

The Church's Mission: Awaiting the Kingdom

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians 2. We'll be looking at verses 13-20 this morning. As you're turning there, just for context, Paul, if you remember, is writing to the believers in Thessalonica, which exists today. It's the second largest city in Greece. It's the second largest commercial port in Greece. And it was significant then and it remains significant to that part of the world today. Paul has great warmth and affection for them. We read in chapter 2 how he's defending his ministry to them by reminding them of his message, the message of the gospel, as well as recalling his motives and his methods among them. And he goes on to defend his absence as well due to unwanted hinderances.

But with great joy and thanksgiving, Paul was encouraged that the believers there were still holding strong in their faith in Jesus Christ. And through his letter, he's seeking to encourage them in their faith and address some of their challenges while they are anticipating Jesus's return, which is a subject that shows up at every single chapter of this letter. It's an important topic of Christ's coming. Now we celebrated advent and Christmas which is celebrating the first advent. And much of those discussions and sermons were about how the church, we are a people of advent anticipating the coming Messiah. But now that He has come, we are anticipating His second coming. We are still an advent people.

So, let's follow along as I read the passage. 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20:

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. 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, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind 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!

But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. So, let's explore what God wanted the believers then to hear. And let's pray for what God has for us this morning.

Father God, we come to you drawing near to you because you have drawn near to us in Christ and you have given us your word. Help us to stand firmly upon it. Help us to approach it with humility. Help us to approach your word with confidence that you are good and righteous and faithful to your promises. Help us to learn from it. Help us to walk according to your ways. We pray these things in Jesus's name. Amen.

So, I don't know if you're aware. We live in an age when we have instant text, instant video, instant e-mail, instant access to our televisions, to our iPhones, to our watches. Some people even look forward to the day where we might have some sort of chip just kind of implanted into us and we can just always be consuming everything. Our devices actually tell us when our messages are delivered. We can see that, "delivered." Now whether or not they're being read or ignored, there's a gap there, right? But that gap is

not very big because we see very quickly that they are typing. The person is typing; we see the little dot dots. Something's happening, something's coming, instant.

This was not the case, of course, not that long ago. And, certainly, for thousands of years, people waited for their letters to arrive somewhere. And they waited even longer still to hear news back. Now I'm about ten years behind schedule, but I've just started watching the television mini series *John Adams*. And I'm at this section where John Adams has gone to meet up with Ben Franklin in France and he's left the family farm and left his family. And there is a scene where his wife, Abigail Adams, is cleaning the windows at like 4:00 in the morning, or whatever. And her daughter wakes up and comes to her, and you see the weight that Abigail is carrying. She's worried, she's tired, she hasn't heard news from John for some time. And she says this in the show, "His letters grow more and more infrequent. The one letter I received gave no assurance of his affection. How can he not know what his silence costs me to ensure me that we have not been forgotten?"

And her daughter very wisely, as this teenager, is trying to comfort her mother in her frustration, in her confusion, in her doubt. And her daughter says, "He has not forgotten us." She draws near to mother and gives her a hug.

How do you live life in the waiting? For the past several months, we've considered this topic of waiting, waiting for the advent of Jesus's birth. Now that that has come and gone, we're waiting for His second coming. We live between these two realities. Jesus has come and Jesus will come again. How do you live life in the waiting?

We see in this letter the Thessalonians are believers. It's part of Paul's missionary journeys. We can learn more details from the book of Acts. And we see from his letter his warmth, his affection. But it's in a place of a gap. Now we don't have the letter in between the first and second Thessalonians. But we see in chapter 2 Paul's desire to defend, to defend his ministry to them, to defend how they lived among them, and even to defend his absence. I wonder if the Thessalonians were wondering if Paul had forgotten them. Has Christ forgotten them?

So, this morning we're going to look at three sections of this passage. We're going to look at how in this awaiting the kingdom, between the then and not yet, the now and the yet to come, how do we live in the waiting? We see how the Thessalonians, and I think the encouragement is to us today, is how they accepted the word, how they suffered with the people of God, and how they endeavored until the coming of God.

So, first verse 13. "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you receive 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." Paul writes about his constant thankfulness to God for their faith. He did that in chapter 1:2, and he does it again here in verse 13. And so, we have to really ask, what is he really thankful about? And he tells us, "for this, that when you receive the word of God," this word that you heard from us, did you take it? Did you discard it? What did you do? Well, it tells us they received it as the word of God. We see it at work in their lives. Paul's ultimately thankful for the word of God being at work in their lives. Their testimony is one that never grows old. We read it again and again in the Scriptures of God doing it again, bringing people from distance to closeness, bringing them from fear to safety, bringing them from absence to intimacy, enemies to friends.

Chapter 1:9-10 mentions how they turn to God from idols to wait for Jesus's return acknowledging Jesus who was raised from the dead and who delivers from the wrath to come. It is a story of seeing all they place their trust and joy in as counterfeit compared to the truth, compared to the beauty, and compared to the grace of God found only in Jesus Christ. And we are faced with a similar question, is the Bible the word of God or is the word of men? Paul is asserting that his message is not his opinion, it's not his philosophical conjectures, it's not his spiritual reflections. His message is in full agreement with the word of God. Paul is defending that his motives are not out of greed or self-glory such as the other traveling philosophers of that time who may have been attempting to make a living off of their eloquent

oration or play people for fools with their babbling nonsense. But rather out of affection for them and for the glory of Christ, Paul is warm to them, cares for them, and his motives are shaped by a love that is beyond him.

Paul is likewise highlighting his methods and that they are not with deception. And likewise, his methods are not a burden to them. So, to avoid hindering their attitudes of Him, but instead his methods are employed in a way so that they would respond freely to the gospel. And by accepting Paul's message of the gospel of Jesus, the Thessalonian's become examples of a great mystery and a beautiful truth. That faith comes from hearing the word, and hearing through the word of Christ. Paul says that in Romans 10:17.

By accepting the word of God, the Thessalonians received it. They took it. They approved of it with full conviction and with great joy. Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword," "discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." I know that that's my testimony of seeing the words on the page jump to life, observing what God says in His scriptures to what I observed in my life, my circumstances, my heart. His word knew me. It penetrated the depths of my soul and said, I know you and I'm not finished with you.

2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." So, how you answer that question, is the Bible the word of men or the word of God? How you answer that question makes all the difference. You see, if it's the words of men, then they can be received or discarded on the merit of the person speaking. But the words of men can become irrelevant. They can become forgotten in one time or another place and then new words come along from men that may be more relatable or more fashionable for other times and places. But God's prophet Isaiah says this, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God will stand forever." And, again, the wisdom of the Proverbs says this, "Every word of God proves true. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him."

Is that your testimony, receiving God's word as what it is? Not on the basis of the merit of the one speaking, and certainly not my merit. There are more eloquent preachers. Do you receive it with full conviction? Do you receive it with joy that God is communicating to His creation? He's communicating to you. Do you crave it? Do you long for it? Do you want to be near to this God who is living?

God indeed is our shield. He was for the Thessalonians, that's what they needed. And it certainly is what we need because Paul next reminds us that whoever accepts this word of God might begin to suffer with the people of God. Let's look at verse 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." We see this similar in Paul's introductory verses, 1:6, where he says that they became imitators of him and the Lord, not just the imitators of the fellow believers in Judea. But they're imitating them in a particular way which is something that they didn't even ask for: imitating those that receive the word of God by their affliction. He's comparing what they experience in Thessalonica at the hands of their fellow countrymen to be like what the believers in Judea experienced.

We learn more about this in Acts 17:1-19 where Paul spent at least three weeks with the Thessalonians going to the synagogues, teaching from the scriptures how it was necessary, showing them how it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and then by the scriptures proclaiming that this Christ is Jesus. Some believed, some didn't, some got angry. Those that got angry incited a mob against Jason, the host of Paul and his companions as well as the other believers. They went before the leaders of the city and were accused of undermining the leaders, undermining the society of what is the social order, the kingdom Caesar. And it was only until they paid a security that they let them go. Many scholars believe that part of the security certainly was a payment of some kind, but it also probably was the agreement that Paul and his companions would leave the city and cause no more unrest so that peace could return again. The status quo could go back to normal.

It's important to understand in these verses, particularly in verses 15-16 that when they are speaking against those that are opposing God, this is not to be taken as justification for anti-Semitism. It has. We have to be honest. It has been used against the Jewish people throughout the centuries. But that is not Paul's desire, and it shouldn't be ours. In their commentary of the New Testament use of the Old Testament, Beal and Carson – two great scholars – note that “By the New Testament times, the phrase ‘killing the prophets’ had become a common way to refer to the persecution of the faithful remnant within Israel by the unrighteous.” So, what might seem jarring to us maybe by our ears, we also have to be reminded that Jesus used similar language describing the scribes and pharisees.

Matthew 23 where He says, “Thus, you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murder the prophets.” Likewise, Stephen, one of the first deacons, stands up and is preaching about this Christ. In Acts 7, Stephen tells his accusers that their fathers “persecuted the prophets and also murdered the righteous one.” As the ultimate rejection of their message, Stephen was likewise killed just as Jesus was. Also, Matthew 5, remember that Jesus Himself teaches, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter evil against you falsely on my account.”

This past December, Wang Yi, his wife, and more than 100 Christians who attend Early Rain Covenant Church were arrested by Chinese authorities. The members of the congregation were charged with inciting subversion of state power. According to the organization China Aid, this is a charge often handed to Chinese Christians because the Communist party views religion as a threat to their ideological control. If convicted, pastor Wang and his parishioners could face up to 15 years in prison. Some of the church leaders and members have since been released but remain under house arrest. Others are still missing.

One of the church elders who was also arrested, he wrote this while he was in hiding. This was just a small excerpt,

“Beloved brothers and sisters, do you have joy? Are you rejoicing in the fact that you are suffering with Christ because of this church? Do you know that we are blessed? The Lord is bestowing on us poor people today treasures of glory from heaven. The Lord himself is bestowing on us weak people comfort from heaven. The Lord Jesus is shining on us blind people his great light. Those of us brothers and sisters standing on the front lines of the gospel war will earn great spiritual riches. Thank the Lord for being with us in this trial. Thank the Lord for cultivating us according to his true word. Thank the Lord for training us through these days of hardship. Thank the Lord for sculpting us through today's persecution. May the Lord give us great joy and true hope and make a strong reliance on him.”

This past Wednesday, Open Doors released their 2019 watch list ranking the top 50 countries where it's most dangerous and difficult to be a Christian. China is only ranked 27. They would say 2018 was a very difficult year for Christians worldwide. “For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets.” Now there's discussion on whether Paul is referring to the Old Testament prophets or if he's referring to the prophets of Jesus. Either way you take that, it still does not lose its meaning. The messengers of God bearing witness of His promises. There is a response of belief in some, and there is a response of indifference sometimes and anger in others. They drove us out, they displease God and oppose all mankind. And why are they opposed to God? Because they're hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved, that the promises of God are for the world, not just for the Jewish people but the inclusion of the nations. So, they, too, might share in the riches, in the splendor of Christ.

There's more that could be said about the phrase “but wrath has come upon them.” Some scholars are thinking Paul is referencing something that's happening in Judea. There's a famine that's happening during this time. Is Paul making some sort of assertion about their circumstances as being just

punishment from God? Other scholars just take it to be a reality of God's eternal justice, that at the end of the day in the midst of suffering, how we endure is part by the hope that we have in Christ because of who we are in Christ. But it's also in the recognition of His justice, His righteous judgement at the end.

So, friends, brothers and sisters, do you have joy in the midst of your circumstances? Maybe you do not have such persecution in your life. Maybe you have a spouse that laughs at you. Maybe you have family members who think you are ridiculous. Maybe you have co-workers that think you are ignorant. Take great joy of your faith in Christ because this suffering is coupled with receiving the word of God for what it is and recognizing that a willingness to suffer is part of your discipleship. I can't say when it would happen or if it's going to happen, but it's a willingness that we have to appropriate when we claim that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world.

And that great joy abounds with greater focus, with greater zeal, with greater beauty than anything else that could deter us, that could hold us back, that could undermine us, that could sow seeds of doubt, that could seek to cause confusion, to grow your apathy, to grow your lethargy, to grow your sense of: I'm exhausted, I just need to step away and escape. However, you might escape, these are hinderances that undermine the work that God is doing in us by His word. A willingness to suffer is part of our discipleship. We place our trust in the Lord's sovereign care, we place our hope in His justice, we place our faith and love in His redeeming grace. How do you wait? This is how you wait. You wait by that which is true. You wait by that which is sound and secure. And we wait together knowing that if you're not suffering, someone else in the body of Christ is suffering in the name of Jesus. And we bear each other in that way, encouraging, strengthening, pointing us to this Christ.

And while we accept the word of God and perhaps experience suffering with the people of God, we must endeavor until the coming of God. He's defending his ministry of his absence, whether there are people that are gossiping: oh, Paul, he doesn't want to be here, or, Paul talks a big game and first sign of suffering he moved on to the next town, he's forgotten you. These kinds of hinderances that Paul ascribes to Satan whether that is the actual logistics of being detained where he was, where he moved on, whether it's referring to the actual security that he made with Thessalonica, that payment. Maybe the hinderance, some scholars suggest, that he's fearful to go back because of the agreement that they made to secure peace with Jason and the other believers that remained.

This warmth and affection are heightened when he says in verse 17, "But since we were torn away from you, brothers," this "torn away," it's becoming orphaned. Earlier in chapter 2, he talks about being gentle, becoming infants. He talks about nursing mothers, he talks about fatherly instruction. He is exuding this warmth and affection for the believers there and he is at great pain that he can't be with them. He's reminding them that he has not forgotten them and neither has Christ. Verse 19, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?" A rhetorical question that he answers himself, "Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy."

Traveling philosophers of the day spoke of "glory" as their payment for their oration or how they might have attracted followers, made their living as traveling philosophers. But Paul is using the word "glory" to reference what that is, and his reward is in Christ. His reward is in the fact that the word of God was accepted and received and is bearing fruit in their lives. Their faith in Christ is Paul's glory and his great joy.

So, as we come to the table in just a few moments, as we think about how you accepted the word of God, maybe you haven't yet and you're exploring it, this relationship that we have between each other as believers. Has there been a believer, fellow brother, or sister in your life who has demonstrated such warmth and affection to you, encouraged you in your walk of faith? Have you likewise demonstrated warmth and affection to another person in their walk with Christ? Who do you long to be with when circumstances keep you apart? When other people you wish to be with, when they are absent, what lies do you believe? What doubts enter your mind? How easily do you forget?

Paul is encouraging them as they suffer to continue to accept the word of God as the word of God and endeavor until the coming of God, this second coming. So, here we are, for thousands of years God's people awaited a Messiah. And here we are, 2,000 years, we're awaiting His return. How do we live in the already/not yet? How do we wait? That is the encouragement that Paul has to the believers. And the way we wait is what we do when we gather on Sunday mornings. It's what we do in our homes. It's when we go through the mundane, everyday rhythms of life. But while we do that, we have our eyes fixed on Jesus and we encourage each other to not lose hope. We come together and we celebrate the Lord's Supper. This by the very means of God's communication, by God's means of His grace, He encourages us to continue, to hold fast, to endeavor with warm affection for Him and for one another.

So, we don't live in a time where we have to wait a very long time for our letters, because who sends letters today anyway. But we do have things in our life that we wait for. And those moments, how we respond to the discomfort, how we respond to the pain, the impatience, those are the moments that we lay hold of the riches that are in Christ. Those are the moments that we lay hold of not our crowns, but the crowns that Christ has done by the work of His word in people's lives. And we press on and we endeavor until His coming.

The very supper we are about to partake, we have been commanded to do it to proclaim His death until He comes again. Do not grow tired of this meal. Long for it. Eagerly await when we celebrate it on Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings. Long for the time that we come together as Christ's church to proclaim His life, death, and resurrection. That the long-awaited Savior has come, and the long-awaited Savior will come again. Remain hopeful in the day-to-day as you wait. Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we give you thanks and we give you praise as we are indebted to you in ways that we cannot pay back. But your grace is abundant and you pour it out continually. And we draw near to you even as we are encouraged by your spirit and by this bread and this juice as we remember and as we take and eat and drink. May we be nourished in our faith as we wait. O Lord come Jesus. Come quickly and help us, strengthen us as we wait.