

Strength for the Battle

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

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The great A.W. Tozer once said that “The Christian life isn’t a playground; it’s a battleground.” It’s so true that we, as Christians, are battling against the world, against our flesh and against the devil. You have three enemies: the world—the worldly system apart from God; your flesh—your old, sinful nature; and the devil—there really is a devil.

Let me warm up to the text by giving you some context. The church at Thessalonica was a model church, because they were the elect of God. In 1 Thessalonians 1:4, Paul says, “... knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God.” If you are a Christian, you are a Christian because God chose you. You are the elect of God.

The church at Thessalonica was also an evangelistic church. Chapter 1, verse 8 says, “From you the word of the Lord has sounded forth.” They were a church that was preaching the Word and sharing the Word. “The word” here means “trumpeted out.”

And they were an expectant church. Chapter 1, verse 10 says that they were waiting “for His Son from heaven.”

Every church should be an elect church, an evangelizing church and an expectant church.

By the way, the Thessalonian church had Paul as their pastor. No wonder they were a model church! I would have loved to have had Paul the apostle as my pastor. The amazing Apostle Paul. He had a father’s heart with a love for them. He said in chapter 2, verses 11-12 “You know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” So they were a model church with a model pastor. Yet it did not immune them from suffering, difficulties and persecution.

I want to give you some more references in context. In chapter 1, verse 6, it says, “...having received the word in much affliction.” In chapter 2, verse 14, it says they “suffered the same things. In chapter 2, verse 15, Paul mentions they “persecuted us.” In chapter 2, verse 18, Paul says, “Satan hindered us.” And in chapter 3, verse 3, he said, “No one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.” In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul says, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

If you live a godly life in Jesus Christ, you will be persecuted, but God provides divine resources to give us strength for the battle. I want to point out three resources God gives us to strengthen us in the battles we face. They are simple but not simplistic. The first divine resource is that God gives us His Word within us. God’s Word in our hearts will help us in the battles we face in life.

Notice in verse 13, that he refers to the fact that when he came to them, they received God's Word from him "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God." Verse 13, "For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God..." notice that "...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."

This verse has a whole sermon in it. Paul talks about their relationship to the Scriptures. I want to preface my points on this text by saying it is so very essential and important that you have the right attitude toward, commitment to, understanding of, pursuing of and receiving the Word of God, the Bible, in your life. You cannot live a strong, victorious, Christian life without having the Word of God hidden in your heart. If you divorce yourself from Scripture, you won't be ready to stand against the battles you will face in life.

The church in Thessalonica was born, founded and the believers' lives were transformed by the Spirit of God through the preaching of the Word of God. Paul was thankful to God that they were receptive to God's Word. The best way to find strength through life's battles is to hide God's Word in your heart. Verse 13 mentions that Paul was thankful to God. Paul had a thankful heart. He thanked God for the Thessalonians' receptivity to God's Word; he was thankful for the fact that they received the Word of God.

Verse 13 says, "The word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe." That means that it performs its purpose. When you have a right relationship to the Bible, God's Word will work effectively in you; it will fulfill its purpose and design. It means that it performs its purpose.

Is God's Word working effectively in you? Ask yourself, "Is the Bible working in my life? Or do I neglect the Bible? Do I not read the Bible? Do I not study the Bible?" If you only open the Bible on Sunday mornings when you get to church, that's good that you are going to church and hearing the Word, but that's not enough. You need to daily feed on the manna from heaven found in God's Word. You must open the Bible, read the Word, believe God's promises and be obedient to God's Word in your life. I like what D.L. Moody used to say: "Every Christian's Bible should be bound in shoe leather." That's to remind us that the Word of God is to be lived out in our daily lives.

If the Word of God is not working effectively in you, it's not accomplishing its purposes in you, then I want to ask three questions. Number one, "Do you appreciate God's Word?" Verse 13 says about God's Word, "You welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God." Twice Paul uses the phrase "the word of God," and then uses the statement, "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."

So do you appreciate and value God's Word? 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that the Bible is the Word of God. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." The word "inspiration" means that it is "God breathed." It is given by the breath of God, breathed out by God. And it is profitable. There is nothing more important for you as a Christian than to have a high view of Scripture. If

you lose a high view of Scripture, you lose everything, because all we can know about God is found in the Bible. We can't know God apart from the revelation of His Word.

Let me tell you what I mean when I talk about given by "inspiration." The inspiration is actually God's breath. You say, "Well, God's Word was actually written by men, by people. How can it be God's Word?" Here's how it should be defined: it is God's superintendence on the human authors, so the very words that they wrote were the words of God. God didn't dictate the words to them as passive instruments; God superintended the human authors, so that when they wrote, they wrote the very words of God. In Peter's epistle, it says that "They were moved..." or "carried along" "...by the Holy Spirit" (1 Peter 1:21). They weren't writing out of their own ideas or thoughts but were carried along by the Holy Spirit. It is the same word used for a boat on the ocean when the sails are up, the wind hits the sails and the boat is carried along over the water.

I believe what's called "verbal, plenary inspiration." "Verbal," the words, "plenary," all of them, are given by inspiration of God. In the original texts, they are inerrant and infallible. So we must come to the Bible for that kind of knowledge; that we are hearing the Word of God.

And I believe God still speaks through what He has spoken. In Hebrews 4:12, it 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."

Psalms 19:7-10 says, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." God's Word is seven things: it is "perfect...sure...right...pure...clean...true...more to be desired...than gold, yea, than much fine gold."

The psalmist says that not only is the Bible "perfect," but it is comprehensive in "converting..." or transforming the inner life "...the soul." Not only is the Bible "sure" or true, but it gives wisdom to the simple person. It gives wisdom from above. Not only is God's Word "right," but it makes the heart rejoice. Not only is it "pure," but it is "enlightening the eyes." Not only is God's Word "clean," but it is "enduring forever." It is relevant today. Not only is God's Word "true," but it is "righteous altogether." It makes you fully righteous. And not only is God's Word desirable, but it is "more to be desired...than gold, yea, than much fine gold." And the psalmist also says it is "sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb."

Do you have an appetite for God's Word? Pray that God would give you an appreciation for His Word.

A lot of Christians are in trouble today, because they have lost their appetite for the Bible, for the Word of God. You cannot grow in your Christian walk without the Word of God.

The second question is, “Do you absorb God’s Word?” In verse 13, Paul said, “When ye received the word of God...ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (King James translation). The first time he used the word “received” it just means “to accept from another.” But the second word “received” means “to welcome, be receptive to, absorbed.” I like that word “absorbed.” We are to welcome or absorb God’s Word into our lives. So we are to hear with our ears and to accept it into our hearts.

Jesus gave the parable of the sower and the seed (Matthew 13). The sower is the preacher, who is preaching the Word of God, the seed. The Bible is likened to seed. Then He gives the four soils it could land on, representing the human heart. The first soil is a hard, beaten path. Some seed lands on a hard, beaten path, which is like concrete, and the seed doesn’t penetrate. The birds flying overhead swooped down and ate the seed, so it didn’t take root and bore no fruit. Some people hear the Bible, but their hearts are like that hard, beaten path. They produce no fruit.

The second soil is the shallow soil. The soil is like the heart of man. The seed was sown—it penetrated into the heart—took root and began to grow. But the seed had no depth; it was shallow. The sun rose, beat down on the plant and it withered and died and brought forth no fruit. Many times Christians don’t grow in their walk with the Lord. They start off by reading the Bible, but they don’t go deep; they don’t put their roots into God’s Word, and when trials, hardships or battles come, the Word withers and dies.

The third soil of the heart is what I call “the crowded heart.” The seed lands on soil that has thorns. It takes root and starts to grow, but the thorns choke it out, so it bears no fruit. Jesus said that the thorns are “the cares of this world...” the worries “...and the deceitfulness of riches” (Matthew 13:22) of this life. So a lot of times Christians let the things of the world choke out the Word of God from their life, or they don’t really receive the Word and grow.

The fourth soil or heart is not hard but soft, not shallow but deep and not cluttered by clean. It is good soil that is fruitful. The seed penetrates the soil, takes root and brings forth fruit—thirty, sixty or a hundredfold. This heart is bearing fruit for the glory of God.

What kind of soil is your heart? Is your heart open and receptive to the Scriptures, bringing forth fruit to the glory of God? Do you absorb God’s Word?

The third question is, “Do you apply the Word?” Verse 13 says, “...the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.” The key word here is “believe.” The Word of God will only work effectively in you if you believe it. You must believe it and you must obey it. Implied in the word “believe” is that you obey it. So faith responds in obedience.

Are you hearing the Word? Are you responding obediently to God’s Word? James 1:22 says, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only.” It’s not enough to hear the Word; you must be a doer of the Word. You must be like the wise man, who built his house on the rock. And when the winds blew and the floods came, that house stood strong, because it was built upon the

Word of God in obedience to the Word. The foolish man heard the Word, but he didn't build his house on the rock or on the Word; he built it on sand and it didn't stand the storm. Don't build your house on sand; build it on the solid rock of the Scriptures (Matthew 7:24-27). Strength for the storms of life comes from your relationship to God through His Word.

The second divine resource is the people of God around us. So we have the Word of God within us, verse 13, and the people of God around us, verse 14. "For you, brethren, became imitators 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." The Thessalonians were not alone in their suffering. The Jews in Judea were suffering as the Jews in Macedonia were suffering from the Gentiles.

The Jews that Paul was referring to who were persecuting the church in Judea "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," verses 15-16. There was persecution going on in Judea; the believers were Jewish and were being persecuted by other Jews, because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul told the believers in Thessalonica that they were part of a family, the brotherhood, the family of God, and they were also suffering by their own countrymen. So Paul seeks to encourage the saints by reminding them that they were not suffering alone. He had already called the Thessalonians "brethren," and told them they were not suffering alone.

To know you are not alone is so important. Don't try to live the Christian life alone. You need to be part of a local church fellowship. Not only can you not live a strong, healthy, growing, Christian life without the Bible; you can't live a strong, healthy, Christian life without the family of God. Since Covid, there are still a lot of people who have not come back to church. A lot of people dropped out of church and dropped out of fellowship. You cannot live the Christian life on your own. You need to be part of a fellowship.

And I urge you to do more than just come on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights. That's important and helpful. But get involved—in a dinner fellowship, in a small group, in women's Bible study, in men's Bible study, in a study group, in some sort of ministry. Don't just come but serve. Get to know other people and pray for them. It's so very important. Don't be alone; you need the family of God around you.

Satan will do everything he can to get you out of God's Word, the Bible, and out of fellowship with the family of God. He will isolate you and try to separate you from other Christians. Notice Paul said, in verse 18, "Satan hindered us." Satan will do all he can to keep you from fellowship. You get so busy, you no longer make fellowshiping with God's people a priority. We need to make that a priority. It's very important.

Let me give you some of the "one anothers" in the Bible that we need to put into practice in the

church. We need to “love one another” (John 13:34). We need to “wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). That doesn’t mean to literally wash each other’s feet. It means that you serve others, that you serve other people in the church. We are to “edify one another” or build up one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11). We are to “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). When someone stumbles or falls, “You who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” back to God (Galatians 6:1). We are to “pray for one another” (James 5:16). The Bible says we are to be “forgiving one another” (Ephesians 4:32). And in the church we are to be “hospitable to one another” (1 Peter 4:9).

How do you do all these “one anothers” if you’re not with other people? If you’re living by yourself? Have you ever thought of introducing yourself to someone on Sunday and inviting them to your house for a meal or getting together with them and fellowshiping, reaching out to them? The word “hospitality” literally means “loving strangers.” You might say, “That’s creepy!” It’s Christian. It’s reaching out to people to love them, to encourage them, to serve them, to strengthen them in their walk with God.

So be committed to being a part of a fellowship. Don’t just come to church. Get involved and get connected. It will help you when you face battles in life.

The third divine resource is the glory of God before us. We have the Word of God within us, the people of God around us, and we have the glory of God before us. We should keep our eyes on eternity. In verse 17, Paul said, “But we, brethren.” In verse 14, he said “the brethren.” In verse 14, he said “the brethren,” which includes the sisters as well. “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.”

Evidently Paul was chased out of Thessalonica after only a few weeks there (Acts 17). Then there were false teachers who came to replace Paul. They told the Thessalonians that Paul was not a true minister of God, because he left and hadn’t come back. So Paul was affirming to the Thessalonians of his love for them and that he had been taken from them. It was his desire to come back, and he would have come back, but in verse 18, he said, “Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us.” He doesn’t say how Satan hindered him, but it evidently was clear in Paul’s mind that Satan had hindered him. Verses 19-20, “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? For you are our glory and joy.”

No doubt Satan hindered Paul by Jewish opposition in putting Paul in prison and by his throne in the flesh. But Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” So God took the evil intended for Paul and turned it for good. God uses Satan’s attack to work His own purpose. He fulfilled His own purpose in Paul’s life and in the life of the believers in Thessalonica.

The point I want to make is in verses 19-20: Paul looked forward to heaven. He was talking

about the hope of heaven. Get your eyes off of earthly things and put them on eternity. Get them on the hope of heaven. "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? For you are our glory and joy."

The word "coming" here is the Greek word "parousia." It means "His presence." It is possibly a reference to the rapture when the Lord appears for the church and catches it up "to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

There is so much confusion about this. People confuse the rapture with the Second Coming. You must keep them as separate events. They are totally different events. In the rapture, the saints are "caught up...to meet the Lord in the air," "in the twinkling of an eye"

(1 Corinthians 15:52). In the Second Coming, the saints come from heaven with Christ to the earth at the end of the tribulation period, when God's wrath will be poured out, and to establish His kingdom on earth for 1,000 years. The rapture is not preceded by any time of tribulation; the coming of the Lord for the church could happen at any moment. There is a lot of confusion and people may disagree about this.

As I watch the news very closely of late, I'm looking for Jesus Christ to come again. He is coming again, so as a church, let's not lose that hope. Let's keep the hope alive, because that's what helps us through the battles, the hardships. We should fix our eyes on the prize. When the outlook is bad, try the uplook. Jesus Christ is coming again.

What is the Thessalonians but "hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?"

As I thought about this verse, I thought about this church that God has called me to pastor. I want everyone who comes to Revival to meet me in heaven. Let's all go to heaven together! And we'll be there forever with the Lord. What a blessing that is going to be! That should motivate us through the battles, the hard times and the difficulties of life.

When Jesus comes, will you rejoice in His presence, because of the people you have fellowshiped with, influenced for Christ, mentored and disciplined? I like Jude 24: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy."

So we have the Word of God within us, the people of God around us and the hope of heaven before us.