he loves them, but he was taken from them physically, but not in heart.

Another theme that runs through this passage is that of suffering. Even though it was a model church, and they had a model minister, it didn’t mean that life was easy. They were facing opposition and persecution.

First I want to look at some phrases. In 1 Thessalonians 1:6, we see “much affliction.” In chapter 2, verse 14, we see “suffered the same things.” In verse 15, we see “have persecuted us.” And in verse 18, we read “Satan hindered us.” Then in chapter 3, verse 3, Paul says, “No one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.” So they were afflicted, they suffered, they were persecuted, Satan was attacking them and hindering them and their afflictions they were appointed to. This is why A.W. Tozer said, “The Christian life is not a playground; it is a battleground.”

In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul says, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” All who desire to live for God are going to suffer persecution. So the affliction, suffering and opposition that the Thessalonians were enduring wasn’t just because they were living in a sinful, fallen world; it was because they had chosen to follow Jesus Christ.

When you choose to follow Christ, you’re going to be going against the grain, and you’re going to run head on into the devil. Paul said, “Satan hindered us.”

So to discover there really is a devil, give your life to Jesus Christ. You’ll certainly meet the devil in opposition and from the world around you.

But thankfully God has provided us with divine resources to strengthen us in the battles that we face. And there are three resources I want to point out. Number one, He has provided the Word of God to strengthen us for the battle, verse 13. He says, “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”

Notice in verse 13, Paul starts with, “For this reason we also thank God.” He’s talking about the fact that they received God’s Word. It’s not looking back to what he is thankful for; he’s looking ahead, saying they’re thankful that when Paul and the others preached to them, they didn’t receive it as man’s word but what it really was—the Word of God. So the church in Thessalonica was born, founded and transformed; the Word of God worked effectually in them who believed by the Word of God. They had a unique relationship with God’s Word. When Paul came to preach with Silas and Timothy, the Thessalonians knew that the words that Paul was preaching were the very words of God.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6, we see the relationship the Thessalonians had when Paul first came with the preaching of God’s Word. “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers...”—the word is “imitators” or “mimics,” which we get in our text today—“...of us and of the Lord, having received...”—there it is—“...the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.” So when Paul came to Thessalonica, he preached the Word, they received the Word, they were being afflicted for it, but they had much joy in the Holy Spirit.

Now in 1 Thessalonians 2:9, Paul said, “We preached to you the gospel of God.” For the believers to stand in the face of opposition and persecution, they must be strong in God’s Word. And there are three things that I want you to know about their relationship to the Word of God. Number one, they appreciated God’s Word. If you’re going to stand strong in the trials and difficulties and the adversities of life as a Christian living in this dark world, you will have to hold a high value of God’s Word in your heart and life. Verse 13 says that they received Paul’s preaching “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God.” They realized that this very Word that Paul preached is the Word of God. Paul does not rebuke them for believing that

his message was God's Word. They had a high view of the Scriptures.

I believe that when you come on Sunday morning to church that it is not only important that I preach the Word, but it's important that you hear the Word, that you receive the Word and that you live and apply the Word. So we want expositional preaching and expositional listening; we want you to get God's Word in your heart to work effectually to transform your life.

So when they heard the preacher, he said, "This is the Word of the Lord." And Paul didn't say, "No, no, no! You're viewing my words too highly. I'm just a man. I'm just preaching man's word." No. Paul said, "You're listening to me preach, and you're hearing God's Word."

It's like Paul was speaking in the manner of the Old Testament prophets, who when they would speak, they would use the phrase, "Hear the word of the Lord," or they would preach and say, "This is the word of the Lord." God was speaking through His Word and through the prophets. God also spoke through the Apostle Paul. What a marvelous truth that is!

Even today, when the Bible is preached, read and heard, we are hearing not the word of men but the Word of God. One of the reasons why I preach from a text, and I always read the text is because I believe the Bible is the Word of God. My sermon is bound by the text. I'm not free to take it out of context. I'm not free to impose my thoughts or ideas into the text. I'm not free to add to it. I'm not free to substitute it. I'm not free to take away from it. I'm only called as a faithful steward to preach the Word.

So when you hear the Bible being read, or you read it yourself at home, you're hearing the Word of the Lord. The Bible is being given by inspiration of God. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Bible is the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God. It literally means it is "God breathed" or "God breathed out." In 2 Peter 1:21, Peter says, "For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved ..."—or "carried along" or "borne along"—"...by the Holy Spirit."

These are two classic passages on inspiration. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:21 show that God breathed out His Word, God carried along the holy men as they wrote His Word. So my definition of inspiration is God superintended the human authors, so that the very words they wrote were the words of God.

The Bible is unique; it is like no other book. It actually is the inspired word of God. In Psalm 19, which is a beautiful psalm describing the glories of God's Word, there are six attributes of the Scriptures listed. It is "perfect, converting the soul...sure, making wise the simple...right, rejoicing the heart...pure, enlightening the eyes...clean, enduring forever...true and righteous altogether." In verse 10, the psalmist said, it is "more to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." So we need to appreciate the Bible as the Word of the Lord.

When you open your Bible to read it, you actually still your heart before God and say, "Speak, Lord, Thy servant is listening." You're hearing the Word of the Lord. The problem in the church today is that we've gotten away from a high view of Scripture and the reality that this Book is the inspired Word of God.

The second relationship the Thessalonians had with the Bible is that they appropriated God's Word. Verse 13 says, "You received the word of God." I don't know if you noticed, but in this verse, Paul twice used the word "received" or "welcomed." The first time he used the word "received," it literally means "to hear with the ear." The second time he uses it, it is a slightly different word, which means "to welcome into the heart." They first received by hearing, and they second received by welcoming the Word of God into their hearts. So the Bible should not only be read and heard; it should be welcomed into our heart.

Jesus gave a warning in Luke 8:18: "Take heed how you hear." Actually, Jesus said to take heed that you hear, what you hear and how you hear. We need to learn to listen to God speak through the Word of God, the Scriptures.

Jesus gave us a parable to describe the different hearts and their receptivity to the Word of God. It's called the parable of the sower and the seed, but it's really a parable of the hearts. There are four soils in this parable. These four soils represent men's hearts and how they receive the seed, the Word of God. The sower is the preacher of the Word of God, the seed is the Word of God and the soil indicates the receptivity of the listener when the Word of God is preached to them or received by them.

The first soil is the hard soil, the beaten path. The seed lays on the surface. The seed doesn't penetrate the soil, because the soil is hard. The birds flying overhead swoop down and pick up the seed. The birds represent Satan stealing the seed, the Word of God, out of the heart of the hearer. So some people hear, but Satan immediately comes and steals that seed from their heart and it doesn't take root.

The second soil in the parable that Jesus gave is the stony soil or the rocky soil. What He describes is a thin, shallow layer of soil with rocks under it. Then when the seed takes root and begins to grow, it lacks depth and moisture. When the sun beats down, it withers, dries up and dies. A lot of people have an emotional response to the Bible, but their roots don't go deep into the Word; they don't appreciate the Word or receive the Word or appropriate the Word. They don't have deep roots, so when the trials—represented in the sun—beat down, it withers and dies.

How many people have you known who seem to have come to Christ, they get excited about the Lord, but the minute a problem comes into their life, they're nowhere to be found; they fall away?

The third soil that is represented is the thorny soil. This is the crowded heart. The seed lands on the soil. It begins to take root and grow, but the weeds take over. And pulling weeds is my

most hated job. The weeds choke out the good plants. If you want a fruitful garden, you have to get the bad stuff out, so the good stuff can grow. Jesus said that the weeds represent “the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things.” Many times people have God’s Word choked out of them, because they’re too busy making money or with other things. They let the worries and cares and the things of this life choke out God’s Word, and their life bears no fruit.

Then there is the fourth soil. It’s called the good soil. Unlike the hard soil, the good soil is soft; unlike the stony soil, it is deep; unlike the thorny soil, it is clean; and it is good soil. This is the heart you want. When the seed lands on it, it takes root and it brings forth fruit—“some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred.”

My question to you is, what is God’s Word doing in your heart today? Are you hearing the Word? You can come to church every Sunday, listen to expository preaching and the reading of Scriptures and your life never changes. Your heart is hard. Maybe it’s shallow or thorny. You really haven’t given place to Christ in your heart. The Bible says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in your heart richly.” It will transform your life. So what is the soil of your heart?

The third Biblical relationship the Thessalonians had, verse 13, was they applied God’s Word. “...the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.” The word “works” means it “energizes” or “empowers.” It is the word “poiéma”; the power of God works in those who believe. We all know Hebrews 4:12, which says, “The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

Notice that God’s Word brings salvation, sanctification and equips us for service. But it must be believed, verse 13. “Believe” is a synonym for the concept of “faith.” When you hear God’s Word, you appropriate God’s Word and then you must apply God’s Word into your life by faith. So you appreciate God’s Word in your mind, you appropriate God’s Word in your heart and you apply God’s Word by your will. In James 1:22-23, he says, “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.”

Do you ever look in the mirror and say, “I need help. Oh, well, there’s nothing I can do about it,” so you just go off and go to work that day. People say, “Do you own a mirror? Because you look really bad right now.”

You open the mirror of God’s Word, and it shows you your needs. Then you let God “cleanse [you] with the washing of water by the word” and reinstate your heart with God. It’s so important that you let God’s Word have its place in your heart and in your life. We appreciate, we appropriate and then we apply; we are “doers of the word and not hearers only.” Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

So the first divine resource—and I think the most important—is God's Word within us. You're never going to be able to stand against the persecution, opposition, affliction and suffering in this world unless you have God's Word hidden in your heart. It's so important.

The second divine resource, verses 14-16, is the people of God around us. "For you, brethren, became imitators..."—or "followers"—"...of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus." What was going on with the Jewish Christians in Judea with the persecution there was happening to the Gentile Thessalonians. Thessalonica was mainly a Gentile church and a Gentile town. But in Judea the Christians were being persecuted by their countrymen, the Jews. To the believers in Thessalonica, Paul was saying they were in good company; they were being persecuted just like the Jews persecuted the believers in Judea. "For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans." So they suffered for Christ.

Then Paul goes on a little attack of the Jewish people, even though he loved the Jews and he was a Jew. Paul wrote Romans 9, 10 and 11 talking about God's plan to restore the Jewish people; God's not finished with Israel. But Paul gives six indictments against them in verse 15: "...who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets..."—that's Old Testament—"...and have persecuted us..."—that's New Testament—"...and they do not please God..."—what an indictment that is—"...and are contrary to all men." Before Paul's conversion, he fit this description. He was persecuting the Christians. But now he indicts the Jews for killing Jesus, their own prophets, persecuting Paul and the Thessalonians, they didn't please God and were "contrary to all men."

Jesus said, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." So we are in good company with the people of God when we are being persecuted for righteousness sake. Remember, Paul said, "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

Verse 16 says, "...forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles..."—that's indictment number five—"...that they may be saved..."—that's indictment number six—"...so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost."

So the Jews rejected Messiah, they have not Christ, they have not God. Any religion, even Judaism, without Christ is empty and false. Jesus is the Messiah; He's the only way to God the Father. If you have not Christ, you have not God. So Judaism, even with all its Old Testament glory, covenants and promises is empty without Christ, their Messiah. But one day they will come back to Jesus and be restored at the Second Coming.

When Paul says, "The wrath has come upon them," they fill up like a cup, there is coming a day called "the time of Jacob's trouble," the tribulation. For seven years, God is going to pour out His wrath not only on this world but on Israel. Israel will be prepared for their Messiah when Jesus comes back in the Second Coming. That will usher in the kingdom age and will be the

restoration of Israel. In Romans 9, we see the election of Israel; in Romans 10, we see their rejection; and in Romans 11, we see their restoration. But here Paul is indicting the Jews.

This part of our passage is basically a detour. Paul is talking about their suffering in verse 14. He remembers what the Jews did by killing their prophets, by killing Christ and persecuting the believers, not pleasing God and contrary to all men.

The point is that Paul was letting them know that the same suffering, the same persecution, the same afflictions they were going through in Thessalonica, the Christians in Judea were going through the same sufferings and afflictions from their own countrymen.

You ask, "Well, what is the point?" The point is that you are not alone; you have the family of God and the body of Christ.

I meet a lot of people who suffer. Many times in their suffering, they become self-centered, self-absorbed and self-focused. Every Sunday people come up and pour out their problems, cares, worries and concerns. I'm patient to pray for them, but many times we need to turn away from ourselves and realize there are others in the family of God who are suffering as well. One of the best ways to heal your sorrow is to be a blessing to someone else. One of the best ways to find joy in your sorrow is to find somebody you can identify with and be a blessing and encouragement to them.

You're never alone in your suffering. This is why we need the church, the body of Christ. We need the fellowship of the family of God. We need to pray for one another. We need to encourage one another. We need to build each other up in the faith. We need to provoke each other to love and good works. You can't live the Christian life without the family of God. We need others, so we realize we're not alone. We're not suffering by ourselves. A lonely saint is vulnerable to the attacks of Satan. We need the fellowship of the family of God.

The third and last divine resource is the reward of God before us, verses 17-20. We have the Word of God within us, the family of God around us when we are going through suffering to strengthen us and encourage us so we are not alone and we have the reward of God before us. We have the glory of God or the rewards of God before us; we're going to heaven. "But we, brethren..."—using that endearing term again that he used in verse 14—"...having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart..." That means they were physically, violently torn away. It wasn't voluntary. But they were with the Thessalonians emotionally; their hearts were still with the believers. "...endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire."

First, in verse 17, Paul had left them with great reluctance. He was torn away from them. My Bible has "taken from you." From the word translated "taken," we get our word "orphaned." It's the Greek word "orphanos."

Remember that Paul said that as their minister, he was like a nursing mother, a concerned father, but now he is an orphaned parent, because he was torn away.

Why is Paul saying this? His accusers were saying that Paul left because he didn't love them, he didn't care for them. They said Paul would have come back if he really loved and cared for them. They said Paul had forsaken them. But Paul said, "No, no, no! We were taken and orphaned from you. We wanted to come back to you, 'but Satan hindered us.'"

Secondly, in verses 17-18, Paul made repeated efforts or "endeavored" to return to them. "Endeavored" means "very hard stress or work." Paul said he "endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire." That was Paul's love to see them again. "Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul..."—this phrase was meant to be emphatic—"...time and again—but Satan hindered us." The word "hindered" here means "to put up a roadblock." It means to break up the road so you could not travel over that road.

It's interesting that he mentions Satan in verse 18. Paul wanted to come back to the Thessalonians, but Satan hindered them. Number one, he believed in a real devil. I suggest that you realize the Bible teaches there really is a devil. If you haven't met the devil, I wonder how much you pray, read your Bible and serve the Lord. When you decide to live for Jesus Christ, don't expect a standing ovation in hell. Rather, the devil will oppose you. When you say, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord," I promise you that trials, hardships and difficulties will come.

Now be careful that you don't go to an extreme imbalance where the devil is in everything. If you eat too many donuts, it's the demon of donuts. If the car won't start, there's a demon in the carburetor. Everything's the devil. This is Flip Wilson theology: "The devil made me do it." No, the devil didn't make you do it. But there is a devil, and we have to see the hand of the devil. And the other extreme is to deny that the devil even exists, never acknowledge that he is real and our enemy and he's after us to get us. So Ephesians 6:11 tells us to "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

But I want to say that although there really is a devil, and he really does oppose you, he is nothing compared to God. "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." And I believe that God can even use Satan's roadblocks for His glory and for your good. You might say, "The devil did this" and "The devil did that," but God says, "The wrath of man shall praise You." He uses it for your good and for His glory. God's sovereign purpose can even use the devil.

In closing in verses 19-20, Paul asks two rhetorical questions. Verse 19 says, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing?" Even though they were suffering, going through persecution, difficulties and opposition, Paul had hope, joy and a crown. The Greek word for "crown" is "stephanos." It's not "diadem," the kingly crown but "stephanos," the victor's crown. Then the second question is, "Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" Paul is saying that his hope, his joy, his crown of rejoicing is that when he gets to heaven, he will be seeing them there.

One day we're all going to be in heaven together. It's going to be awesome; no more sickness,

no more disease, no more sin, no more Satan—"Bye, bye, Beelzebub!" And God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. He will dwell with us. We will be His people, and He will be our God.

One of the things that keeps me motoring or motivates me in this life is not the trials around me but the glory ahead of me. And the longer you walk with the Lord, the closer you are to heaven. You're like Abraham looking "for the city...whose builder and maker is God."

Verse 20 says, "For you are our glory and joy." So Paul says that what will give him joy is not only the joy of seeing the Thessalonians growing in the Lord but seeing them in heaven. Paul was wanting to be in heaven, see them there and rejoice with them. That would be his crown.

When we get to heaven, we will be rewarded for our service. It's called the "béma," or "the judgment seat of Christ." We won't be judged for our sins, but we will be judged for our service. Our salvation is already taken care of; we won't be judged for our sin. But we will be judged for our service. Did I do it in the power of the Spirit? Did I do it according to God's Word? Did I do it for the glory of God? If so, there's a crown waiting for you in heaven. And when we worship around the throne, the Bible says that we take our crowns and throw them at the feet of Jesus, who gets all the glory.

So Paul was being motivated by the glory of God that is before him. Paul is saying that his joy right now and his glory in the future is seeing them in heaven.

Just a reminder that at the end of each chapter of 1 Thessalonians, there is a reference to the coming again of Jesus Christ. In chapter 1, it relates to salvation; in chapter 2, His coming again, "parousia," relates to service—our joy and our crown, hearing "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." He has given us His Word in us, God's people around us and the glory and rewards of heaven before us.