



NOVEMBER 21, 2021 | PASTOR TIMOTHY SONG

“The Word of God at Work in Us” (1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5)

13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. 14 For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews 15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone 16 in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

17 But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. 18 For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 19 For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? 20 Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

3 So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. 2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. 4 In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. 5 For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain.

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon church. If you can open up your bibles to 1 Thessalonians 2, we will be continuing from verse 13 to 3:5. As you’re looking for the page, here’s brief recap. In chapter 1 Paul addresses that a true Christian demonstrates a work produced by faith, labour prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw how much he loved this community. In the first 12 verses of chapter 2, Paul reminds us that our calling is to live lives worthy of God by growing in boldness, purity and love. And as we get into today’s text, Paul encourages the believers in Thessalonica to continue to live out their calling by faith as the word of God is at work in them. So please follow along as I read starting from 2:13.



[Read the Text]

This is the word of God. Let me begin by asking you a question: What is a mark of a believer? There could be many ways to answer that question. But from the text we just read, here's the answer: A mark of a believer is that the word of God is at work in them.

Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart". This verse describes the word of God as living and active! It is not just living... it is living and active! So the word is at work. It is constantly active. So the word of God transforms us in the way we think, in the way we speak, and also in the way we act. And this is why Paul and his companions, Silas and Timothy, are giving thanks to God constantly. Look with me in verse 13: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe". These men wrote to the Thessalonian believers to encourage them in their faith. They wanted to remind them of their hope in God on the basis of His work through His word in them, because they accepted the gospel that was preached to them as being from God, not from the three men.

Did you catch that? When the word of God was preached and the gospel was proclaimed, some people accepted it. They have received and accepted the word of God. And Paul continually gives thanks to God because it is only God who can give these Thessalonians (and all of us for that matter) faith to accept His Word and His Gospel about Jesus. Only God can give that kind of faith to a person; to give eyes that can see and ears that can hear!

Paul knew that when he and his friends entered Thessalonica, as they faithfully preached the gospel, it was God through the Holy Spirit using the Word to convict and call people to believe what they heard. This was God's work! This was how the word of God was at work. When we go and share the gospel, we need the help of the Spirit. We need that faith and boldness like when Paul said,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes; first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." – Romans 1:16-17



The gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. When you are sharing the gospel with someone who does not know Jesus yet, do you speak with the faith that God can work in that person's heart to receive and accept His word? Paul later writes in his letter to the Romans,

For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? and how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" – Romans 10:13-15

You don't have to be a called, ordained preacher to have beautiful feet. You don't need to be a pastor or some spiritual leader to be used by God for His work. You can proclaim the word of God as a parent raising children in the home. Or as you're having lunch with friends. Or perhaps the Spirit compels you to share the good news of Jesus to a complete stranger. My hope and prayer is that every member of City on a Hill, myself included, would be prepared and able to proclaim the gospel as a witness for Jesus with someone else. Always prepared for any moment God gives us to tell someone else about salvation in Jesus.

ILLUSTRATION: I remember when I was in university, my pastor at the time was passionate about evangelism. I remember he told me that I had to share the gospel to at least one person a week. Why did it feel so much easier to do then? I would be on campus and talk to random students while we sat in the cafeteria or as we were walking towards class. We even studied Scripture and how to evangelize. There was a time when we focused on sharing the gospel to Muslims and I had to research how to share the gospel to Muslims. The point is, because Paul, Silas and Timothy went and shared the word of God and the gospel of Jesus, people accepted God's word and was saved. Imagine what that would look like if our community of believers did that in our families, in our classes and workplaces, our neighbourhoods. How amazing would it be to see the word of God at work in bringing salvation to the people we shared the gospel to!

Can you remember the moment when the gospel made sense to you? Try to go back to when you first believed. You heard the word of God proclaimed. Then you received what you heard. But just because you received what you heard doesn't mean you believed it. I read somewhere that "Receiving is the hearing of the ears. But accepting is the hearing of the heart". Once you received the word, you then made a decision: either you accepted it to be true or rejected it.



ILLUSTRATION: Think of a vending machine when it receives money. You put the coins or bills in the machine and one of two things happen: it either accepts the bill and you get what you chose, or it rejects the money and spits it back out. That's the same with the gospel. There were some in Thessalonica who accepted the word and believed. But there were others who rejected it. Which we will get to in a bit.

In the beginning I mentioned that a mark of a believer is that the word of God is at work in them. Well, how was God's word at work in the believers? We find two things – and they are

both connected. Look at verse 14: “For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews...” The word of God was at work in the believers through imitation and suffering.

First, the word “imitators” simply means “one who does what others do”. The Thessalonian believers became imitators by letting the gospel work in their lives. They became imitators of the churches that were in Judea who were already transformed by the gospel. As they believed the word of God, the Spirit led them to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to those around them. And that is what the believers here imitated.

And because of that, just like the other churches, they suffered persecution. From whom? Paul mentioned at the end of verse 14 and going into verse 15: “You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.” The believers were being persecuted by their own people; they were fellow Jews in Thessalonica. Don preached on Acts 17 a couple weeks ago and it tells us that some Jews were persuaded by Paul and Silas while others were jealous and “rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city” (Acts 17:5). Here, now, we see that not everyone accepted the gospel. But those who rejected it began to scorn, ridicule, physically assault, and even kill believers. Could you imagine, some of these Jews would have been family members, friends and neighbours who used to hang out together. And all because they were offended by the gospel, it led them to take drastic, harmful measures.



Paul reminds the believers of how those who rejected the gospel drove him and his companions out of the city. They were so enraged that they went out looking for Paul when they heard he went into other cities to preach the gospel. And we know what kind of persecution he had endured throughout his life. This was the same for the believers. But it was in their suffering that they became known as belonging to Jesus. Jesus Himself suffered! Jesus was rejected by many as He taught. He was scorned, ridiculed, arrested, beaten, mocked, and hung on the cross and died. Jesus suffered. Brothers and sisters, becoming a Christian comes with the expectation to suffer at some point. But in suffering, there is hope. There is hope because it's anchored on the Word of God. This is the hope that the Thessalonians heard, received, accepted, believed, and became imitators of, even willing to suffer for the sake of this life-saving gospel.

Paul continues by explaining that it was the Jews “who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out” (verse 15). Now, if you look back at the gospels, wasn't it the Romans who actually killed Jesus? Yes. But Paul reminds the readers that it was instigated by the unbelieving Jews. But not only that, but some Jews who were strongly opposed to the spreading of the gospel persecuted and killed Christians. And he also mentions how some Jews

severely persecuted and drove him and his friends out of the city as well. All this to say that there is consistent opposition to the word of God and His people. But even though these unbelieving Jews killed the Lord Jesus, He rose again and continued to speak. Though they killed “prophets” or Christians who shared the gospel, they continued to speak. And though Paul and his companions were persecuted and suffered, they continued to speak. How? Because the Word of God cannot be silenced. It will work even through rejection! Praise the Lord that He is the One who continues to penetrate the hearts of those who hear the word of God and transforms them! And that is what Paul witnessed! Amidst the suffering, the gospel was expanding, and more people were being saved.

If we continue in our text it says in middle of verse 15, “They [the unbelieving Jews] displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.” Opposition can take many different forms. Here, it takes the form of hindrance. Those who rejected the gospel made every effort to keep it from being proclaimed to those who never heard, preventing them from receiving salvation that only comes through Jesus. We see this happening in the world today. Think of places in the world where drastic measures are taken to block people from hearing the gospel. Whether it's through censorship, intimidation by threatening their lives. Who would want to even listen to the gospel message when it may cost them their lives?



Rejecting the word of God hinders the work of God. But it doesn't keep God's word from working in believers. And God will work in those who do not believe and who hinder the advancement of the gospel: "The wrath of God has come upon them at last." For those who accept the gospel message, there is promised hope in the end. Why? Because Jesus delivers us from the coming wrath of God. Go back to 1 Thessalonians 1:10 which says, "...and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescue us from the coming wrath". But for those who reject the gospel, there is no hope, but wrath.

APPLICATION: Let me pause here for a moment. As I look across this sanctuary and think of those joining us online, the question I ask is, "Have you accepted or rejected the gospel? Is the Word of God at work in you? Recall the parable of the Sower. A sower goes out and sows seed (which is the word of God). There are four places where the seed fall and each represent a type of person. First, the side of the path where the seed is devoured by birds. This is where the evil one snatches away what was heard, but not understood, therefore they do not accept the gospel. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil, so the seed did not have enough root and withered. This is the person who hears the word and receives it with joy, but is not changed by it. When suffering comes, he/she immediately falls away. Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns eventually choked the plant up. This is the one who hears but the cares of the world choke the word and it becomes unproductive. Therefore, there is no faith. But finally, some seed fell on good soil and produced fruit. This is the one who hears, understands,

and produces fruit. This is the one who hears, receives, accepts and believes the gospel. And they are transformed.

Do you know what strikes me about this parable? There are three times more soil and ground that rejects the word of God. Only one falls on good soil and accepts the gospel. Nevertheless, God's Word continues to be scattered and spread. And the Lord will continue to work. Brothers and sisters, where has the seed, the word of God fallen for you? Is it on good soil where the seed will grow and produce fruit? Or perhaps you've heard the gospel but have rejected it until now. There is hope for you because the Lord is always ready to forgive and save you. God will give you faith to accept the gospel for what it is: the word of God.



The gospel is the good news of what God has done in Christ to secure our salvation. The word “gospel” means “good news”. It’s really important to understand that. The Bible is not a book that tells us what we have to do to earn salvation. No. It’s a book that tells us what God did to earn our salvation. What He did was send Jesus. Jesus did for us what we could never do for ourselves and He paid for what we had done in His body on the cross. God created human beings and intended for them to be ruling creatures. We were supposed to be under God but over everything else. We were supposed to rule over creation under the guidance and authority of God’s Word and to function as channels for all the blessings of heaven. That’s how it was supposed to be, but unfortunately, the Bible tells the story of how our first parents, Adam and Eve, fell into sin by choosing to rebel against God’s Word in order to become autonomous ruling creatures. Basically, they wanted to be their own gods. From that point on, humanity has been on a downward spiral moving further and further away from God and our original design and glory.

The heart of the Gospel is the good news that Jesus has come as God in the flesh and has obeyed God perfectly and has therefore won the right to all the blessings God originally intended to give to men and women. Furthermore, through His sacrificial death on the cross, He has paid the debt that we owed to God for disobeying His commands. There is therefore no need anymore for us to hide from God. In Jesus, we can come home and we can be restored. The climax of the Gospel is the great news that He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven where He now intercedes on our behalf. He gives the Holy Spirit to all His people and He slowly but surely, changes our hearts, reforms our desires and teaches us how to be the children of God we were always intended to be. For now, Jesus remains in heaven, hanging the world one person at a time, but one day He will return and judge the world in righteousness. He will remove from this world all sin and all causes of sin and He will restore the cosmos to a state of peace, prosperity and flourishing and all those who have received Him as their Lord and Saviour will participate in His rule and enjoy His goodness forever.

What is your response to this good news? If you are not yet a Christian, as you heard the gospel message, will you accept it and receive the gift of salvation as you believe that Jesus died

for you and your sins, and that Jesus has paid off your debt and you now have eternal life with God? If, in your heart, you said that you accept this saving gospel message, please come talk to me or one of the leaders here. We’d love to pray with you. By the way, the gospel presentation I just read from an article on the Gospel Coalition website. It was so well-written, I borrowed it.



But as I look around the room, I think majority of us have heard and accepted the gospel. But I wonder, how did you feel when you heard the gospel message just now? I know I just spent the majority of the sermon focused on 2:13-16. But I think it's really crucial. We must check our hearts and ask, "Is the Word of God at work in me?" Have we receive and accept the gospel. Only then can we grow more and more like Christ and be ready to face all the joys and the sufferings that come with being a Christ-follower. Paul really wants to establish this point first. But as we finish chapter 2, it ends with Paul's intense longing to be reunited with the believers in Thessalonica.

Look quickly with me in verse 17: But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you." Paul uses the imagery of an orphan being separated from their parents to describe how much he longed to see them. It pains him to be apart from them. He even mentions that Satan was at work blocking him and companions from seeing them (v.18). Notice, that the enemy once again is trying to do everything in his power to hinder God's work and Paul's desire to be with his fellow brothers and sisters.

ILLUSTRATION: It's like we must pause and wonder how Satan is using this pandemic to hinder our faith. Perhaps we have fallen into this deep, coma-like state in our spiritual walk with God. Not being able to gather in-person for the longest time has caused us to become lazy in our faith. We're not in the Word. How can God work in us if we're not in His Word? We've been distracted by other things and have lost focus on Christ. Perhaps with everything that has happened in our community this past year, you're still harbouring bitterness and choosing not to come out or get involved. As I was meditating and preparing this sermon, a scary thought came into my mind and heart; and I felt very convicted by this: Maybe Christians who don't feel like they're being persecuted or suffering for the sake of the gospel is because we're not living godly lives. Maybe the reason why we don't suffer is because we are not living our lives worthy of God. Isn't that a scary thought? Now, I'm not telling you to go look for trouble and hardships and sufferings to prove that you are a Christian. No. But I've been challenged by that this week and perhaps we all need to process that. How is Satan hindering you from growing in your faith?

Paul considered the believers in Thessalonica as his hope, joy and crown. Now the crown that Paul speaks of is like the wreath crowns that were given to the victor at like the Olympics. There was such joy in the fact that those who heard the word of God preached accepted it and now are destined for eternal life with God. These believers are Paul's crown.



And he thinks about the day when Jesus comes, His second coming, when we will all be taken into heaven. And Paul is picturing seeing all the familiar faces as they all rejoice in glory forever. Have you ever longed for your fellow brother and sister in that way? I mean, just look around this room and ask yourself, is it with this heart I come here on Sundays, longing to see one another? Is it with this overflowing joy and love that we commit to being a community together rooted in God's Word?

ILLUSTRATION: Sharing the Word of God with my Life Group Members. It's so encouraging and life-giving to hear how God's Word is molding and shaping them; to witness how God is working in their lives.

Paul is shifting gears here. He is not just concerned about the moment they accepted the gospel and were saved. He's also concerned about their discipleship and sanctification. Next time, I'll go deeper into chapter 3, but I wanted us to read the first 5 verses today because it's connected to Paul's longing to see them. Something was on Paul's mind and heart that he couldn't stand it any longer. What was that? Concerned how the believers were doing amidst the suffering. There was such fierce opposition that he wanted to be there with them to, verse 2, "strengthen and encourage you in your faith so that no one would be unsettled by these trials". That's why he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. He was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted them (v.5).

I will go deeper into this next time. But let me close with this.