



I THESSALONIANS 2:13-16 ESV

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!

SERMON

In all sincerity, why do we emphasize with such energy the importance of being rooted and grounded in the written word of God? What is it about the Bible that makes its teaching so important for us on a daily basis? In what way is the Bible different from a variety of other religious texts? Why the Bible and not the Book of Mormon? Why the Bible and not the Tipitaka of Buddhism? What makes the 66 books of our Bible different from the Qur'an of Islam? Would we not be just as well off reading the wisdom of Confucius or the writings of some contemporary philosopher?

I could answer these questions in any number of ways, but I want to focus on one in particular. We emphasize the Bible because, among other things, it provides us with inspired instruction on how to cope with life's most demanding problems and puzzles and challenges. And we find a perfect example of this here in 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

Let me put it this way. When you find it especially *difficult to love your spouse*, to what do you turn for help? When you are *ostracized* by those who you once thought were your best friends, how do you keep from growing bitter? When you are *treated unjustly and persecuted*, where do you go for comfort and encouragement? When everyone around you seems to be *promoted and praised and you are left unnoticed and overlooked*, how do you keep from growing angry? When someone *betrays your trust* and shares with other something about you that you told them in confidence, what remedy do you seek for the anger that rises up in your soul?

Would it surprise you to learn that Scripture, the inspired, inerrant, infallible, and life-giving revelation from God, tells you to **look to the gospel of Jesus Christ**? And if that is true, precisely how does the gospel do that? I suspect that many of you think that the gospel is only for unbelievers, to tell them how to be saved and put right with God. The apostle Paul says otherwise. For example, in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 he says this:

"Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved" (1 Cor. 15:1-2a).

Did you notice that the verb "saved" is here in the present tense? Perhaps you thought that the gospel is solely the message by which you *have been* saved, in the past. But our salvation is not simply something that happened in the past when we first believed in Jesus. It is also the present, on-going, progressive transformation of our lives as we grow more and more in conformity to Christ. There is yet another text that makes the same point, and it is the one we are looking at today. Look again closely at 1 Thessalonians 2:13 –

"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" (1 Thess. 2:13).

The verb translated "is at work" is also in the present tense. The point again is that the gospel not only worked for us in the past when we first believed in Jesus, but also continues to work in us in the present time and will continue to do so until we die or Jesus returns. It is this truth, that the gospel is "at work" in believers that I want us to think about today. How does it work in us? What does it do? In what ways will it help me with all my problems? Those are the questions I want to answer. But before we do, let's notice several other things in this verse.

(1) This isn't the first time that Paul has expressed his gratitude to God. Back in 1:2-3 he thanked God for the Thessalonians, in particular for their work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope. Here he goes even

further and in effect *gives God all the credit for the way they responded to the gospel* when Paul preached it to them.

Don't press the word "constantly" as if Paul never did anything else but pray and give thanks. Rather he means that he never failed to give thanks for them every time he prayed. If Paul had a prayer list, the Thessalonians would always be on it.

Why does Paul "thank God constantly" instead of congratulating the Thessalonians for receiving and believing the gospel? Let's make sure what it is for which Paul gives thanks. It is for the way they received and accepted the gospel when it was preached in their city. "Sam, are you saying that God is the ultimate cause of the faith of the Thessalonians?" Absolutely, yes! In Ephesians 2:8 Paul explicitly says that faith "is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." In Philippians 2:29 Paul says: "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake." We read much the same thing when it comes to repentance. Here is what Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

"And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Here is what Luke says in Acts 11:18.

"And when they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life' (see also Acts 5:31).

So, let me ask you all a question. *When you look back on the time of your conversion, how do you account for the fact that your heart responded in faith and repentance instead of unbelief and denial?* Perhaps the best way to make this point is to cite the example of Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of the 19th century.

"One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, '*How did you come to be a Christian?*' I sought the Lord. '*But how did you come to seek the Lord?*' The truth flashed across my mind in a moment – I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to *make me* seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, *How came I to pray?* I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. *How came I to read the Scriptures?* I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, 'I ascribe my change wholly to God'" (Charles H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 1, *The Early Years, 1834-1859*, reprint ed. [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973], p. 165).

(2) What is "the word of God" that is mentioned twice in v. 13? We find the answer in what Paul has already said earlier in 1 Thessalonians. In 1:5 he refers to it as the "gospel." But in 1:6 he reverts to using "the word." Again, in 1:8 he mentions the "word of the Lord." But then he switches yet again in 2:2 and speaks of the "gospel of God." He does this again in 2:4. He uses the word "gospel" in 2:8 and 2:9. But then when we come to our passage in 2:13 he twice reverts to speaking of his message as "the word of God".

So, this is my question. We know what Paul means when he talks about the "gospel," but what does he refer to when he uses the term "word"? Is the "word" identical with the gospel or more expansive in its reference? I think its primary reference is to the gospel, but I feel justified in expanding it to include what Paul refers to in Acts 20 as "the whole counsel of God."

What, then, is the gospel? I never assume that Christians can define it. So I will!

The "gospel" is the gloriously great good news of what our triune God has graciously done in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to satisfy his own wrath against us and to secure the forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness for all who trust in him by faith alone. Christ fulfilled, on our behalf, the

perfectly obedient life under God's law that we should have lived, but never could. He died, in our place, the death that we deserved to suffer but now never will. And by his rising from the dead, he secures for those who believe the promise of a resurrected and glorified life in a new heaven and a new earth in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit forever.

How important is it that we properly understand, define, and preach this gospel? I'll let Paul answer that question, as he does in Galatians 1:6-9,

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."

This alone is a stern warning to everyone not to tamper with the gospel or recast it or add to it or detract from it or in any way reshape it to make it more palatable to human tastes and desires.

(3) In v. 13, what is the difference between the "word of God" and the "word of men"? It seems as if the second half of v. 13 is redundant. He has already referred to his message as "the word of God" so why does he yet again say that it is not the word of man but "the word of God"? I think he wants to counter or refute any suspicion that his message is his own, as if he created it or shaped it. In other words, it is not merely some human teaching but has its origin in God. The "word of God" here in v. 13 is simply the same as "the gospel of God" back in v. 2.

When Paul preached, he did so as a man speaking words. But Paul wants everyone to know that his words did not derive from a human being, neither from himself nor anyone else. His "word" was given to him by God. Listen to how Paul describes it in Gal. 1:11-12,

"For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

Now we come to the fourth point in v. 13 that I want us to consider in depth.

(4) What does Paul mean when he says at the close of v. 13 that "the word of God," i.e., the gospel, "***is at work in***" the Thessalonians?

The verb translated "work" reminds us that no matter how wise or eloquent or intellectually deep the word of a human being may be, it cannot do what God's word can do. See 1 Cor. 1:18.

There are a few other truths about the gospel that we must keep in mind. For example, the gospel is fundamentally about something that ***has*** happened. It is an accomplished event, an unalterable fact of history. Nothing can undo the gospel. No power in heaven or earth can overturn or reverse it. But as a settled achievement it also exerts a radical and far-reaching influence into both our present experience and our future hopes. We must never think that the gospel is solely for unbelievers. It is for Christians, at every stage of their lives. There is nothing in the Christian life that is "post" gospel!

So, how does the gospel change us? Of what practical, daily importance is it? There are many ways of answering this question. First of all, many Christians live in an "***if / then***" relationship with God. *If* I do what is right, *then* God will love me. *If* I give more money to missions, *then* God will provide me with a raise at work. *If* I avoid sinful habits, *then* I will be spared suffering and humiliation. It's a *conditional* relationship that is based on the principle of *merit*.

The gospel calls us to live in a "***because / therefore***" relationship with the Lord. *Because* we have been justified by faith in Christ, *therefore* we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). *Because* Christ died for us, *therefore* we are forgiven. *Because* Christ has fulfilled the law in our place, *therefore* we are set free from its demands and penalty. This is an *unconditional* relationship that is based on the principle of *grace*.

If we are to understand the gospel rightly, we must keep in mind several foundational truths.

First, the gospel is not what God requires. The gospel is what God provides. There is of course, an intrinsic demand built into the gospel. The good news that is proclaimed calls for a response of faith and repentance. But our faith and repentance are not themselves the gospel. Our personal testimony is not the gospel. We cannot *be* the gospel, but we *bear witness* to it.

Second, the gospel is not an imperative, demanding things you must do. The gospel is an indicative, declaring things God has done. Again, of course we do things *because of* the gospel. But our doing things isn't itself the gospel.

Third, the gospel is not about human action. The gospel is about divine achievement. Or again, the gospel is about God's provision, not man's response. The gospel is not a moralistic Do! The gospel is a merciful Done! There are undoubtedly multiple consequences of the gospel that extend beyond its impact on the individual and his relationship to God. But we must never confuse the content of the gospel with its consequences, or its essence with its entailments.

Having said all that as an introduction, we are now ready to see what Paul means when he says that the gospel "***is at work***" in all believers. Consider the following small sampling of how all of life and local church ministry are influenced or energized by the gospel.

Our approach to ***suffering***, that is to say, how to suffer unjustly without growing bitter and resentful is tied directly to the way Christ suffered for us and did so without reviling those who reviled him – "when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

Or take ***humility*** as another example. The basis for Paul's appeal that we "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility count others more significant than" ourselves is the self-sacrifice of God the Son in becoming a human and submitting to death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:1-5 in relation to 2:6-11).

All of us know that as husbands we are to ***love our wives*** "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25-33).

Why should we be ***generous and sacrificial with our money***? Because, says Paul, "you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9; 9:13).

We are to ***forgive*** one another "as God in Christ forgave" us (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13).

We are to "walk in ***love***" toward each other, says Paul, "as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:1-2).

We are to ***serve*** one another in humility as Christ served his disciples by washing their feet and eventually suffering in their stead (John 13:1-20).

The ***freedom*** we have in Christ, says Paul in Romans 14, is to be controlled in its exercise by the recognition that the weaker brother who might be damaged by our behavior is one for whom Christ died (Romans 14).

Paul encourages us to ***pray*** for all based on the fact that Christ "gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:1-7)

If that were not enough, there are countless instances in the NT where we are directed back to the reality of the gospel and what Christ has done for us through it as the primary way to combat those false beliefs and feelings that hinder our spiritual growth. So, for example, . . .

- When you don't feel loved by others, meditate on Rom. 5:5-11; 8:35-39.
- When you don't have a sense of any personal value, read Matt. 10:29-31; 1 John 3:1-3.
- When you struggle to find meaning in life, study Eph. 1:4-14; Rom. 11:33-36.
- When you don't feel useful, consider 1 Cor. 15:58; 12:7-27.
- When you feel unjustly criticized, rest in the truth of Rom. 8:33-34.
- When you feel excluded by others, rejoice in Heb. 13:5-6.

- When you feel you have no good works, let Eph. 2:8-10 have its effect.
- When you are constantly asking the question: Who am I? Take courage in 1 Peter 2:9-10.
- When you live in fear that other people have the power to destroy or undermine who you are, be strengthened by Heb. 13:5-6; Rom. 8:31-34.
- When you don't feel like you belong anywhere, take comfort from Eph. 4:1-16; 1 Cor. 12:13.
- When Satan accuses you of being a constant failure, remind him of 1 Cor. 1:30-31.
- When Satan tells you that you are an embarrassment to the church, quote Eph. 3:10.
- When you find yourself bitter towards the Church and indifferent regarding its ministries, reflect on Acts 20:28.
- When you find yourself shamed into silence when confronted by non-Christians, be encouraged with 2 Tim. 1:8-12.
- When you find yourself experiencing prejudice against those of another race or culture, memorize and act upon the truth of Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 5:14-16; Eph. 2:11ff.; Revelation 5.
- When you struggle with pride and boasting in your own achievements, be humbled by Rom. 3:27-28; 1 Cor. 1:18-25, 30-31.
- When you feel despair and hopelessness, let Rom. 5:1-10 restore your confidence.
- When you feel defeated by sin and hopeless ever to change, delight yourself in Rom. 7:24-25.
- When you feel condemned by God for your multiple, repeated failures, speak aloud the words of Rom. 8:1.
- When you lack power to resist conforming to the world, consider Rom. 12:1-2; Gal. 6:14.
- When you feel weak and powerless, be energized by Rom. 16:25.
- When you are tempted sexually, never forget 1 Cor. 6:18-20.

And again, when you find yourself saying . . .

- I'm not having any impact in life or on others, be uplifted by 2 Cor. 12:9-10.
- I feel guilty and filled with shame all the time for my sins, be reminded of Eph. 1:7.
- I live in constant fear, be encouraged by Luke 12:32; Rev. 2:9-11.
- I struggle with anxiety and worry about everything, don't neglect the truth of Matt. 6:25-34; Phil. 4:6-7; 1 Pet. 5:6-7.
- I am defined and controlled by my past, look to 2 Cor. 5:17.
- I live in fear that God will abandon me, consider his promise in Rom. 8:35-38.
- I can't break free of my sins and bad habits, linger long with Rom. 6:6,14.
- I'm afraid to pray and fear that God will mock my petitions, take heart from Heb. 4:14-16.
- I carry grudges against those who've wronged me and live in bitterness towards them, reflect and meditate on Col. 3:12-13.
- I can't find strength to serve others, fearing that I'll be taken advantage of by them, let Phil. 2:5-11; and Mark 10:45 have their way in your life.
- I'm a spiritual orphan and belong to no one, rejoice in Gal. 4:4-7.

Each of these texts refers to the gospel of what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and each text applies that gospel truth to the particular problem noted. These, then, are just a handful of the ways that the gospel affects all of life, all of ministry, and everything we seek to be and do and accomplish as Christians and as local churches.

A Brief Summary of vv. 14-16

Earlier in 1:6, Paul had commended them for having become imitators of both Jesus and himself when they received the gospel with great joy, even though it meant subjecting them to intense persecution and affliction. People don't typically suffer great pain and loss for something they know is false. The proof that the Thessalonians had truly trusted in the power of God's word is seen in the fact that they willingly suffered for having believed it. In this they had become imitators of both Paul and other believers in Judea.

Sadly, some have used vv. 15-16 to justify anti-Semitism. But when Paul singles out "the Jews" he is talking specifically about those in the first century who persecuted Christians. They are the ones who conspired with Herod and Pontius Pilate to crucify Jesus. We see this in Acts 4:27-28,

"for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27-28).

Paul is not talking about all Jewish people as a particular ethnicity. After all, he was himself a Jew (Rom. 11:1ff), as were most in the early years of the church. He has in mind those Jews who persecuted the church and participated in the crucifixion of Jesus. Any attempt by someone to justify anti-Semitism based on this passage is horribly misguided.

The "prophets" most likely refers to the prophets of the OT who were persecuted by the religious leaders of Israel. Thus, this statement is parallel to what we read in Matthew 23:29-36 where Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees who shed the blood of the prophets. "You witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. . . Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town." We find the words of Jesus echoed here when Paul says they "fill up the measure of their sins," by which I think Paul means there is a measure or degree of sin that God will permit before judgment falls.

One of the more lamentable developments in recent days is the rise of anti-Semitism, as seen in the many protests and riots on college campuses. It isn't primarily because of what Israel has done in response to the carnage of October 7 in Gaza, but rather because it is the Jewish people who did it. The protests are not primarily about whether Israel's response is justified or excessive, but rather about the fact that it is *Israel's* response. If it had been any other ethnic body or nation that sought to destroy Hamas, I doubt if the protests would have been nearly as hostile and hateful as what we've seen.

It forces one to ask the question: Why is there such animosity and opposition to the Jews? The pro-Palestinian people today couldn't have cared less that some Jews in the first century participated in the crucifixion of Jesus. Hitler didn't hate the Jews because of the death of Christ. He hated them and sought to exterminate them, at least if we take his word for it, because he believed they were filthy and were corrupting the pure Aryan bloodline that was so essential to his designs for Germany. So, where does such hatred come from? There are any number of other reasons, but I suggest that behind them all is Satan. These antisemitic riots are utterly demonic in nature.

Another important point Paul makes in v. 16 is how displeasing it is to God that anyone would seek to prevent the gospel from reaching lost souls (v. 16a). This may occur on a national level, such as what we see in places like North Korea and Iran and Communist China, where governments suppress the preaching of the gospel. It may occur on a local level where city governments pass legislation forbidding public preaching or the distribution of gospel tracts. It strikes me as nothing short of amazing that on several occasions in England, men and women were arrested for praying silently outside abortion clinics.

In other places, it has become criminal to speak of the sinfulness of homosexuality. To label this as hate speech is clearly an attempt to silence the voice of the church. In some countries, to deny the reality of so-called "transgenderism" is likewise a hate crime, when in fact it is a loving response to those who are deceived into thinking they can choose to change their gender.

All such attempts by government officials, be they local, statewide, or national, to silence the voice of the church on any issue that is addressed in Scripture is, to use Paul's words here in v. 15, to "displease God." Paul laments the fact that these Jewish opponents of the gospel prevented him from preaching to the Gentiles when they "drove us out." Paul had been chased out of Damascus (Acts 9:23-25), Jerusalem (Acts 9:29-30), Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:45-50), Iconium (Acts 14:2-6), Thessalonica (Acts 17:5, 10), and Corinth (Acts 18:6, 12-13).

Finally, what does Paul mean when he says at the close of v. 16 that "wrath has come upon them at last"? Some translate this concluding word in v. 16 as "finally," or "decisively," or "forever, through all eternity," or "fully." I think Paul is speaking proleptically, that is, he is describing something that is so certain to occur in the future that it is spoken of as if it had already taken place. He may well be referring to what was to happen in 70 a.d. when Roman armies destroyed both the city of Jerusalem and the temple. This was but a foretaste of the final wrath that enemies of the gospel will suffer at the end of history.

Praise God for the saving and sanctifying power of the gospel!