

Encouragement in the Face of Sin & Satan – 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

Five Points Community Church (10/9/16) Brett Toney

Hit With a 2x4

Throughout my time in seminary, I had the opportunity to work as an assistant for one of the pastors at my church. He is a seasoned pastor with a very warm and personable demeanor. He is the kind of guy where you think you're best friends or ready to bare your soul to him after just minutes of talking. And he is absolutely genuine in his care for others, and in that way he is a tremendous encourager. Another pastor at the church once described him to me by saying he could hit you across the head with a 2x4, and you'd thank him for it. He just has a way of communicating, of being right there with you, where you just *know* that he is seeking your greatest good.

I wonder if the Apostle Paul was like this. Because as we read his first letter to the Thessalonians, his clear objective is to be an encouragement to them in the challenging situation they find themselves in. He is striving for their greatest good, that they would persevere in faithfulness to Christ despite the pressures that mount around them. And we see in our passage this morning that he is continuing to encourage them to endure. He does so by taking two frustratingly difficult situations head on: being sinned against and being hindered by Satan. He's not going to back down from his positive outlook on where history is heading even when this beloved, fledgling church is struggling significantly. And there is encouragement here for us as well for when we are sinned against and even face satanic opposition.

Encouragement in the Face of Sin (v.13-16)

We see right off the bat that Paul's aim here is to continue his encouragement as he states for the second time in the letter that he and his ministry partners "thank God constantly" (v.13, 1:2) for this church. They are so grateful that this group of Christians have been chosen by God

(1:4), how they received the gospel (1:6), how they have been faithful messengers of that same gospel (1:8), and how they have been called into God’s “own kingdom and glory” (2:12). As one pastor would put it, this is God-centered praise for those who are not God.¹ Paul has observed and made mention of commendable things in their lives, yet he thanks *God* for it all. They receive the encouragement, and God gets the glory.

Because of Gospel Reception (v.13)

Paul’s gratitude is here grounded foundationally on the manner of their reception of the gospel he proclaimed to them. He is reiterating what he wrote in 1:5-6, “Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction ... [6] And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” Paul explains the kind of ministry and reception he had among this church in the rest of chapters 1 & 2, but here he summarizes it by saying they received the gospel—“the word of God”—“not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God” (v.13). The good news that God has made a way for the redemption of rebellious humanity through his own death and resurrection is not just something some guys at a religious think tank came up with. No, this gospel is divine revelation. God has spoken—no, God speaks. Will you listen to his voice?

Not only does he speak, but he uses his self-disclosure first in the Incarnate Word and now the Written Word to do great work in those who will believe. The Thessalonian church did not consider the crucifixion of the God-Man, Jesus of Nazareth, as foolishness. They didn’t scorn the humiliation of the Eternal Son as an ignorant crutch of the masses, but they saw it as the

¹ Sam Crabtree, *Practicing Affirmation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

wisdom of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25). They received it as what it really is, the word of God. And through their faith, God had done a great work in them.

For this church plant that benefited so briefly from the apostle's ministry among them had already become imitators of the very first churches back in Judea. Those churches had benefited from the established leadership of numerous apostles and godly men and women. Those Judean believers benefited from growing up in a context of biblical literacy. The Thessalonians didn't have either of those things going for them. Yet they had the word of God and God the Spirit to mature them in Christ.

Before we look at how their Christian maturity was displayed—how they imitated the more established churches—let's just pause and consider if the Word of God plays this kind of role in *our* lives. Sure, we do our devotions or Bible reading plans, but is God evidently at work in us by means of his written Word? Do you see evidences of grace in your life that Paul might say of you that you have received the gospel not as the word of men but as the word of God? Friends, if our lives are not increasingly being conformed to the image of Christ as we see him in the written Word, then our reading is just religion. If we cannot commend our lives as worthy of imitation, if we cannot commend the gospel with our words *and* our lives (cf. 2:8), then we need to reflect on what we're really doing when we read God's Word. And it may not be that there's a problem with our reading—it may be that we just don't see the evidences of grace in *our own* lives. So we need one another to be a "Paul" and point out those evidences lest we get discouraged and despair.

The Imitators & Imitated (v.14-16)

Now Paul says the Thessalonians were imitators of more established, mature Christians in Judea because they too had faithfully suffered for the sake of Christ. It is a wondrous grace

that when the heat of persecution rose upon them that they did not get scorched and immediately fall away (cf. Matthew 13:5-6, 20-21). They have demonstrated through their endurance already that their reception of the gospel was not in vain. One of God's purposes in ordaining suffering in the lives of Christians is to confirm their calling through the evidence of their perseverance. When we find ourselves in a time of affliction, if we are clinging to Christ, we ought to be strengthened to know that is God's grace manifestly at work in us.

What Paul does next in v.15-16 is a little bit strange I think. He provides this scathing list of how the Jews sinned against churches and the purposes of God. Why list these things? What benefit is that for the Thessalonians? Paul indicts the Jews for the death of Jesus and the prophets and for forcing Christians out of Judea. Then he ups the ante by saying such opposition to Christianity is "displeasing to God" and that in fact they are opposing "all mankind." In rejecting their Messiah, they are rebelling against God. They are pitting themselves against humanity by prohibiting the gospel from freely spreading to all the nations.

Then Paul uses language that we've come across in our study in Joshua. The Apostle says the Jews have done these things "as always to fill up the measure of their sins" (v.16). This is similar to the reason why Joshua and Israel devoted to destruction the cities and people of the Amorites, because "the sin of the Amorites [was then] complete" (Genesis 15:16). This is severe language for the people God had chosen to set his covenant love on from all the nations of the earth. And it underscores the heinousness of opposing Christ and his gospel. This is exactly how Jesus talked and what he prophesied in Matthew 23:29-36,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, [30] saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' [31] Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. [32] Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. [33] You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape

being sentenced to hell? [34] 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, [35] so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. [36] Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”

And judgment did come upon that generation as Paul, writing maybe 15-20 years after Jesus spoke those words, says, “God’s wrath has come upon [the Jews] at last” (v.16).

We don’t know what exactly Paul has in mind for *how* that wrath has come. But Paul’s word choice indicates that the display of this wrath has only begun; it is not the complete expression of God’s wrath against sin that will come at the end of the age. But the judgment the Jews were experiencing at this point in history was a foretaste of the wrath God will pour out on them if they persist in their hard-hearted rebellion. Paul fleshes this out more—the dynamic of the Jews’ opposition to God and the gospel and God’s wrath on them—in Romans 11.

But let’s come back to the oddity of these verses. Why would Paul write these things to a Gentile church in Thessalonica? If his aim is to encourage *this* church as they are sinned against in facing persecution, why detail the sins of *other* persecutors and the judgment that has come on *them*? I think what Paul is intending to communicate is that the Thessalonians should hope in God to likewise bring righteous judgment on *their* persecutors. He’s saying, “You have suffered persecution like those in Judea have. Their Jewish persecutors have received God’s wrath, so know that your Gentile persecutors will also receive God’s wrath. God has not forgotten you. Your suffering has not gone unnoticed by the Holy One. He will seek vengeance for how you have been sinned against.” Do you see how this serves the encouragement of this afflicted church? In the midst of suffering, it can feel like there is no hope and one’s aggressors loom large. But we worship a great and righteous God who will not let the guilty go unpunished (cf. Exodus 34:7).

We ought likewise find encouragement in the face of sin. When you are sinned against, what is your response? You may not personally seek vengeance, but you harbor anger or bitterness. Maybe you gossip about or slander those who have wronged you. Maybe you play the victim and exact your revenge slowly over time. None of those responses are walking by faith in God. If the Thessalonians suffer faithfully when truly persecuted for their faith in Jesus by hoping in God's righteousness to make all things right, how much more ought we respond to much lesser offenses by hoping in God to be our avenger. We ought to be in a posture of forgiveness knowing that God will secure the justice in the wrong you've experienced.

When you're sinned against, you must know what is your responsibility and what is God's. That distinction is clear for us in Romans 12. Your responsibility as a Christian is to: "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves" (Romans 12:17-19a). And God's responsibility? "Leave [vengeance] to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Romans 12:19b). God will bring wrath against those who sin against you. If they repent and believe, then that wrath has already been poured out on Jesus. If they don't, judgment is coming if not in this life then the next in being sentenced to Hell (cf. Matthew 23:33).

Living by faith in this kind of way is one way in which we display that the word of God is at work in us, believers (v.13). The gospel has so saturated our lives that when we are sinned against, we cling to Christ and trust in his sovereignty over all things. And we don't begrudge his mercy when those who sin against us repent and believe, but we delight to see such a sinner redeemed. And we don't begrudge his justice as he pours out his wrath against unrepentant rebels for all eternity.

Encouragement in the Face of Satan (v.17-20)

We really see Paul's affection for this church in v.17-20 and how eagerly he seeks to be an encouragement to them. He didn't leave them willingly but was ripped away from them. He feels like a parent at the mall who has lost his child; he's going to do everything he can to be reunited. Paul and his ministry partners have gone to great effort to find a way to return and be a help to these Christians. But Satan hindered him (v.18). This very letter then is his effort to be an encouragement in the face of Satan.

We don't know what form Satan's opposition took in this instance. And it should be observed that not every time that Paul's plans were frustrated is it attributed to Satan's influence (cf. Acts 16:6-7; Romans 1:13, 15:22; 2 Corinthians 1:15-2:4).² Indeed our battle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces (cf. Ephesians 6:12), but I think we give too much credit, too much authority to Satan and his minions by attributing every mishap to satanic opposition.

We also don't know how Paul discerned that *this* time it was a result of Satan's work. But he does describe in battle terms. Commentator Gene Green observed the term "hinder" was borrowed from military use; an army would obstruct the advance of an opposing army by tearing up the road.³ But what is Paul's response? He doesn't fear Satan or whatever his abilities may be. Ultimately, Satan is defeated. This hindrance is just a scorched earth retreat. Just as sure we can be that wrath will come upon our sinning persecutors and aggressors, so sure we can be that Satan's efforts will reach their demise. For Paul and all who are in Christ are on the offensive. The gates of Hell will not prevail, and all Satan can do is hinder some plans here and there.

² This compilation of references by Gene Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 152.

³ Ibid.

After all, consider Paul's joyous outlook on where history is heading. Satan's hindrance is almost an afterthought here. You could imagine Paul chuckling at Satan's efforts; "Seriously? A little hindrance? Wow. Like wow." Paul's focus is distinctly on the hope of Christ's coming. Despite his absence from this church, despite Satan's hindrance, neither Paul nor the Thessalonians *nor us* ought to be dismayed. Jesus is coming! And Paul looks forward to the reward that will be his in Christ for his faithful ministry. The assurance Paul has that he has much to look forward to is that these believers have continued in the faith, that they too have much to look forward to. Greg Beale describes it well, "The focus of Paul's joy, hope and glorying is not merely in the readers' persevering faith but ultimately in the sovereign power of God at work that has enabled faith to arise in the lives of Paul's flock."⁴ (94). Paul started this section with constant thanksgiving to God, and he concludes it with glorying in God's work.

Do you have a means of assurance like that? Have you shared not only the gospel but your very own soul with someone who now has enduring faith that you might glory in God's work in them through you? Participating in God's work in that way cultivates such joy in Christ and confidence in his gospel promises. And seeing the word of God at work in another believer as you open your Bible with her and talk and pray will deepen your longing for Jesus and being in his presence. Your faithful perseverance will be encouraged as you serve the encouragement of another. And whenever you are sinned against or endure satanic opposition, never forget to set your hope on the coming of Christ when both sin and Satan will be finished.

Maranatha, come Lord Jesus.

⁴ Greg Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 94.